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Kaplan, Sara.

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SOULS AT THE CROSSROADS, AFRICANS ON THE WATER
The Politics of Diasporic Melancholia

by Sara Clarke Kaplan

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.” It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. [...] The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. [...] Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe if the enemy is victorious.¹

When I ask, “How are gods made?” I am also asking, “How are histories told?”²

Introduction: To mourn a genocide

In 1992, Julie Dash’s independent film Daughters of the Dust entered cinematic history as the first feature-length film by an African-American woman to have a national release. Set in 1902 in a Sea Islands Gullah community off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, Daughters tells the story of a pivotal moment for the Peazant family: their final day together on Dawtah Island before the majority of the clan departs to join in the widescale northern migration by African Americans of the era.³ Lauded for the depth of Dash’s historical research, the ground-breaking techniques of cinematographer Arthur “A.J.” Jafa, and the unflinching feminist perspective—both filmic and political—displayed in the film, Daughters had a notable impact on both African-American and independent film communities, earning it the dubious honor of “cult classic” status (Making xv, Lee E1).

Despite a significant and ever-growing body of scholarship on Dash’s landmark film, relatively little critical attention has been given to the complexity with which Dash deploys the religious traditions of the Black Diaspora in the film as a critical part of her black feminist project.⁴ This article focuses on this oft-overlooked intertextual use of the cosmologies and religious practices of the Black Diaspora within Daughters. Rather than interpreting the film’s allusions to diasporic religiosity as integral only to the aesthetic fabric or cultural context of the production, I suggest that through the invocation of the ceremonies and
spirits of black diasporic religions, *Daughters* produces a historical geography of diaspora through the performance of a collective cultural memory capable of linking contemporary individual and familial struggles to the historic trajectories of imperialism and white supremacy. In so doing, the film demonstrates how, through the open-ended engagement with a shared history of subjugation and opposition, formerly enslaved people and their descendants produce and sustain situated practices and places of diasporicity capable of intervening in contemporary material and discursive structures of racism.

If, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued, racism can be understood as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies” (261), then African chattel slavery’s hyperexploitation of labor, multi-scalar expropriation and deformation of place—of bodies, homes, communities, and national status—and mass administration of social and physical death to captive Africans and their enslaved descendants can only be understood as a three-century practice of genocide. Any project that envisions black liberation, therefore, must first come to terms with the significance of this history of genocide for future political desire and action. In other words, the political and psychic stakes of “how to mourn a genocide” remain high (Lockhurst 244). In what follows, I argue that when read in conjunction with historical and contemporary theories of melancholia, *Daughters* provides a provocative model for mourning the conjoined genocide of African chattel slavery and the Middle Passage—one that recognizes “that the work of mourning, for genocide, cannot be allowed to end” (244). The film’s deployment of diverse symbols, practices, and philosophies of the diasporic religions of the black Americas engenders an “ethical hesitation between the possible and the impossible,” the living and the dead, Africa and its displaced peoples, in which a radically different space and time of diaspora are produced (244). In this space and time of diaspora, I suggest, both past griefs and current political desires can be articulated through a practice that I term *diasporic melancholia*.

In bringing the concept of melancholia into dialogue with Dash’s film, the diverse body of diasporic religions, and theories of the Black Diaspora itself, I attempt to widen the provocative opening that contemporary theories of melancholia, in general, and racial melancholia, in particular, have presented. In the past two millennia, the notion of melancholia has taken numerous forms reflective of and in service to diverse sociopolitical forces and needs. My conception of diasporic melancholia draws specifically from Freud’s description of the melancholic process and Walter Benjamin’s coetaneous considerations of the performance of mourning, as well as from contemporary critical work on the politics of melancholia. My specific purpose—a consideration of black diasporic melancholia as a response to the social and physical genocide of African chattel slavery—demands a continuing revision of both Freudian and Benjaminian approaches and those currently in use. This revision is spurred, in large part, by the extensive scholarly work on diasporic religious practice, as well as by my own politically interested understanding of the philosophical and political underpinnings of these practices themselves.

Certainly, embarking on such a revision requires a modicum of wariness, given the myriad ways in which diasporic religious practices have historically served as “convenient [. . .] canvasses for escapist white fantasies and political allegories,” enabling their strategic appropriation as useful paradigms for any number of theories of cultural and political
resistance and reform (Matory 166). My intent is not to further these processes of imperial cooptation by, at best, posing diasporic religions and melancholia as theoretical analogues or at worst, reducing the philosophical, cosmological, and epistemological complexities of diasporic ceremony to a kind of ‘primitive’ version of Freud’s erstwhile psychic pathology. However, by continuing the longstanding dialogue between the field of psychology and the study of diasporic religious practice I seek to illustrate how a conjunctural reading of seemingly disparate philosophical traditions both enables and demands an interrogation of deeply-rooted presumptions about the politics of melancholia, diasporic religions, and black diasporicity itself.

