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Social Death in the Work of Julie Dash

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Social Death in the Work of Julie Dash

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B.A., University of California, Irvine, 2011

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Abstract

Social Death in the Work of Julie Dash
By Rachal Burton

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, critically acclaimed Black female *auteur* Julie Dash wrote, assisted with, and directed films while attending the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Film School. More specifically, during this period she participated in the L.A. Rebellion, a group "with a common purpose to create a new Black cinema characterized by innovative, meaningful reflection on past and present lives and the concerns of Black communities in the United States and across the African diaspora." This cohort included, Alile Sharon Larkin, Charles Burnett, Zeinabu irene Davis, Larry Clark, Jacqueline Frazier, and Haile Gerima. Manthia Diawara's essay "Black American Cinema: The New Realism" contextualizes their films as the main example of mid- to late 20th-Century Black independent cinema. Black indie directors, he argues, tried to upend mainstream Hollywood modes of filmmaking; cinema for them, Diawara asserts, became "a research tool." The L.A. Rebellion's filmography then, specifically the group's distinctive narrative form and style is central to the Black indie movement. Dash in particular currently occupies a unique and highly esteemed place in the history of American film. Her most famous works—her UCLA thesis production *Illusions* (1982) and her theatrical feature *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)—have become celebrated for their narratives centered on Black women as well as their implicit critiques of Hollywood and slavery, respectively. In this thesis, I examine her Project One UCLA student production *Four Women* (1975) as well as *Illusions,* and her only full-length feature production *Daughters of the Dust*—to argue that Dash's Black characters are positioned by what sociologist Orlando Patterson calls natal alienation, a term he uses interchangeably with social death. Most broadly, I argue that Dash employs narrative strategies and cinematic style, to meditate on and dramatize what constitutes Black life and love within this context.

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Introduction

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, critically acclaimed Black female *auteur* Julie Dash wrote, assisted with, and directed films while attending the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Film School. More specifically, during this period she participated in the L.A. Rebellion, a group "with a common purpose to create a new Black cinema characterized by innovative, meaningful reflection on past and present lives and the concerns of Black communities in the United States and across the African diaspora" (Field, Horak and Stewart 2). This cohort included, Alile Sharon Larkin, Charles Burnett, Zeinabu irene Davis, Larry Clark, Jacqueline Frazier, and Haile Gerima. Manthia Diawara's essay "Black American Cinema: The New Realism" contextualizes their films as the main example of mid- to late 20th-Century Black independent filmmaking. According to Diawara, before this period "[w]henever Black people appeared on Hollywood screens, from [D.W. Griffith's 1915] *The Birth of a Nation* to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* [Stanley Kramer, 1967] to *The Color Purple* [Steven Spielberg, 1985], they are represented as a problem, a thorn in America's heel" (Diawara 3). Black indie directors, he argues, tried to upend this mode of filmmaking; cinema for them, Diawara asserts, became "a research tool" (5). The L.A. Rebellion's filmography then, specifically the group's distinctive narrative form and style is central to the Black indie movement.

In his introduction to *Black American Cinema* Diawara speaks to the industrial milieu in which Dash emerged: "Hollywood is only interested in White people's stories (White times), and Black people enter these times mostly as obstacles to their progress, or as supporting casts for the main White characters" (12). For Diawara, Hollywood narratives equal White narratives in which Blacks appear only as peripheral characters. Following the Black indie tradition however, as Ntongela Masilela points out in his "The Los Angeles

School of Black Filmmakers," the L.A. Rebellion attempted to change this.[1] He situates this group of filmmakers as inspired by the work of early 20th-Century race film director Oscar Micheaux: "The revolutionary breakthrough of the UCLA school was to draw on Micheaux's work, yet shift its social subject matter from a middle-class to a working-class milieu in which Black labor struggled against White capital" (Masilela 108). Many of the L.A. Rebellion directors, particularly Dash, Burnett, and Gerima, embraced a Marxist viewpoint in their productions. This allowed the L.A. Rebellion to show depictions of the Black working-class in order to portray more realistic images of the material conditions that plague many Blacks even today.[2]

Dash currently occupies a unique and highly esteemed place in the history of American film. Her most famous works—her UCLA thesis production *Illusions* (1982) and her theatrical feature *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)—have become celebrated for their narratives centered on Black women as well as their implicit critiques of Hollywood and slavery, respectively.[3] In this thesis, I examine her Project One UCLA student production

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[1] One exception, however, was Jamaa Fanaka, who became well known mostly for the 1979 action film *Penitentiary* and utilized the style of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

[2] Richard Hofricther discusses the implications of what I am referring to when he says, "Material conditions such as poverty, inadequate housing, and excessive air pollution generated by law, public policy, corporate decision making, and sometimes violence, produce and perpetuate health inequities" (emphasis mine). See "The Politics of Health Inequities: Contested Terrain," 1-56.

[3] While she has produced the bulk of her work independently, recent years have seen her undertake projects for increasingly mainstream formats. Dash's additional works, not analyzed in this thesis, include her American Film Institute (AFI) production titled *Working Models of Success* (1973), L.A. Rebellion film *Diary of an African Nun* (1977), and post-UCLA movies including a short distributed by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) entitled *Praise House* (1991), the "Sax Cantor Riff episode for the Home Box Office (HBO) television movie *SUBWAYStories: Tales from the Underground* (1997), the "Grip Till It Hurts" episode of *Women: Stories of Passion* (1997), *Funny Valentines* (1999), *Incognito* (1999), *Love Song* (2000), the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) television biopic *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002), and *Brothers of the Borderland* (2004) as well as the documentary that she presently has in the works called *Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (2016).

Four Women (1975) as well as *Illusions,* and her only full-length feature production *Daughters of the Dust*—to argue that Dash's Black characters are positioned by what sociologist Orlando Patterson calls natal alienation, a term he uses interchangeably with social death. Most broadly, I argue that Dash employs narrative strategies and cinematic style, to meditate on and dramatize what constitutes Black life and love within this context.

Chapter One begins with a review of Patterson's discussion of natal alienation in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), where he situates the phenomenon as the second of three constituent elements of slavery. I also provide a close reading of *Four Women*, paying particular attention to its "Saffronia" episode and place it in terms of 19th-Century discourse concerning politics of race-mixture. This enables me to demonstrate how Dash contextualizes the stereotypical "tragic mulatto" and other characters in the film as positioned by social death. In doing so, I draw upon more general theories of Blackness put forth by critical race theorists Frank B. Wilderson, III and Jared Sexton, as well as by literary theorist Saidiya Hartman. I further discuss Wilderson's argument that "second wave film critics" from the 1970s onwards, such as bell hooks and Valerie Smith, have failed to analyze Blackness vis-à-vis social death in Dash's early work.

Chapter Two builds upon my arguments in Chapter One to assert that Dash's *Illusions* conveys politically as well as formally and stylistically what Hartman deems an "integrationist rights agenda" which works "towards an integration into the national project" (Hartman and Wilderson III 185). The constituent elements of that "national project," given the place of Blackness across time and place in the U.S, by definition are anti-Black. I employ these and related concepts to argue that *Illusions* does not portray as Smith and hooks

argue, a subversive narrative of passing.[4] I then turn to *Daughters of the Dust* to illustrate, more broadly, the political relationship between Red, a term employed by Wilderson to denote Native American, and Black positionalities. By positionality, I refer specifically to where the subject fits within the racial hierarchy in the U.S. This affords me a methodology for understanding the political relationship between the various racialized subjects in Dash's filmography and the implications that ensue from it. One of the advantages of thinking in terms of positionality is that it avoids essential notions of race. Ultimately, I argue that a tension between Redness and Blackness exists in Dash's films along with certain motifs of mise-en-scène that emphasize, rather than obscure, her Black subjects as positioned by social death. My study of social death in Dash's films is important because they have never been analyzed in these terms in a sustained way. Hence, my auteurist analysis of Dash has implications for fresh readings of her other films as well as of other Black indie films.

[4] To assess this I draw from their *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (1998) and "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" respectively.

