Was Your Mama Mulatto? Notes Toward a Theory of Racialized Sexuality in Gayl Jones's Corregidora and Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust

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WAS YOUR MAMA MULATTO?
NOTES TOWARD A THEORY OF RACIALIZED SEXUALITY IN GAYL JONES’S CORREGIDORA AND JULIE DASH’S DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST

by Caroline A. Streeter

Gayl Jones’s novel Corregidora (1975) and Julie Dash’s feature film Daughters of the Dust (1991) are singular texts that use historical frameworks to comment upon post Civil-Rights-era race and gender relations and identity formations. Daughters of the Dust, the first feature film written and directed by Dash, was also the first film by an African-American woman to receive widespread theatrical distribution. Daughters is an independent work that resists and contests many aspects of the Hollywood film. Corregidora was the first novel by Gayl Jones, a reclusive figure with a small but striking literary output. Both the novel and the film call attention to understudied aspects of the African diaspora. In Corregidora, Jones creates an unusual migration circuit that links mid-to-late twentieth-century African Americans living in Kentucky to their slave ancestors in Brazil. In Daughters of the Dust, the plot concerns the persistence of African traditions among black people at the turn of the century living on the Sea Islands, located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Both works also highlight the crucial role of women in maintaining cultural memory for black communities. This essay concerns the ways in which Corregidora and Daughters of the Dust make compelling interventions that transform mulatta characters—“racially mixed” women of African descent who bear the phenotypical (physical) markers of “race mixing”—into figures that help us to understand new things about sexual and racial normativity. Both texts effect a surprising deployment of a figure that has been symbolic of repressed histories and regressive discourses.

Mulatta characters have long been controversial figures for scholars of African-American literature. In novels such as Clotelle, or the Colored Heroine, A Tale of the Southern States (William Wells Brown, 1867), Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1892), Megda (Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, 1891), and Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South (Pauline Hopkins, 1900), mulatta characters are symbolic of traumatic histories of enslavement. In novels of the 1920s and 1930s, especially those associated with Harlem Renaissance writers such as Nella Larsen (Quicksand [1928] and Passing [1929]) and Jessie Fauset (There is Confusion [1924], Plum Bun [1928], The Chinaberry Tree [1931], and Comedy American Style [1933]), mulatta characters represented access to class mobility and the possibility of escaping the stigma of blackness altogether through “racial passing.” In an essay entitled, “If The Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?”
Like?” (1983), Alice Walker wrote that early African-American novels that represented black heroines as “virtually white” are signs of a “fatal social vision” and ultimately undermine emancipatory struggles (297, 310). Some feminist literary critics have offered analyses that attempt to challenge the reading of the mulatta as simply a “negative image.” Barbara T. Christian (1980) has argued that early black female fiction writers deployed what she calls the “proper mulatta” to claim access for black women to the status of true womanhood that dominated public consciousness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And Hazel V. Carby (1987) has analyzed “the figure of the mulatto in literature . . . as a narrative device of mediation, representing both an exploration of the relationship between the races and an expression of the relationship between the races” (89).

My contention here is that Dash and Jones re-imagine the mulatta by explicitly engaging racially mixed women’s sexual agency and desire. Both *Daughters of the Dust* and *Corregidora* render visible black female sexualities that call into play the phenomenon that Adrienne Rich (1978) has called “compulsory heterosexuality.” In her film, Dash represents lesbian desire between mulatta prostitutes at the turn of the century, historically resituating this possibility for erotic relations and thereby problematizing racialized discourses of normative black identity in the post-civil rights era. In *Corregidora*, lesbian desire is depicted as a rejection of the heterosexual imperative for women’s sexual passivity, a passivity that feeds women’s subordination in gender relations. This essay puts black feminist theories into conversation with theories of sexuality to argue that normalizing racial discourses implicitly invoke a standard of heterosexuality as a sign of authentic racial identity.

*Daughters of the Dust* takes place at the turn of the century and over the period of one day. The Peazant family has a reunion on the eve of the migration of a large portion of their family from the Sea Islands to the mainland. The gathering symbolizes what will likely be the last time they will all be together. The film’s narrative focuses on the women of the family, and among these women are Yellow Mary and Trula. Yellow Mary previously relocated to the mainland and returns home to take part in the family reunion. Trula, who accompanies Yellow Mary, is a stranger to the family. As her name indicates, Yellow Mary is lighter in color than some members of her family. Nevertheless, as her cousin Viola remarks, “Of course, compared to some people, Yellow Mary isn’t all that light-skinned. . . .” (79). Viola’s remark is a non-too-subtle reference to Yellow Mary’s companion Trula, whose light skin, clear blue eyes, and abundant blonde/brown hair mark her as a fetching example of “some people.” Trula is also significantly younger than Yellow Mary is. As Harryette Mullen (1994) has written, the liaison between the two women is ambiguous. However, in the book about her film co-authored with bell hooks, Julie Dash has indicated that she scripted the characters as lesbians and as prostitutes.

Like *Daughters of the Dust*, the novel *Corregidora* features a protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, who is caught between the imperatives of family and her sexual desires. Ursa is a blues singer descended from a line of women who trace their ancestry to an African woman who was a slave in Brazil. The Portuguese slave owner Corregidora raped Ursa’s great-grandmother, the African woman. As a result, Great Gram gave birth to a daughter (“Grandmama”), whom Corregidora also raped. Eventually Great
Gram left the plantation, but returned years later for her daughter, by that time pregnant with Corregidora’s child. They migrated to the United States, eventually settling in Kentucky. There, Grandmama gave birth to a daughter, (“Mama”) who became Ursa’s mother. Although Ursa’s own father was a brown-skinned African American, Ursa resembles her mother and her grandmother. She has light skin and long, red hair.