Such a reading offers insights for contemporary efforts to understand melancholia not as a private, backward-looking phenomenon of paralyzing psychic conflict, but as an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances that traverse continents and cross time. Concomitantly, it confounds impulses among both advocates and detractors to interpret diasporic spiritual practices as a form of what Pierre Nora has dubbed “true memory;” that is, “the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning,” rooted in “the concrete, in spaces, gestures, [. . .] and objects” (8–9); and proffers a model of black diasporicity that refuses abstraction into a monolithic ‘African’ whole or incorporation into teleological narratives of modernity’s progress. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it lays the theoretical groundwork for an enriched conception of how best to understand the continuing political, ethical, and social significance of the past losses, wounds, and grievances of African chattel slavery and subsequent forms of black unfreedom; not only in the present, but for the future.

The politics of diasporic melancholia

First introduced in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud’s notion of melancholia emerges as a failure of mourning that originates in a loss that cannot be fully known or claimed. With the impossibility of closure, the lost object is internalized, initiating a split in the ego from which the subject cannot extricate itself, sinking instead into a melancholic fugue of self-abuse (245–47, 49). By his 1923 study of “The Ego and the Id,” however, Freud had thoroughly revisited his characterization of melancholia as an entirely unique and thoroughly pathological condition, arguing instead that the internalization of the lost object within the ego is the fundamental process through which “the very character of the ego” is constituted as a sedimented “history of those object-choices” (28–29). With its gesture to melancholia’s crucial role in the processes of subjectivation, Freud’s conception of melancholia has, over half a century later, provided the impetus for numerous structurally-situated readings of melancholia as a “mental constellation of revolt,” a counter-discourse of grief and grievance articulated in the face of large-scale historical repression or erasure.7

In recent years, scholars of race and racialization have been particularly interested in revisiting Freud’s theory of melancholia in relation to processes of racial formation in the United States.8 My own approach to diasporic melancholia draws upon three key insights
from their work: first, as a phenomenon of the psyche produced through and in response to external factors, “melancholia highlights the intersubjective basis of intrasubjectivity;” that is, because it emerges from the disruption, distortion, or violence of intersubjective relationships, it is a uniquely-suited means through which to explore racism as a collectively-experienced articulation of psyche and structure (Cheng “Ralph Ellison” 124; Eng and Han 345). Second, as a process and practice by which racial violence is internalized as racial grief, racial melancholia speaks to racism’s irremediable injury without necessarily constituting an inherently damaged or essentially victimized subject (Eng and Han 263; Cheng Melancholy 14–15). Third, and perhaps most significantly, as a paradigm, racial melancholia emphasizes that not only white supremacy, with its attendant processes of exclusion, subjugation, and bodily and territorial expropriation, but its continuing national disavowal are both constituent elements of nation-building in the United States (Cheng Melancholy 9–10). In such a context, the conjoined refusal and inability of racialized subjects to simply let go of past griefs can no longer be read as a pathological or regressive attachment to the past, but rather must be seen as a “militant refusal” that lies “at the heart of melancholia’s productive potentials” (Eng and Han 365).9

If melancholia’s refusal to declare the past resolved can be understood generally to produce meaning out of lost histories and histories of loss (Eng and Kazanjian 1–3), then what new systems of meaning might such a radical revisitiation of African chattel slavery in particular produce? What work might invoking the “ghosts and specters” of chattel slavery and the Middle Passage—both literally and figuratively—do to produce a radically revised history of the past and imagination of the future (Eng and Kazanjian 4)? If a melancholic attachment to and, perhaps more crucially, articulation of loss can reconstitute the remnants of violence and loss as “a world of new representations and alternative meanings” (Eng and Kazanjian 4–5), then how might we read the new world produced in the unending mourning of the genocide that was African chattel slavery as the diaspora itself?

As contemporary theories of racial melancholia suggest, the political claims of diasporic grief and grievances can be read as responses not only to the interrelated losses of body, home, and freedom that date back to the emergence of the African slave trade, but also to the concomitant processes of racialization initiated through and integral to the production of and persistence of continuing structures of black unfreedom. These include state-sanctioned and extra-legal territorial displacement, the violent expropriation of bodies for productive and reproductive labor, the “natal alienation” of enslaved and formerly-enslaved peoples from past and future kin (Patterson 5), and the discursive production of slaves as and at the limit of the human (Kaplan 100). In Daughters, it is this continuing process of bodily subjugation and structural silencing that Peazant women recognize when they gaze into the “muddy waters of Ibo Landing” to recall not only the last “salt water Africans,” but the ubiquitous “rap[ing] of colored women,” and the threat of lynching and other forms of punishment that prevented black retaliation or response (Making 120, 23). In the current moment, the punitive objectification of so-called black welfare queens, the imposition of civil death on disproportionately black prisoners, and the general devaluing of black life continue to pose an ethical impossibility: how can we ‘let go’ of losses that are reproduced in marginally different forms with every generation? Because, rather than being a state of exception, black unfreedom has been integral to the production of liberal ideologies of white freedom;10 and because black subjugation continues to be a central means through
which the nation-state reproduces itself structurally and ideologically, these losses are doubly excluded from any process of mourning and moving on.