Chapter One

Social Death and Politics of Race-Mixture in *Four Women*, *Illusions*, and *Daughters of the Dust*

Julie Dash's *Four Women*, the seven-minute, L.A. Rebellion short, films a dance staged, choreographed and performed by Linda Martina Young to jazz singer Nina Simone's titular ballad. At the start of the film, we hear humming, drumming and African singing, followed by Young moving in a shroud accompanied by various sound effects (whippings, crying, water, chants) that evoke some of the horrendous aspects of the journey across the Atlantic. Then Young portrays through dance the stories of four Black women stereotypes that Simone's song lyrics describe in the first person: "Aunt Sara," the mammy; "Saffronia," the tragic mulatta; "Sweet Thing," the lascivious Black woman; and "Peaches," the angry Black woman. As Jacqueline Stewart describes it, "Kinetic camerawork and editing, richly colored lighting and meticulous costume, makeup and hair design work together with Young's sensitive performance to turn longstanding Black female stereotypes to oblique, critical angles" (Stewart n.p.). Indeed, Dash's cinematic style in effect critiques the historical stereotypes plaguing Black women in the 19th- and 20th-Centuries. Young's costuming, hairstyle and makeup combine with Dash's lighting and use of dissolves to connote transitions in time and place, and in effect shows the pervasive nature of these stereotypes of Black women across time. Dash thereby demonstrates what constitutes Black positionality during slavery, i.e., social death or natal alienation, or living in the context of what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). In short, *Four Women* is emblematic of the ways in which Dash employs particular narrative strategies and cinematic techniques to do so. I turn now to a discussion of Orlando Patterson's ideas and how they have been elaborated by others to provide a foundation for the film analyses to follow.

In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), Patterson begins by noting that

every human relationship functions within a structure of power (Patterson 1). For him though, slavery exists as a form of extreme domination "approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master and total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave…[It] has three facets. The first is social and involves the use or threat of violence…The second is the psychological facet of influence…And third is the cultural facet of authority" (1-2). In his view, the psychological dimension of power involves the way one person influences another's understanding of their own interests and circumstances. Defining power's third "cultural facet of authority," Patterson writes that it "rests on the control of those private and public symbols and ritual processes that induce (and seduce) people to obey because they feel satisfied and dutiful when they do so" (2). Altogether then, Patterson explains that a person having power over another in a relationship generally entails violence, influence, and lastly, authority.

These relations of power become amplified in the case of slavery, which has its own three constituent elements: (a) gratuitous violence, the act of using violent force to change a free person into a slave; (b) natal alienation, the "genealogical isolation" (5) of the enslaved and their prohibition from ties of kinship, conjugal relations, or to any of their non-slave counterparts except those chosen for them by their master (7); and (c) general dishonor, referring to the sociopsychological feature of relations of domination and how a slave understood and simultaneously accepted their subordinate position as obedience.

Natal alienation, in part, eradicates the subject-positions of mother, father, and child for that matter, as they relate to enslaved persons. In her examination of the "sexual economy of American slavery," scholar Adrienne Davis explains the peculiar nature of Black motherhood under the institutional regime. Together with "back-breaking, soul-savaging labor" performed by slaves, she notes how the institution "extracted from black women

another form of 'work' that remains almost inarticulable in its horror: reproducing the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced sexual labor to countless men of all races" (Davis 105). Needless to say, white male slave owners literally objectified Black enslaved women through rape and simultaneously rendered their offspring slaves via the legal process of "hypodescent," consequently denying Black motherhood. Similarly, historian Martha Hodes's discussion in "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War" of how terror in the form of lynching frequently became used against Black men who achieved higher social positions, also helps to draw a connection to and understanding of the denial of Black parenthood more broadly. She begins by observing, "In the antebellum South, sexual liaisons between white women and black men threatened the institution of racial slavery...[W]hen white women had children by black men…racial categories eroded [in addition to] boundaries of slavery and freedom…as free people of African ancestry endangered racial slavery" (Hodes 402). In this way the denial of Black fatherhood alongside that of Black motherhood worked to perpetuate slavery's influence over kinship more generally. Hence, Simone's lyrics in *Four Women* that describe Saffronia as living "between two worlds" draws upon this discourse concerning the racialized sexual violence inflicted upon enslaved Blacks.

Although the "Saffronia" episode takes place during slavery, it resonates with post-Emancipation discourse concerning politics of race-mixture. More specifically, the discourse of recognizing Blackness as distinct from Whiteness[5] began shortly and most frequently after the issuance of the 1863 Proclamation of Emancipation; and it related to divergences between notions of "amalgamation," "miscegenation," and the discursive change from a

[5] See Patterson, 6-7, for a discussion of earlier instances of discourses that put notions of Blackness and Whiteness in contrast with each other.

White/non-White divide structured by White supremacy to a Black/non-Black one based on anti-Blackness. Critical race theorist Jared Sexton defines anti-Blackness in his essay "'The Curtain of the Sky': An Introduction" specifically as the persecution "of blackness as the embodied antithesis of intelligence, a consuming violence leading to madness and the loss of bodily integrity" (Sexton 12). In his *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (2006), historian David Hollinger examines conversations during the late 19th-Century period of Reconstruction about race mixture and tells of a shift in terminology that accompanied Emancipation. More specifically, he clarifies how the word "'amalgamation' had been…generally used to refer to the mixing of races…But in 1863, the very year emancipation made mixture more possible [it] was replaced by the more ominous word that rang more like 'mistaken mixture'" (Hollinger 7). The phrase miscegenation became utilized to both support White supremacy and foster anti-Blackness since, as Davis explains, interracial relationships threatened slavery's ideological basis. Hollinger notes, "Eventually, miscegenation would become an ostensibly neutral word, but one that flourished in a Jim Crow discourse alongside another term that came into use for the mixing of white Americans with each other. This was the notion of the 'melting pot'" (8). In this case, people from every race ideally would come together and form a new face of America; however, the melting pot concept was only referred to European peoples mixing with each other whereas "miscegenation" became used to describe any mixing with Blacks (9). Hollinger subsequently argues that in this way, "European immigrant groups became less ambiguously white by becoming more and more *definitively 'not black'*" (9; emphasis mine). This distancing from Blackness, also taken up by non-White and non-Black groups (i.e. Native Americans, Asians, Latinos), consequently

solidified the Black/non-Black divide structured by anti-Black ideology.[6]

Returning to *Four Women* and the notion of hypodescent, in the "Saffronia" episode the protagonist solemnly describes herself: "My skin is yellow / My hair is long / Between two worlds / I do belong / My father was rich and white / He forced my mother late one night / What do they call me? / My name is Saffronia." Simone in a whisper repeats, "My name is Saffronia." These lyrics tell of her mixed race background and the implications that ensue from it given the violent conditions of Saffronia's birth. Simone's song, released in 1966, closely resembles the poem "Cross" written ten years prior by the renowned Black poet Langston Hughes. Like Saffronia, the Black subject in Hughes's piece describes the life of a "tragic mulatto" from a first person perspective. Another key similarity between the song and the poem comprises how both main characters express their existence as not quite part of the Black or White "worlds." For example, the Black subject in Hughes' poem tells

My old man's a white old man
My old mother's black
But if ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back
If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well
My old man died in a fine big house
My ma died in a shack
I wonder where I'm gonna die

[6] See Yancey, 1-230, for an extensive discussion of Black/non-Black divide.

Being neither white nor black. (Hughes 87-88)

Beyond each character's uncertain place relative to their mother's or father's "worlds," these "worlds" obviously refer to the realms of white freedom and black slavery.

In both cases the White freedom nonetheless inextricably ties with male patriarchy while Blackness has been passed along to each of the subjects through a Black mother. Although Saffronia exists as one of the "four women" and Hughes' poem connotes a male perspective,[7] both protagonists become situated, in multifarious ways, by social death in the context of slavery. For instance, *Four Women* and "Cross" resonate historically with 19th-Century racialized legal discourse that Davis writes about in her essay "'Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle': The Sexual Economy of American Slavery." Particularly she writes on how "the economy of American slavery systematically expropriated black women's sexuality and reproductive capacity for white pleasure and profit" (Davis 104). Dash and Hughes both represent via language the institutional expropriation of Black women's sexuality and reproduction. Particularly, slave law of the period legitimated instances like the rape of Saffronia's Black mother by her White father and consequently gave White men (and by extension women) impunity with regards to atrocities of the same kind. Simultaneously, Black women's reproductive labor increased the profits of their often-white, male slave owners.

Saffronia's narrative also corroborates literary theorist Saidiya Hartman's discussion of "the bifurcated condition of the black captive as subject and object" (Hartman 69). Particularly, she tells how 19th-Century American slave law attempted to "contain…tensions [of the] seemingly contradictory invocation of the enslaved as property and person, as absolutely subject to the will of another, and as actional subject by relying on the power of

[7] Those who heard Hughes read the poem would know that the character is male.

feelings or the mutual affection between master and slave and the strength of weakness or the ability of the dominated to influence…the dominant (80). Taking into account Hartman's description, Saffronia's lyrics and specifically her claim that she belongs *in-between* two worlds therefore convey an internalization of the language of 19th-Century slave law, that, for example, regards the slave as both a fungible object and criminal with individual agency (80).