Ursa’s female relatives are committed to the oral repetition of the horrifying tales of enslavement and sexual violence that Great Gram and Grandmama endured in Brazil. They are determined to keep the story of their oppression alive because there are no official narratives that acknowledge their history. This is why they keep “Corregidora” as a family name. They are committed to “making generations”—giving birth to children who will continue the obsessive repetition of the slave master’s atrocities. The novel’s plot involves Ursa’s inability to have children, the result of an accident caused by her first husband. Ursa’s barrenness precipitates a multidimensional crisis. She feels sexually neutered, emotionally betrayed, and above all can no longer fulfill the imperative to “make generations.” Ursa explores her traumatized sexuality through a relationship with a second husband as well as two lesbian characters, Catherine (Cat) and Jeffrene (Jeffy), who represent an alternative sexuality that simultaneously attracts and repels Ursa.

The Color of (Hetero)Sexuality

Through their focus upon women with mixed blood, and their exploration of this condition as both “taint” and “privilege,” along with lesbian desire, Jones and Dash engage the relationship between color and sexuality. Colorism, the conferment of privilege based upon shade, has been analyzed through historical studies (Joel Williamson, 1980) as well as more topical contemporary investigations (Kathy Russell with Midge Wilson and Ronald Hall, 1992) and films (Kathe Sandler, 1992). Although skin is the somatic feature most frequently focused upon in discussions of colorism, hair color and texture also figure significantly in the literary representation of this hierarchy of physical features among African Americans. Alice Walker argues that women and relationships between women bear a disproportionate burden of the tension that manifests from the disparate privileges that are associated with color. Black women’s bodies become the sites for the projection of the standards of beauty that are shaped by colorism, and relationships between black women suffer when black men appropriate these standards. Walker revises W.E.B. DuBois’s prediction that the problem of the twentieth century would be the color line based on the way in which power dynamics of gender intersect with color, making physical features a contentious issue within African-American communities. Critiquing DuBois’s notion as a “man’s vision . . . it sees clearer across seas than across the table or the street,” Walker relocates the color line “between the darker and lighter skinned in the black race” (310).
Jones and Dash engage colorism in their texts by referencing the complex ways in which skin color accrues social meaning, with an emphasis on the under explored dynamic of how color becomes infused with sexual meaning. Jones and Dash deploy black vernacular language to chart this territory, focusing particularly on the words red and yellow as signifiers of difference. In African-American communities, red and redbone refer to skin and/or hair that are brown with a reddish cast, whereas yellow and high yellow refer to skin that is light brown or a lighter shade (beige, cream colored, ivory). Although yellow does not refer to a specific hair color, a yellow person is likely to have hair that is lighter in color and less curly in texture. Descriptive color terms such as red and yellow point to race mixture and have a multiethnic valence. Red and yellow also have distinctly gendered meanings. When used to describe men, red can confer an edginess or sense of danger. For example, Malcolm X’s nickname as a young street gangster was “Detroit Red.” In The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1964), the reader learns that red referred both to Malcolm’s physical appearance and his personality. He explains the reddish cast to his hair as the legacy of a white grandfather on his mother’s side.

Of this father of hers, I know nothing except her shame about it. I remember hearing her say she was glad that she had never seen him. It was, of course, because of him that I got my reddish-brown ‘mariny’ color of skin, and my hair of the same color. I was the lightest child in our family. (2)

When used to describe women, red and redbone indicate an assertive female sexuality which other women often object to or disapprove of. In a song entitled “Redbone” (1993), Cassandra Wilson sings the refrain, “The women in church say, Redbone girl got a problem . . . she drives men folks crazy.” In Corregidora, Ursa’s physical appearance is read by other women as a threat, a fact the local women make clear during one of Ursa’s infrequent visits to her hometown in Kentucky:

“You red-headed heifer.” That’s what that woman down in Bracktown called me. I wasn’t even studying her man. He looked at me, I didn’t look at him . . . the last time I was in Bracktown, I went to the Baptist church with Mama. “Who’s that? Some new bitch from out of town going be trying to take everybody’s husband away from them?” . . . Then when I was just walking down the street minding my own business, these two women in a car. “You red-headed heifer.” I didn’t stay long back in Bracktown. (72–3)

In the film Daughters of the Dust, the women of the Peazant family express similarly harsh appraisals of the characters Yellow Mary and Trula. The scene of the two women’s arrival depicts them walking toward the family gathered on the beach, accompanied by young women of the family, Myown and Iona, who carry their luggage, skipping with excitement. The camera moves in for a close up on a Peazant
female relative, who comments, “Ain’t that Gussie’s daughter? She got ruint, you know. Yellow Mary went off and got ruint.” (In the Gullah vernacular pronunciation used by the characters in Daughters of the Dust, a woman who is the object of a sexual transgression such as a rape becomes ruined, or ruint.) Haagar, Iona’s mother, calls her daughter to her side—“Iona! Go warn Nana Peazant! It’ll most likely kill her to see this heifer done returned!” Subsequently the film cuts to a close-up of Viola, the family member who came in on the boat with Yellow Mary and Trula. Viola, having joined her family in watching the two women approach, murmurs “All that yellow wasted.” As Harryette Mullen has written, this cryptic phrase speaks to the Peazant women’s ambivalence about the constellation of traumatic associations invoked by Yellow Mary and Trula—including rape, incest, miscegenation, racial passing, homosexuality, and prostitution—“when these experiences are perceived to be threats to collective identities as well as to the constructed continuity of tradition itself” (12).