Like the ancestors Dash references in her screenplay, the history of slavery and the Middle Passage is “half-remembered and half-forgotten” (Making 80). The continuing failure of nations built on myriad related forms of black unfreedom to fully grapple with the extent to which Western modernity is constructed upon racial genocide would suggest the existence of a large and long black melancholy rooted in a transnational hegemonic failure to adequately acknowledge, mourn, or testify to the violent processes of dislocation and dehumanization that constituted African chattel slavery and the Middle Passage and maintain subsequent forms of black subjugation. As a political practice, diasporic melancholia can thus be understood as the refusal to declare slavery and continuing systems of black unfreedom over and done, or to perceive them as anything less than a constitutive element of modernity and post-modernity.

The diasporic “repertoire” and the embodiment of memory

In Daughters’s slow fades, moments of dreamy slow motion, asynchronous flashbacks, and scenes of spiritual possession, Dash gestures to the continuing ghostly presence of that history, as sedimented in and animated by displaced spirits and ancestors, or “old souls” (Making 133). While Dash’s extensive research and incorporation of spiritual practices developed in Gullah communities lends a historical and regional specificity to the narrative, she deploys a much broader range of African diasporic religious traditions in the visual, linguistic, and narrative aspects of the film. In so doing, Dash proffers a version of black diasporicity in which Baptist ring shouts and baptismal ceremonies are interwoven with Egyptian Gnosticism and the oral invocation and bodily manifestation of Yoruba spirits, reminding viewers of the complex set of spiritual, political, and philosophical beliefs and practices that link philosophy and religions of the Sea Islands to the related Afro-syncretic cosmologies of the Caribbean and Latin America, including vodou, candomblé, and santería.

These disparate religions share more than Western and/or Central African theological heritages and similar meldings of African religions with European Christian and Indigenous American beliefs: each was forged within the context of racial subjugation, bodily exploitation, and abject dehumanization, to which each seeks to respond through the embodied elaboration of an alternative system of spiritual, political, and ethical beliefs. Emerging in the context of the African slave trade’s systematic processes of territorial displacement and natal alienation, the myriad practices described under the rubric of diasporic religions exemplify not just the prevalence of so-called African ‘survivals’ in the New World, but a “strategic assertion of Africanness” intended to “carve out [. . .] a ‘home’ in the midst of New World homelessness” (Matory 17; Gunning, Hunter and Mitchell 2). In direct antagonism to what Roger Lockhurst has described as “slavery’s active disorganization of community: the way it injects death and then enforces the impossibility of mourning” (247), diasporic religions delineate a transgenerational diasporic community of the living and the dead, the lost and the forgotten, across national borders and historical periods.
This diasporic community holds the potential to not only testify to and challenge the processes of cultural and physical genocide but to enact a radically oppositional practice in which the logic of the gods and the ancestors, by which the human can come to embody the divine, is understood to superecede the laws of the state that render the racialized human as less-than-human.

At the same time, the semi-public and private songs, dances, and manifestation of spirits that make up the practice of diasporic religions work to re-member the history of displacement and transformation that marked the African slave trade to the New World. In this sense, they are a form of what Joseph Roach has named the “kinesthetic imagination,” an embodied practice that “flourishes in the place where imagination and memory converge,” and offers, through bodily movement, a means of thinking the otherwise unthinkable, and articulating the otherwise unspeakable (27). Taken as a whole, then, diasporic religious practices can be read as a living “repertoire” capable of producing and transmitting collective histories, memories, and forms of knowledge that must be addressed, but which the written archive cannot—or will not—contain (Taylor 20–21).

In one register, then, Freud’s description of melancholia as an internalization of the external loved and lost object within the ego, where it produces, in turn, an “absence of self-regard” (“Mourning” 244) sounds similar to what a practitioner of vodou, candomblé, or santería might describe as the act of serving the gods, marrying the gods, or being mounted by the gods; as Joan Dayan describes it, “you let yourself be taken over by something outside of you, a force you want and don’t want, control and don’t control, and you get a sense of yourself you did not have before” (“Vodoun” 19). Yet unlike traditional conceptions of melancholia, the phenomenon commonly referred to as possession “is not evidence of psychic disruption or proof of pathology,” but rather the enactment of a “vital connection between human and divinity—between thoughts of the beyond and claims of the present—uneasily and endlessly reformed and redressed” (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 3). Revisited within such a framework, melancholia itself—the unending grief for a person, object, or ideal—might be reconceived as a practice in which the individual places herself in reciprocal relationship with a larger imagined and remembered collective, a broader history of losses yet-to-be-answered-for. As Nana Peazant explains, “there is a thought . . . a recollection . . . something somebody remembers. We carry these memories inside of us” (Making 96).