These politics of race-mixture persist in *Four Women*, *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*, as well as in the short dance film *Praise House* made the same year. More specifically, Dash portrays cinematically the image of the "mulatta" in *Illusions*. The film centers on Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee), a Black women studio executive during the 1940s who passes for white in order to diversify Hollywood and produce movies about people of color. In the course of the film, among other things, Mignon fends off the advances of the white Lieutenant Bedsford (Ned Bellamy) stationed at the studio to do public relations; supervises the dubbing of a black singer, Esther Jeeter (Rosanne Katon) for a white actress's onscreen performance; and tries to persuade her studio head that they make films encompassing Native Americans' contributions to the war effort. Unlike Mignon's co-workers, Esther recognizes Mignon's Blackness and speaks to her about it; at the end of the film, the lieutenant does likewise, after opening Mignon's mail and seeing a photo that includes her Black partner. The film ends with Mignon undeterred by this exposure and determined to continue her struggle to influence the studio to diversify their films.

Valerie Smith describes in her book *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (1998) how Dash, through *Illusions'* protagonist, attempts to combat the vestiges of

slavery. In particular, Smith explains that, as distinct from other passing characters[8] whose fates are frequently marked and sealed symbolically with signs of their fallen or marginal status [like *Imitation of Life*'s Peola], Mignon is associated with signs that connect her to African American cultural history and practice" (Smith 52). According to Smith, the latter "signs" connecting Mignon to Black culture and history encompass the World War II Double V campaign for victory in civil rights at home as well as military victory abroad; and the veil Mignon wears, which resonates thematically with—and may even have been inspired by—Black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; 2007) and his idea of double-consciousness.

Regarding his childhood interactions with his classmates, and the refusal of a presumably White young girl to accept a visiting card from him, Du Bois writes

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had therefore no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and listed above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. (Du Bois 8)

Du Bois' reference to the veil parallels his understanding of the color line as the "problem of the 20st-Century." Mignon's veil within *Illusions* therefore has a symbolic element to it. The veil also precipitated in Black folks a "peculiar sensation, [a] double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (8). Mignon's passing connects almost ironically with Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness in that during most of the film

[8] In my next chapter I will discuss the implications and stakes that arise from Smith's claims about *Illusions'* passing narrative and subplot.

she looks through the eyes of her co-workers to see a white woman until Lt. Bedsford "reveals" her Blackness. However, since Esther knows that Mignon "is" Black, they both communicate from behind the veil. Nonetheless, as I will discuss later, Mignon's grievances in relation to Esther's dismissive treatment by the White sound technicians mirrors the measuring tape of a world looking on in pity.

Similarly, Patterson's seminal work provides an adequate framework for examining signs of social death in *Four Women*. For example, he describes how symbolism within the institution of slavery manifested and functioned. He observes that as "the literal whips were fashioned from different materials, the symbolic whips of slavery were woven from many areas of culture. Masters…used special rituals of enslavement [including] the symbolism of naming, of clothing, of hairstyle, of language, and of body marks" (Patterson 8-9). The consequences of these rituals become apparent in *Four Women* as they pertain to naming in general and the stereotypes, more specifically, of "the strong 'Aunt Sarah', tragic mulatto 'Saffronia', sensuous 'Sweet Thing' and militant 'Peaches'" (Stewart n.p.). The four protagonists' names, for instance, have biblical and historical connotations. Aunt Sarah's name simultaneously references the Hebrew woman married to Abraham in addition to Isaac's mother in the Jewish and Christian spiritual traditions as well as images of the mammy. The name Saffronia represents both a yellowish color mirroring that of Saffron, and 'Sophonias' denoting the Seventh Century B.C.E. Hebrew prophet Zephaniah in the Jewish Tanakh and Old Testament of the Bible meaning "Yahweh has concealed." Literary theorist Hortense Spillers likewise illustrates that, historically, names such as those in Dash's film served to "mark" Black women. She begins her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" by writing

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches'

> and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. (Spillers 203)

Some of the names listed above by Spillers overlap with those of Dash's protagonists in *Four Women*. Additionally, the phrase marking used by Spillers indicates à la Patterson's "rituals of enslavement" the position of social death during slavery and in its afterlife. By invoking them, Dash alongside other L.A. Rebellion directors, in the words of Michael T. Martin, consequently resisted mainstream Hollywood portrayals of the Black (female) stereotypes and instead "constituted [Black] women as a spiritual and life-rendering force for renewal;" her employment of such names in the short effectively forms one strategy by which "Dash renders and subverts as she signifies Black female archetypes" (Martin 211).

Dash accomplishes this subversion in *Four Women*'s narrative partly by way of her portrayal of the historical background of the stereotypes and through the lyrics of Simone's ballad. For example, Dash in depicting the mammy through Aunt Sarah's character describes from the point of view of the protagonist the pain inflicted upon her "again and again," which upends the image of a Black woman often portrayed as overweight and happy to serve her White master. The L.A. Rebellion director also subverts the "tragic mulatta" image by recognizing the violent conditions of her birth. Subsequently, Dash overturns the lascivious Black woman stereotype by alluding to "Sweet Thing's" once-held innocence by way of Simone's lyrics, "Whose *little girl* am I? / Anyone who has money to buy" (emphasis mine). Finally Dash historicizes Peaches, the militant/angry Black woman ostensibly (from a non-Black perspective) for no reason other than being Black, using Simone's phrase "I'm awfully bitter these days / Because my parents were slaves."

In all of these instances, Dash's film undermines the power of stereotyping, a power that has dangerous consequences. As Sexton and Steven Martinot discuss in their article "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," the derogatory term, or in this case, stereotypes

> do not merely signify; they assault. Their intention is to harm. [T]hey are not solely discursive signs or linguistic statements but also modes of aggression. They express a structure of power and domination, a hierarchy that contextualises [*sic*] them and gives them their force. As gestures of assault they reflect their user's status as a member of the dominant group. The derogatory term does more than speak; it silences. (Martinot and Sexton 174)

Given mainstream Hollywood cinema's conventional portrayal of Black women, Simone's repetition of the women's names in the short consequently represents their pervasiveness in American popular culture writ large. As Martin notes, in "[c]asting [Young], who, like a chameleon, enacts each stereotype…in cadence with the song's lament, Dash, like Simone, foregrounds the resilience, rape, miscegenation – and because of it, sexual commodification – and resolve, and bitterness that are Black women's…bequeathal" (Martin 211).

As noted above, Saffronia exists as merely one of the "four women" in Simone's ballad and Dash's film; however, also noted earlier, both the song and movie tell a story of Black positionality that begins prior to Saffronia's episode, specifically with the Middle Passage, and extends into the present. Alessandra Raengo, in her chapter "Encountering the Rebellion: *liquid blackness* Reflects on the Expansive Possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion Films," tells how "Young acts *out* and *through* the various characters" and that in *Four Women*'s "prologue Young's silhouette is tightly wrapped in a veil, signifying the physically and metaphysically cramped conditions of the Middle Passage. She struggles to break free, while the soundtrack carries sounds of whip lashes, water, and moaning" (Raengo 299;

author's italics). Similarly, Martin writes of the short's onset: "The sound of flailing whips and the moans of a dispossessed people off-camera render in Young's dance – at once poetic and haunting, beautifully choreographed and powerfully performed – the immorality, hypocrisy, and brutality of Western civilization" (Martin 212).

It is worth taking a closer look at the film's opening. Young's dance interpretation begins with her faceless draped body in movement, which signals the ontological positioning of Blackness within the context of social death. A still image of the opening shot resembles that of an obstetric ultrasound with Young educed as the gender-neutral fetus and the ruffling sheer fabric as the sound waves as the meditative "Om" present from the short's black-screen opening (and lasting about 31 seconds) remains in the background, altogether suggesting the birth of the slave. Literary critic Saidiya Hartman provides historical context for this portrayal in her essay "So Many Dungeons" when she tells of the significance of the architecture of the Elmina Castle in Ghana constructed by the Portuguese to export slaves and how "[t]he lesson imparted to [them] by this grand design was that slavery was a state of death…But the Royal African Company [et. al.] didn't imagine their human cargo as a pile of corpses, nor did they consider these dank rooms a grave. As they saw it, the dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born" (*Lose Your Mother* 111). As Raengo points out, when the music in *Four Women* begins (and even in the prologue), "Young gradually develops a wider range of motion…as Aunt Sarah, her arms are still wrapped around her body; then, as Saffronia and Sweet Thing, she gains momentum and sensuality; and finally, as Peaches, she stretches her arms fully and kicks amply into the air, as the editing repeats this [*sic*] gestures at an increasingly faster pace" (Raengo 299).

