What Remains to be Seen: An Exploration of Intersectionality through Cinematic Representations of Black Women's Rape

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These are the people who never let me fall:

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Introduction: Envisioning Black Women's Rape

In this project, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which cinema may complicate, perpetuate, and reframe the representation of Black women's rape as a technology of western, capitalist patriarchy that produced and continues a legacy of slavery. Filmic representations of Black women's rape also provide a rich landscape for interrogating the limits of intersectionality as the main framework for theorizing Black women's subjectivity and epistemic positioning. I posit that film is a unique material and conceptual tool that offers a wide scope of modality for reading Black women and sexual violence; it can be used to intervene in strongholds of historico-ideological production and move towards a radical reclamation or revisionist agendas. In order to unpack the ways in which representations of Black women's rape manifest larger social anxieties and projections of domination, I specifically consider Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) as case studies, reading these films for both their limitations and their contributions to representing Black women's rape as a particular, historically situated facet of Black women's lived experiences.

Watching rape on film, viewers visually and psychically participate in the desire to see women's subordination, which in turn ensures patriarchy's stability. When the violated woman is Black, we witness the messy convergence of gendered denigration with racial domination inextricable from the history of enslavement. Black feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, Darlene Clark Hine,

and Hazel Carby have shaped the body of knowledge linking the intersections of race, gender, rape, and enslavement. As Angela Davis makes clear, "rape itself was an essential weapon utilized by the white master to reinforce the authority of his ownership of Black women…rape served not only to further her oppression, but also as a means of terrorizing the entire black community."[1] Analyzing Black women's rape on film through a Black feminist lens helps create a bridge of emphasis between the historic reality of sexual violence in the lives of Black women and the ways in which they are viewed and valued in the present tense. Whether films contest or validate the visual legacy of slavery, scenes depicting Black women's rape contribute to the visual economy that limits Black women's subjectivity.

The Color Purple, She's Gotta Have It, and *Daughters of the Dust* form a constellation based on several points of convergence. They feature Black women as the central figures of the film's narrative, they deal with the presence of rape in Black women's lives (as an event, as a constant fear or threat), and they all emerged at a moment of political and social gain for Black women in the United States as a result of anti-sexist and anti-racist work of the decades preceding their production. In varying ways, each of the films attempt to depict Black women and Black communities at large in more liberal, progressive ways than mainstream films. Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams describes the

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[1] Angela Davis, "JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape" in *The Angela Y. Davis*

relationality between cultural values or movements and the processes by which they shift in and out of hegemonic positions.[2] For Williams, culture is the product of the dynamism created between dominant, residual, and emergent perspectives. The films I consider attempt to challenge dominant culture in different ways, but their tactics of subversion carry different indexes of change. Through the images they put forward, each of these films works toward revising the historic distortions of Black women's filmic representation and filling in the gaps where they have been erased completely. In doing so, these films articulate desires for alternative representations of Black women's lived experiences.

Envisioning different sets of Black women's images poses a challenge, since it is clear that the cinematic apparatus thrives on the degradation of Black women's images and is therefore complicit in crafting and perpetuating a dehumanizing iconography of Black women. The visual cue of a Black woman's body in film has been shaped to signify particular tropes: rape, sexual excess, and the ease with which Black women's bodies are controlled under patriarchy. Women's bodies are synecdoche for a larger history of patriarchal, capitalistic dominance. Raped by her master and forced to breed with other slaves under captivity, Black women's sexuality still bears the scars of their assigned cultural value under slavery. Black women were seen by whites as seductive, alluring, lewd, and even sexually predatory in their promiscuity. This figure of the Jezebel

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[2] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.

validated Black women's sexual shaming.[3] Against this deep-rooted set of images, I hope to demonstrate how rape absorbs and organizes histories of Black women's cultural capital and how hegemonic and radical forces or institutions utilize film to construct a Black women's discourse. By Black women's cultural capital, I am referring to the language, images, stories, and affective realms associated with Black women that lead to or limit their social mobility in a white supremacist patriarchal society; these elements are often shaped by the cinematic apparatus.

Cinematic representations of rape reveal a matrix of power and values written upon the violated bodies on screen. Rape is a mean and an end by which patriarchy secures women's subordination by negating their subjectivity, their agency, and insisting on their silence; it is both the act and the threat that haunts the ways that women are able to move through the world. Rape permeates society in several ways. I consider rape in some of its many forms: as a concrete event in film, as a cultural phenomenon, and as a technology of patriarchy. We derive what we think rape is (or isn't) from our particular vantage points and modes of access to prevailing ideologies in our cultural landscape. Black women's rape in Spielberg's, Lee's, and Dash's films are depicted differently and reveal different messages about Black women in each iteration of rape in the films.

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[3] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

Although rape on film can certainly solidify perceptions of Black women as exploitable ground, film's ability to simultaneously depict multiple viewpoints and a scope of subjective experience makes cinema an important place and method of exploring intersectionality's claims about Black women's value. As an important tool for exploring this race and gendered intersection to which Black women's rape on film attests, Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality unpacks the meeting points and overlapping locations of oppression for Black women's race and gender.[4] According to Jennifer C. Nash, Crenshaw's argument doesn't account for the complexity of Black women's subjectivity and plurality of experiences. Working with Black feminist values such as the differences in experience that proliferate under the category of "woman," I build upon Nash's critique in order to demonstrate how filmic representations of Black women's rape can reveal a world in which Black women's experiences and subjectivities are varied, multifaceted, and told from their own perspective. In this paper and in my own filmmaking practice I am interested in reparative, reclamatory filmic representations of Black women's rape that articulate the "messiness of subjectivity" Nash meditates upon. By "reparative" representations of Black women I mean that I would like to see the weighty and consequential history of sexual violence in Black women's lives accounted for and validated as a major socio-historical phenomenon that

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[4] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241.

continues to shape the treatment of Black women in the United States. Alongside this project of collective memory, my desire to see a "reclamatory" representation involves opening up the space for Black women to reclaim or reimagine what Black female sexuality could look like without the denial that rape represents, or more agential ways to express sexuality.

Through film's ability to manipulate temporal space, I would like to see rape materialized as new images formed by attention to contested histories of rape, a multiplicity of rape's affect as lived experience, and a resistance to the voyeuristic representation of rape that proliferate in cinematic history. I posit that, among its other features, film's materiality and temporal malleability especially allow for a unique engagement with intersectionality's intricacies and complications**.** Influential feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey calls attention to film's "privileged relation to time," which upon "preserving the moment at which the image is registered, inscrib[es] an unprecedented reality into its representation of the past" In depicting rape, film represents diegetic power relationships between the victims and perpetrators; these power relationships as well as the ideological implications the filmic rape is steeped in are crystallized and recast whenever the film is played.[5] Rape on film adopts a kind of facticity through its permanence across time. Through my readings of *The Color Purple, She's Gotta Have It, and Daughters of the Dust*, I hope to illuminate

[5] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second.* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), 9.

the ways in which film is uniquely equipped to articulate, explore, and "grapple with the messiness of subjectivity" within intersectionality's framework.[6]

What is at stake in interrogating the messages encoded in filmic representations of Black women's rape is the prospect of what Black women's sexuality, subjectivity, and lived experiences can look and feel like. Together these films reveal the impact of Black feminism in U.S. cinema. These three films charts a history of depictions of sexual violence forced upon Black women, point towards certain gains, and attest to what remains to be seen. Their complex contributions vary by how they articulate their aesthetic and political filmmaking practices, yet they all work with similar elements of the psychic and material consequences of enslavement, rape, and the limited understandings of Black women's sexuality they produce.

The Color Purple was originally a radical epistolary novel by Black feminist author Alice Walker. Walker's book was awarded with a plethora of literary accolades: the 1983 Pulitzer Prize, the 1983 American Book Award, and a nomination for the 1982 National Book Critics Circle Award.[7]

Letters written to God by Celie, a poor, young, and uneducated girl living in the countryside of Georgia in the early 1900s shape the book. Celie confides in God and thus to the readers that her father sexually, physically, and emotionally

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[6] Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review*, no 89 (2008): 4.