To reconceptualize melancholia in this way extends José Esteban Muñoz’s suggestion that melancholia can be understood as neither pathological nor painful, but as mourning rescued from the teleological impulses of Western modernity (as, indeed, diasporic cosmologies refuse the linearity of Christian eschatology) and as a “structure of feeling” integral to our constitution as individual subjects and part of a larger communal whole (73–74). Such a reading enables the imagination of a politics of black diasporic melancholia as not only a means of survival—what Nana describes as “fighting for my life [. . .] and [. . .] fighting for yours”—but as an embodied enactment of a politics of freedom (Making 96; Muñoz 74).
The melancholic diaspora of *Daughters of the Dust*

By utilizing the foundational premises of diasporic religious traditions as structuring elements of the narrative, *Daughters* illustrates the processes by which the exploited, subjugated, and dispossessed come to terms with and oppose the continuation of the violent processes by which they were rendered such. But more significantly, Dash produces a film that can itself be read as a kind of diasporic ceremony, a spatio-temporal nexus that collocates the past, the present and the future; the living, the dead and the unborn; Africa, the Americas, and the Middle Passage. If we were to ‘read’ *Daughters* as a form of diasporic ceremony, we would take note of how the white garb that is ubiquitous among the film’s costumes evokes the clothing worn by initiates in *vodou*, *santería*, and *candomblé*, and by *seekers* in some black Zionist churches. We might observe the prerequisite invoking of the spirits from across the waters in Nana’s submersion in water, in the recitation of “The Thunder, Perfect Mind” from the Gnostic Gospels, and in the calls between the field workers in the distance: “I...bo...Fu...la...ni...Da...hom...ee...” —that signify the “tradition of lost souls calling out to identify a half-remembered, half-forgotten ‘people’ they were taken from” (*Making* 80). As each character appeared, we might recognize her or him as the embodiment of one of these summoned spirits, come to join the ceremony. Given this, what might Dash’s cinematic production of an embodied repertoire of diasporic memory and community, griefs and grievances, offer a conception of the political uses and meaning of diasporic melancholia? It is to this question that the remainder of this article addresses itself.

*Diasporic melancholia and the production of diasporic space-time*

In his comparative study of “diasporan religions,” Joseph Murphy has argued that through ritual practice the inner sanctums of Afrosyncretic spiritual practice are reconstituted as the space and time of Africa; for the length of the ceremony, the *igbodu* in *santería*, the *terriera* in *candomblé*, and the *peristil* in *vodou* each becomes a material moment of Africa, ushering in “the time of the ancestors, who are contemporary in the bodies and minds of the people” (3, 186). In this sense, such ceremonies are productive of a new kind of historical geography, one that not only recognizes but creates a *new* Africa that is not a static point of origin but a “spiritual, cultural, and political signifier” of New World blackness (“Cultural Identity” 231). In *Daughters*, that new historical geography is constituted as and at the shallow cove the local community calls “Ibo Landing.” While much of the film takes place on the beaches, woodland paths and inland settlements of Dawtah Island, it is Ibo Landing that Dash gives as the location of the film in its opening sequences. It is in the waters off Ibo Landing that Nana bathes, and on its banks that the Peazant family departs for their life-changing migration up North. And it is in the retelling of the Ibo Landing legend that *Daughters*’s deployment of diasporic spiritual practice as a means of confronting the past and envisioning the future becomes most evident and most crucial.
As we learn in the first moments of the film, Eula Peazant, the pregnant wife of Nana’s great-grandson Eli, is at a crossroads. Recently “forced” by a white man, her relationship with her angry and confused husband has become strained, and she has no desire to leave the island and the life it provides. In her time of need, the “old souls” send her one of their own in the form of her unborn child. As we hear the names of the Yoruba deities listed, we see the old/new spirit enter Eula’s womb, while Eli is simultaneously mounted, or possessed, by the Yoruba deity Eshu-Elegba. It is immediately after both she and Eli have been embraced by these spirits that Eula recounts to her unborn child the first version of the legend of the Ibo: how, when brought to shore, these “last Africans” looked around them and saw “all that had come before and all that was yet to come.” She explains how they then turned—men, women, and children—and walked back over the water, home to Africa. The Ibo, Eula explains, saw all that lay ahead, including her, standing at the Landing and retelling their story to her unborn daughter. As she tells the story of her ancestors to her unborn child, she turns to the past, only to find it gazing back upon her.