Paralleling Young's "wider range of motion," the dancer's costuming loosens. In the "Aunt Sara" episode alluding to the stereotypical image of the "mammy," Young wears

period 19th-Century garb; this changes to her wearing a long black dress and veil together with bright red lipstick and nail polish for the Saffronia piece. In the Sweet Thing episode Young wears a flowery and flowing blouse with a knee-length maroon and yellow skirt, medium-size hoop earrings, and hair down amidst a flashing red "streetlight." After the "birth of the slave" in the prologue and the various episodes of Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, and Sweet Thing, *Four Women* introduces us to "Peaches," the last woman that Simone describes. As in the case of each preceding woman, Simone tells Peaches' story from her point of view. Young's hair also becomes tightly braided in cornrows in the final episode with some of the braids up in a loose bun and the lower half down, and she wears a yellow strapless blouse and flowing yellow pants. Although the dancer's costume confines her less and less as the short moves forward in duration, the same thread of social death positions each segment's main character due to the fact that each character's existence stems from a stereotype based in slavery.

In other words, costuming in Dash's production works in tandem with the respective protagonists' names to not only "confine, define, and control" (Wacquant 41) Black women and Black people more generally, but also to show the fixed position of Blackness. More pointedly, when juxtaposing Saffronia's lyrics describing her father as "rich and white" (presumably in contrast with her poor Black mother) alongside the "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," which constitute for Hartman slavery's afterlife, the fixed place of Blackness then becomes clear. Black positionality also coincides with Patterson's explanation of social death. According to him, "Natal alienation has one critical corollary that is an important feature of slavery, so important indeed that many scholars have seen it as the distinguishing element of the relation. This is the fact that the relation was perpetual

and inheritable" (Patterson 9). In other words, for Patterson "hypodescent" exists as the most crucial aspect of social death. *Four Women*'s implicit meaning becomes powerfully simple: that of social death, in this instance via stereotypes, contextualizing each successive generation of Blacks. Although Dash seems to depict a production of new generation Blacks with Peaches, the notion of hypodescent applied to the stereotypes beginning with Aunt Sara, renders each protagonist as positioned by natal alienation.

While Dash's cinematic depictions of the position of Blackness as it relates to natal alienation most likely occur unconsciously or inadvertently, several critical race theorists examine it more directly. Some of these scholars include Hartman and Sexton, as well as Frank B. Wilderson, III. In her article "The Time of Slavery," Hartman generally makes note of "how best to remember the dead and represent the past is an issue fraught with difficulty, if not outright contention" ("The Time of Slavery" 758). This observation encompasses precisely what constitutes the political and emotive power of movies like *Four Women*. On the other hand, Sexton's case study of Antoine Fuqua's Denzel Washington star vehicle *Training Day* (2001), "The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing," examines the particular ways Blackness has appeared in contemporary films and media. He begins his essay by arguing that a renewal of anti-Blackness in American popular culture has coincided with the "growing clamor" in response to Blacks in high positions that came from both liberals and conservatives especially with President Barak Obama's first election. Moreover, Sexton in particular writes that in mainstream Hollywood cinema, "various guises of black empowerment, particularly images of black masculinity as state authority, should not be simply contrasted with the associations of illegitimacy, dispossession, and violence that seem to otherwise monopolize the signification of racial blackness. Rather, the former should be understood as an extension of the latter" ("The

Ruse of Engagement" 39-40). Sexton explains this further in his discussion of Sidney Poitier's role of Mr. Tibbs in Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and how the filmmaker depicts the protagonist repeatedly as "*unauthorized*" and "*unarmed*" (43; author's italics). In other words, Sexton's analysis of Mr. Tibbs demonstrates the constituent elements of Black positionality: slavery's afterlife of "illegitimacy, dispossession, and violence" towards Blacks, while also putting forth ways that Hollywood perpetuates, or continuously solidifies that position. Therefore, Mr. Tibbs, Peaches (who evokes the Black Power movement of the 1970s) in *Four Women*, and by extension Alonzo in *Training Day*, exhibit cinematically "guises of black empowerment" as they contradict, in their corresponding eras, the material conditions of Blackness.

While Sexton discusses the position of Blackness regarding its "power" on and off screen, Wilderson discusses in his book *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), this positionality vis-à-vis ontology. His argument draws explicitly from Patterson's conception of social death. Regarding how the scholar denotes these positions he writes, "Throughout this book I use *White, Master, Settler*, and sometimes *non-Black* interchangeably to connote a paradigmatic entity that exists ontologically as a positioning of life in relation to the Black or Slave position, one of death" (Wilderson, III 23; author's italics).[9] This particular methodology enables me to argue that Dash's Black subjects exist as natally alienated and socially dead beings despite their positions in the films as "mothers," "fathers," significant others, and even as paid workers. Additionally, the subject-positions named above would imply that her Black characters have agency; however given Wilderson's

[9] He continues, "I capitalize the words *Red*, *White*, *Black*, *Slave*, *Savage*, and *Human* in order to assert their importance as ontological positions and to stress the value of theorizing power politically rather than culturally" (Wilderson III 23; author's italics). From this point forward in my thesis, I follow Wilderson's methodology in capitalizing these racial/political designations.

definition of what Blackness entails, those particular forms of subjectivity become disallowed. Wilderson's interview with Hartman in "The Position of the Unthought" contributes to an understanding of how the various subject-positions exist under erasure when taking Blackness into consideration and in comparison with other positions (e.g., class, gender and sexuality).

Significantly, for Wilderson, as well as for Hartman, social death persists to this day. The latter explains it phenomenologically as Black lives "still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago…[i.e.] the afterlife of slavery." The former in a similar manner uses his examination of Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's argument in *On the Postcolony* (2001) to describe Blacks' continued position in relation to social death. According to Wilderson, Mbembe argues that "once the slave trade dubs Africa a site of '*territorium nullius*'…even Africans…not captured are nonetheless repositioned as Slaves in relation to the rest of the world, the absence of chains and the distance from the Middle Passage notwithstanding" (95; author's italics).

Turning to film, Wilderson posits that most Black filmmakers deliberately and mistakenly avoid critiques of Black positionality in their work, thereby ignoring the position of Blackness as functioning in the "afterlife of slavery." For example, in discussing *Antwone Fisher* (dir. Denzel Washington, 2002), Wilderson tells how the film "begins by assuming that Black masculinity *is* the law (naval officers and ensigns) rather than a void created by the force of law" (110; author's italics). In other words, Washington mistakes Blackness for comprising subjects rather than objects of the law, as institutionally alive instead of socially dead. Wilderson's logic of the position of Blackness as contextualized by social death regardless of the spatiotemporal distance from *de jure* American slavery thereby informs my

analysis of Dash's work. In the case of *Four Women* then, not only Aunt Sarah and Saffronia, but *each* of the characters exhibit the position of social death.

Furthering this elaboration of social death's persistence, Hartman and Wilderson discuss in their interview the meaning behind "existence in the space of death where negation is the captive's central possibility for action" (Hartman and Wilderson III 187). In response to Hartman's quote above, Wilderson tells how Blackness has "tremendous life," but that life cannot be compared to touchstones that hold together what he deems civil society (187). He therefore relates Blacks' "tremendous life" to a revolutionary violence spoken by the Black psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968); Dash portrays a revolutionary violence indicative of Fanon in the "Peaches" episode. It occurs most evidently when Simone sings from the protagonist's viewpoint, "I'll kill the first mother I see / My life has been rough." Sexton more pointedly conceptualizes "social life" as "another name for freedom and an attempt to think about what it entails" ("The Social Life of Social Death" 17). Putting Dash in conversation with Sexton demonstrates the director's aesthetic depictions of freedom, as I mentioned before, particularly through performance and costume.

Dash's feature-length film *Daughters of the Dust* provides an example of the limitations of representing Blackness: as the filmmaker attempts to map her Gullah Geechee heritage, she can only go so far in her elaboration. The film gives a narrative account of the Gullah Geechee Peazant family's move to mainland United States from Ibo Landing of the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. More specifically, it depicts the story of three Black women protagonists: family matriarch Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day) Eula

(Alva Rogers), and Yellow Mary (Barbara-O).[10] As the family prepares to move, Nana Peazant attempts to keep her loved ones there on the Islands for the purpose of staying close with her descendants as well as to continue the various traditions of the Gullah Geechee culture. Meanwhile, Peazant family member Eula works to maintain a relationship with husband Eli (Adisa Anderson) that suffers due to her current pregnancy (with the Unborn Child voiced by Kai-Lynn Warren) by a man who raped her. Yellow Mary comments, "Same time, the raping of colored women as common as the fish in the sea." A later scene confirms that Yellow Mary returned to Ibo Landing after having lived in Cuba where her employer also raped her. Therefore racialized sexual violence occurs as one major theme in *Daughters of the Dust*'s narrative.

Eli and Nana Peazant appear to deal with the fallout of Yellow Mary and Eula's rape in several of the scenes in Dash's film. In this way, the L.A. Rebellion filmmaker shows the closeness between the matriarch and the younger generation. For example, in an earlier scene, an anguished Eli tells Nana Peazant his pain of knowing that Eula will give birth to a child not his. In a later sequence, Yellow Mary also reveals to Nana, though not explicitly, the atrocity that occurred in Cuba. During the picnic scene towards the end of the film, a frustrated Eula scolds the women in the family for gossiping about Yellow Mary and calling her "ruint." In this way Dash appears to critique the racialized sexual violence, particularly against Black women, frequent during this period of post-Emancipation.