[7] Gerri Bates, *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion.* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 89.

abuses her. She gives birth to two children by her father, both of which he took as soon as they were born. Celie's younger and more beautiful sister Nettie is her only line of support, her only loving relationship. A man who Walker introduces as simply "Mr.___" wants to marry Nettie, but their father offers Celie instead. Mr.___ continues the pattern of abuse in Celie's life. He rapes her, hits her, and even his children disrespect Celie. Nettie runs away from their father's home and takes refuge with Celie, teaching her to read and making Celie's life more livable. Mr.___ attempts to rape Nettie and she runs away, writing letters to Celie that get intercepted and hidden by Mr.__. One of Mr.___'s old lovers, jazz singer Shug Avery comes into town and we find out Mr.___'s name is Albert. Shug sings in the dance hall that one of Mr.__'s sons, Harpo has built. Harpo's strong-willed wife Sofia befriends Celie and Celie's network of women change her life for the better. Shug becomes ill and in nursing her back to health, Celie and Shug become close friends and eventually lovers. Walker demonstrates the power of women's relationships throughout the novel, particularly celebrating the erotic quality of Shug and Celie's relationship as a way to survive and enjoy life. Shug prevents Mr.__ from beating Celie and helps her uncover the letters from Nettie he had been hiding over the years. Nettie has been doing missionary work in Africa and serendipitously living with Celie's biological children. We find out that Nettie and Celie's father is actually their stepfather and once he dies, Celie

inherits his land. Nettie reunites Celie with her children, reconciles with Mr.___, and sets up a successful pants-making business.

Adapted for the silver screen, *The Color Purple* explores intra-communal dynamics and tensions of a Black community through the character of Celie. Celie's varied relationships with other women cultivate her voice and her ability to cope with her experiences of sexual assault. Like many book to film adaptations, famed Hollywood film director Steven Spielberg took several liberties in changing the emphases of the book. Part of the film's legacy is the heated debates in the wake of its release; generally, the film is most critiqued for representing Black men in a demeaning, exploitative manner. Spielberg also diminishes the erotic quality to Celie and Shug's relationship; sexual tension is hinted at in the film, but the transformative qualities of their lesbianism does not get translated to the film version of *The Color Purple.*

Reading *The Color Purple* allows me to explore Black women's radical contributions to the cinematic apparatus and the mechanisms that limit those contributions. Through Celie's transformations, Walker demonstrates the power of Black female collectivity to shape and share a sense of empowerment among Black women. Although *The Color Purple* reveals the impact of Black feminism on the visual discourse of rape, Spielberg's Hollywood styling compromises the radical potential for a mainstream depiction of rape in alternative ways.

She's Gotta Have It's success in independent and mainstream circuits inaugurated a wave of Black independent cinema in the United States and, like Dash's film, enjoyed success overseas as well. Lee's wild success with this first feature film points towards a cultural desire to see Black narratives on screen, but also begs the question as to why he chose to tell the 'sex-selling' story of a Black woman's sexuality as the plotline of his first feature film. Released at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1986, *She's Gotta Have It* went on to win the coveted Prix de Jeunesse award the same year at the Cannes Film Festival in France.[8] *She's Gotta Have It* presents us with Brooklynite artist Nola Darling and her constellation of lovers vying for her undivided attention. Stylized as a comedic documentary, the film aims to provide us with some 'truths' not being cinematically told about contemporary Black life without having to resort to tired, racist tropes of Black stock characters. The most salient part of this film for my argument is the scene in which one of Nola's lovers, Jamie, rapes her; I consider the affect of the rape in the ensuing narrative and how it enacts the complexity of cinematically representing Black women's subjectivity.

As the first theatrically released feature-length film directed by a Black woman, *Daughters of the Dust*'s immediate success demonstrated that films by, about, and for Black women deserve a place alongside films with more privileged filmmakers and audience demographics; *Daughters of the Dust* offered evidence that there exists a strong desire to see Black feminist films. Dash's film

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[8] Ibid., 62.

immerses us into the world of the Peazant family as they prepare to move from Ibo Landing, one of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, to mainland United States in 1902. Save for a few younger members of the family, the Peazants have lived on Ibo Landing since their ancestors were brought as captives from Africa. The women of the Peazant family take center stage in the complicated and challenging film depicting their last day on a mythical sea island off the coast of South Carolina. The film is a non-linear meditation on cultural memory and loss, on hopes and expectations for a community on the threshold of a new era after having been unbearably denigrated through slavery during the last one. *Daughters of the Dust* garnered recognition in prestigious film festivals around the world, opening the door for future Black feminist filmmakers. In the United States, the film received Best Cinematography prize at the 1991 Sundance Festival in Utah and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize that same year.[9] In 2004, *Daughters of the Dust* was selected for the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, crystallizing its place in cinematic history. I chose this film because of the way it registers the emotional and historical impact of rape, and because it resists the glamorization of depicting rape as a spectacle. Dash's impressionistic, flowing aesthetic offers a wealth of possibilities for thinking through the limitations of intersectionality. Indeed,

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[9] Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film/White Money.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 96.

Daughters of the Dust comes closest to the kind of filmmaking I would like to pursue.

My investment in analyzing cinematic representation of Black women's rape emerges from my experiences as a filmmaker; I write this thesis out of a necessity to account for and reimagine the scenes that have so deeply moved and enraged me, and given me hope for future filmic iterations of rape that deny and naturalize exploitation of Black women's images and bodies. In varying degrees, these films have all come out of my women's studies and film studies coursework at Duke. In bringing these films together to analyze cinematic representations of Black women's rape, I hope to show the filmic language and performative functions that many representations of Black women's rape share. Furthermore, I hope to point towards the future possibilities of representing Black women's rape; I read these films for what they have made visible while also looking for what remains to be seen.

Intersectionality: Getting Messy

As one of the most prominent frameworks for considering identity and lived experience, intersectionality offers a paradigm for evaluating the political purchase and weight of race, gender, and sexuality. Intersectionality rejects the notion that multiple identities can be disarticulated from one another or hierarchicized. Intersectionality's popularity as a framework for considering the lived experiences of women of color emerged after legal theorist Kimberlé

Crenshaw's landmark 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." Crenshaw inaugurated the political and academic conversation surrounding multiply oppressed women, using the term "intersectionality" as a way to "contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences."[10] Crenshaw's work allows multiply oppressed subjects to resist reducing their identities and experiences for the sake of patriarchy or capitalism to function as usual. Intersectionality dreams of the possibility of subjects moving through a world that values the significance of their multiple identities and their overlapping, flowing, and unpredictable relationship with one another. As a kind of strategic essentialism, intersectionality emphasizes the facticity of identity as it shapes lived experiences and seeks to make life more livable for those whose identities or intersections of identities preclude them from access to privileged positions or experiences in society.

Published two years later after "Demarginalizing Race and Sex", Crenshaw's next seminal essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" considers the particularity women of color's legal retribution in cases of domestic and sexual violence. Crenshaw establishes rape as a significant point of convergence for race, gender,

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[10] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139.

class, sexuality, nation, law, and culture. "Mapping the Margins" details several instances of Black and Latina women attempting to navigate the legal system and the institutional prejudices that block justice. Crenshaw posits that the "very representation of a Black female body at least suggests certain narratives that may make Black women's rape either less believable or less important."[11] Given Crenshaw's background in the legal system, here we can conjure the scenario of a Black woman providing testimony in a court of law; the stereotypes attached to her image precede her account and alter her validity as a speaking, witnessing subject. Crenshaw demonstrates the difficulty in disarticulating the images of Black women from the essentializing narratives whites fabricated in order to authenticate Black women's constant assault under slavery. Deeply entrenched in the law and with legal concerns, Crenshaw's analysis of identity has made a long-lasting impact on Women's Studies.

Recently, feminist and cultural critics have been taking up intersectionality as an object of methodological and theoretical critique. Jennifer C. Nash critiques Crenshaw for not having explicitly credited the legacy of Black feminists who preceded her, but her larger investment in interrogating intersectionality is organized by four main concerns: "the lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology, the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects, the ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and the coherence between intersectionality and lived

[11] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1271.

experiences of multiple identities." [12] Nash is fully aware of the gains that intersectionality has contributed to; she does not want to dismiss the possibilities and the redemptive qualities it affords women of color.[13] Instead, Nash problematizes and challenges intersectionality as a way to "continue working to dismantle essentialism, to craft nuanced theories of identity and oppression, and to grapple with the messiness of subjectivity."[14] This "messiness" suggests an unpredictability to the possibility of fully mapping out subjectivity through identity markers.

I would like to think of Nash's concern over the messiness of subjectivity as a platform for film to explore. Film offers an opportunity to interrogate and interpret intersectionality's project, as well as the way that certain hegemonic vales or identities are reified, erased, or put into a hierarchy. Film's material production, coupled with the relationality created between spectators and images, and the flowing, shifting values that construct different visual

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[12] Nash, "Re-thinking Intersectionality," 9. Nash writes, "Intersectionality recycles black feminism without demonstrating what new tools it brings to black feminism to help it fashion a more complex theory of identity." Black feminists such as the Combahee River Collective had long operated under the tenets of intersectionality without the term.