A densely paradoxical designation, yellow is most commonly associated with the mulatto in literature. Historically, there is no doubt that possessing light skin color has been advantageous. The artist and philosopher Adrian Piper (1996) noted that lighter-skinned, “white-looking” people tend to inhabit the upper classes because of the disparate privileges that came with looking like, and being related to, white people since the time of slavery. Despite the fact that the skin color hierarchy privileges lighter-skinned people in mainstream society, in African-American communities “yellow” people are frequently associated with unflattering images. Historian Joel Williamson argues that African Americans in the early twentieth century came to a general consensus that “brown” was a shade superior to black or yellow, being neither too dark nor too light. A rhyme quoted in John Langston Gwaltney (1980) sums up the hierarchy of shade among African Americans: “Black is evil, yallah so low down, look here honey, ain’t you glad you brown?” (81). Stereotypes about yellow people focus on their unsavoriness; they are “contaminated” by their obvious connection to white people. In Daughters of the Dust, the Peazant women project just such a stereotype onto Yellow Mary when they express reluctance to eat her cooking. A woman comments upon the biscuits that Yellow Mary offers to Haagar upon her arrival at Ibo Landing: “I wouldn’t eat them anyhow, if she touched them.” Another echoes, “That’s right! You never know where her hands could have been. I can just smell the heifer” (112). Needless to say, such a comment also refers strongly to Yellow Mary’s scandalous sexuality. Because she is a lesbian and a prostitute “you never know where those hands could have been.” Dash problematizes the Peazant women’s vilification of Yellow Mary and Trula by interrogating the impulse to make them moral scapegoats. In a pivotal scene near the end of the film, the pregnant character Eula challenges such distinctions between women by reminding her family members that making the mulatta the abject symbol of painful histories cannot protect them from the impact of the past. She says:

As far as this place is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood . . . Deep inside we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them . . . Even though you are 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. (156)

Although being “yellow” is often conflated with the ability to pass as white, depending upon how whiteness is defined “red” people may also pass. In Corregidora, Ursa’s “red-headed” body triggers precisely that memory for the character Sal Cooper:

“You know every since I first laid eyes on you I thought you was one of my long-lost relatives . . . my mother came out the darkest, and so they wouldn’t claim her. I don’t know who they are. I don’t even know what they look like. Mama probably wouldn’t even know them now. She think they up in New York somewhere now though, passing. I don’t know, but when I first saw you, I had that feeling.”

“I couldn’t pass,” I said. I had to say something. I felt resentful, and a little angry because she was saying those things to me.

“I don’t mean passing white. I mean passing for Spanish or something, you know. Like Cole Bean getting in the front door down at the Strand that time.”

I started to say I didn’t know, but I nodded. (70) 7

The imperative to “lighten the race” through marriage is a consistent theme in African-American novels, as is the realization that efforts to control the color of offspring through marriage are easily thwarted. 8 As the conversation in Corregidora continues, Sal explains to Ursa:

“My mother married a light man so that her children could have light skin and good hair. But look what happened.”

I frowned. We sat there saying nothing again. (72)

Black Female Sexuality and “Compulsory Heterosexuality”

In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich asserts that the institution of heterosexuality achieves its dominance through the way in which heterosexual sexuality masquerades as a choice made by women, rather than the primary mode of subservience to male domination. 9 Because the compulsory heterosexuality that Rich describes is theorized in the context of white American society, it has limited theoretical use for other ethnic communities. In fact, Rich’s description of the way in which men constrain women’s rights and mobility to achieve sexual/gender domination over them is strikingly analogous to the way in which white supremacy was secured during and in the aftermath of slavery in the United States. In a list adapted from Kathleen Gough’s “The Origin of the Family” (1975),

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Rich enumerates eight characteristics of male power. For clarity, I have paraphrased the list as follows:

1. The power of men to deny women their own sexuality
2. (The power of men) to force sexuality upon (women)
3. (The power of men) to command or exploit (women’s) labor to control their produce
4. (The power of men) to control or rob (women) of their children
5. (The power of men) to confine (women) physically and prevent their movement
6. (The power of men) to use (women) as objects in male transactions
7. (The power of men) to cramp (women’s) creativeness
8. (The power of men) to withhold from (women) large areas of society’s knowledge and cultural attainments

The substitution of the terms *black Americans* for *women* and *white Americans* for *men* in Rich’s elaboration of characteristics of male power results in a strikingly accurate description of the effects of enslavement and institutionalized racism experienced by African Americans in the United States, particularly with regard to sexuality. For example,

1. The power of white Americans to deny black Americans their own sexuality
2. (The power of whites) to force sexuality upon (blacks)
3. (The power of whites) to command or exploit (black) labor to control their produce

Angela Y. Davis (1998) writes that under the conditions of enslavement, consensual sexual relations between black men and women were a privilege rather than the status quo:

(F)ollowing the abolition of slavery . . . For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered . . . Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation. (4)

Davis’s analysis clarifies how crucial it is to interrogate whether and how African-American men and women have experienced “normative” heterosexual relations in the United States. In an afterword to her essay (1986), Adrienne Rich acknowledged that through her reading of African-American women’s fiction, she came to recognize “a different set of valences . . . a different quest for the woman hero, a different relationship both to sexuality with men and to female loyalty and bonding” (74). As black feminist theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1992) and Patricia Hill Collins (1991) maintain, neither gender-based nor race-based models are adequate in accounting for black women’s experience. Compulsory heterosexuality may enable black men to dominate black women, but the fact that white supremacy impedes black
men’s access to patriarchal power necessitates an investigation into how compulsory heterosexuality articulates with white supremacy. *Corregidora* and *Daughters of the Dust* attest to the ways that racial inequality prevented black men from assuming many of the privileges of normative heterosexual manhood. Both texts delineate black men’s inability to protect black women from the sexual violence they experience at the hands of white men. The novel and the film also highlight the fact that black women, both during and in the aftermath of slavery, who defended themselves against sexual violence, risked their own lives as well as the lives of husbands and lovers. In *Corregidora*, Ursa remembers a story Great Gram told about the brutal torture and death suffered by an enslaved black woman and her husband on a plantation in Brazil in retaliation for the woman’s murder of her owner, an act committed in self-defense as the owner attempted to rape her. In *Daughters of the Dust*, Eula (who is the matriarch Nana’s granddaughter and the mother of the unborn child, who provides the film’s voice-over narration) keeps silent about the identity of her rapist to prevent her husband Eli from attempting to avenge the attack.