Several other subplots in addition to motifs of rape comprise Dash's narrative. One specifically entails that of spirituality represented by Bilal Muhammed (Umar Abdurrahamn), a Muslim character in the film as well as by Viola (Cheryl Lynn Bruce), who became

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[10] A number of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers including Dash, Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett who counter overdetermined Hollywood representations of Blackness employed many of the same actors in their productions.

introduced to Christianity upon visiting the mainland U.S. Dash juxtaposes alongside these depictions those of the various Gullah Geechee cultural practices that encompass language, clothing, dance, and food. This becomes emphasized through stylistic techniques involving cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and sound. For example, an early scene of the film we hear in voice-over narration a woman speaking in the Gullah Geechee dialect. We also see many of the Peazant women in white linen clothing and specifically Yellow Mary wearing a veil, as do Saffronia in *Four Women* and Mignon in *Illusions*. Using a series of long shots and slow motion, Dash portrays the Peazant men doing a special handshake and some of the Peazant women playing a dance game, with both scenes occurring on the beachside. Hence, the importance of depicting Gullah Geechee culture becomes unmistakably evident, even as the film's main characters are plagued by the conditions of natal alienation.

Toni Cade Bambara in her chapter "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," discusses more in depth several of *Daughters of the Dust*'s themes: "the thematics of colonized terrain, family as liberated zone, women as source of value, and history as interpreted by Black people are central" (Bambara 121). Regarding a theme of "colonized terrain," Bambara points out that Ibo Landing existed once as an indigo plantation. Several flashbacks, structured by the voice-over narration of the Unborn Child and Nana Peazant, shows the slaves producing indigo with color-stained hands. In terms of the "family as liberated zone," Dash portrays the different Peazant men and women fraternizing with each other throughout her film while the family members outwardly display respect for the older matriarch. The last theme Bambara claims in the film resonates with ideas concerning ontology within social death (Hartman and Wilderson III 187) and that while slaves attempted to have ties with their communities, these attachments had no legitimacy (Patterson 6).

Dash also reinterprets history by giving accounts of slavery from her Black characters' point of view. Diana Pozo explains various aspects of this in her "Water Color: Radical Color Aesthetics in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*." Here she writes, "The legend of the Ibo, African captives who refused to live in slavery and walked back into the water, has many interpretations: Eula tells a version of the story where they walk over the water back to Africa. Bilal…recounts that their chains weighted them down and they drowned rather than live in capacity" (Pozo 432). Based on Pozo's explanation, Eula's take on the Ibo legend has more of an imaginary element when compared to Bilal's. However, Dash in several places of the movie uses her Black subjects to recount historical narratives of slavery. For instance Viola tells Mr. Snead (Tommy Redmond Hicks), a photographer she brings to document the Peazants' move over to the mainland, "Just before the [Civil] War…they were still running and hiding salt-water Africans, pure-bred from the Yankees." Nana Peazant, still alive during the regime of slavery, also describes in voice-over the labor she had to do and the numerous effects it had on her family. To emphasize the importance of knowing your family, Nana Peazant recounts,

> In recollect, how we live in a time 'fore freedom come in the old days, they didn't keep good record of our birth our death in the selling of the slave back then. A male child might get took from their mother and sold at birth. Then year later the same person might have to mate with his own mother or sister if they was brought back together again. So it was important for the slave theyself to keep the family ties. Just like the African griot who would hold this record in the head. The old souls in each family could recollect all the birth, death, marriage and sale. Those 18th-Century Africans they watch us, they keep us, the ancestors.

Natal alienation becomes starkly evident during Nana Peazant's soliloquy and in this way Dash thereby foregrounds the centrality of slavery in the lives of her Gullah Geechee characters.

By making slavery a point of focus in *Daughters of the Dust*'s narrative, Dash entered into a major Hollywood tradition; still, her film tells its story in a unique way. Film scholar Anna Everett discusses journalistic reviews on *Daughters of the Dust* saying, "The fact that Dash had intentionally broken with mainstream filmmaking approaches that too often reduce the complexities of black life to homogenized, ready-made film commodities apparently was lost on most critics who reviewed the film for the popular press" (Everett 909). Regarding mainstream cinema's depiction of Blackness in general, film scholar Ed Guerrero's book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) explains the several ways that Blackness has become 'framed' in Hollywood movies overtime thereby contextualizing the dominant representations that Dash's work challenges. In addition to having an ideological foundation of anti-Blackness, the dominant method of representation in the U.S., he tells, also works from specific economic and political vantage points (Guerrero 5).[11] As Guerrero puts it, "Representations of *blackness* in commercial cinema are, in fact, 'overdetermined'" (6; author's italics). Coinciding with Diawara then, he acknowledges the fixed position of Blackness in Hollywood. Within this particular industrial context, a "new realism" (Diawara 6) in Black cinema emerged. Guerrero provides an example of a discussion of the ways directors have represented the American peculiar institution within Hollywood specifically in his chapter "From 'Birth' to Blaxploitation: Hollywood's Inscription of Slavery," calling these on-screen images the "plantation genre,"

[11] See Wilderson, III 225-240 for a discussion on the relationship between slavery, capitalism, and white supremacy.

which for him occurred in three phases. Guerrero illuminates this writing that "[b]ecause slavery, and resistance to it, is such a *central and formative* historical experience deeply rooted in the social imagination of…Americans, cinematic expressions of [it] have become sedimented into a range of contemporary film narratives and genres, and, specifically, into the symbolic or latent content of many films depicting African Americans" (Guerrero 43; emphasis mine). Dash's filmography sits among the repertoire of movies that address the peculiar institution directly and indirectly in their narratives. This becomes apparent by way of her employment of authorial form and style as well as content.

For example, Anissa Janine Wardi's essay "Between Breath and Death: Transatlantic Memory in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*" tells how the filmmaker characterizes her Gullah cultural history on the Sea Islands of the Carolinas and Georgia. She writes in particular of how "Dash captures the poetry of the Sea Islands by casting land and water as primary narrative agents in a film about the Peazant family leaving the Sea Islands for mainland America at the turn of the twentieth century" (Wardi 45). In this respect, landscape becomes personified in *Daughters of the Dust*, even becoming a character in and of itself. Wardi's analysis complements my own with regards to a reocurring trope of social death in Dash's movie when she writes, "Transgressing oceanic and continental domains, the Sea Islands are themselves sites of tension and contradiction, *in-between* spaces of the living and the dead, a terrain where it is possible to 'catch a glimpse of the eternal'" (45; emphasis mine). Put differently, Wardi's description highlights the parallel between the Saffronia character in *Four Women*, the Sea Islands (as character), Yellow Mary and Eula Paezant: Saffronia and the *Daughter's of the Dust* characters literally personify social death via the racialized sexual violence they endure in both films and the latter as natal alienation illustrated via space. Furthermore, the L.A. Rebellion filmmaker's dramatization

of the interracial relationship that Iona Peazant (Bahni Turpin) has with character Ninnyjug (Jabario Cuthbert) "of the Cherokee nation" for instance, also illustrates the "afterlife of slavery." This relates also relates to mother-daughter kinship in that Iona has to "lose her mother" in order to be in a relationship with Ninnyjug. This subplot demonstrates a cinematic portrayal of a particular "structural divide" (Wilderson, III 225) between Red and Black positionalities.

As noted earlier, natal alienation-*cum*-social death manifests itself precisely in the nature of motherhood, fatherhood and other Human[12] relations. In his piece on L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Haile Gerima's major film, "Cinematic Unrest: *Bush Mama* and the Black Liberation Army," Wilderson explores this dynamic, noting that "gratuitous violence [slavery's first constituent element] relegates the Slave to the taxonomy, the list of things. That is, it reduces the Slave to an object. Motherhood, fatherhood, and gender differentiations can only be sustained in the taxonomy of subjects" (136). Similarly, Spillers, in the latter half of her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," discusses this phenomenon in the spatiotemporal context of the peculiar institution, writing: "In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the owner 'possesses' it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, *and*, *as often*, without whatever benefit of patrimony" (Spillers 217; author's italics). Spillers's explanation therefore highlights the crux of Saffronia's narrative, and by extension that of the Black subject in Hughes's poem, when both protagonists make the

[12] I use Sylvia Wynters's discussion of Liberal humanism to explain the political implications behind my capitalization of the word Human: "Liberal humanism is itself based on the primacy of the issue of the Rights of Man as *the* defining premise that underlies our present order of knowledge." See "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward a Human Project," 107-169.

claim of belonging in between two worlds. This also goes alongside Wardi's analysis of the role of landscape as "in-between spaces of living and the dead" in *Daughters of the Dust*. Hence, as Wilderson summarizes, "Black children do not belong to Black mothers (or fathers), just as Black men and women don't belong to, and…cannot claim, each other: flesh is always already claimed by direct relations of force" (Wilderson III 138).