[13] Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*. (Durham: Durham University Press, 2012), 299. In *Object Lessons,* Robyn Wiegman engages with Nash's critique of Crenshaw. She calls our attention to the tension between revealing the "paradoxes of intersectionality's theoretical foundation [which] would require abandoning the power and proliferation of Crenshaw's rhetorical point."

[14] Nash, "Re-thinking Intersectionality," 4.

discourses at different historical moments are all openings in the cinematic apparatus that would serve Nash's project of uncovering intersectionality's ideological production.

In the context of spectator identification, I would like to think of representations of rape as yet another block to women making meaning, particularly as spectators. Looking at rape in film as a means of interpreting and interrogating intersectionality is useful because of the way that filmmakers attempt to make the visual violence part of the narrative continuity when the raw, traumatic element of rape resists such a discursive framing. Through insisting on continuity through editing and narrative, the cinematic apparatus normalizes and tranquilizes the incoherence and unpredictability of the subject. Something as volatile and unintelligible as rape becomes constrained through filmic conventions so that privileged spectators do not lose congruency with their subject positioning. In his essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Jean-Louis Baudry reveals that "the search for… narrative continuity…can only be explained by an essential ideological stake projected in this point: it is a question of preserving at any cost the synthetic unity of the locus where meaning originates [the subject]."[15] This harkens back to Lacan's mirror stage and the spectator's identification with the idealized image on screen. Yet, when rape becomes the glamorized, idealized, scopophilic

[15] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Winter, 1974-1975): 44.

imago, a holistic sense of the spectator's self is denied by the violence of the image. Rather than an always equal, always-overlapping sense of intersectional identity, representations of rape often demand that spectators temporarily choose or value one part of their identity over another. Depending on the narrative placement of the rape scene, spectators might, for example, find themselves more attuned to their gender over their class position, or their sexuality over their race.

Nash's attachment to "messiness" as a way to describe the conditions of subjectivity reminds us of the unpredictability and incoherence of life, even under highly codified identity frameworks. I agree with "messiness" as an appropriate term to describe subjectivity because it allows for the possibility of new ways to think about the problems around identity that arise when, for example, Black women's history is still being rewritten. Acknowledging the messiness of subjectivity invites us to get our hands dirty and think deeply about what it means to identify as Black, as woman, as any kind of combination of identities, and being open to the possibility that we might not come up with the perfect theory. We may only catch a few glimpses, a hint of what it might look like—what remains to be seen from what we already know about life under the signs of Black or woman.

The Color Purple: Compromises and Possibilities

Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985) is the mainstream adaptation of Alice Walker's eponymous 1982 novel. Walker's novel is a source rife with possibilities for subverting cinematic images of Black women, yet Spielberg's film privileges the spectacle of violence over fully developed representations of Black women's relationships with one another. *The Color Purple* makes Black women's histories of rape visible, but the film ultimately compromises Walker's profound womanist[16] vision into an assimilated blockbuster. Making significant

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[16] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). A political and theoretical coalition for Black feminists, womanism offers a synthesis of Black experience that takes the history of enslavement into account. "From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter) and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mamma, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mamma, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and

changes to the plot and affect of Walker's original book, Spielberg visually reproduces many of the same stereotypes that have contributed to the notion of Black communities as willing participants in their oppression. I am interested in the ways in which Spielberg puts forth a particular version of Black womanhood that must sell well for the sake of his career and his institutional backing, yet it would be too easy to leave the analysis here. Jacqueline Bobo reminds us that as an institutionally successful Hollywood director, Spielberg is "under ideological pressure to reproduce the familiar."[17] Given cinema's problematic history of Black women's representation, moviegoers are used to seeing silent, sexually exploited images of Black women on film. Turning *The Color Purple* into a mainstream film demonstrates the potency and reach of Black feminism in the 1980s, but the compromises the film makes allows me to think about what elements of Black feminism remain to be seen in a larger cultural landscape.

The Color Purple is generally known as a "progressive" Hollywood film. Assimilating Walker's work into a more easily digestible text of popular culture, Spielberg casts an "emergent" perspective (Walker's) into a "dominant" one. In the visual reduction of Walker's text, there are indeed cringe-worthy moments in the film, but I believe Spielberg's adaptation is a prime example of the

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food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

[17] Jacqueline Bobo, "*The Color Purple:* Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Feminism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 281.

cinematic apparatus' complex, flowing, and shifting terrain of values moving in all directions. Williams suggests that "no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention."[18] What may seem clear-cut at first may upon a deeper examination reveal jagged edges at the splice. The convergence of the emergent and the dominant in *The Color* Purple reveal a "messiness" of the cinematic apparatus.

Rape and the threat of rape shape the subjectivity of Celie, the protagonist in *The Color Purple.* The film opens with a sunny scene in which young Celie and her sister Nettie run through a field of flowers. As soon as we are comforted by this 'happy' vision of a post-emancipation South, Celie's father beckons the girls to come home for dinner and we see Celie in full view: pregnant and cowering in front of Pa. The scene cuts to a dimly lit, claustrophobic space with just enough room for the bed Celie is giving birth in. Though the tenuous interaction between Celie and Pa in the scene before hints at it, we find out is her second child by her father. Celie's father bursts into the room and snatches her newborn child away from her and silences her, warning "You better not tell nobody but God. It'll kill yo' mama." Whereas the first scene of Celie and Nettie together was open, colorful, and bright, the birthing scene seems suffocating in its tight shots, burned colors, and Celie's howling labor pains. This shift between

[18] Ibid., 125.

worlds is the line Celie inhabits throughout the film—in shadows, exposed in the light until her relationships with other women equip her with survival strategies, particularly language. Until this intervention from other women, however, Celie's body and subjectivity are constituted by rape.

Spielberg avoids representing Celie's incest; the familial rape is only revealed through Celie's epistolary voice-over narration. However, Spielberg does depict Celie's marital rape. Celie's father arranges her to marry Albert (or sometimes, simply referred to as Mr.), an abusive patriarch who subjugates Celie to constant and severe beatings as well as rape. Inaugurating Celie into her role as wife and mother, Mr. grounds young Celie into a subordinate position.

In the rape scene, tarnished buckles on dozens of worn leather belts clang against a rocking wooden headboard. This first shot simultaneously gestures at the force in which Albert is pummeling Celie and the repercussion she may face if she were to resist or fight back. The belts are a visual cue that forces us to recall other instances of Black women's bodies (literally) under lashings, whippings, and flagellating beatings. With this allusion to Black women's sexual subordination during slavery, Spielberg glides the camera down and we see an agonizing, painful expression on Celie's bloodied and bandaged face. She sneezes and Mr. slams his hand against the headboard, then covers her mouth with his large hand, grunting. By fragmenting his body in the frame and emphasizing his guttural sounds and the force in which he is raping Celie,

Spielberg casts Albert as primal, bestial, and inhuman.[19] Celie narrates over the scene, explaining that she no longer cries during rape, but instead thinks about her sister and the pretty woman in the picture on Albert's bedside table: "I know what he doing to me, he done to her. And maybe she like it." Albert leers closer to her face, sighing "Jesus," and collapses on top of Celie, her eyes still wide open.

Albert's muffling hand over Celie's face as well as some of the first words spoken to Celie in the film, "You better not tell nobody but God," work to actively silence her about her survivorship and her experiences of incest. *The Color Purple* depicts what Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray describe as the product of how "dominant discourses have co-opted [sexual assault survivors'] collective speech."[20] In this text, Alcoff and Gray consider the discursive possibilities and limitations of speech as a political and personal tool for survivors of sexual violence. They are concerned with the survivor's subjectivity and its place within hegemonic structures. For this reason, they utilize Michel Foucault's reading of the church confessional as a way to draft personal subjectivity into dominant superstructures. Part of the process of speaking for and over survivors involves the legitimizing, authoritative role of the expert. Laura and Gray examine media portrayals of survivors and analyze how their bodies,

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[19] Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism, and The Myth of the Black Rapist" in *Women, Race and Class*, ed. Angela Davis (New York: Random House, 1981). Davis traces the stereotype of all Black men as rapists to white supremacy and as a part of Black women's oppression.

[20] Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Winter, 1993): 283.

language, and subjectivity are recuperated and woven into patriarchal, misogynist institutions that speak for and over survivors. Alcoff and Gray describe the power of language for survivors of sexual violence, noting that it "may threaten to disrupt the smooth flow of patriarchal social commerce."[21] Though Alcoff and Gray do not consider Hollywood films such as *The Color Purple,* their analysis helps us see the delicate position of sexual assault survivors in representational institutions such as the cinematic apparatus.

The Color Purple reveals how Black women's speech and collectivity has the power to transform and revise even the most brutal lived experiences. It is only through Nettie's teaching Celie to read that we see the possibility for Celie to have any impact on her situation living with Albert. Nettie gives Celie another mode of relating to the world, which Celie takes up in her letters to God. Language is transformative for Celie's healing process, allowing her to describe her experiences and open up to the women in her life.

