

## Daughters and Sons of the Dust: The Challenges of Accuracy in African American Historical Film

Kathryn M. Silva  
*Clafin University*

THE ELECTION of our nation's first African American President, Barack Obama, and his family's residence in the White House—a space built by slaves—has brought increased attention to African American history, particularly the topic of slavery. While historians have been exploring and documenting slavery for generations, this heightened interest in American culture is evidenced by the recent opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The large crowds and sold-out tickets demonstrate the nation's desire to learn more of African American history.<sup>1</sup> This interest has also translated to what cultural anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla has uncovered in her essay for the “Django Unpacked” issue of *Transition*. The issue, dedicated to the 2012 film *Django Unchained*, found that in 2013, there was “unprecedented attention to representations of slavery in American film,” with over nine films on slavery in theaters or in production.<sup>2</sup> Most audiences, then, have had more exposure to Hollywood versions of slavery than ever before.

In this essay, I compare *Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino in 2012, which relies on common tropes about slavery and

largely silences the experiences of enslaved women, to *Daughters of the Dust*, directed by Julie Dash in 1991, a film that focuses on black womanhood in the post-Reconstruction era on the eve of the First Great Migration. In contrast to 1989's *Glory* (dir. Edward Zwick), 2012's *Lincoln* (dir. Steven Spielberg), and 2013's *Twelve Years of a Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen), neither *Django Unchained* nor *Daughters of the Dust* is based on an actual person or event in American history. Instead, they convey a period in history through their setting and themes. They also both read as authentic to audiences despite conveying very different messages regarding slavery and emancipation, especially in terms of enslaved womanhood and the experiences of African American women in the nineteenth-century South.

I have discussed and screened select scenes of *Django Unchained* (due to intensely violent content) in my classroom; however, many of my college students have seen this film on their own.<sup>3</sup> I screen the entirety of *Daughters of the Dust* in upper-division United States History courses. I use both of these films and compare them here because both *Django Unchained* and *Daughters of the Dust* were part of this recent increased interest in depictions of slavery. It is also useful to compare the director, box office draw, budget, and audience interest, and have students discuss their belief in these films as historically accurate and authentic. On the one hand, *Django Unchained*, a violent blockbuster by controversial white male filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, was popular among critics and audiences. Since the release of the film, which was distributed by The Weinstein Company and Columbia Pictures, the #MeToo campaign, adopted by Hollywood and recently linked to allegations against Harvey Weinstein, has raised the consciousness of the history of sexual exploitation and misconduct in the film industry and for women globally.<sup>4</sup> *Django Unchained* won two Academy Awards, including Tarantino's win for "Best Writing, Original Screenplay," and made \$400 million at the box office compared to its \$100 million budget—figures that have consistently sparked interest and discussion in my classroom. On the other hand, students have rarely mentioned the critically acclaimed independent film *Daughters of the Dust* before seeing it in class, until they learned of its influence on Beyoncé's Emmy-nominated visual album, *Lemonade* (2016).<sup>5</sup> The studio subsequently re-released *Daughters of the Dust*, created and

directed by Julie Dash, an African American woman who, with this film, became the first black woman to direct and nationally release a film, which she developed on an \$800,000 budget.<sup>6</sup>

In my own experience teaching college history and using these two films, it is not uncommon to for students to comment that they learned more from the film, even as they enjoyed the other course texts, lectures, and discussions. As an educator, I recognize that films can uphold structural racism by perpetuating dominant tropes of white heteronormative heroism and redemption, especially when films purport to convey history either authentically or accurately.<sup>7</sup> In a world where Tumblr and Twitter firestorms subject popular culture to endless critiques, the college students I encounter have become increasingly sensitive to and critical of racial and gendered stereotypes. However, those same history students often judge films with historical themes primarily on their accuracy. Furthermore, if “accuracy” is taken to mean fidelity to a widely accepted narrative of history, then prejudices that are part of that narrative can be perpetuated uncritically—and African American history is especially vulnerable to such generalizations and misconceptions. When engaging with historical cinema, educators have a responsibility to prompt students to question their assumptions about the period and the events portrayed, while also challenging them to consider the narrative and visual strategies of the film, especially regarding who has the power to speak and act, who remains silent, and what counts as significant to the film’s narrative and the history behind it. Even still, educators have a duty to introduce students to alternative films and historical interpretations that will broaden their perspectives. As Bonilla surmises from the work by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “most professional historians are trained to focus on issues of accuracy . . . but fail to reflect on the authenticity of historical representations.” Furthermore, “the value of a historical product cannot be debated without taking into account . . . the context of its consumption.”<sup>8</sup> When taking these ideas together—accuracy, authenticity, and consumption—educators must recognize that films created with the goal of historical accuracy or authenticity often leave out the voices of everyday African Americans, particularly black women.<sup>9</sup> This omission ends up reinforcing students’ misunderstandings, leaving them to believe that racism is experienced primarily by African American men in slavery, and that freedom and rebellion are predominantly, if not only, found in the

black male experience. Moreover, they come to believe that African American women, enslaved and free, did not defy racism or fight for freedom and equality. This was in fact one of the major critiques of Spielberg's *Lincoln*.<sup>10</sup>

### Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Representations

The pointedly racist worldview found in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), with its historical distortions of slavery and Reconstruction, shows just how films can hold such a powerful place in our historical imagination that the public reads their racist depictions as true. In March 1915, President Woodrow Wilson, after viewing the film at the White House, is quoted as saying, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."<sup>11</sup> The film's release fueled both the rebirth and growth of the Ku Klux Klan to its largest membership in the 1920s, and massive protests by the National Association of Colored People (NAACP). Most modern films have moved away from blatantly racist depictions of African Americans like those in *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>12</sup> Still, films continue to focus on slavery as the origin story of the African American experience, and center the male experience as the focal point for the genesis of race relations.

Despite progress, films about African American history also still center a white hero alongside African Americans who lack agency, such as in *Lincoln* (2012) and *Mississippi Burning* (1988). The television mini-series *Roots* (1977), remade in 2016, and *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) have become important stories of the African American male experience for students; however, screenplays and scripts that focus primarily on masculinity and male characters suggest interpretations of slavery as a black male experience and emancipation as the endpoint in discussions of systemic racism.<sup>13</sup> This invisibility of black women is even borne out in contemporary discussions of police brutality and protests surrounding deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement. Although the #BlackLivesMatter movement began as a hashtag created by three queer women of color—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—the spread of the movement and media depictions have largely focused on the murders of black men, and have largely ignored or minimally reported on the murders of black women,

as noted by the founding members on their website “Herstory” tab.<sup>14</sup> The hashtag #SayHerName sprang from this erasure of the black female experience in political mobilization around state-sanctioned violence and death, even though black women are also disproportionately represented among the victims of police murder and brutality.<sup>15</sup> As David G. Holmes argues in his critique on *Django Unchained* for *Black Camera*, “Blacks are hardly out of the woods in terms of discrimination.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than examine the long history of African American agency from the Middle Passage to modern mass incarceration and racial justice movements, films like those named above limit the story to the moments of black liberation from slavery or Jim Crow, while ignoring the lived experiences of African American communities, particularly the women in these communities, in other historical contexts.

Since college students can and often do take films as accurate representations of marginalized groups, the films’ stories and characters can further that marginalization. Film depictions focused on shorter stories of particular moments can even reinforce stereotypes, even if that story is not racist or meant to be historically accurate. As Professors of Education Cameron White and Treina Walker point out in *Tooning In: Essays on Popular Culture and Education*, in the classroom, “[s]tudents are generally not required to think beyond the scenes presented. Popular films are cultural artifacts and as such require critical historical thinking to make important connections to the periods in which they were made.”<sup>17</sup> Too often, students privilege an individual story told in a film set in a historical moment over primary source documents, memoirs, and scholarly works. When screening films as historical texts, educators of American history must use these issues as moments to have students engage critically with the film as historians rather than as consumers of cinema. As Leslie Alexander asks in her critique of the more recent film entitled *Birth of a Nation* (directed by Nate Parker in 2016), “How do we feel when film contains only a smidgen of historical fact? And what if the historical inaccuracies are damaging and insidious?”<sup>18</sup>

Alan S. Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard’s explain in their fifteen-year study of high school teachers in Wisconsin and Connecticut that the teachers in their sample used an “extraordinary amount of film in class.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, their research suggests that seventy-five

percent of high school teachers use Hollywood films weekly in their classrooms.<sup>20</sup> One issue historians encounter in our work as educators is how to balance the stories that films depict with historical interpretations of the past. Historians critique the stories that films tell because, as cultural studies and film theorists Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in *Unthinking Eurocentricism*, the films “might induce audiences unfamiliar with the facts into a fundamental misreading of American history.”<sup>21</sup> Much of the problem with student consumption of films as historical tropes stems from the prevalence of stereotypes and major lack of diversity in films. Shohat and Stam argue that “the sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises, then, from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation.”<sup>22</sup> Marginalization in film is an important consideration because it has real-world implications and consequences. In the case of the African American experience, films can help educators fill gaps in their students’ historical knowledge that are not otherwise addressed in the education system; however, without deep historical knowledge to critically engage the stories films tell, students and audiences are too often left with a limited, and sometimes inaccurate, reading of the past.