The lyrics of Simone's *Four Women* allude to kinship vis-à-vis each of the protagonists, such as *Aunt* Sarah's name, Saffronia's reference to her mother, the question "*Whose* little girl am I?" in the Sweet Thing episode, and Saffronia's explanation that her "*parents* were slaves," the four women's overall position as Black crowds out the daughter subject-position. In other words, these women have no legitimate claims to kinship. According to Patterson's theory, they can only inherit social death. The internalization of the 19th-Century discourse makes this evident in the "Saffronia" episode when she views herself as belonging *in-between* two worlds. Also, paralleling Wilderson's argument concerning Black positionality's relationship to structures of policing, the four women's existence as historical stereotypes renders them objects and not subjects of American popular culture. In this way Dash represents through narrative form in her depiction of the Middle Passage during the prologue, and style through various cinematic techniques of cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and sound, four *natally alienated* Black women. As I have shown, similar dramatizations inform the passing character in *Illusions* and various members of the Peazant family. Their inability to claim family clearly constitutes a major thread of Dash's depiction of Black life in the three films under examination in this thesis. In this and in the many textual strategies I have enumerated in this chapter, these works stand apart and distinct from mainstream Hollywood films that purport to do likewise.

Chapter Two

Subversion and Red and Black Positionality in *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust*

Having discussed the elements of social death present in *Four Women*, *Illusions* and *Daughters of the Dust* in the previous chapter, I conduct a close reading of *Illusions* to demonstrate how Julie Dash depicts her Black subjects to convey formally and stylistically what Wilderson has termed a "grammar of suffering," which is premised on Black (non)ontology. While doing so, I also challenge the interpretation of *Illusions* as a subversive narrative of passing as some of its previous analysts, such as Valerie Smith and bell hooks, claim, seeing the film instead as expressing what Hartman calls an "integrationist rights agenda" as opposed to what Wilderson calls an "antagonistic identity formation."

Significantly, hooks belongs to a group of critics Wilderson calls "Second wave Black film theorists" (with Thomas Cripps and Donald Bogle constituting the first wave),[13] that also include Smith, Diawara, James Snead and Jacqueline Bobo, among others.[14] For him, many of their works have no basis in "overt theories and methodologies" regarding spectatorship. Moreover, these second wave Black film theorists "were not inclined to meditate on the archaic persistence of two key ontological qualities of the legacy of slavery namely, the condition of absolute captivity and the state of virtual noncommunication within official culture" (Wilderson, III 64). In other words, they have not grappled with Blackness' position within social death. Wilderson does credit these critics with complicating the field via their various works, understanding film as part of the apparatus or institution that relates

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[13] Wilderson references their works *Black Film as Genre* (1978) and *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973/89) respectively.
[14] The repertoire of works that he critiques of theirs comprise Snead's *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (1994), hooks's *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), Smith's 1997 anthology *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*; and Diawara's 1993 anthology *Black American Cinema*).

to Black people's derelict institutional status, and for their examinations of cinematic form and style (63-64). Still, Wilderson argues that they misunderstand the ontology of Blackness, a positionality to which they grant to Black people "some institutional status or the potential for institutional status" (64) that cannot exist by virtue of their position within social death. Examples of this "institutional status" denied Blacks could even include designations of gender, sex, and class. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter One, Sexton discusses how in films like *Training Day*, Hollywood attempts to give Blackness institutional legitimacy (with Alonzo as a police officer) despite the conditions of social death. In Wilderson's examination of *Antwone Fisher*, he argues that the film posits that even "though off-screen the police are everywhere the Black body is not (meaning that Blacks are the objects, not the subjects, of policing even when in uniform), popular cinema is able to invert the world so that, on screen, through selected iconographic and acoustic combinations, Blackness can embody the agency of policing" (103). Wilderson's critique of second wave critics has important implications for Smith and hook's argument that *Illusions* has subversive elements in its handling of the passing narrative.

A key concept for my analysis of *Illusions* comes from Wilderson's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010). This book, in the author's "seeks to uncover Red, Black and White socially engaged feature films as aesthetic accompaniments to grammars of suffering, predicated on the subject positions of the 'Savage' and the Slave" (Wilderson, III 6). The contrast between them helps to clarify the unique aspects of Black positionality. According to him, the "Savage" or Native American position's grammar of suffering includes the loss of sovereignty vis-à-vis land, governance, religion, and kinship; by contrast, that of the Slave or Black positionality consists of social death (i.e. the non-recognition/legitimacy of kinship and conjugal ties). Another crucial concept for my

discussion is Wilderson's notion of "antagonistic identity formations," as discussed in his piece "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" I will use Wilderson and literary critic Saidiya Hartman's theories as a rubric for determining whether *Illusions*' grammars of suffering conveys an "antagonistic identity formation" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 225) or "integrationist rights agenda" (Hartman and Wilderson III 185).

In the case of Wilderson's theory, the mass mobilization of an "antagonistic identity formation" would "precipitate a crisis in the institutions and assumptive logic c which undergird the United States of America [and] come to grips with the limitations of marxist [*sic*] discourse in the face of the black subject" ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 225). Wilderson explains the necessity of understanding the limitations of Marxism as resulting from the fact of the United States' construction at the place where the matrices of capitalism and white supremacy intersect. Hence, the "Gramscian categories [of] work, progress, production, exploitation, [etc.]" that, for him, comprise White positionality (a term interchangeable with civil society and Human) become "disarticulated" by the slave's grammar of suffering (226). Put differently Wilderson explains that although Gramscian Marxism can imagine the subject who transforms him/her self into a mass of antagonistic identity formations that can precipitate a crisis from the worker's position (i.e. a formation based on the worker's *conflictual* relationships with bosses within capitalism), Gramscian theory cannot account for the antagonisms based on the Slave's positionality (225).[15] For example, while *Illusions*' protagonist Mignon expresses her grievances with mainstream Hollywood cinema from a Marxist viewpoint (that is, as a worker arguing for better working conditions for Esther and

[15] It is worth noting that Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks* (1992) does give an explicit account of his understanding of the crisis of black subjects under American capitalism and that although Wilderson does not seem especially Gramscian [hegemony] or Lucaksian [reification], CLR James in the 1940s also presents a reading of the black worker as being in a vanguard position for revolution against capitalism.

for the diversity of Hollywood narratives), Dash's narrative form and style, as discussed in Chapter One, depicts her as positioned by social death.

The film's title sequence announces that Dash's narrative concerns the work of film production: the movie's name appears printed in white letters on dark partially unrolled film stock.[16] After a dissolve, 1940s jazz music plays while a glistening and rotating Academy Awards Oscar statuette floats in the middle of a dark screen. We then hear Mignon's narrative voice reciting "The Shadow and the Act," an essay written by the notable Black fiction author and film critic Ralph Ellison, whom literary scholar Lawrence Jackson describes as "the most competent writer of the generation" (Jackson 126) in 1942, the year in which *Illusions* takes place. Specifically, Mignon tells us, "To direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, the image with reality. In the beginning was not the shadow but the act; and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion." Here Mignon informs us by way of Ellison's quote that critiquing Hollywood indicates confusion between what appears on-screen and reality off-screen; in other words, mainstream Hollywood cinema works to fabricate reality instead of replicate it.

Regarding the interplay between illusion and reality, Dash delays her introduction of the protagonist (e.g. we hear Mignon before we see her) to build up her importance to *Illusions*' plot, but we can also see this strategy as alluding to the mysterious nature of Mignon's "true" identity. The fact that Mignon passes for white places *Illusions* in a long tradition of such narratives. Yet, as Smith argues in her essay "Class and Gender in Passing Narratives" from *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (1998), Mignon's passing subverts the conventional narrative because it usually foregrounds the main

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[16] I must note that *Illusions* takes place on black and white film stock. Regarding this Dash tells how she "was going for that 1940s film noir, very rich, rich velvety Black look, so [she] used [black and white] reversal stock" (Dash 335-336).

character's uncertain identity as the story's main tension (Smith 52). Moreover, Smith points out that passing characters' fates conventionally become marked and intertwined symbolically with signs of their marginal status as with the light-skinned Peola in director John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life*'s (1934). As noted in Chapter One, Mignon in Dash's film by contrast becomes associated with signs that connect her to a Black "cultural history and practice." Whereas Smith argues that *Illusions* "construct[s] passing as a potentially subversive activity" (36), I argue that Dash's narrative, to the contrary, puts forth an "integrationist rights agenda," exemplifying Hartman's claim in "The Position of the Unthought" of how "[s]o much of our political vocabulary/imaginary/desires have been implicitly integrationist even when we imagine our claims are more radical" (Hartman and Wilderson III 185)

Put differently, as the worker calls for better working conditions in the paradigm of Gramscian discourse, the slave's grammar of suffering insists the end of production altogether. Mignon's character therefore speaks from the position of the worker as opposed to from the position of Blackness, or that of social death. Wilderson's critique of Gramscian Marxism alongside his description of Red, or Native American, positionality also confronts a question posed by hooks in her chapter. Specifically in terms of the subversive nature of Migonon's narrative, hooks writes how *Illusions* "does not indicate whether the character Mignon will make. Mignon's demands for diversity in film production are based on a mistaken understanding that Native Americans and Blacks occupy equal positions; however given the historical fact of slavery, Blackness precipitates a more radical grammar of suffering. In other words, Mignon privileges Native American represention while still leaving Blackness off-screen as with Esther.