The Color Purple makes the silence/speech binary rape survivors face visible, but does not attend to any deeper complexity on the issue, which might flesh out the "messiness" of Celie's subjectivity. Darlene Clark Hine explains that many Black women actively resisted their denigrated image by "adher[ing] to a cult of secrecy, a cult of dissemblance to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their

[21] Ibid., 260.

lives."[22] She maintains that this culture of silence surrounding sexuality was necessary in order for Black women to oppose the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women. It was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self.[23]

Through language and solidarity with the women around her, Celie reconstructs her own image and experiences sexuality not wholly determined by violence. Her lesbian relationship with Shug changes the conditions of the way she sees herself and others, but Spielberg does not elaborate upon this relationship on screen. What remains to be seen in *The Color Purple*, or what becomes the relic of Spielberg's attempt to assimilate Black feminism into the cinematic apparatus, is a simplified narrative of a Black woman overcoming adversity and pulling herself up by her bootstraps. Though the film is a major reduction of Walker's original work, *The Color Purple* still opens up a space to reimagine other representations of Black women.

Though *The Color Purple* is compromised, it is a valuable cultural text because it represents the impact of Black feminism in popular culture. Frederic Jameson's essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," (1979) historicizes the fetishization and commodification of the image, which lays the groundwork to more deeply imagine the function of mass culture texts such as film in

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[22] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* vol. 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-920.

[23] Ibid., 917.

contemporary society. Jameson considers the work of films in mass culture beyond the ideological demands and gestures they satisfy and perform. Though indeed beholden to, say, Hollywood's comfortable production of what will make the most money at the box office, Jameson argues that works of mass culture "cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated."[24] In *The Color Purple,* this "genuine shred of content" is Celie's journey through incest and rape. We want to see the horrors of violence against Black women reversed on the silver screen—Celie's happy ending in *The Color Purple* allows us to glimpse a visual manifestation of this utopic yearning.

Historical and Theoretical Foundations: Second-Wave and Black Feminism, Feminist Film Theory, and Rape on Film

The Color Purple represents the impact of second-wave feminism, particularly Black feminism, on American popular culture. Second-wave feminists deeply committed themselves to making the social life of rape and its ideological functions visible. My interest in the affective landscapes different rape representations create depend on the widening of rape's definition and relevance, which was a major project of second-wave and Black feminists.

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[24] Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social* Text, no 1. (Winter, 1970): 14.

Susan Brownmiller's 1975 seminal text on rape, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* identifies the ways in which rape acts as the hallmark of patriarchy, and details the dramatic cultural effects of rape on women's lived experiences.[25] Spanning from biblical times to the 1970s, Brownmiller's work accounts for historic and culture-specific genealogies of rape, which made her book a significant contribution to the burgeoning discourse around rape from within second-wave feminism. Brownmiller distills gender disparity to the act of rape, which in her findings had become "not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear…rape has played a critical function [as] nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear."[26] Her book radically redefined rape as more than just forceful sex; she maintains that rape operates as the flagship of patriarchal domination. Brownmiller ends her project by calling for the extinction of the "ideology of rape" by means of coalition building and fighting back.[27] Though Black feminists such as Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Pauline Hopkins explored the intricacies of rape and race, Brownmiller's account is credited for inaugurating

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[25] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975)

[26] Ibid., 15.

[27] Ibid., 404.

the intellectually and historically rigorous dialogue around the politics and vocabulary of rape.[28]

Against Our Will opened a space for revealing the consequences of rape, yet Brownmiller received criticism from Black feminists for her chapter, "A Question of Race." In the chapter, she discusses the case of Emmett Till, a young Black boy lynched for having been perceived to whistle at a white woman in 1955. Although Brownmiller examines particular difficulties and complexities Black women face because of the ideological and material legacies of slavery in an earlier chapter, she does not extend that context or historical positioning in her consideration of a young Black man such as Till. Angela Davis asserts Brownmiller's account of Till inherits and perpetuates racism under the sign of feminism. Critiquing Brownmiller and many other white second-wave feminists, Davis cites white feminists' "indifferent posture toward the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression" as well as the fact that "few feminist theorists seriously analyzed the special circumstance surrounding the Black woman as rape victim" as complicit in the occlusion of Black women in second-wave feminist discourse. [29] Davis points out how the reign of white patriarchal capitalism over people of color operates successfully through the

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[28] Hazel V. Carby, "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era:' Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1. (Autumn 1985): 262-277.

[29] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1981), 173.

accusation of Black men raping white women and the right for white men to rape women of color. For Davis, calling attention to the hypervisibility of Black men as rapists and the invisibility of Black women as rape victims is as much a part of anti-rape work as it is anti-racism work. Through perpetuating images that align with the goals of white, capitalist patriarchy, the cinematic apparatus has been historically complicit in substantiating the validation of Black men as rapists and the making Black women's rape a paradox of theft and property.

In conjunction with the efforts of academics and activists of the 1970s, feminist filmmakers attempted to grapple with a way to validate the lived experiences and histories of women's rape in such a way that imagines a future without rape. One work that I believe helped chart new terrain for future feminist films exploring rape is JoAnn Elam's 1975 documentary, *Rape.*[30] In the film, three women and the filmmaker discuss their experiences of rape, street harassment, and intellectual analyses of the institutions and social factors that promote these crimes. This free-form participatory method of documentary film is interspersed with inter-titles that emphasize or repeat certain phrases the women say and sometimes sarcastically comment on the culture they are deconstructing. For example, we read, "Rape is a perfect example of control," "men think women want to be raped," "masculine sadism," "evidence of penetration and lack of consent" and simultaneously engage with the women's

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[30] *Rape*, directed by JoAnn Elam (1975: Chicago, IL: Chicago Film Archives), DVD.

thoughts of rape culture and their experiences. One of the women was raped by a young Black man and has difficulty dealing with the institutional and everyday racism that may have driven him to think rape was a way out of his own oppression. As a white woman speaking, she does not try to put herself in a favorable light by looking past his race, but instead articulates her desire to work around the whiteness lodged in second-wave feminism and the connections to be made between feminism and anti-racism struggles. Perhaps most critical to this film is the way that the women are in total control of the conversation and how they present themselves; the camera is handed from woman to woman and the result is a representation of a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Elam attends to the ideological function of rape, its affect, and the politics of looking. The women in Elam's film grapple with the male gaze, which became highly theorized the same year by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey.

In an essay which would go on to initiate an animated and ongoing conversation about women's representation in cinema, psychoanalysis, and the politics of the male gaze, Laura Mulvey surveys the way in which women are constructed as erotic objects on screen that are looked upon with a voyeuristic, fetishistic desire by the spectator. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey charts an anatomy of spectatorship by deconstructing the formal codes and conventions at work in crafting women as static objects in cinema. She examines the gaze because "it is the place of the look that defines cinema, the

possibility of varying it and exposing it."[31] Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage substantiates Mulvey's account of spectator identification and subjectivity through the screen image.[32] As a reaction to the threat of castration inherent in women's representation, male spectators fetishize the woman as image. The male gaze fixes women to their fragmented, exploited image, thereby occluding a space for female subjectivity on screen. Because the ego ideal of the identification process is male, women spectators are positioned to see through the lens of the active male.[33] There is power in the gaze: it is a fragmenting, violent act. Mulvey writes, "The power to subject another person to

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[31] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 843.

[32] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006) Lacan offers a theory for explaining how human subjects initially come to recognize their own being. Young children arrive at self-awareness and form their ego by a process that begins with seeing their reflection in a mirror. The "mirror stage" requires that the children comprehend the one-ness of their reflection. Seeing their complete image for the first time, the comprehension of their one-ness becomes idealized. Called the *imago,* this ideal image becomes a model for how children should begin to consider their own being in the world. It is a comprehension that they are not a collage of body parts and basic instincts, but rather one whole entity that self-contains mental and physical experiences. Their mirror image, according to Lacan, is an ideal representation because the completeness of it can never be achieved. This becomes a threat because achieving the ideal can never be complete, yet the desire to exist wholly is instilled when children first see the *imago*; desiring impossibility becomes alienating for the child.

[33] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 838.

the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both. Power is backed by a certainty of legal right and the established guilt of the woman".[34] Here we may recall Crenshaw's notion that the image of Black women's bodies precedes their account or their validity as subjects. The construction of looking at Black women in film bleeds into the treatment of Black women's lived experiences.