### **Representations of Black Womanhood in *Django Unchained***

Set in very different historical periods, Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) evoke historical material through the intersection of regional memory, race, gender, and sexuality. However, their representations of African American women’s history are vastly different, with one rooting its story in stereotypes and tropes, as the other shatters them. *Django Unchained*, an immensely popular film that students are eager to discuss as a historically accurate film on slavery, is set in the Antebellum South on the eve of the Civil War, and focuses on men and slavery. In contrast, *Daughters of the Dust* examines the female African American experience during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Very few of my students have previously seen the latter film, and fewer still can appreciate it on first viewing. Anna Everett notes, “every major Hollywood studio rejected the film on the ground that it was not commercial enough to support financially and not familiar enough for audiences

to embrace emotionally.”<sup>23</sup> *Django Unchained* situates enslaved womanhood on the periphery of the slave experience; women are objects of male desire and enslaved black masculinity is inherently violent, furthering interpretations brought on by films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In an interview with historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Tarantino affirms Gates’ statement that he “deconstructed *The Birth of a Nation* through *Django*.”<sup>24</sup> While Tarantino is self-consciously playing off the merger of generic conventions from Blaxploitation and spaghetti-Western genres, *Django*’s actual storyline reflects a white man’s perspective, with the black man’s as secondary, and emphasizes the agency of white men over enslaved black men and women.<sup>25</sup> Students who see the film experience only the basest, caricatured version of what black men accomplished during slavery: the mass murder of white slaveholders and overseers to emancipate their wives.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the self-consciously black female perspective found in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* more fully depicts the agency of black women. Although set in the Great Migration, the story reflects on the history of slavery from the shores of Africa to the freedom some slaves and their descendants found in the Sea Islands of Coastal South Carolina. Dash’s film eschews Eurocentricism and colonial discourses and moves toward Afrocentric thought. Therefore, the film is unique when juxtaposed against what Shohat and Stam describe as “cultural colonialism” in films like *Django Unchained*.<sup>27</sup> *Daughters of the Dust* not only focuses on “realistic casting” of African Americans in these roles, but also represents the complexity of race and gender in the ethnic African diaspora Gullah community on the eve of joining the Great Migration.<sup>28</sup> *Daughters of the Dust* is a fictional account that portrays the real lived experiences of the Gullah peoples of South Carolina, but reflects a more realistic and complex account of history, refusing to privilege the male experience, and untangling the history of African Americans from heteronormative definitions of labor. Through storytelling, the film reveals the history of African knowledge and skilled labor, which passed from enslaved women to their free descendants, and recasts the story to emphasize their agency and their history. Both films represent the possibilities and limitations of films set in historical periods, and compel educators to consider ways of framing discussions around the real or imagined histories they tell.

For all the praise and awards it garnered, *Django Unchained* is, at its core, yet another version of Tarantino's fondness for sexploitation, Blaxploitation, and martial arts films that reflect his fascination with Germans, extreme violence, and the use of the n-word. Since students read films as historically accurate, or at the very least, plausible, *Django Unchained* perpetuates their preconceived notions without ever problematizing the reality of slavery and racism within historical context. Instead, *Django Unchained* reinforces racism and a distorted historical narrative through its structural trope of good men versus evil men, with characters of both races as heroes and villains.

A fictional Southern Mississippi plantation, "Candyland," is the setting for *Django Unchained*. It evokes the memory of the similarly named children's board game where everyone has control over the moving pieces, and anyone can win. The period is just before the Civil War and tells the story of Django, a runaway slave played by Jamie Foxx, who is searching for his wife to free her from bondage. The film begins with a German former dentist and bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), who has purchased an enslaved Django because he knows Django can identify the slave traders he hopes to track and kill—the Brittle Brothers. Dr. Schultz justifies bounty hunting to Django by saying, "like slavery, it's a flesh for cash business." Tarantino absolves Schultz to Django (and to the audience) through his dialogue, as in one of the early scenes where Schultz says to Django:

I must admit, I'm at a bit of a quandary when it comes to you. On one hand, I despise slavery. On the other hand, I need your help. If you're not in a position to refuse, all the better. For the time being I'm gonna to make this slavery malarkey work to my benefit. Still, having said that, I feel guilty. So, I would like the two of us to enter into an agreement.

The agreement is seemingly simple: Django will help Schultz track the Brittle Brothers, and Schultz will then free Django and give him \$25 per brother found. Django accepts these conditions, and after fulfilling his promise, the two have a heart-to-heart conversation in which Django reveals that he agreed to the arrangement because he hoped to free his enslaved German-speaking wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington), from her evil master, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). Schultz decides to help Django, now his friend, on

his quest. This plot twist thereby does the work of absolving the bounty hunting and slave-owning Schultz by turning him into heroic abolitionist. It also places Django in the position of hero and justifies his violence against white men, continuing to play on the stereotype of African American men as dangerous, seeking revenge, willing to use guns and explosives at any cost, and needing white protagonists and allies to give meaning to justified anger. In the 2014 book, *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema*, Professor of Film Studies Oliver Speck argues, "The film's pathologizing and mocking of white supremacy...and its representations of violence, furthers to elevate, celebrate, and redeem whiteness."<sup>29</sup> In the scenes where Schultz and Django kill white men and women, Django's actions can be read by students as justified because of his alliance with Schultz, who also participates in the violence.