By the same token, both texts engage the tensions that manifest between black men and women precisely because women resist men’s attempts to enact patriarchal prerogatives. *Corregidora* opens with Ursa’s description of the ongoing argument she had with her husband Mutt throughout their brief marriage because she would not give up her singing and allow him to “support her” (3). Mutt resents Ursa’s independence and, as their relationship deteriorates, becomes increasingly possessive to the point of “joking” that he will offer her up for sale to the highest bidder before the primarily male audience that listens to her sing nightly in Happy’s Café. In *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana cautions Eli about his possessiveness toward Eula. When Eli claims that he cannot accept the rape of his wife because “she don’t feel like mine no more,” Nana challenges him, saying, “Eula never belonged to you. She married you” (95). The novel and the film represent the subjectivity that develops in women who survive in racist and sexist social worlds without the protection of “their” men—a condition that increases their vulnerability yet also affords them possibilities for agency.

Mulatta characters in both *Corregidora* and *Daughters of the Dust* express ambivalence about investing in the patriarchal power that potentially accrues to them through their relationships with men, or through their adherence to traditional gender roles. In Jones’s novel, Ursa resists her husband Mutt’s insistence that she stop singing after their marriage, “I said I didn’t just sing to be supported. I said I sang because it was something I had to do, but he never would understand that” (3). On the other hand, she enters ambivalently into a relationship with her second husband, Tadpole, appearing to marry him out of a need for stability. In response to his declaration of love, and immediately prior to his proposal of marriage, she reflects, “I said nothing. I was thinking I’d only wanted him to love me without saying anything about it . . . I was grateful he didn’t ask me the same question” (55). In Dash’s film, Yellow Mary is acknowledged by family members to be a wealthy woman of independent means. Yet, she also engages in a fantasy of heteronormativity: “I wish I could find a good man, Eula. Somebody I could depend on. Not that I’d want to depend on him. Just to know that I could if I had to” (121). The two texts move beyond depicting mulattas as troubling objects of desire in African-American communities, symbolic of
the traumatic history of slavery and the racist standards of colorism through their exploration of mulatta agency. Daughters of the Dust raises an alternative scenario: as lesbians and prostitutes, Yellow Mary and Trula elect to practice a taboo profession and engage in a taboo relationship. Becoming “ruined” thus has the potential to transcend victimization when such a label is indicative of sexual agency. In Corregidora, Jones suggests a similar link between prostitution and agency by implying that prostitution can be a viable source of income for black women. In a conversation between Ursa and Cat about their limited employment opportunities, they banter,

(T)here’s always something you can do to keep your own hours. Now we ain’t talking about that . . . Hush. (32)

Ambiguous Relationships: Color, Sexuality, and Mother–Daughter Bonds

In “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” Rich makes a convincing case for the idea that the sensual/sexual impulse that females develop toward other females through the bond between mothers and their infants is forcibly ruptured when girls and women are compelled, as they mature, to turn away from female bodies as a source of erotic pleasure. My initial impetus for linking Corregidora and Daughters of the Dust was inspired by an aspect of the intertextual relationship between the novel and the film, which Rich’s essay helps to illuminate. As a pair of women, Yellow Mary and Trula are depicted as lovers, but also resemble what we might imagine the mothers and daughters in the novel would look like, in large measure because of the visible age difference between the actresses. This mother–daughter effect in the film is heightened by the skin color difference between Trula and Yellow Mary—the younger woman being lighter-skinned than the older one. The mulattas in Dash’s film constitute what I call a “visual echo” of the mulattas in Jones’s novel—their color and age difference can be read as representing the legacy of white men’s sexual domination over black women that is documented in Corregidora. Visually, Yellow Mary and Trula could be seen as representing what I call the “bleaching of the race” that is embodied in Ursa’s mother and her grandmother as well as in Ursa herself. In Jacqueline Bobo’s study of black women’s reception of Daughters of the Dust, as well as in my own experience, screening the film for multiethnic student audiences, some viewers—especially upon initial viewing—assume Yellow Mary and Trula are mother and daughter. This reading comes as no surprise—both because of the subtle way that the eroticism of their relationship is conveyed and because of the way in which compulsory heterosexuality renders lesbian relations invisible.

In the film, the “blurring” of erotic relationships between women and relationships between mothers and daughters is very present in the scene of Yellow Mary and Trula’s arrival at Ibo Landing. Dash constructs an ambiguous alliance between the two mulattas that is rife with mixed messages. The first family member to recognize Yellow Mary remarks, “Ain’t that Gussie’s daughter? Old man Peazant’s Grand-daughter done come home!” Subsequently, Yellow Mary spies the pregnant Eula
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among the family members and cries out, “Is that the little girl I used to rock in Gussie’s yard?” Éula runs to embrace Yellow Mary, who introduces her to Trula. At this point, it is plausible that Trula is Yellow Mary’s daughter, particularly because it has been established that Yellow Mary is considerably older than Éula, and Éula and Trula look much closer in age than Yellow Mary and Trula. There is also the issue of the names—Éula and Trula sound alike. It is conceivable that Yellow Mary, who has moved away from home, would give her daughter a name that sounds as if it could be from the Sea Islands. Moreover, as viewers will learn, Yellow Mary initially left the island to work in Cuba as a domestic servant, and was raped by her employer. Thus, Trula could be a child of rape.