Mulvey hopes that cinema will move in a direction that "leav[es] the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire."[35] Mulvey sets the stage for feminist filmmakers to engage in her project of disarticulating voyeuristic pleasure from the framed female body. Some of her later works address the complexity of female spectators' pleasure, but many Black feminists took up her arguments and fleshed out the nuances and differences in the politics of the gaze when looking at Black bodies.[36] Jane Gaines points out how feminist film theory as established by white theorists is "unequipped" to deal with film about race and sexual difference because of its

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[34] Ibid., 841.

[35] Ibid., 835.

[36] Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)" in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader,* ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

inability to weave in the history of enslavement.[37] Gaines reveals how an attachment to psychoanalysis in feminist film theory's foundational texts has "eclipse[d] the scenario of race-gender relations in Afro-American history, since the two accounts of sexuality are fundamentally incongruous."[38] Much like Angela Davis' criticism of Susan Brownmiller's arguments about race in a feminist project, feminist film theory inherits a legacy of problematic notions about racial difference.

Feminist film theory's use of the psychoanalytic construction of women's subjectivities builds off of some of the gaps in Marxist feminism to build a fuller picture of women's oppression, but Gaines claims that "what was gained with a theory of the social individual was at the cost of losing the theory of social antagonism."[39] The notion of the "social individual" derives from Louis Althusser's famous essay that became a precursor to feminist film theorists in the 1970s. Published in 1971 and considered by emerging feminist film theorists, Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" puts forward a theory of the subject that is shaped and controlled by ideology, or value-loaded social practices that shape our everyday lives. [40] Althusser maps out the many ways in

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[37] Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *University of Minnesota Press* (1986): 12.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 14.

[40] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971)

which all Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) shape subjects as effects of the state.

Film falls under the category of the communications apparatus, which "cram[s] every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism."[41] The cinematic apparatus acts as a communication ideology that structures subjects based on hegemonic values. The phenomenon of rape is naturalized by its status as ideology, which masks possible locations of disarticulating it from its policing, fear-mongering effect on women. Though all people are shaped by the state, the history of slavery and the cinematic deployment of sexual violence towards Black women continually reinforce Black women's subordination and denigration.

The cinematic apparatus' exploitation of Black women has to do with what cultural critic Stuart Hall calls the "encoding" process.[42] Hall argues that there is a particular process for which history and lived experience must transform in order to enter and eventually circulate into a highly codified system of discourse. The rigid codes and institutional pressures to repackage stories in particular ways are controlled by the "professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, [and] assumptions about the audience," thus reflecting more so in this case on the institution of

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[41] Ibid., 19.

[42] Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," *Media Series,* No. 7 (Virginia: University of Birmingham, 1973): 1.

Hollywood and what messages the filmmaking industry wants to put out.[43] What is at stake in this monolithic structure of representing Black women's rape in a particular way is a lack of regard or concern for their "messy subjectivity". Because filmic representations are encoded with a hegemonic language shaped by patriarchal and racist ideology, we must look toward building a different language to explore the complexity of Black women's lived experiences, and thereby validate their personhood in filmic representations of rape.

Cinematic representations of Black women's rape function to deny their personhood. The perpetual deployment and exploitation of Black women's images through representations of their rape in film functions to keep their cultural capital low and their citizenship void. Sanctioned by patriarchy as a method of maintaining institutional order, rape ensures women's subordination. Representational iterations of rape form the discourse around it as an ideology. Philosopher Susan Brison posits that we encounter rape as "means of representations—sensory perceptions, bodily sensations, and linguistic classification are all influenced by the perceived cultural meanings" of rape. Cinematic representations of rape inform these cultural meanings of rape. [44]

As a key ideological function of patriarchy, the cinematic apparatus recycles the degraded images of Black women and the narratives of their sullied

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[43] Ibid., 3

[44] Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), 31.

sexuality or morality so that they eventually become 'true.' In her essay "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," bell hooks remarks, "this is a time when commodities produce bodies."[45] Black women's bodies and personhood are objectified so that they do not register as fully formed subjects. Instead, Black women become visual receptacles for the necessary violence of patriarchy: rape. Along with her relationships with other women, Celie in *The Color Purple* was able to ultimately resist the pressure of patriarchy through language. Mulvey's agenda of crafting a new cinematic language of desire gives rise to the possibility of breaking from the exploitation of Black women's objectifying and sexually violent iconography.

The male gaze is a tool of patriarchal mastery, but the violence of the gaze carries different historical weight for Black women. In her essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," Lorraine O'Grady explores the occlusion of Black women's bodies in Western cultural texts.[46] Dealing with the legacy of Black women's subjectivity denied by enslavement, O'Grady wonders if Black women "have internalized and are cooperating with the West's construction of not-white women as not-to-be-seen. How could they/we not be

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[45] bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 71.

[46] Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*. ed, Joanna Frueh, Cassandra Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 153.

affected by that lingering structure of invisibility…still enforced by the images of both popular and high culture?"[47] O'Grady's stresses the power of images as both the means and markers of cultural validation or stigma.

Considering the long history of denigration and violence in Black women's cinematic discourse, bell hooks attempts to locate a space of political resistance in cinematic spectatorship that would radically open new possibilities for constructing Black women's subjectivities on screen. She traces a historical relationship between black spectatorship and mainstream media, noting the shift "before racial integration," when "black viewers of movies and television experienced visual pleasure in a context where looking was also about contestation and confrontation."[48] The charge of looking stems from and is haunted by the critical look of the slave as a strategy for survival, for "even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."[49] Harnessing the power of the gaze, hooks maps out a political agenda for fostering subversive spectatorship that probes, centers, and reclaims Black women's images. This "oppositional gaze" not only demands complex, multi-vocal representations of Black women's lives and their

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[47] Ibid., 2.

[48] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), 95.

[49] Ibid., 94.

complexity as they are, but also acts as an archival tool of collective remembrance and a way to navigate desires for future images.

In the wake of second-wave feminists' efforts to bring rape to the forefront of our lived politics, several films 'about' rape emerged, yet they were often 'whitewashed' in their inheritance of an iconography that assumed Black women's bodies as inferior. For example, Jonathan Kaplan's 1988 film *The Accused* depicts a ripped-from-the-headlines story about a Portuguese woman's gang rape and her struggle for justice in the courtroom. The film proclaimed to stay true to the 'real' events except for one narrative reimagination of punishing the voyeurs of the rape. Widely disseminated, *The Accused* held the possibility of demonstrating the impact and the complicity of watching rape, but its use of rape as spectacle in the film invalidates this possibility, even making this point ironic. As a film "based on a true story," there were significant opportunities for *The Accused* to bring these intersectional complexities between race, gender, class, and rape to light and yet the film's success is rooted in a "universal story about human nature, individual moral conscious, and a judicial process that treats the victim like a criminal" by its erasure of racial spectacle intrinsic to the real crime and aftermath.[50] As the first film "unique as the culminating product of over two decades of feminist consciousness-raising on rape", *The Accused* has

[50] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (London: Routledge, 2004), 91.

a strong place in popular memory.[51] The failure to include the racial tensions present in the real case offer a false crystallization of the true events and further silence the stories of women of color. Though *The Accused* heralds the gains of second-wave feminism, its inability to represent the complexity of a woman of color's rape leaves us with lingering doubts about what remains to be seen—compromised filmic representations.

Cinema can be used (and has historically functioned) to validate and collapse hegemonic values and histories. In her book *Watching Rape*, Sarah Projansky calls attention to the relevance and potency of rape representation, which "naturalizes rape's place in our everyday world, not only as real physical events but also as part of our fantasies, fears, desires, and consumptive practices. Representations of rape form a complex of cultural discourses central to the very structure of stories people tell about themselves and others." Representations of Black women's rape in film have long operated to maintain and reinforce networks of domination; colonization, slavery, rape, lynching, domesticity, sexual denigration, and body exploitation are among the many forces at work in the spectacle of Black women's rape. The violence of Black women's rape as filmic image denies Black women from identifying as fully realized subjects. Related to the ways that *The Color Purple* relies upon stereotypical representations of Black women*, She's Gotta Have it, and Daughters of the Dust* also depict Black women's rape in ways that work from

[51] Ibid., 163

iconographies that validated the denigration of Black women under slavery. However, *She's Gotta Have It* and *Daughters of the Dust* attempt to respond and contribute to radically new images of Black women on screen.

She's Gotta Have It: Whose Pleasure is This?

She's Gotta Have It registers the desire to see new entries in Black women's filmic iconography, but the rape in the film attests to the limits of the patriarchal imagination of Black filmmakers. Spike Lee's film articulates what remains to be seen in future iterations of representing Black women as sexually agential, independent, and intelligent. Independently produced, Lee's first feature length film *She's Gotta Have It* has sparked controversy since it was first released in 1986. The film is credited as having inaugurated the independent filmmaking boom of the 1980s, marking it as an especially important cultural icon.[52] On the surface, the film seems to promote an image of an independent, confident, and sexually liberated Black woman, but among other scenes, a highly contested rape scene creates ambiguity around Nola Darling's agency and independence. Overly simplified, sexual liberation as it is known en masse is a malleable façade that runs the risk of perpetuating dominating relations over women and female desire. This risk is compounded when stories of black women's sexuality are told, because of the legacies their representations carry.