The film's characterization of black men—particularly the lead character of Django, along with Samuel L. Jackson's role as Stephen, the trusted slave, Broomhilda's tormentor, and Candie's most favored and powerful slave—relies upon racial stereotypes, absolving white men for the abuses they perpetrated in slavery. Stephen, the most powerful figure on the plantation, is the overseer of all slaves, and the conscience of the white master, Candie, who seeks Stephen's advice. For example, it is Stephen who suggests Broomhilda's punishment and becomes the most malevolent character in the film by far, harkening back the racist Uncle Tom stereotype. In *Django Unchained*, "the focus on 'good' and 'bad' characters in image analysis confronts racist discourse on that discourse's favored ground," as Shohat and Stam argue. The film frames slavery and race relations in terms of hyper-virtuous and hyper-evil characters. By juxtaposing characters whose actions are righteous and justified (Schultz and Django), to those who take pleasure in inflicting pain (Candie and Stephen), it becomes impossible for the viewer to see the film as anything but a battle between good and evil. It ignores real racist discourses and the inability of any slave to make decisions freely outside of the institution of slavery. Tarantino's use of the good versus evil trope allows students to argue that slavery is a matter of "moralism" rather than racism; the danger is that students' discussions of film and racism turn into "fruitless debates about relative virtues of fictive characters (seen not as constructs, but as

if they were real flesh-and-blood people) and the correctness of their fictional actions.” The seemingly virtuous acts of Django and Schultz versus the evil of Candie and Stephen become a morality play, rather than addressing “racism as a systemic self-reproducing discursive apparatus that itself shapes racist attitudes.”<sup>30</sup> Tarantino depicts both Django and Stephen as using cunning and extreme violence—sexualized racist traits attributed to black men—and in doing so avoids having to critique patriarchy, the hegemony of the slaveocracy, and the complexity of gender in the slave experience.

The treatment of women in *Django Unchained* not only mirrors the film’s emphasis on individual characters and the good versus evil trope, but also reinforces sexist and racist stereotypes of enslaved black womanhood. The women in the film, both white and black, are silenced, mattering only in their relationship to the men, and are merely another site of violence in the enslaved male experience. Broomhilda’s brutal enslavement is the justification for Django’s actions; yet, as the main black female character, she is depicted standing in fields gazing at the camera in vignettes throughout the early part of the film. Django explains to Schultz that Broomhilda is known for running away; however, she is almost silent throughout most of the film, left without her voice. Broomhilda and the other African American women in the film do not have the cathartic release of violence, further affirming misconceptions that African American men were the only enslaved people who opposed their oppressors by running away, and framing the brutal treatment of black women as an affront to black manhood.

In an important scene early in the film, Django finds the Brittle Brothers—John, Ellis, and Roger—with the help of a young enslaved woman, Betina, who gives him a tour of the plantation at the request of her master. It is here that we see Broomhilda’s punishment for running away during Django’s flashback while he looks upon John Brittle sitting on a horse in a plantation field. Although Django and Broomhilda slip away together at night through a field, with torchlights behind them shining through the woods, it is Broomhilda who receives the punishment for their collective action. Broomhilda cries, shakes, and, in another brief moment, kisses Django as hounds bark in the distance. The scene primarily consists of Django beseeching the overseer to refrain from whipping Broomhilda, pleading, “Old Man Curracun ain’t gonna appreciate

this, now. She works in the house, John. You could mess her skin up, and you gonna mess her up and she ain't gonna be worth...she ain't gonna be worth a damn thing." Tarantino cuts to the overseer John Brittle as he ties Broomhilda's arms above her to a limb of a tree. Django frantically states that he made her do it, "She didn't wanna run off with me...She's a house slave, she can't be—" and then Broomhilda receives the lash of the whip and screams out, the first time we hear her voice. She is sexualized even as she is running away in a dress with a V-cut neckline showing her cleavage, harkening back to earlier scenes where black women are forced into sexual slavery, and implying both Broomhilda's value as a pretty house slave and sexual abuse by a master. The brutality and sexual exploitation Broomhilda experiences in this scene are shared with Django as gets on his knees begging the overseer, "I am asking you this, please. Ain't this what you want? I'm keeping it funny for you. Now, John, please." The next time the audience hears Broomhilda's voice, she is screaming and naked, being manhandled by Stephen and forced into a hotbox in the ground on the Mississippi Plantation as punishment for another attempted escape. Both of these scenes imply the sexual abuse of both characters, but when Django offers himself to the overseer to end Broomhilda's whipping, Tarantino conveys the image of Django's possible sexual abuse as a result of Broomhilda's place in Django's life. Her torture is not her own; it is transferred to Django, implying that the abuse of black women is the abuse of black men.