While Eula narrates the tale of the Ibo, we witness Eli’s manifestation of Eshu-Elegba, the keeper of the crossroads between the world of the living and that of the spirits. The presence of Elegba, the first deity traditionally called to create the space and time of ceremony, makes possible a community of memory constituted through a trans-Atlantic, cross-generational communication between the gods and their servitors, the here and the beyond, the living and the dead. Mounted by the deity, Eli enacts a concurrent restoration and reinvention of the conflicted and ambivalent history of African chattel slavery. Walking over water as the Ibo once did, he performs the ceremonial cleansing and blessing of the waterlogged wooden figurehead partially submerged in the cove. The iconic representation of a West African warrior, the figurehead is both a signifier of African resistance and a residual of black subjugation made material in the rotting remains of the slave ships that once banked on the island’s shores. As the apocryphal tale of the last “salt-water Africans” being brought to shore only to reject their newly-enslaved status unfolds (Making 84), those same shores are transformed through ceremony into a spatialized memory not only of Africa but of chattel slavery and African resistance.

If, as Paul Gilroy has argued, the Black Diaspora can be seen as the eruption of space into the linear trajectory of time that characterizes modernity (198), then it must, at the same time, be understood as a continual return of the past that reconstitutes different places and different kinds of places—bodies, communities, nations—in light of their common history of racialized violence. In this sense, the space and time of diaspora produced through ceremony aligns closely with Walter Benjamin’s description of the trauerspiel, or tragic drama. As Judith Butler has observed, the trauerspiel, for Benjamin, is a play of mourning; that is, it is at once the performance of loss and the act of mourning it. Unlike classical tragedy’s reliance on linear historical temporality, Benjamin tells us, the trauerspiel “takes place in the spatial continuum, which one might describe as choreographic” (“Origins” 95). In this performance of mourning, the “chronological movement” of history is “grasped and analyzed in a spatial image” that enables a heightened confrontation with and understanding of the historical (“Origins” 92). In short, the non-linear relationship to the past that Benjamin imagines emerging under the gaze of the “melancholy man” produces not only a historical materialism extended to the realm of affect, but a spatialization of history in all its violence (Benjamin qtd. in Butler, “After Loss” 471).
In Daughters, the scene of that spatialized history both includes and exceeds Ibo Landing itself. For if the diaspora is a place constituted through the historically and regionally specific conditions under which it is imagined and practices through which it is produced, it is a place defined by dispersal, difference, and delocalization. Or, to put it differently, as sedimented traces of the memory of slavery and the Middle Passage, the ancestors and spirits are multiply-located. They wait across the ocean, in Guinée, where the souls of the displaced and dispersed living return upon their death. They rest under the waters of the Atlantic, where captive Africans drowned themselves in an ultimate rejection of the conditions of social death. They reside in the hounfo, candomblé, and ilé, whose allegiance they are owed, and in the minds and bodies of their people, whom they mount. In their multilocatedness, the spirits connote a geographic inscription of the displacement that defined chattel slavery and the Middle Passage as it was experienced in different places and in different kinds of places—from the body to the family to the community to the globe. Their simultaneous presence and absence testify to the systemic abduction, enslavement, and exploitation which built America, but which must be erased in order to maintain it. In their manifestation, they stand for that which cannot be disappeared but remains, sedimented in the bodies of the living and the dead, in communities and in nations, producing a spatial memory of a past that is not over and must be confronted.

Imagining diaspora and the politics of impurity

By creating in Daughters a juncture-point of diasporicity exemplified by the shores of Ibo Landing, Dash departs from an ethnographic representation of Gullah culture in favor of the production of a new, mythic Sea Islands, in which a breadth of diasporic traditions find their home. Nor are these traditions merely ‘African’ in their imagined origins: by explicitly indexing the history of indigenous peoples in the Sea Islands through the character of St. Julian Lost Child, Dash firmly situates her project in the Americas; by including numerous references to the symbols and beliefs of black Christianity, she underscores the syncretic ethos of diasporic religious beliefs. Her intentional and consistent religious and cultural intertextuality stymies any ontological impulse on the part of the viewer to trace an unbroken lineage of ‘authentic’ African culture. Dash situates her film within a complex body of philosophical and theological traditions, concomitantly invoking the violent processes of removal, captivity, and enslavement, through which captive Africans were brought to the Americas, and the transnational embodied practices of recalling and responding to such violence in the black Americas—North and South. In this sense, Dash locates Dawtah Island, and her film, within a Black Diaspora that is defined “not by essence or purity,” but through “an imaginative geography and history” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 235). The diasporic practices that she portrays are “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference;” the Black Diaspora that she constructs is a place of political imagination as well as historical memory, revision as well as tradition, difference as well as convergence (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 235).