However, Julie Dash deploys camera angles and a form of indirect address among the women that effectively communicates Trula’s outsider status. The same woman who first recognizes Yellow Mary, upon spotting Trula, murmurs, “What dat she got wit’ her?” 11 In a subsequent shot sequence in the same scene, Yellow Mary approaches her cousin Haagar (who sent her daughter Iona to warn Nana, their grandmother, that “this heifer done come home”) to offer her a tin of biscuits. Eyeing them suspiciously, Haagar looks from the box to Trula asking, “What dis is?” Following a beat during which Yellow Mary and Trula exchange exasperated looks, Yellow Mary replies, “Store-bought biscuits.” Haagar responds incredulously “Bread from a store??” Haagar’s scornful glances and mocking tone, followed by her comment that “a woman who don’t cook must be mighty pretty,” convey that Haagar is drawing a link between the mulattas and the store-bought biscuits. In effect, she implies that Yellow Mary and Trula can, like the biscuits, be acquired for a price; they are “store-bought women.” 12

In Jones’s novel, in which subsequent generations of women obsessively recount their sexual abuse at the hands of the slave owner Corregidora, mixed blood becomes a mute witness through the vehicle of what is visible—the skin. Mulatto skin is the visible scar of slavery and rape. Ursa’s female relatives teach her:

. . . They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn’t burn out what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that’s left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood. (72, reviewer’s emphasis)

Through the “white-looking” Trula, Dash plays on the theme of mixed blood as mute witness and visible scar. In the film, Trula’s ambiguous presence is a critical aspect of the way in which Yellow Mary simultaneously attracts and repels her family members. 13 In addition to being racially and/or ethnically ambiguous, Trula is a physical embodiment of the literary trope of the “golden child” the light-skinned (and often golden-haired and light-eyed) child born to a dark-skinned woman of African descent. The golden child may be, but is not necessarily, biracial. Giving birth to such a child was at one time considered a mark of good fortune—the child was more attractive according to dominant standards of beauty, and colorism would function to privilege him or her. Alice Walker mentions the golden child in her essay, and Toni
Morrison has made scathing critiques of this figure in the novels *The Bluest Eye* (1972, with the character Maureen Peale) and *Jazz* (1992, with the character Golden Gray). The paradox between the brutal history that the mulatta represents and Trula’s unmistakable physical beauty is ambivalently addressed by Dash. During a pivotal scene that establishes that Yellow Mary will remain on the island when the family members who are migrating depart, Dash positions Trula at the periphery of the narrative. As she stands alone watching the family, Trula becomes visibly agitated when she realizes that Yellow Mary will not return to the mainland.

A narrative strategy of ambivalence also marks Jones’s engagement with her mulatta characters in *Corregidora*. At different points in the novel Ursa reflects on how color overdetermines her resemblance to her mother and grandmother, both children of rape:

> I got so embarrassed because it was me I was looking at, not us... Because I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I’d always thought I was different. *Their* daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora. I don’t know. But when I saw that picture, I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother’s mother before her had. The mulatto women. Great Gram was the coffee-bean woman, but the rest of us. . . . (60)
>
> She (Mama) was still beautiful in *their* way of still being beautiful, and the way I knew I would still be beautiful when I got to be their age. (110)

The overwhelming infiltration of the past into the present—represented by the lack of temporal boundaries in the narrative, especially from a psychological standpoint—makes it difficult for Ursa to know if substantive boundaries exist between the different women’s stories, and even between their bodies. As Bruce Simon (1998) has noted (citing Madhu Dubey, 1995), “the narrative structure of *Corregidora*. . . foregrounds the way (Ursa’s) memories and dreams ‘repeatedly erupt into her narrative’” (95). Ultimately, Ursa resists the notion that her physical features mark her as one of “Corregidora’s women.” Jones signals Ursa’s rejection of her foremothers’ internalization of the status conferred upon them because they possess light skin color and/or because they have the potential to give birth to light-colored children. When her first husband Mutt asks Ursa, “Was your Mama mulatto?” she curtly replies, “I’m darker than her” (59). In the continuation of the passage, Ursa reflects:

> But I *am* different now, I was thinking. I have everything they had, except generations. I can’t make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come—what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her* (Great Gram), or *them* (Grandmama and Mama)? (60)
Mulattas and Lesbian Desire

Many African-American texts pose challenges to analyses that seek to center what Adrienne Rich would call “lesbian existence.” In *Corregidora*, Jeffy and Cat’s homosexuality is marked in black vernacular terms that are subtle and allusive—other characters refer to their lesbian sexual practices by describing Jeffy and Cat as “that way” and “like that” (39, 43, 48, 49). Although Julie Dash has stated that Yellow Mary and Trula were scripted as lesbians, in *Daughters of the Dust* the women’s relationship is conveyed almost entirely through gaze and gesture.

Contemporary feminist discourse by writers such as Adrienne Rich (1979) has often characterized silence as representing women’s victimization. Some feminist theorists of color writing from perspectives not solely located within Western epistemological and cultural traditions have questioned that generalization. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) has reflected:

Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored. (373)

The notions of a “will not to say” and silence as “a language of its own” aptly describes how Dash cinematically conveys the erotics of lesbian desire between Yellow Mary and Trula. Julia Erhart (1996) observes that the two women enjoy a privileged relationship to the visual apparatus because they are the only female characters in *Daughters* who handle the instruments of visual technology. The scene that demonstrates this occurs early in the film, when the women are on their way to Ibo Landing. In the boat, they experiment with a kaleidoscope belonging to Mr. Snead, who accompanies Yellow Mary’s cousin Viola to the family reunion to photograph the Peazants. Although Erhart cautions against placing too much emphasis on this brief scene, it is notable for the flirtatious rapport that is evident between the women as they play with the kaleidoscope. In the film, only heterosexual couples express the kind of giddy joy in each other’s presence that is evident in several scenes between Yellow Mary and Trula. At one point the women are depicted walking together on the beach at sunset—the classic romantic image of the couple. Although Eula is walking with them, Dash does not place all three of them in the frame at the same time. At one moment, as the volume of the film’s lush theme music rises, Trula and Yellow Mary throw their arms around one another and rock in an embrace. Their gesture brings to mind a description written by Angela Carter (1967): “It was a lover’s embrace, annihilating the world” (193–4). Several of the scenes of Yellow Mary and Trula together, or of the two women with Eula, are notable for their lack of activity, apart from talking and aimless walking. The women simply enjoy their own company, basking in each other’s beauty and the beauty of the island.