Ultimately, Tarantino depicts the possibility of women running away and rebelling against slavery only with the help of their husbands. Broomhilda's portrayal lends itself to the erroneous idea that only men, with the exception of Harriet Tubman, ran away from their masters. It is her husband, Django, who explains that she learned German through her enslavement to German masters, and she is valued because she is exceptionally beautiful. Both of these characteristics evoke the importance of her emancipation only through the male trope of heroism. The film further affirms for students Broomhilda's supposed quiet agency; her willingness to run away comes from having her husband at her side, or from a desire to find him. She is a house slave, too pretty to beat according to her masters, furthering my college students' often inaccurate belief that house slaves were light-skinned, pretty, and never punished.<sup>31</sup>

Tarantino furthers the trope of the complacent female slave in the other, often nameless, female slaves in the film by linking their agency solely to that of the men in their lives, evoking characters in films like *Gone with the Wind*, which students also often perceive as a historically accurate film.

The only other enslaved women in *Django Unchained* who merit more than a few minutes of screen time are prostitutes and concubines of the white master, who are enslaved as “fancy maids.”<sup>32</sup> In the historical imagination of the film, African American women are sexual objects, and their bodies belong to white or black men. Their bodies are not their own. *Django* portrays Broomhilda and other enslaved women either as overtly sexual jezebels, or as silent and without agency; enslaved women are prostitutes complicit in their enslavement and sexual abuse at the hands of their master or as wives still beholden to their husbands. Moreover, in *Django Unchained*, the sexual exploitation of enslaved women is portrayed as an affront to black masculinity; the way to recapture one’s masculinity is through extreme violence justified because of this exploitation and through the desire of the white bounty hunter to capture and kill “bad men.” With bullets and dynamite, Django rescues his wife and re-establishes his masculinity.

The film fits into belief systems that students often bring to the classroom and fails to challenge stereotypical images of black womanhood or the dominant voice of black manhood in the history of slavery. Django instead reinforces a reverence for the male slave narrative—most notably Frederick Douglass’s famous narrative, and more recently, Solomon Northrup, in the retelling of his story in *Twelve Years a Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen, 2013)—over that of enslaved women. Frederick Douglass, recounting the brutal beating of his “Aunt Hester” at the hands of her master, describes the horror of witnessing this violent beating of a female family member as the moment when he became aware of his enslaved condition. In *My Bondage*, Douglass recalls being “hushed, terrified, stunned and could do nothing.” As Elizabeth Barnes notes in her work, *Love’s Whipping Boy: Violence and Sentimentality in the American Imagination*, “Rather than offering relief to himself or to his own aunt, Douglass’s pity exacerbates the horror of his own situation; his identification with her renders him impotent, able to do nothing.”<sup>33</sup> Douglass could not free his aunt, or his mother, who died when he

was just seven years old, from their bondage. While *Django* may evoke pity, *Django* can only regain his masculinity—lost through his pleading with the overseer, Broomhilda’s punishment, and his and Broomhilda’s sexual exploitation—by freeing Broomhilda. It is disempowering, “rendering impotent” both the characters and viewers. Instead of critiquing the exploitation of black women’s bodies through the behavior of the plantation master or mistress, we critique it through the emasculated black male figure as a stand-in for the master, Calvin Candie. The main male figures in the film fight over the body of Broomhilda, in the name of sexual exploitation, love, or manipulation, but always seen through the male experience; the many narratives and stories of enslaved women including figures such as Harriet Jacobs, Celia, Margaret, and Sojourner Truth may as well not exist.

### ***Daughters of the Dust* in the History Classroom in the Era of *Django Unchained***

*Django Unchained*’s popularity among students reminds us that, as educators, we must address history in all its complexity. Where many popular films lack historical accuracy or diversity of voices, educators can use other films that reflect a more inclusive history. *Daughters of the Dust* reflects enslaved and free black women’s experiences and stories. Throughout the film, Dash centers the narrative on women born into slavery or after emancipation, who lived through the early Jim Crow South and saw the beginning of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. Students must learn these stories as they are central to our understanding of the African American experience, and educators can counterbalance imagination and history with films like *Daughters of the Dust*. The male-centered story is one taught to us as school children and imprinted in our collective memory, which is why it should not be surprising when films based on that fantasy, like *Django Unchained*, are accepted as accurate retellings of a historical event. Film and Media Studies Professor Anna Everett notes that Dash herself was aware of this problem: “In fact, Dash has remarked on the discomfiting realization that many people base their historical knowledge on cinematic depictions. For such people, Dash observed, ‘History is on the screen. History is not from the textbook’”<sup>34</sup>