Nowhere in the film is this non-essential and impure conception of diaspora more evident than in the storyline that revolves around Yellow Mary Peazant. A mixed-race
prostitute with a female lover, Mary returns to the island, after years away, on the very
day of the Peazants’ farewell gathering. Spurned by her female cousins and ignored by
the men, Mary carries the double stigma of her professional and personal sexual practices.
As Caroline Streeter has noted, Mary simultaneously personifies and subverts the trope
of the tragic mulatta. In one sense, she signifies a “constellation of traumatic associations”
including sexualized violence, miscegenation, racial passing, and overt and uncontained
sexuality (772); it is precisely this conjuncture of significations that makes Mary a desta-
bilizing figure for the majority of the Peazant women. Mary, one young cousin remarks,
is a “scary kind of woman,” certainly not a “family woman.” At the same time, however,
in her refusal to be dependent on anyone, or to apologize for either her coerced or chosen
behaviors, Yellow Mary embodies an unashamed black female sexuality that encompasses
both exploitation and agency. She is, as Myown Peazant replies to her young cousin, “a
new kind of woman.”

As a “new kind of woman,” Yellow Mary establishes a reconfigured relationship to her
own past and to longstanding diasporic practices of interminable mourning. In the course
of the afternoon, Mary reminisces about a “pink satin case”—a jewelry box intended for
wealthy women—she glimpsed in a store window. Unable to afford the case, Mary imag-
ines that she possesses it: “In my mind, I put all those bad memories in that case and I
locked them there. So I could take them out, look at them when I’d feel like it, and figure
it out, you know. But I don’t let nothing in that case or nobody outside that case tell me
who I am or how I should feel about me” (Making 143). In claiming the case as a repository
for her memories but refusing to allow it dictate the terms of her existence, Yellow Mary
produces an open and reciprocal relationship with the past, reiterating Nana Peazant’s
practice of keeping “scraps of memories”—the remnants of generations of enslaved and
unfree Peazants—gathered together in a tin (Making 128). At the same time, however, she
rearticulates the family tradition in order to suit her own material conditions: Mary’s past
resides in a box lined with pink satin, a metaphor for the vaginal canal that signifies her
simultaneous status as sexual agent and as object of sexualized racial violence.

With Yellow Mary’s decision to remain on Dawtah Island, the Peazant family—and
the women in particular—are forced to confront both a collective history of sexualized
racial violence and the possibilities of their emerging future. It is their refusal to recognize
Yellow Mary, and thus to come face-to-face with the rearticulated commingling of past,
present, and future that she represents, that brings events at the family picnic to a head.
In a rage at the women’s refusal to listen or to see, Eula exposes their fear of revisiting a
past about which they each secretly believe that “[whites] ruin[ed] [their] mothers and their
mothers before them.” In her fury, Eula demands that the Peazant family confront their
unspoken history, and recognize that “[d]eep down,” they each believe that “even God
can’t heal the wounds of [their] past or protect [them] from the world that put shackles on
[their] feet.” She warns against the collective attempt to erase a past of racialized sexual
ruination by literally moving on from their place of extended mourning—Ibo Landing:
“Even though you’re all going up North, you all think about being ruined, too. You think
you can cross over to the mainland and run away from it? You’re going to be sorry, sorry
if you don’t change your way of thinking before you leave this place” (Making 156). As she
finishes speaking, Eula vomits in the sand, reenacting a key scene from Paule Marshall’s
Praisesong for the Widow, in which Avey’s evacuation of years of accumulated bile and pain
makes her ready to take her rightful place at the annual diasporic ceremony, the Carriacou Shuffle. With Eula’s own expelling of bile, her use of the term cross over is given a double meaning, signifying not only the family’s move to the mainland, but the process of spiritual initiation into the service of the diasporic deities. She calls upon the women of the Peazant family to cross over from a stance of shame-ridden aborted mourning to one of militant melancholia, to initiate a new relationship with the past that no longer seeks to produce black female purity through the expurgation of historical losses, wounds, and injuries. In so doing, she calls for new forms of recognition—both personal and political—that rest upon the articulation of a shared history of raced and gendered violence from which none of them can run.\(^{20}\)

If diasporic melancholia presents the radical possibility that the wounds of genocide cannot be healed, and the loss of freedom is beyond redress, then Eula’s call for a multiply-located, continuing relationship to an impure past of raced and sexualized violence suggests what the first steps might be toward articulating a political claim based upon the ethical impossibility of ending the process of mourning genocide. She argues for a confrontation of the always-present past that neither seeks to distance it nor to grant it the privilege of pure origins, but instead marshalls it as one part of a militant move toward future freedom. In these penultimate moments of the film, Dash indeed articulates a radical, diasporic politics of melancholia that demands a confrontation with past wounds and foreclosed grievances—neither to simply mourn them nor to render them static and unchanging, but to militate on behalf of them.