Moreover, although Mignon keeps in close contact with her Black loved ones and new acquaintences (e.g. her boyfriend Julius, her mother, her sister Fontaine, and Jeeter), certain formal and stylistic elements of the film convey the protagonist and her Black "counterparts" as positioned by natal alienation. In other words, the play between sound and image in *Illusions*' prologue, as well as Dash's employment of mise-en-scène (here I am specifically referring to props such as the letter, the photograph and the telephone associated with Mignon's loved ones) exemplify the positioning of the L.A. Rebellion filmmaker's Black subjects as "genealogical isolates." Reminding us of the meaning behind this phrase vis-à-vis Black positionality and natal alienation, Orlando Patterson in the sociological treatise *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) writes,

> Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a *genealogical isolate*. Formally isolated with those lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. (Patterson 5; emphasis mine)

In the prologue Dash attempts to connect Mignon with Ellison by way of her narrative voice, however she juxtaposes this use of sound with an Oscar statuette, an emblem not often associated with Blackness.[17] Furthermore, the planetary-like statuette's rotation within a dark space connotes the illusory nature of the scene thereby rendering the "connection" between Mignon and Ellison a fantasy. This in effect sets *Illusions*' tone structurally. Afterward, elements of mise-en-scène serve as stand-ins for Mignon's absent

[17] This has become exemplified most recently by the boycott of the Academy Awards by some Black actors in the mainstream Hollywood industry.

loved ones. For example, we become introduced to Julius, Mignon's boyfriend, at first by a letter that her white co-worker Lieutenant Bedsford (Ned Bellamy) playfully keeps hostage. After a scene that shows him sexually harassing the protagonist, which thereby denotes an instance of "Dash's critique of white patriarchy in the Hollywood system" (Martin 212), we see Mignon leave for National Studio's executive Mr. Foresster's office and read the message sent by her beau verbalized through voice-over narration together with a high angle close-up shot of the letter. The next time we "see" Julius occurs during *Illusions*' climax when Lt. Bedsford "reveals" Mignon's Blackness as he discovers a picture of Julius alongside his military squad in a photograph. Literary critics Farah Jasmine Griffin and Hartman discuss the implications of this when they write, "The lieutenant consumes Julius's body, objectified as image, and finds 'truth' there: the threat of black sexuality. Assailed by the gaze and enframed by the lieutenant's racial schema, Julius becomes the clue which explains the elusive Mignon. Finally the lieutenant understands the mystery he has detected in her eyes" (Hartman and Griffin 362). In other words, the use of Julius' image to expose Mignon parallels the historical appropriation of Blackness and simultaneously the not only patriarchal but also, now, racial power the Lt. has over Mignon. The consumption and objectification Julius's body undergoes and threat his and Mignon's Black (hetero)sexuality pose to the lieutenant, provides an example of the unspeakable place of Blackness within American history and popular culture.

In this climatic scene, Dash seeks to illustrate the racialized sexual violence common during the Jim Crow era that Hartman and Griffin's examination of the white male gaze alludes to. The scene, moreover, emphasizes what critical race theories David Mariott calls the "curious coincidence between the work of photography and the work of lynching" (Marriott 3). Parallel to Hartman and Griffin, Marriott discusses the material consequences

of the white male gaze in his chapter "'I'm gonna borer me a Kodak': Photography and Lynching" from *On Black Men* (2000). More pointedly he says of this particular group of spectators (who often attended the lynchings of Blacks), "The lesson to be learned through the murderous gazes of these white men is that you might be reduced to something that 'don't look human' – a reduction which is, precisely, your annhiliation and their pleasure" (9). Keeping in mind his assertion, as well as Hartman and Griffin's ideas, Lt. Bedsford's exposure of Mignon through Julius's image "reduces" her to something not Human, that is, a being positioned by natal alienation. Similarly, an earlier scene in Dash's film reduces the protagonist's mother to a telephone receiver[18] while the National Studio's crisis with Lila Grant precipitates the disembodiment and reduction of Esther to a voice.

Lt. Bedsford's gaze indicates Mignon and Julius's position within social death, and thereby highlights Patterson's explanation of the phenomenon when he says, "Because slaves were natally alienated, they could be used in ways not possible with even the most dominated of nonslave subordinates with natal claims" (Patterson 32). Our awareness of the prevalence of Black lynchings after slavery, especially during the Jim Crow era, and of the circulation of lynching photos, imbues this final scene with a profoundly serious tone. Yet, the film reveals no dramatic consequences for Mignon's act of passing and its exposure. Accordingly, Smith characterizes this moment as "anticlimactic," for in diverging from the conventional trajectory of passing stories, which show the protagonist suffering by the conclusion, Dash offers a "revisionist approach to her subject" (Smith 52) and portrays a triumphant Mignon by *Illusions*' end.[19]

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[18] This element of mise-en-scène returns in the 1996"Sax Cantor Riff" episode of *SUBWAYStories*.

[19] See Woolsey, 171-195, for an in-depth analysis of the "revisionist" aspects concerning Black music within *Illusions* as well as other works created by L.A. Rebellion directors.

What renders Dash's film subversive for hooks encompasses the protagonist's connection to Black icons. This becomes clear in her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." hooks argues, "[S]ubversively, *Illusions* problematizes the issue of race and spectatorship. White people are unable to 'see' that race informs their looking relations. Though she is passing to gain access to the machinery of cultural production represented by film, Mignon continually asserts her ties to black community" (hooks 318). hooks' emphasis on Mignon's "ties" to Black culture demonstrate the symptomatic pervasiveness of social death within *Illusions*. In other words, the importance of keeping ties would not be as vital were the characters not harnessed by social death. Yet hooks invokes the concept of "Black community" to a narrative that Dash's prologue and following action renders illusory. Put another way, hooks disregards the fact that Mignon's loved ones except for Esther are absent from the film and that although Mignon argues for more Native American stories on screen, the protagonist only asks for a cup of tea for Esther. Why not ask to put Black women like Esther's stories on screen or the end of cinema altogether as Black positionality circumscribed by social death would ask of capitalism in Gramscian discourse? hooks' claim that Dash subverts issues pertaining to race and spectatorship focuses on the model of white supremacy rather than anti-Blackness. This coincides, furthermore, with Mignon's—and *Illusions*'—"integrationist" approach to Hollywood instead of the movie having an antagonistic identity formation based on Black positionality.

I am referring, more pointedly, to a scene from *Illusions*, wherein Mignon attempts to include Native American stories into the National Studio's theatrical rotation. We hear the protagonist in a voice-over say, "What about these Navajo men? They're all marines and they're trained as communication experts. They can deliver and receive codes that the

enemy is unable to break." The problem with Mignon's request parallels Wilderson's argument concerning the slave in Gramscian discourse. The latter writes,

> [T]he slave makes a demand, which is in excess of the demand made by the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic…the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop with recourse to its ultimate democratisation [*sic*]…If, by way of the black subject, we consider the underlying grammar of the question 'What does it mean to be free?' that grammar being the question 'What does it mean to suffer?' then we come up against a grammar of suffering beyond signification itself, a suffering that cannot be spoken because the gratuitous terror of white supremacy is as much contingent upon the irrationality of white fantasies and shared pleasures as it is upon a logic – the logic of capital. ("Gramsci's Black Marx" 230)

Specifically in terms of the subversive nature of Mignon's narrative, hooks writes how *Illusions* "does not indicate whether the character Mignon will make Hollywood films that subvert and transform the genre or whether she will simply assimilate and perpetuate the norm" (hooks 318). A short answer, in light of Red positionality's grammar of suffering, would indicate the latter.