There is a dramatic difference in the type of space inhabited by the women of the Peazant family and the space that is created around Trula and Yellow Mary. Over the course of the film, the adult Peazant women spend a significant amount of time
preparing the feast that the family will eat and taking care of young children. Although there is fellowship among the women, the tone of their collectivity is altogether different from the palpable erotic energy that radiates from Yellow Mary and Trula when they are together. In fact, one would think that at such a family gathering every available adult woman would be recruited to help with cooking and childcare. Yet, Yellow Mary and Trula lounge in a tree smoking and teaching Eula how to say water in Spanish. Of course, the Peazant women intentionally exclude the mulattas from their domestic sphere. As noted, unflattering comments have been made indicating that one would not want Yellow Mary’s help with food preparation. By the same token, Yellow Mary expresses disdain for domestic labor. As she comments to Haagar, “You know I don’t like messing around in no kitchen…” (112).

One of the most telling indications of the nature of the relationship between Yellow Mary and Trula is rarely mentioned in criticism about Daughters of the Dust. The scene occurs during the film’s conclusion, when the family members who are migrating depart from Ibo Landing. Yellow Mary has decided to stay on the island, and Trula is leaving with the others. In a moment that has no correspondence in Dash’s published screenplay, Yellow Mary weeps uncontrollably as she watches the boat carry Trula away.

Although the representation of lesbian desire in Corregidora is more explicit than in Daughters of the Dust, lesbian desire in the novel, as in the film, is peripheral to the plot. However, the fact that Jones and Dash make light-skinned women the object of female desire is a key aspect of the rearticulation of the mulatta paradigm that can be read in these works. In Corregidora, the full potential of the blurring of the boundaries between lesbian relationships and mother–daughter relationships can be explored by looking beyond the biological mother–daughter dyads of the novel to Ursa’s interactions with her older female friend Cat and the teenage girl Jeffy. The relationships among Cat, Ursa and Jeffy mimic relationships between mothers and daughters even as they include both realized sexuality and unrequited desire. Cat acts as a surrogate mother toward both Jeffy and Ursa, an effect that is reinforced by the age difference between the characters; when the novel begins Ursa is twenty-five years old, Cat near sixty, and Jeffy is fourteen.

The novel opens with Ursa’s accident, a fall down a flight of stairs precipitated by a fight with her husband Mutt that necessitates a hysterectomy. It is striking that neither Mama nor Grandmama visit Ursa in the hospital or help during her recuperation. Instead, Ursa goes home with Tadpole, the owner of Happy’s Café, where she sings. When Ursa returns from the hospital, Cat visits her in Tadpole’s apartment and offers Ursa a place to stay in her own house. It is during this passage that Jones makes Cat the medium for a cautionary—one might say maternal—message about sexuality. Cat is skeptical about Ursa’s rush to be with Tadpole; she comments that Ursa seems to be moving into the relationship because he is “the first man that has looked at her” (25). Ursa reacts with anger at Cat’s insinuations, but later in the narrative we learn that she herself realizes that she is rushing things with Tadpole out of insecurity—afraid that the hysterectomy has compromised her femininity and sexuality. During the same passage in which Cat gives Ursa advice, she also flirts with her, joking when Ursa tells her to go to hell that she will go, as long as Ursa “is coming with her” (26).
Jones highlights the different nature of female desire by portraying the qualitatively different gendered looks that are trained on the mulatta. Throughout *Corregidora*, there is tension about how men look at Ursa, especially the men who patronize Happy’s Café. In the exchange between Ursa and Mutt that precedes her fall, they argue about the way the men look at her. Mutt says, “I don’t like those mens messing with you.” Ursa protests, “Don’t nobody mess with me,” to which Mutt replies, “Mess with they eyes” (3). This exchange illuminates the importance of the look, and the way that looking alone may constitute an act of aggression. In Ursa’s reflection about her struggle with Mutt over her decision to continue singing at the club after their marriage, Mutt continually equates the men’s looking at Ursa with sexual provocation—“He’s all eyes too, and probably all dick” (157). By contrast, the act of appreciative looking by a woman doesn’t cause the same kind of conflict. Cat’s admiring gaze upon Ursa is not considered threatening, although it does not go unnoticed: Sal remarks to Ursa, “Cat thinks you’re beautiful” (72).

In the novel Jeffy is a teenaged neighbor who, when her mother is working the night shift, stays the night with Cat. Although Ursa moves briefly into Cat’s house after her accident, she returns to Tadpole’s after she overhears Cat and Jeffy having a sexual conversation (and what seems to be sexual activity). Although Jeffy has previously made a sexual advance upon Ursa, it is Ursa’s discovery of Cat’s relationship with Jeffy that precipitates her move out of Cat’s house. The novel suggests that Ursa’s phobic reaction to lesbian desire can be understood in the context of the insecurity that being barren causes her to feel vis-à-vis her own sexuality. As Simon notes, homosexuality in the novel is pathologized through its association with a range of negative metaphors: whiteness, insanity, abusiveness, and death (110). And yet, homosexuality in the novel is no more pathological than heterosexuality. Ultimately, Ursa rejects lesbianism as a viable alternative to heterosexuality and the relationship between Cat and Jeffy is not represented in a utopian way. But Jones also deploys lesbianism in the text to highlight the constraints of normative heterosexuality for women, providing a strong critique of their enforced passivity in intimate relationships with men. To Ursa, Cat explains her sexual affair with Jeffy as a function of “being tired of feeling like a fool in bed” (with men) (64). She intimates that Ursa cannot empathize, implying that mulattas receive better treatment in heterosexual relationships. Although Ursa refuses to engage Cat in the moment, in fact she interprets Cat’s behavior through the prism of her own frustration about a woman’s proscribed role in heteronormative sex. Eventually Ursa reflects,