**Conclusion: Mourning the past, working for the future**

Within Dash’s film, the Black Diaspora emerges as a mutually constitutive conjuncture of place and a time, a geography of dislocation, and a history that challenges the limits of historicity. It is the memory of displacement, dispersion, and fragmentation; a political stance in the present that both indexes and exceeds the continent for which it is named; and a metaphor of freedom for the future that first demands we come to terms with it as a constellation of geographically specific and heterogeneous places constituted by and inhered with historically varying meanings. At the same time it is what Eng and Kazanjian have described as a “new world,” created through and generative of transfigured and transformative meanings, discourses, and political practices (4).

Accordingly, diasporic melancholia exceeds the expression of past griefs, or even of historical grievances, to provide a historically and geographically specific militant articulation of present and future political desires that is rooted in the unending mourning of a past genocide and continuing subjugation. By emphasizing both the spatiality of melancholia and the spatiotemporal constitution of the Black Diaspora, the concept of diasporic melancholia as it can be traced through the practices and beliefs of diasporic religions suggests that the work of embodied memory is to not only bear witness to long-past, historically-disavowed wounds and losses. For, in their spatialization of memory, the ceremonies and traditions of diasporic religious practice produce new political communities in the context
of and in direct opposition to the centuries-long experience of territorial displacement, bodily expropriation, and social genocide.

As Eula astutely notes, diasporicity—like melancholia—can stake no claim to purity, radical or otherwise. Constituted at the interstices of space and time, absence and presence, the erased past and demands for the future, diasporas are formed in and maintained through contradiction. Undeniably, diasporan thinking can take the form of a regressive ahistorical essentialism or a backward-looking, delocalized ontology. Just as dangerously, it can function to elide “the fatal coupling of power and difference” that constitutes the difference between global north and global south, neo-imperialist and neo-colonized. If, however, the practice of diasporic melancholia is best understood as the articulation of certain ethical impossibilities—the impossibility of forgetting, the irremediable nature of the loss—then the spatio-temporal community which it constitutes and by which it is maintained is, at its best, a geography of political possibility.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the American Studies Association 2004 Annual Conference and the Symposium on Cinema and the Fact of Blackness at the University of California, Berkeley. This article owes a great debt to the invaluable insights of my colleagues, including Ruth Wilson Gilmore, José David Saldivar, Shannon Jackson, Kirstie A. Dorr, Soo Ah Kwon, Mimi Nguyen, and the African American Studies writing group at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

2. Dayan, *Haiti*.
3. While there is considerable debate about what the term *gullah* encompasses, the Gullah can be described generally as a series of communities along the coastal region of South Carolina, whose residents are descended from enslaved Africans brought to the New World from the Windward coast and Kongo-Angolan regions of Africa. They have remained a people of considerable fascination for anthropologists, historians, and linguists, because their religious, social, and linguistic practices and structures diverge from surrounding black and white communities in ways which can be linked to the languages, religious practices, and social structures of the Kongo, Dahomey, Ibo, and Fulaney nations of West and Central Africa. The most studied Gullah communities are located on the Sea Islands off the Atlantic coast, halfway between Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia. *Gullah* is also the name given the creole language spoken in Gullah communities. See, for example, Creel, *A Peculiar People* and “Gullah Attitudes”; Goodwine, et. al. Of course, the attempt to delineate, define, or describe “the Gullah” is inevitably runs the risk of reducing to a static monolith what is, in practice, both contingent and complex. Moreover, as J. Lorand Matory notes, to invoke the ethnographic and historical work on the Gullah requires a recognition that, “[l]ike the history of the entire black Atlantic world—and of human culture generally—it is preeminently a history of rival political interests, strategic cultural citations, and contestations of collective identity in which translocal actors, including ethnographers themselves, are patently and appropriately involved (298).

4. Valuable alternative approaches include those that emphasize *Daughters’s* repeated visual homages to African American artistic predecessors James VanDerZee, Spencer Williams, and Bill Gunn in order to situate Dash’s cinematic project within a trajectory of black cultural production that stretches back as far as the Harlem Renaissance (Bambara, Brouwer); those that focus on Dash’s use of costuming and cinematography to make a visual argument for the diversity of Black women’s beauty and breadth of their experiences (Bambara, Bobo); and those that examin the crucial role of the film’s non-linear narrative and innovative cinematic techniques in enabling a unique attention to multiple black women as both protagonists and political agents (Bambara, Brouwer). While Vincent F. Rocchio follows Bambara’s lead in discussing the significance of *nommo*, defined by Bambara as “that harmonizing energy that connects body/mind/spirit/self/community with the universe” (Rocchio 184–189; Bambara 131), he fails to consider the specific relationships to spirit that underlie the practices depicted in the film, instead describing them all under the general rubric of “ancient
tribal religions” (185). One notable exception to the general critical elision of the role of diasporan religions in the film is Sheila Smith McKoy’s analysis of Dash’s use of diaspora temporality. While McKoy’s approach differs from mine, she does discuss in detail the complexity of Dash’s approach to diasporan spiritual practice.