*Daughters of the Dust* removes black women from the male-dominated narrative and focuses on women's relationships, including young and old, sisters-in-law, lovers, friends, and the matriarch. The women's knowledge and discussions carry the film, while the male figures are at the periphery rather than the center. Set on the fictional Ibo Landing and Dawtah Island, the film reflects the historical reality of the region, with similar histories found in Hilton Head and Edisto Islands, for example.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, most students, unless specifically familiar with this history, may read *Daughters of the Dust* as a mythical tale, which is part of the reason some students find the film confusing. By no means is this a critique of the film itself; rather, it is more of a reflection of how historians write, research, and disseminate history, and how films on the black experience center on the male experience and the white protagonist in African American stories. *Daughters of the Dust* tells the stories that we as historians often cannot convey because of what historian Deborah Gray White so accurately describes as a "source problem." As White argued in *Ar 'n' t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, "Source material on the general nature of slavery exists in abundance, but it is very difficult to find source material about slave women in particular."<sup>36</sup> This problem continues well into Reconstruction and the twentieth century, the setting of *Daughters of the Dust*. Moreover, if we go back into the collective memory of black women, as Julie Dash did by using African American women's narratives from the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narratives as the basis of *Daughters of the Dust*, films can tell richer stories that more fully reflect the African American experience. Her work bridges slavery and the Great Migration since these two events exist on a continuum. Dash uses the narratives conducted in the 1930s of women who lived in Gullah communities during slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration as the historical basis for her film. Although slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration seem like separate events to students, they are connected experiences that individuals and communities lived through and allow Dash to deal with the source problem.

Historians Deborah Gray White, Thavolia Glymph, and Kibibi Mack-Shelton have all gone back to examine women-centered issues in slavery and emancipation; we have worked to examine the small, but significant events in the lives of women that reflect the black family and the specific ethnic and regional cultures that inform

the lives of black women.<sup>37</sup> Although *Daughters of the Dust* is an allegory, its setting in Ibo Landing evokes the memory of the Igbo origins of American slaves in what is now Nigeria, and its localized, contextualized history of black womanhood encourages students to become more thoughtful about the experiences of black women in American history. In particular, films like *Daughters of the Dust* can challenge students' misconceptions about seminal historical events, changing the way historical accounts of such moments focus on stories of men, which often mirror society's racism and misogyny. As White finds, "Much of what is important to black Americans is not visible to whites, and much of what is important to women is not visible to men." Furthermore, she argues, the historical experience of "resistance" becomes a "defining aspect of female slavery, one that shaped relationships and identity."<sup>38</sup> Educators must engage with films like *Django Unchained*, even if they don't show the film in the classroom, because students believe these stories and characters are realistic accounts of historical events. At the same time, we must provide alternatives like *Daughters of the Dust* so that students do not continue to perpetuate and reflect what White and other historians argue are the multiple oppressions black women encounter.<sup>39</sup>

From the beginning of *Daughters of the Dust*, the role of women and work is established immediately, making it an excellent source for educators. *Daughters of the Dust* reflects the multi-faceted experience of female slavery and emancipation, race, and ethnicity. The historical experience of resistance becomes, "a defining aspect of female slavery, one that shaped relationships and identity."<sup>40</sup> The setting and non-linear storytelling evoke the African griot traditions found in the unique regional identity of the Gullah/Geechee culture of the Sea Islands. This film allows historians to ask new questions that are not addressed in films like *Django*. *Daughters* requires students to ask questions about slavery, emancipation, and the black community through the perspective of black womanhood and, in doing so, counters the patriarchal narrative.

In fact, the opening moments of *Daughters* immediately asks the student to learn something new. The credits read:

At the turn of the century, Sea Island Gullahs, descendants of African captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. A result of their isolation, the Gullah created and maintained their own distinct, imaginative, and original African American culture.

This removes the film from a Eurocentric lens and embraces the Gullah language and culture, which is rooted in West African cultural traditions, particularly of the Igbo. Also, Dash chose to use the fictional place, Ibo Landing, to retell the real histories of Gullahs who reside on the mainland in Beaufort, Charleston, and Georgetown, South Carolina—indigo and rice growing regions—and on the islands of Hilton Head and Edisto, among others, which have now become tourist attractions and golfing resorts, pushing out the many of the descendants of its formerly enslaved residents. For Dash, historical setting is important, as it should be for those telling these histories. There is no singular African American community and Dash's film highlights the specific histories of an African American family in the nineteenth century that traces its past, geographically and culturally, to the moment where we enter: a day in 1902 when the family readies itself to leave the island for the mainland and the uncertainty of the North. *Daughters* supplements and reflects the historical documents and oral histories of enslaved women, material Dash herself used as she wrote this film. Dash used materials from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the National Archives.