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[52] Rhines, *Black Films/White Money,* 4.

With their sexual exploitation sanctioned by slavery, Black women have long been characterized as hypersexual, promiscuous, and openly inviting to sexual aggression. *She's Gotta Have It* shows how this set of images was simultaneously challenged and reinforced.

Nola Darling is an artistic Brooklynite juggling relationships with three men: Jamie, Greer, and Miles. Her encounters with each of the men are as diverse as their personalities. Jamie presents himself as a mild-mannered gentleman, Greer is a narcissistic model who treats Nola as a trophy, and Mars keeps Nola laughing with his sharp wit. Well aware of Nola's relationships with the other two men, Jamie, Greer, and Mars vie for Nola's unadultered attention. Nola resists the monogamous demands, despite her frequent meditations on the difficulties she encounters trying to maintain affairs with all three. At one point, Nola manages the anxiety pushed onto her by the demands and projections of the three men by visiting a sex therapist to inquire if she's "oversexed." The men try to pathologize her refusal of monogamy; Mars, for example, calls Nola a "freak" and thinks her perceived hypersexuality derives from unresolved issues with her father. The men are unable to conceive of Nola as a desiring subject and in their denial of women's sexuality, they police her into submission. After losing patience with Nola's hesitation towards a monogamous relationship with him, Jamie distances himself until Nola insists that he come over to her apartment. *She's Gotta Have It* takes a more serious tone in its climax, when

Jamie rapes Nola as retribution for the denial of his ownership of Nola. Nola eventually dismisses all three men as lovers, but not without having first apologized to Jamie and pleaded for him to come back to her.

My initial interest in this project came from a polarizing, affective class discussion following a viewing of this film. When we discussed whether or not Nola Darling "Got It" and what the eponymous "*It*" was, the classroom conversation halted at an impasse: all of the women in the class labeled a scene between Nola and Jamie as rape, whereas the few men in the class labeled the scene as rough, consensual sex. I recall one of my male classmates interrupting a female peer explaining why the scene was identifiable as rape, interjecting, "She called Jamie over, she asked for it!" What made this discussion and our interpretations so tenuous was the fact that Nola calls her rape a "near rape" when she describes the events to one of her female friends. While others in the class did not consider any other outside forces of the film as relevant to deciphering the scene, the other women and I attributed extra-diegetic social constructs to our understanding of Nola's reaction. We nuanced the binary rape/rough sex argument into a larger question about representations of women of color as victims and the politics of victim blaming. I thought I had been aware of the power of images until this moment, but these varied reactions keenly sharpened my sensitivity to the simultaneous ambiguity and possibility of film as a battleground for cultural meaning and consequences. *She's Gotta Have It* demonstrates how cinematic representations of rape become

commodified and fetishized even within an otherwise progressive or radical film space, thereby aiding the misogyny of the cinematic apparatus and its ideological function in subordinating women and particularly women of color.

She's Gotta Have It emerges out of a revisionist desire to show images of the Black middle class without relying on the visual discourse of Hollywood and television shows that glorified stereotypes of Black life.[53] The film's clean, simple aesthetic stresses the newness of the representational politics: save for one scene, the film is shot in black and white and the long takes allow spectators to appreciate the elements of the visual world Lee creates. At the beginning of the film and before Nola's rape, Lee turns to still photography montages that communicate a different temporality of the narrative. The montage acts as a kind signal for the traumatic scene to come: the blurry shots of Jamie on the subway are similar to the images on the mural he stands in front of during the rape.

In the film's one hundred and twenty-four minutes, the rape scene occurs in less than one minute. In an establishing shot, Jamie walks into Nola's dimly lit apartment and the camera tracks along his movement towards Nola. Facing one another in medium close-up, Jamie asks about the so-called emergency that required he come over. Nola simply answers, "I need you," and Jamie becomes visibly angry, shadows chiseling into his furrowed brows and mean stare. He

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[53] Ibid., 72.

insults, “Once a freak, always a freak,” to which Nola protests slightly, but insists that he “make love to [her].” She wraps her arms around Jamie’s neck and kisses him tenderly. Jamie throws her arms off of him and deepens his voice: “You don’t want me to make love to you. You want me to fuck you.” The camera zooms out to a low angle, as if we are watching from Nola’s bed. Jamie hurls Nola to the ground and stands behind her, rolling up her skirt and unzipping his pants. The shot is extremely dark except for the light from a window highlighting the Edvard Munch-like figures in Nola’s collage. As Jamie becomes more violent, he begins verbally assaulting Nola as well. “Is this the way you like it? Huh? Does Greer do it like this? What about Mars? Who else? WHO ELSE?” As Jamie names the other men, we see Jamie’s imagination on screen: Greer and Mars replace his position as rapist when he calls out their names. Nola protests, “You’re hurting me!” and Jamie continues, demanding, “Whose pussy is this?” Here, Lee could have intervened on a critical moment in acknowledging the messiness of sexual politics and power dynamics by scripting Nola’s response to be anything other than what she does say: “yours.” Although Nola is the “she” of the film’s title, Lee’s work does little to define and develop Nola as an autonomous subject capable of resisting the influence and projections of patriarchy at play around her. Before leaving, Jamie thrusts one last time into Nola and then shoves her facedown on her bed. The camera’s movement is in sync with Jamie’s push: the viewers participate in pushing Nola down as well. Our independent, sexually

liberated Nola Darling has been betrayed and the possibility of seeing a non-dominated Black female sexuality on screen becomes all the more distant.

The shaky attempt at producing a sense of sexual and personal autonomy for Nola is shattered by the rape scene. It therefore substantiates Projansky's assertion that the rape scene functions as the "culmination of the gendered struggle for control of Nola's body diegetically and Nola's story narratively, a struggle that is never completely resolved but in which masculinity reasserts control over femininity, at least temporarily. [54] Projansky brings our attention to the symbolism of the rape. Despite Lee's gestures towards Black men's attitudes on women as problematic or his attempts to show Nola as a liberated woman thriving through her sexuality, the rape halts and invalidates Lee's attempts. What remains to be seen, what becomes the residue of Nola's narrative is the facticity, the materiality of her rape. Nola as a sexual being and as a humanized subject is objectified and punished for her perversity against patriarchy, monogamy, and being a desiring Black woman. There doesn't seem to be a moment of redemption for Nola's sexual identity and she instead becomes the object of dominating male desire.

Nola's rape scene is an example of how the cinematic apparatus produces serious consequences for women's lived experiences through representations of Black women's Rape. bell hooks notes how Lee's casual handling of the scene

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[54] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture.* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 189.

contributes to the notion that women enjoy rape and that there are no serious consequences of rape.[55] Lamenting that Nola's sexual preferences and performances are for the benefit of her partners, rather than her own satisfaction, hooks posits that Nola's "sexual desire is not depicted as an autonomous gesture…Instead her assertive sexuality is most often portrayed as though her body, her sexually aroused being, is a reward or gift she bestows on the deserving male."[56] There are specific filmic strategies that contribute to the economy Black women's bodies as unvalued, exchangeable, and openly available. Rape is one such strategy. Nola's rape is the repercussion, the punishment she receives for falling outside of the monogamous, chaste, subordinating order prescribed to women and especially Black women.

Much of the debate around *She's Gotta Have It* centers on this rape scene and many defend Jamie's actions, noting Nola's pleasurable facial gestures, the fact that her calling him over to her apartment was on open invitation, and that later Nola describes the act as a "*near* rape." Some men even claim that Nola's protests to Jamie were performative enhancements for his pleasure.[57] Projansky explains, "Explicit representations of violence against African-American women emphasize the seriousness of the assaults. Ironically, however, they also

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[55] bell hooks, "Whose Pussy Is This?" A Feminist Comment," in *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 233.

[56] Ibid., 230.

[57] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 148.

naturalize a subsequent narrative neglect of the experience: if the rape is so unquestionable, there is no need to spend time investigating it."[58] In "Selling Hot Pussy," bell hooks imagines if "Nola Darling been able to claim her sexuality and name its power, the film would have had a very different impact."[59] I wonder, however, if Nola's degradation began long before the rape scene. The framing of her body in the film draws on a long history of exoticized and eroticized image making of women.

During the rape, Nola's body is fragmented by the filmic composition. Grounded into the lower half of the frame, we see her as an object being thrown around by Jamie. Dehumanized in the act of rape, the representation of Nola's body as cut up and split on screen duly denies her a claim to personhood. Literally objectifying Nola with the violence of the gaze recalls other contexts in which Black women have been denigrated by the gaze.