5. The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as follows:

“any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:
(a) killing members of the group;
(b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

I would argue that in its varying forms across the Americas, African chattel slavery met in whole or in part every aspect of the definition of genocide as given above.

6. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nora associates true memory most closely with Jews of the diaspora, peasant culture, and ethnic minorities. Shannon H. Jackson first pointed me toward the general challenge embodied practice poses to Nora’s argument in 2000; VeVe Clark reminded me of Nora in 2004, and suggested he might be successfully juxtaposed with embodied theory of diasporan religious practice.

7. For such revisions to Freud’s theory, see Butler, The Psychic Life of Power 185; Bhabha; Crimp; and Kaplan.

8. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, and destroyed” (55).

9. See also Cheng, The Melancholy of Race. While the approaches of both Eng and Han and of Cheng offer useful insights, I am less concerned with the processes by which racialized subjects, black or white, might embody a melancholic status within the nation-state, and more concerned with what these paradigms of melancholic subject formation have to offer to a consideration of the processes by which melancholia articulates a radical grievance against the nation-state through a practice of inconsolable grief.

10. Two astute analyses of the mutual constitution of black unfreedom and white freedom are Rogin and Harris.

11. My use of the concept of the repertoire is deeply indebted to Taylor. However, for an alternative approach to the notion of a diasporic archive constituted not of documents, but of practices, see Edwards.

12. Gullah spiritual practice emerges from a syncretism of Legba-based ceremonials from the Windward coast, BaKongo philosophies of life and death, and Euro-American Methodist and Baptist traditions. In this respect, it can be linked to the spiritual practices and religious cosmologies of people of African descent that Joseph Murphy dubs the diasporan religions of the Caribbean and South America (3). See Twining and Baird 13 and Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert.

13. See also Dayan, Haiti.

14. Indeed, for most of the major characters, Dash marks in the margins of the script the Yoruba deity with whom she imagines them associated. Her linkages are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nana Peazant</td>
<td>Obàtálá (creator of humanity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Mary</td>
<td>Yemaya/Yemoja (ocean deity, mother of dreams)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trula</td>
<td>Oshun (deity of fresh waters, of love &amp; flirtation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli Peazant</td>
<td>Ogun (warrior, deity of iron)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unborn Child</td>
<td>Eshu-Elegba (keeper of the crossroads between the living and the spirit world)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eula</td>
<td>Oya/Yansa (deity of winds and storm, bringer of change)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. My use of the concept of space-time draws upon the remarkable work of Doreen Massey in this
area.

For an alternative approach to how religious practice in particular works to produce a “new” Africa, see also Hall, “Africa.”

As Dash has remarked, nearly every island off the Carolina/Georgia coast has an ‘Ibo Landing,’ a place renowned as the site where a group of newly-disembarked captive Africans returned to the waters of the Atlantic rather than become slaves. Indeed, Dash implicitly references the ubiquity of Ibo Landing as kind of diasporic trope by incorporating into her script an extensive retelling of the legend of the Landing borrowed from Paule Marshall’s 1983 novel, Praisesong for the Widow, in which Marshall locates the legendary Ibo Landing in the small coastal town of Tatum, South Carolina. Tellingly, Dash chooses to situate her Ibo Landing on Dahtaw Island, the small key whose name is pronounced identically to the Gullah word for ‘daughter’. Dash, Making 30, 88; Marshall 150. For more on the significance of Ibo Landing in the Sea Islands, see also Goodwine, et. al.

Dash, Making 20. Throughout the film, Dash chooses almost exclusively to refer to Black women who are sexually assaulted by white men as being forced or ruined, rather than raped. She explains, “Sexual assault, rape, is so much a part of our history that it is a historical fact. [. . .] I wanted to say rape without saying R-A-P-E. [. . .] It’s the way black women talk about this kind of thing. They don’t just come out and say it. They work around it” (Making 50).

See Pollitzer; Murphy; Dayan, “Vodoun”; and Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert.

There are certain commonalities between the revisionist move that Dash makes here and the work of Chicana feminists in the 1980s, who successfully sought to rearticulate the figure of La Malinche as part of a radical revision of the past that enabled a new approach to chicana/o politics in the years following. For a historical analysis of this, see Gutiérrez.

Hall, qtd. in Gilmore.

WORKS CITED