Yes I know what it feels like . . . I remembered that night I was exhausted with wanting and I waited but he didn’t turn toward me and I kept waiting and wanting him and I got close to him up against his back but he still wouldn’t turn to me and then I lay on my back and tried hard to sleep and I finally slept and in the morning I waited and still he didn’t and I thought in the morning he would but he didn’t and I waited but the clock got him up and he went off to work and I lay there still waiting. I was no longer even angry with waiting. I just lay there saying don’t make me use my fingers, and then I got up too. Yes, I could tell her what it feels like. (64–5)
Later in the novel, Ursa revisits this problematic: “a man always has to say I want to fuck, and a woman always has to say I want to get fucked” (89). In this way Jones critiques the imperative for women to be sexually passive. In the novel lesbian sexuality is represented as providing liberating options for women, even as the abject status of women who engage in such relations is acknowledged. In the third section of the novel, Jones details Ursa’s childhood friendship with May Alice, a girl who gave Ursa information about sexuality that focused on pleasure—a striking contrast to the litany of rape and abuse that Ursa’s “mothers” taught to her. When May Alice becomes pregnant by her boyfriend she laments to Ursa “if it’d been you nothing would have happened” (141). The implication that Ursa and May Alice had some type of erotic connection is intriguing. Thus, what Simon has termed “Ursa’s phobic response to Cat and Jeffy” (110) might also stem from the repression of an earlier unrequited desire.

It is revealing that in Julie Dash’s novel, also entitled Daughters of the Dust (1997), Trula is the only main character that does not reappear. Dash’s novel substantially fleshes out the details of Yellow Mary’s story, including the information that she ran houses of prostitution in Savannah and Atlanta that served an exclusively white male clientele (116–21). Although two new lesbian characters are included in the novel, Dash omits any reflection on the relationship between Yellow Mary and Trula. The omission is odd given that Dash clearly intends that the film and novel be read together. Film stills printed in gray half tones are placed at intervals throughout the book, at the beginning of the text, and at the start of each chapter. The images are not strictly illustrative; they do not correspond directly with the novel’s text. However, they have a strongly evocative function, giving the reader a visual suggestion for what is usually the imaginative function of “the mind’s eye.” The images are also incorporated into the material surface of the book’s pages because they are translucent, like a scrim—printed words are superimposed upon the half-tone renderings of the film stills, resulting in a palimpsest effect. In terms of content, the novel simultaneously acts as both “prequel” and sequel to the film. Although the novel’s plot revolves around the young adult Amelia, the daughter of Myown, who was a teenager in the film, the book also provides the reader with background information about main characters in years preceding the time depicted in the film.

The erasure of Trula in the novel is both disjunctive and puzzling, especially given that Dash has maintained that Yellow Mary and Trula were scripted as lovers, in spite of conflicting statements made by Barbara-O, the actress who played Yellow Mary (66). It is commendable that Dash refuses to censure her original conception of the sexual relationship between the characters. However, if we are to read the film and the novel Daughters of the Dust as part of the same story, then Dash’s decision to exclude the enigmatic Trula from the novel also significantly undermines the theme of the rearticulated mulatta. Thus, the complex nexus of racial and sexual ambiguity and taboo that Yellow Mary and Trula represent is, at best, muted in the novel.

In the book Daughters of the Dust, the new lesbian couple Carrie Mae and Toady clearly inhabit the roles of “femme” and “butch.” It is interesting that Dash turns to this familiar trope—the butch–femme couple—which has been critiqued as a stereotype of lesbian relationships. The novel’s depiction of Toady and Carrie Mae, who run
an after-hours speak easy at Ibo Landing, contrasts strongly with the romantic cinematic images Dash used to communicate the connection between Yellow Mary and Trula (the flirtation with the kaleidoscope, the sharing of a cigarette, the embrace on the beach at sunset). In her film Dash stages lesbian desire that occurs between two women who look “feminine,” yet convincingly inhabit conventional romantic scenarios, thus undermining those scenarios’ heteronormativity. In her novel Dash describes lesbian desire that occurs in a framework that observes gendered roles. Carrie Mae is a voluptuous woman of easy virtue, and the androgynous Toady is her protector. At their speak-easy, Carrie Mae plays the role of hostess and Toady is the enforcer, pulling out her gun when drunken male clients become unruly. Although some readers may welcome the explicit nature of the lesbian relationship between the characters in the novel, I would argue that the novel’s lesbian relationship seems a simplistic nod to diversity that fails to substantively challenge heteronormative and racist modes of representation. I am not suggesting that representations of butch–femme relationships do not have radical potential. However, the novel’s relationship between Carrie Mae and Toady is not substantive enough to constitute a critique of that kind. By contrast, the film’s portrayal of the love between Trula and Yellow Mary has radical potential and retains a stubborn mystery that resists being dispelled.

Conclusion

Although some literary theorists regard the mulatta as an anachronistic figure, this essay takes the perspective that political and social developments of the post–Civil Rights period—including the end of anti-miscegenation law; emancipatory social movements based on racial, gender and sexual identities; and the recent politicized emergence of mixed-race identities—warrant new assessments of the mulatta’s relevance to contemporary culture. Through their engagement with such figures, Jones and Dash offer a critique of “race pride” that relies upon stable categories and normative behaviors. Jones’s character Ursa ultimately pursues her creative potential as a blues singer—an artistic profession that places her at the margins of what is considered appropriate behavior for a black woman. Like Ursa, Yellow Mary does not undertake traditional women’s work but becomes a prostitute—also a marginalized profession. These characters represent significant departures from the idea of acceptable or representative black womanhood. In this sense Corregidora and Daughters of the Dust contribute to a dialogue in black cultural studies that Stuart Hall (1988) has termed a politics of representation, foregrounding fragmentation and multiplicity in black identities and communities rather than representing the resolved identities and harmonious communities that constitute “positive images.”