Slavery as an institution scaffolds the commodification of bodies and erotic hierarchy on some body parts over others. bell hooks draws connections between the violence of the gaze on Black women's pop culture representations and as slaves on the auction block "while owners and overseers described their important, salable parts…[Black women] were reduced to mere spectacle…their body parts were offered as evidence to support racist notions that Black people

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[58] Projansky, *Watching Rape,* 147.

[59] bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," 75.

were more akin to animals."[60] Through the complicity of the cinematic apparatus, we are trained to maintain the looking relations of the auction block: judging, distributing unequal value to, and fragmenting Black women's bodies are all at work in cinematic representations of rape.

The auction block helps us think about Black women as commodities for sale and the tension in the films around Black men wanting to claim ownership on Black women. Because slaves were forced into breeding relationships and masters of the house took ownership of female slaves' sexuality through rape, Black men have been denied possession of Black women. The notion of raping a slave was impossible because they were considered property of the slave master, not human subjects. The dynamic between Black men wanting to possess or take ownership of Black women reveals some of the messiness of the legacy of enslavement and rape. By prioritizing the history of enslavement in an understanding of contemporary representations of Black women's rape, I hope to make some of this messiness visible in my reading of the marital rape in *The Color Purple,* the rape between sexual partners in *She's Gotta Have It*, and the effect of a white on Black rape in *Daughters of the Dust*. In *She's Gotta Have It*, we are most acutely attuned to this desire when Jamie demands Nola to respond to the question, "Whose pussy is this?" Though the premise of Nola's relationship with multiple men might hint at a hope for a liberated Black women's sexuality,

[60] Ibid., 62.

the rape scene in Lee's film negates the possibility of relationships outside of ownership and rape as a punishment for refusing that ownership.

Nola's representation as commodity and fetish for Jamie, Greer, Mars, and the male spectator make her character hypocritical, disappointing and unfulfilling to watch. None of the other characters are given the space and the opportunity to fail so profoundly in the spectators' eyes. Despite all of this, I believe Lee is working out something more complex in this rape scene. Without any white characters in the film, the question of the "right" to look emerges. Detailing the ways that film theory has been ill equipped to consider films that deal with gender and race differences, Jane Gaines points towards an exploration of the "right to look" as a lead-in towards a more historically situated film theory: "how some groups have historically had the license to 'look' openly while other groups have 'looked' illicitly."[61] Here, we may recall bell hooks' call for an oppositional gaze: how might we look back at Jamie?

The narrative of a sexually liberated black woman seems progressive, but Lee's narrative and filmic grammar choices show a disappointing depiction of so-called female sexuality. Felly Nkweto Simmonds asserts that the "structure of the [rape] scene allows [Jamie] to punish [Nola] for the other men…[the rape] is

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[61] Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations," 18.

used to punish Nola and to excite other men, the spectators."[62] Not only do we see Jamie taking pleasure in the rape, but we see him define Nola and destruct what the film has presented us as her defining trait: her unapologetic, honest sexuality. What remains to be seen, then, is such a sexually liberated, desiring, independent woman who does not have to face or fear repercussion at the hands of men or the cinematic apparatus.

Daughters of the Dust: Seeing Difference

Daughters of the Dust is a radical cinematic contribution in its lyrical style, its narrative structure, and its privileging of the Black female spectator. It is a hard, slow, complicated film. After watching Dash's film as a homework assignment for a seminar I took during my first year at Duke, I remember thinking to myself, "What did I just watch? I didn't understand every word—did I maybe miss something there?" I had never seen a film like *Daughters of the Dust*; I lacked the language to describe the complexity and the weight of the film. I enjoyed the flowing, layered aesthetic, the film score, and what I was able to glean from the narrative, but I wasn't sure I "got" the message of the filmmaker. Returning to the film in this project, I find *Daughters of the Dust* rife with aesthetically deliberate and historically profound representations of Black women that are well worth the effort Dash elicits from her audience.

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[62] Felly Nkweto Simmonds, "She's Gotta Have It: The Representation of Black Female Sexuality on Film," in *British Feminist Thought: A Reader,* Ed. Terry Lovell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990)

Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* depicts the day before the Peazant family moves from the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina to mainland United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The Peazant's home island is Ibo Landing. We learn early on in the film that Ibo Landing was a port for slaves coming from Africa; the cultural and geographic liminality of this Atlantic island is an important part of *Daughters of the Dust.* Paradoxically rooted to Ibo Landing's liminality, the Peazants continue to speak a Gullah dialect and have been able to practice and maintain their ancestral West African spiritual traditions. Dash captures the mixed sentiments of impending move to the mainland with tenderness and rigor: we are privy to intimate details as well as hard truths about the cultural landscape in one of the last places to import slaves from Africa. Rape is part of this landscape. However, rape is not a visible spectacle on the surface of the film. Rather, Dash registers its affect on the Peazant family's past, present, and future. *Daughters of the Dust* considers a wide scope of African American women's experiences in relation to rape, privileging their voices, putting them at the forefront of the film.

Rape is at the heart of the film; Dash weaves the narrative and characters around the weight of rape as threat of white modernity and a way of understanding the trauma of the past. *Daughters of the Dust* is a material "counter-memory," operating as "a way to know the present and invent the

future."[63] Dash's film is a testament to the possibilities of revisionist images, as the film subverts conventions of stereotyped Black women in favor of fully formed, complex beings. Rape contours the intersection of characters' identity markers, revealing the impossibility of representing any of the characters in all of their totality, or their complete subjectivity. Dash delivers refreshing images of Black womanhood that contest and diversify the visual archive of Black women in film, yet rape helps us understand that much more remains to be seen.

Deeply invested in a political project of varying and multiplying the iconography of Black women in film, Julie Dash's film aligns with bell hooks' itinerary of attending to Black female subjectivity and lived experiences on screen. hooks' essay "The Oppositional Gaze" accounts for the need to address Black female spectators and the ways in which the cinematic apparatus, steeped in patriarchal hegemony, has by and large precluded a space for Black women to inhabit positions of acknowledged and valued subjectivity.[64] *Daughters of the Dust* operates on the desire to imagine a world in which Black women are the site of rich personhood and agential subjectivity, which depends upon a cinema that privileges Black women as spectators. Dash reveals the impact of rape on the Peazant family women without oversimplifying or equating their diverse experiences of sexual violence.

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[63] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 104.

[64] Ibid.

Dash's political and aesthetic accomplishment in creating a radically collective, liberating filmic space for Black women has to do in part with the limitations of many other attempts to construct a non-racist, non-sexist visual economy of Black women's experiences. Racist imagery that served as the foundation to validate or excuse the denigration of African Americans under slavery is still embedded in the way we visualize and conceptualize race today. Film scholar Jacqueline Bobo explains, "If Black women are not shown as 'objects' who have been raped, or who are beasts of burden, or breeders and nurturers, then they have no use value in mainstream cinema."[65] The history of violence and objectification against women of color deeply informs the complexity in representing gendered and racially marked bodies on screen. As a technology of domination deployed to keep white men at the top of patriarchal hierarchy and the power dynamics of slavery in functioning order, rape and the way rape is recast in culture via representation becomes a necessary phenomenon to consider. Dash's intricate temporality at attention to materiality in *Daughters of the Dust* help make it a prime example for the way that film can be used to explore intersectionality's ideological production.

The first signal of rape in the Peazant family occurs early on in the film and congeals many of the tropes Dash uses throughout her work: rape, ancestry, rage, tradition, and spirituality. Eli, the husband of raped and pregnant Eula

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[65] Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 189.

Peazant, visits his grandmother in the family's lush, wooded graveyard. There are few visual distractions to Eli and Nana's conversation and their location in the family's graveyard emphasizes Nana's conviction about the relevance, importance, and trust in the Peazant ancestors. Nana compassionately advises Eli to trust the family's guiding ancestral spirits despite the fact that Eula "got forced [raped]." Barely beyond the purview of the frame, Eli suddenly enters the composition as a jagged, upward flash of motion at the word "forced" until Nana grabs him by the shirt, ensuring that he listens to her. The camera is positioned perpendicular to Nana, which allows us to see her gaze upon Eli. We are level with Nana's shoulders, as if we are sitting next to hear and taking in her advice as well. We identify with Nana as she sticks her neck out towards Eli and the camera tracks along with her motion. Nana discusses the value of their ancestors and the film crosscuts to a group of younger Peazant women dancing on the beach.