In in the film, the director chooses to deal with many issues, including the ancestral past; colorism in the black community; religion in the form of the Orissa African religion, Christianity, and Islam; and the sexual exploitation of black women. Through a conversation between the family matriarch, Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day), and her grandson, Eli (Adisa Anderson), we learn that his wife Eula (Alva Rogers) has become pregnant as the result of rape by a white man. Eula never names her rapist because she fears for her husband's life if he retaliates. In the ensuing discussion, the husband is upset, describing his disgust at the image of a man "riding" his wife. Nana Peazant reminds him, that he "can't get back what he never owned. Eula never belong to you. She marry you." Within the first few shots of the film, we see two women by a large mortar, high enough to reach almost the tops of their thighs, using heavy mortar and pestles. For many students, this history is lost, and they may not realize they are watching a depiction of the skill African women passed through generations from Africa to America. What are they pounding may be a question, but, thanks to historians such as Daniel Littlefield and Judith Carney, some

recognize this work as the pounding of rice (although it could be corn). African women's knowledge of rice growing techniques in Africa made them valuable to Carolina rice planters who knew little of the crop and specifically sought out women from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Igbo of Nigeria. In fact, Littlefield, in his seminal work, "Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina," argues that "it seems that North America established a distinctive reputation as a market for females."<sup>41</sup> The scenes of women pounding rice, planting with their feet, and Dash's use of the permanent mark of indigo dye on the hands of women reflect the use of female knowledge in labor. Despite the depiction of Broomhilda's servitude in *Django Unchained*, which implies household slavery was simpler, easier, higher status, and desired labor as opposed to field work—it was not. In fact, slavery for women was arduous whether it was agricultural work or household servitude.

Educators must put *Daughters of the Dust* into historical context so students can leave the film aware of important moments, including the viewing the women's dye-stained hands, like those of Nana Peazant. Without historical context, students may leave the film without realizing that African American women were highly skilled laborers, possessing knowledge of the cultivation, harvesting, and processing of difficult and valuable commodities like indigo and rice. Indigo and rice were two of South Carolina's most profitable, labor-intensive products, and created immense wealth for Carolina planters.<sup>42</sup> In *Daughters of the Dust*, blue-stained hands were not only a marker of slavery and oppression, but also a marker of skill and knowledge from Africa passed from generation to generation of women, from slavery to freedom. As Nana Peazant says, "We carry these memories used of we."

Students, because of their limited knowledge of the complexity of slave labor and regional differences in the working lives of enslaved women, may not understand that the scenes depicted in *Daughters of the Dust* portray highly skilled food and crop production that enslaved Africans, particularly women, brought with them to the shores of the Americas. The slave owners exploited this knowledge to create vast amounts of wealth and power for the slaveocracy and their descendants after emancipation; however, by Dash's inclusion of this historical material, students can see

that the experiences and voices of African American women are rich and complex. Racism and the audacity to rally against it was not an experience of only African American men, but an entire community. Not only were women's experiences both in slavery and emancipation equally physically brutal and labor-intensive as men's; in slavery, women birthed children that were then stolen from them, created communities bound by hardship, and carried the cultural knowledge of ancestors to pass on to future generations.

Nana Peazant's blue-stained hands resulted from work she performed as a woman living at the turn of the twentieth century and is a reminder of the brutal oppression that black women continued to experience. Students are unaware that at the dawn of the twentieth century, slavery and remembrances of African ancestors were not in the distant past, but present in the everyday lives of women, with younger generations viewing older generations as living "too much in the past." *Daughters of the Dust* reminds students of the heavy physical and emotional labor performed by black women. Instead of Tarantino's silencing of Broomhilda as an enslaved woman, Dash's Peazant women work, talk, worship, and plan their own emancipation out of the oppressive Jim Crow South toward the promise of the North during the Great Migration, where millions of African Americans left the knowledge of their home for the unknown, for the hope of a better life.<sup>43</sup>

Through Nana Peazant, the matriarch, Dash allows us to recognize that at the turn of the century, black women found themselves caught between two worlds: the slave past, still present through Jim Crow, and the promise of freedom in the Great Migration to the North. Nana Peazant "[b]uilt her life around this family... What does she know about the world outside?" Black women keep "scraps of memories" as the family calls it, and this often stands in for what we know of the history of black women. Working-class and poor women did not leave behind papers for us to read and for historians to comb through. The WPA Slave Narratives are the basis of Dash's research and give us a glimpse into the gendered and regional collective memory of women. Therefore, they represent complicated filmic representations of black womanhood, countering white hegemonic ideas of race, slavery, and womanhood in the turn of the century.

## Conclusion

These films represent and rearticulate the fraught history of slavery and racism in the United States; but as I argued here, they do something more, figuring the specifically gendered terms by which we have come to understand this period in history, and bringing students' and audiences' attention to how women experienced slavery and freedom. Indeed, the geographic choices align with gender politics, with *Django Unchained* placed squarely in a white (masculine) agrarian Southern economy, while *Daughters of the Dust*, on the other hand, creates and reflects a distinctly feminine space outside, using the region of Ibo Landing to allegorize both the Middle Passage and the circular nature of women's lives.