In a memorable sequence in the film Daughters of the Dust, new possibilities for female subjectivity capture the imagination of the teenage girls of the Peazant family. The action shifts between a scene that depicts Yellow Mary and Trula relaxing in a tree by the beach, having a conversation with Eula, and a scene depicting several girls in the family eavesdropping on the adult women from a vantage point at the water’s
edge. Myown, one of the teenagers who welcomed Yellow Mary and Trula as they arrived at Ibo Landing, plays with Yellow Mary’s discarded veil as they discuss the scandalous newcomer.

A girl declares: “What kind a ‘oman she is? Yellow Mary ain’t no family ‘oman. She a scary ‘oman.”
Myown replies: “She a new kind of ‘oman.”

The Gullah pronunciation of woman, ‘oman constitutes a linguistic play (oman/omen) that corresponds well with the type of intervention that both Jones and Dash offer in their revisions of the mulatta. By deploying representations of lesbian desire in tandem with representations of miscegenation, Corregidora and Daughters of the Dust anticipate a different role for mulattas. Through narrative strategies that highlight the interrelatedness of race, color, and sexuality, Dash and Jones foreground what black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins theorize as “intersectional” and “interlocking” modalities to express how African-American women are positioned in social relations. Corregidora and Daughters of the Dust offer “a new kind of oman/omen”—characters in stories that gesture toward what Adrienne Rich has called “a different set of valences”—radical narrative revisions of the black female hero in American literature and film.

NOTES

1. In their concept of racial formation, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) theorize race as a historically specific category that is an effect of ideological formations. Although Omi and Winant inform my use of race, I am also concerned with the ways that anachronistic interpretations of race (as heritage, for example, or as physical type) leave their residue in representation.
2. Although phrases such as “race mixing” and “racially mixed” are problematic when “race” is not assumed to have scientific (biological or genetic) validity, they are nevertheless accurately descriptive of relations and subjectivities that develop under historical circumstances in which “race” has real power and palpable effects.
3. In the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich (1986) asserts that the institution of heterosexuality achieves its dominance through the way in which heterosexual sexuality masquerades as a choice made by women, rather than the primary mode of subversion to male domination.
5. In Daughters of the Dust the character Iona, who has a Native American lover, ultimately stays with him on the island when the rest of her family migrates. In Julie Dash’s literary “sequel” to her film, the novel Daughters of the Dust (1997), Black Native American characters have a substantial presence. Dash also introduces a new character in the novel, Amelia, whose “red” features engender suspicion among Sea Islanders unaccustomed to her appearance.
6. Gwaltney recorded similar stereotypes about light-skinned people: “See, people have gotten colors all mixed up with ideas about what is good or bad or nasty or clean. You know, my mother said that a lot of her own relatives did not want to eat her cooking because her skin was light. I mean, a lot of people think that light people are all—well, that they are not clean cooks” (80).
7. Recently published African-American family histories such as Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White (1994) document precisely this phenomenon, wherein a family splits along color lines when some members “pass.”
8. The idea that childbirth is risky for mulattas who are passing because their racial heritage might be exposed through childbirth is a consistent theme in both European-American and African-American literature. Examples include Kate Chopin’s short story “Desirée’s Baby” (1893) (as analyzed by Werner Sollors [1997]) and Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929).

9. In a framework of lesbian desire, women’s sexuality is “disconnected” from its reproductive function and the fulfillment of male sexual desire. In this way, lesbian sexuality is not “natural” but transgressive; female desire for other women is its primary expression.

10. Dash uses clothing, cosmetics and the fact that Yellow Mary and Trula travel without a man to signify their profession. The women are dressed to reflect the latest in turn-of-the-century fashion and they wear heavy make-up, details that distinguish them from the Peazant women. As scholars such as Monique Guillory have argued, historical associations of light-skinned women with prostitution and with the status of mistress to a white man ground the perceived and real sexual/economic niche as prostitutes that light-skinned women had after emancipation. Just as during slavery light-skinned women had a sexual niche as “fancy mulatta womens” (Corregidora, 173) so too “yellow” women after emancipation appealed to the sexual appetite of white men.

11. It is interesting to note that in the transition from film script to celluloid for this particular scene, Trula went from subject to object. In Dash’s published film script, the line is “And, who is that with her?” (110).

12. I am grateful to Vévè Clark for this insightful observation.

13. The actress Trula Hoosier, whose physical features include light-colored skin, curly brown/blonde, hair and blue(gray) eyes, plays the character. A number of viewers in classes in which I’ve screened the film assume that Trula is white or Latina. Because Latina is a multiethnic and transnational category, the label encompasses persons who have a wide range of physical features. Because the African (and Indian) heritage of many Latino countries has been repressed, features such as dark skin and tightly curled hair in these societies are often not recognized as African (or Indian). Nevertheless, as historians such as Jack Forbes (1980, 1993) and Magnus Morner (1967) have written, both the African heritage of southern Europeans and the legacy of African slaves in Latin America are apparent in the physical features of many so-called white Latinos and Europeans.

14. Several scholars have analyzed other ways in which Jones deploys the theme of ambivalence in the novel, particularly with regard to maternity (Sally Robinson, 1991; Stelamaris Coser, 1994, Madhu Dubey, 1995) and sexuality (Bruce Simon, 1998).

15. In Rich’s essay, the “lesbian continuum” accounts for varieties of woman-identified experience that is familiar for many women, regardless of their sexual orientation. Lesbian existence defines women who make a conscious decision to partner sexually with other women.

16. My thanks to Elizabeth Dungan for alerting me to this nuance.

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