Wilderson's discussion of Native American cinema's relationship to White supremacy and, by extension, anti-Blackness in *Red, White & Black* helps to demonstrate the "integrationist" nature of *Illusions* and simultaneously the symptoms of natal alienation present in Dash's nationally released feature-length film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). In the opening of his chapter "'Savage' Negrophobia," Wilderson states that "although Native American feature films (still a small corpus) assert that White supremacy, the press of civil society, constitutes the greatest threat to the project of a restored sovereign ontology, they

make an emotional argument that *Blackness* also threatens this restorative project" (Wilderson, III 221; emphasis mine). From this we can deduce how, despite Red positionality's antagonism with that of Whiteness, it still holds the capacity for anti-Blackness. Altogether the film tells a story of a Black family, the Paezants, "descended" from slaves and currently in the process of moving to the U.S. mainland from the coastal Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. For the purpose of explaining the "integrationist" instead of "antagonistic" nature of *Illusions*, as well as the antagonism between Red and Black positionalities, it helps to understand Ninnyjug and Iona's romance in the film as parallel to Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thorton) and Leticia Musgrove (Halle Barry) in Marc Forster's 2001 film *Monster's Ball*. More pointedly, in "The Position of the Unthought" Hartman agues that in Foster's movie, "Not only is Leticia's husband executed, but *her son must also die* as the precondition for her new life with her husband's executioner" (Hartman and Wilderson III 191; author's italics). While no characters die, in the literal sense of the word, in *Daughters of the Dust*, social death still manifests within its narrative. I am referring, in particular, to a final scene within Dash's movie.

The segment begins with a long shot composed of the bottom half of Ninnyjug's torso in the upper and slightly left hand side of the frame as he rides a white horse in the direction of the camera. Cross-cutting between him, a slow track-in dolly shot of Nana Peazant under natural sunlight, away from any trees looking curiously at how this event unfolds, and the remaining Peazants on a boat ready to embark to the mainland labors to build up to a moment where in slow motion, Dash conveys Iona stepping out of the boat and running to join Ninnyjug. Through a series of cuts the filmmaker shows Iona's mother Hagaar (Kaycee Moore) running after her until a member of the Peazant family holds her back, while yelling her daughter's name frantically and begging her to return. A medium

shot portrays afterward Iona grabbing tightly onto Ninnyjug as they ride away with tears falling down her face while the next shot in slow-motion illustrates them riding away together past Nana Peazant who now stands against a tree. John Barne's musical score plays in the background, further emphasizes the drama of this moment. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dash utilizes the melodramatic form to illustrate the unspeakable/un-showable. In this case the unspeakable constitutes Native American anti-Blackness. Earlier in the film, similar to Mignon and Julius's narrative, we hear Iona reading a letter sent her from Ninnyjug. Specifically, early on in the film (within the first half hour), we hear Iona's voice reciting his message by way of Dash's employment of mental subjectivity: "Mistress Iona Peazant, Daughter Island August 18th, 1902. Iona, with the greatest respect for yourself and the Peazant family, I beg that you stay by my side here on this island. Please do not leave me in this flood of migration [inaudible dialect]. I feel if I lose you, *I will lose myself*" (emphasis mine).

Despite the nobility of Ninnyjug's request, it becomes evident how Iona must lose her own "family" so that he does not lose himself. Comparable to a structural divide between the slave and worker as elaborated by Wilderson in "Gramsci's Black Marx" and that among Hank and Leticia in *Monster's Ball* as pointed out by Hartman, the same rift in positionality occurs in *Daughters of the Dust* consequently showing how natal alienation persists in the lives of its Black subjects. In other words, Dash's Black subjects have no legitimately binding relationship with each other. Similarly, the racialized sexual violence that Dash's Black women characters undergo, specifically within *Four Women* and *Daughters of the Dust*'s narratives, occur as two sides of the same coin: the violence appears inextricably tied with Dash's portrayals of mother-daughter kinship; in particular, Yellow Mary (Barbara-O) and co-protagonist Eula's (Alva Rogers) rape thematically parallels that of Saffronia's mother

within her within *Four Women* episode. Furthermore, in understanding this violence as ideologically based in slavery, the natal alienation or social death of her Black women characters, regardless of space and time become starkly evident.

Conclusion

I have argued in this auteurist study that Julie Dash's approach to narrative and cinematic style in her L.A. Rebellion films *Four* Women and *Illusions* and her feature film *Daughters of the Dust* embodies the phenomenon of social death, as elaborated by Patterson and theories of Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton concerning Black positionality. In *Four Women*, these symptoms include the cinematic portrayal of Patterson's concept of the "rituals of enslavement" in relation to naming, hairstyle, clothing, language, and of body marks.

I have also shown that *Illusions* portrays an "integrationist rights agenda" with regards to Mignon's attempt to create more diverse representation in Hollywood films as opposed to rallying for the representation of Black women or even a more radical desire to end an institution such as the film industry based on anti-Blackness. The protagonist's integrationist push for more Native American stories in Hollywood interestingly coincides with Dash's portrayal of a structural divide between Red and Black positionalities as conveyed by the Iona and Ninnyjugs subplot in *Daughters of the Dust*. Moreover, the motif of racialized sexual violence which stems from slavery, positions Dash's Black subjects as natally alienated.

My analysis of Dash's three films stems from a body of work that Saidiya Hartman calls Afro-pessimism; as yet these ideas have had a comparatively limited presence in the field of Film and Media Studies. I hope to have dramatized their value in shredding new light on both much-studied and previously neglected aspects of Dash's work. One avenue of future research would be extending this analysis to Dash's later works to see the extent to which they also embody aspects of social death.

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry could entail examining Dash's work through the lens of melodrama. The cinematic depictions of familial and romantic

relationships—within social death or outside of it—in any text invariably involve melodrama, and few critics have associated Dash's work with that genre. Linda Williams's piece "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" describes the form and style of melodramas vis-à-vis the Hollywood classical style, arguing against the model of the latter set forth by David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Janet Staiger (Williams 268-269). Melodramatic films, Williams notes, "are addressed to women in their traditional status under patriarchy – as wives, mothers, abandoned lovers, or in their traditional status as bodily hysteria or excess, as in the frequent case of the woman 'afflicted' with a deadly or debilitating disease" (269). Although *Four Women*'s existence as dance interpretation places it within the realm of experimental filmmaking, the subject matter, according to Williams' criteria, places it within the melodramatic form. Exemplifying this, Dash's PBS short *Praise House*, moreover, features the story of three generations of Black women comprising the protagonists Granny (Laurie Carlos), Hannah (Viola Sheely), and Mama (Terrie Cousar); while her "Sax Cantor Riff" episode in the HBO television movie *SUBWAYStories: Tales from the Underground* (1997) tells a story about a "Woman with Flowers" (Taral Hicks) whose mother presumably suffers from "a deadly or debilitating disease;" and *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002) on the Civil Rights Movement icon played by star Angela Bassett mainly shows the protagonist as wife to husband Raymond Parks (Peter Francis James). Dash's films also conform to Williams' description of melodramas in that they "encompass a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (269). The final episode of Iona Peazant and Ninnyjug's intertwined narratives in *Daughters of the Dust* provides a specific example of this.

In her book *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (2001), Williams "argues that since the mid-nineteenth century, melodrama has been, for better or worse, the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans (*Playing the Race Card* 44). This begs, and perhaps answers, the question of why Dash's filmography only encompasses this particular mode. Dash's productions nonetheless fit within something that she calls the "anti-Tom" category, which stands in a dialectical relationship to melodramas of various mediums like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and that "from an Afrocentric perspective seems today blatantly overdetermined by its desire to overturn these earlier racial melodramas" (296). One instance of this given by Williams includes Alex Haley's TV mini-series *Roots* (1977), starring John Amos, Leslie Uggams, and LeVar Burton. Regarding overdetermination in Hollywood, scholar Ed Guerrero's book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) explains the several ways that Blackness has become 'framed' in Hollywood movies overtime thereby also contextualizing the dominant representations that Dash's work challenges, however in a slightly different way than Williams. As he puts it concisely, "Representations of *blackness* in commercial cinema are, in fact, 'overdetermined'" (Guerrero 6; author's italics). Nonetheless, Williams gives a sufficient explanation for the relationship between melodramatic form and race. She writes,

> Here may lie the special link between melodrama and the melodramatic form of contemporary discourses of race and gender in American culture. For if melodrama can be understood as a perpetually modernizing form whose real appeal is in its ability to gesture toward inexpressible attributes of good and evil no longer expressible in a post-sacred era, then this quality could explain why race has been

> such a prime locus of melodramatic expression. For race has precisely become an "occulted" moral category about which we are not supposed to speak, yet which, far from disappearing, has remained as central to popular thought and feeling as it was in the mid-nineteenth century. (*Playing the Race Card* 300)

In other words, this particular form allows the L.A. Rebellion filmmaker to speak, or show, the unspeakable and un-showable. More specifically, melodramas create a platform for Dash to illustrate social death unflinchingly, a fact that further testifies to the rewards of exploring her work.

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