## Notes

1. Dan Kois, "The Successes and Failures of the Smithsonian African American Museum," *Slate*, 4 October 2016, <[https://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/10/the\\_successes\\_and\\_failures\\_of\\_the\\_smithsonian\\_african\\_american\\_museum.html](https://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/10/the_successes_and_failures_of_the_smithsonian_african_american_museum.html)>. Thousands of visitors, including myself, entered the museum to understand more on the experiences of African Americans and visit the history galleries. However, located on the bottom floor, with one way in and one way out, the galleries became impassable even after a two-hour wait.
2. Yarimar Bonilla, "History Unchained," *Transition*, no. 112 (2013): 69.
3. Each semester, I ask by show of hands how many students have seen *Django Unchained* and *Daughters of the Dust*. Invariably, most of my students have seen the former and most not the latter, unless screened in a high school or college classroom.
4. Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman, and Haley Sweetland Edwards, "TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers," *Time*, 18 December 2017, <<http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>>.
5. Michael Nordine, "'Daughters of the Dust': Long-Forgotten Film That Influenced Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' to Be Re-Released in Theaters," *IndieWire*, 28 April 2016, <<https://www.indiewire.com/2016/04/daughters-of-the-dust-long-forgotten-film-that-influenced-beyonces-lemonade-to-be-re-released-in-theaters-291623/>>.
6. Ibid.
7. Bonilla, "History Unchained," 73.

8. Ibid., 71.
9. Ibid., 72.
10. Ibid.
11. London Melvyn Stokes University College, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 111.
12. Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation*.
13. Bonilla, "History Unchained," 73, 77.
14. "Herstory," *Black Lives Matter*, <<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>>.
15. The African American Policy Forum began the #SayHerName campaign in New York City on May 20, 2015 to remember the black women killed by police. "#SayHerName," The African American Policy Forum, <<https://www.aapf.org/sayhername/>>.
16. David G. Holmes, "Breaking the Chains of Science: The Rhetoric of Empirical Racism in *Django Unchained*," *Black Camera* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 78.
17. Cameron White and Trenia Walker, *Tooning In: Essays on Popular Culture and Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 57.
18. Leslie M. Alexander, "'The Birth of a Nation' Is an Epic Fail," *The Nation*, 10 October 2016, <<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-birth-of-a-nation-is-an-epic-fail/?print=1>>.
19. Alan S. Marcus and Jeremy D. Stoddard, "Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School Classroom," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007): 307.
20. Ibid., 308. I would argue that college professors also use film in their classroom at a similar rate, from my own experiences and from anecdotal evidence. Students are exposed to more mature films like *Django Unchained* and *Daughters of the Dust* in the college classroom, therefore, they must be asked to critically analyze the films in the context of the film and classroom content, which is what we ask of high school students according to these authors. For more on teacher use and student and general audience consumption of film, see: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jeremy Stoddard, Alan Marcus, and David Hicks, "The Burden of Historical Representation: The Case of/for Indigenous Film," *The History Teacher* 48, no. 1 (November 2014): 9-36.
21. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 179.
22. Ibid., 184.
23. Anna Everett, "Toward a Womanist/Diasporic Film Aesthetic," in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 850.
24. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'An Unfathomable Place': A Conversation with Quentin Tarantino about *Django Unchained*," *Transition*, no. 112 (2013): 53.
25. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. interviewed Tarantino. In their discussion, Tarantino explains his use of the idea of the Western. Gates, "'An Unfathomable Place.'"

26. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 187.
27. *Ibid.*, 16.
28. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
29. Oliver C. Speck, *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 275.
30. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 201.
31. For more on this, see Holmes, "Breaking the Chains of Science."
32. Edward E. Baptist's work on New Orleans creoles of color and brothels of the early nineteenth century discusses this idea: "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5: (December 2001): 1619-1650.
33. Elizabeth Barnes, *Love's Whipping Boy: Violence and Sentimentality in the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 93.
34. Everett, "Toward a Womanist/Diasporic Film Aesthetic," 851.
35. Vincent F. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 188.
36. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985/1999), 23.
37. For further reading on the experiences of African American women in South Carolina during slavery and emancipation, see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Kibibi Voloria C. Mack, *Parlor Ladies and Ebony Drudges: African American Women, Class, and Work in a South Carolina Community* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).
38. White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 7.
39. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 23.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 72.
42. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*. Indigo was introduced in South Carolina through African slaves by a white slaveholding woman, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who brought this product from her former colonial home of Barbados.
43. Everett, "Toward a Womanist/Diasporic Film Aesthetic."

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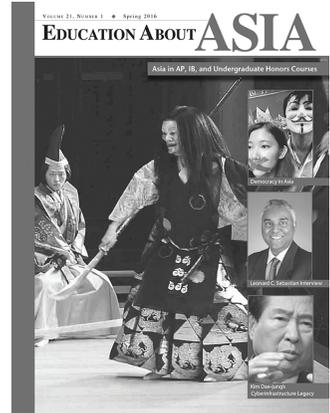
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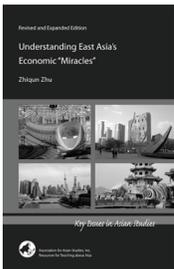


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