Holding hands, eight of the women form a circle and skip in alternate directions around the character Myown in the center. Their white linen dresses billow in the wind as they move against the calm, low tide washing ashore behind them. Eyes closed, Myown cranes her neck up to the sun and we sense that this 'dance' is more than play. In this scene, the images and sound are not in sync. When we hear Nana implore in voiceover narration that "the ancestors and the womb, they're one, they're the same," the camera cuts from Myown's face to

the held hands and flowy dresses over the other Peazant women's torsos, over their wombs. The juxtaposition of the beach scene and Eli and Nana in conversation reveals how their family's ancestral power is alive and well and dependent on the women in the family. The spirit of the Peazants is embodied in the surrendering, joyful bodies experiencing something individual and profound, yet also collective and entirely determined upon the dancing dynamic they create as a group. The force of their collectivity conjures a spiritual presence; the film slows to a lower frame rate, allowing us as viewers to participate in the exuberance of the scene more profoundly than at its normal rate.

The Peazant women resist the historical reality of rape and its accompanying gaze in their creation of a unique, collective space for Black women. Dash's temporal manipulation and crosscutting in between the beach and graveyard shots echo Mulvey's call to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space."[66] By slowing the frame rate, Dash emphasizes the power of Black women's connection to one another and the significance of their bodies as vectors for maintaining the connection between past and present. Though all of the women wear similar dresses, the slow motion allows us to see the particularity of the different women in the group. By calling our attention to the differences between the women in the scene, Dash reveals the plurality of their subjectivities that make for such rich collectivity.

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[66] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 844.

Abstracted from diegetic sound, this beach scene creates a malleable symbolic world for Black women. I take these shots to signify not only a connection with the Peazant ancestry, but also reclamation of Black women's agency and pleasure. I believe Dash's choice to shoot the women's ancestral ritual on the shoreline rather than, say, a more 'obvious' location such as the graveyard prods us to draw a connection between this scene and the Middle Passage. Given that it is cross-cut with Eli's anxiety over Eula's rape and Nana's faith in the will of the ancestors, the Peazant women's ritual stands as a revisionist image to what Hortense Spillers refers to as the "ungendering" of captive Africans.[67]

The denial of kinship structures among Africans endemic to the reproduction of master-slave relations began in the Middle Passage, where families were broken up and "suspended" outside the humanizing force of identity markers.[68] Once they arrived ashore, the surviving captive Africans were commodified and auctioned off; female captives were fewer in number and through rape, were forced to provide more laboring bodies. Motherhood, as

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[67] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics,* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987). Spillers is concerned with the lived experiences of black women as the necessary bottom-tier and most exploited class of Western, post-colonial, capitalist society. The violence of the Atlantic slave trade inflicted corporeal damage, dismantled the body into unprotected flesh, and disrupted traditional forms of African kinship. Having been uprooted from their indigenous home, slaves suffered a literal and metaphysical "theft of the body," which manifested itself in psychological effects on slaves and their descendants.

[68] Ibid., 72.

Spillers explains, was denied to these captives, as maternity relies upon femaleness and only fully humanized beings were capable of gender.[69] On their last day on the island, Dash's placement of the Peazant women, so full of life and joy on the beach, opposes the grim, ungendering fate captive Africans met when they first arrived upon Ibo Landing's shores.

In addressing the "messiness" of motherhood and womanhood under the sign of rape as a function of capitalist patriarchy, Dash also highlights the toll sexual exploitation takes on Black men. When the film crosscuts back to Nana and Eli from the beach scene, they share the composition of the frame equally, though his stake in the shot is dependent on Nana. Eli has remained respectful and patient until this moment, holding a downcast gaze and listening to Nana's advice. Suddenly, he shoots up and the camera cuts to a long shot of Eli and Nana, still seated in front of her husband's grave. Impassioned and accusatory, Eli demands, "How can you understand me and the way I feel? This happened to *my* wife. My wife! I don't feel like she's mine anymore." Nana clutches the tin can full of talismans and keepsakes she has kept at her side until this point, as if using them for comfort and protection in this burst of Eli's anger. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of Nana shaking her head disapprovingly. Now framed from Nana's perspective seated on the ground, Eli continues: "When I look at her, I feel I don't want her anymore." Eli leans into a tree as Nana

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[69] Ibid., 73.

reminds him, "You can't get back what you never owned." Steadfast and assertive, Nana declares in close up, "Eula never belonged to you; she married you." The scene goes on to explore Eli's disillusionment with Nana's magic and traditions; Eli cannot come to terms with his wife's rape. Though Eli does not name it explicitly, Dash depicts Eli's struggle with his threatened masculinity as a result of his inability to protect his wife. Here, Dash is exploring the connection between Black women and Black men's rage towards emasculating regimes of power and its lived affect. Angela Davis takes up this configuration of rape and racism as necessary for capitalist patriarchy. She notes that the "reliance on rape as an instrument of white-supremacist terror predates by several centuries the institution of lynching…rape was a terribly efficient method of keeping Black women and men alike in check. It was a routine arm of repression."[70] Dash's holistic representation of Eula's rape reveals the constellation of those around her that are also held captive by white capitalist patriarchy and the sexual intimidation and rape that ensures its hegemony.

Dash is deeply invested in the future without abdicating the past. She uses the figure of the Unborn Child, a wise, spectral incarnation of Eula's pregnancy as a way to look towards a new way for Black women to move through the world. In the film, the Unborn Child co-narrates alongside Nana, which further textures the film's non-linear temporality. She represents the

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[70] Davis, "The Dialectics of Rape," 183.

power of Black women's collectivity and the importance of the family to survive the phenomenon rape built into slavery. At the moment of Eli's rage and Eula's pain, the Unborn Child races down an empty, wide shoreline, narrating that she "got there just in time." An embodied image, the figure of the Unborn Child represents the future of the Peazants. She travels in and out of the film's diegesis; she is attuned to the past and invested in the future. In Spillers' examination of the Middle Passage archives, she is keenly attuned to the absences in the records. She wonders about the "fate of the pregnant female captive and the unborn."[71] Dash registers the impact and lived affect of captivity and colonization in the Peazant family. Rape has functioned to fragment the family, but the Unborn Child compels the Peazant family to confront their historic wounds and look towards the future. Indeed, it is through literally dissolving the space between Eli and Eula that the Unborn Child enters the filmic world. *Daughters of the Dust* opens Black women's subjectivity into a future tense, an open state of becoming.

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[71] Ibid.

Conclusion: What Remains to be Seen

Film allows us to explore the "contradictions, absences, and murkiness" of intersectionality, to illuminate the nuances and details that proliferate within and between identity markers such as Black and woman. [72] We can read films in search for who we are, who the cinematic apparatus wants us to be, and how we come to identify in the world. Rape on film has narrowly determined many of these trajectories. Works such as *Daughters of the Dust* open the possibilities for Black women's identities not to be cast as unitary, but instead as constantly negotiating race and gender as processes shaped by ideology.

In revisiting old film class notes, I came across the figure of the Sankofa bird. An African, specifically Akan, word which means, "one must return to the past in order to move forward," the Sankofa's body is positioned frontward with its head looking backward. In thinking about the rape scenes in *The Color Purple, She's Gotta Have It,* and *Daughters of the Dust* and the kind of film I want to make about Black women's rape, I find that the figure of the Sankofa bird neatly encapsulates the historical and radical gestures I would like to see. I am certainly not the first to use the figure of the Sankofa; emerging in the 1980s alongside the films I have discussed, my film education at Duke has been shaped by Sankofa Film and Video, an independent Black British collective.

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[72] Nash, "Re-thinking Intersectionality," 3.

I would not want to make a film completely removed from the way we have been trained to understand the signs, the narratives of rape. Ideally, the film would be critical of these social practices, leaving the spectator uncomfortable with the production of rape as a technology of patriarchal capitalism and hopeful towards crafting a new vocabulary for interpreting sexual violence under dominating institutions.

Building on work such as Dash's, my ideal film explores some of the breadth of experience under the rubrics of identity politics that are profoundly meaningful and vital to some while also countering this notion with accounts of exclusion, insufficiency, and resistance to identity markers and categories. My ideal film 'about' sexual violence would materialize my desire to eradicate sexual violence while at the same time acknowledging its historical bearing on the way we understand the world. The film would indeed motion towards collectivity in its form and content, but it would express utopia in a plural, inconclusive, open-ended voice and visual economy.

Perhaps filmed through visual metaphor or spoken through poetry, sexual violence would permeate the film in a nebulous, hazy way. Its imprecision and abstraction would resist the political purchase of legibility so that it could not be taken up for exploitation under a dominating gaze or institution. The film would deny the traditional spectacle of rape entirely. In an effort to imagine uncolonized bodies, the camera would not frame, cut, or fragment the body into

commodities and fetishes. The value of women's bodies and sexuality would be reconstituted as independent of and resistant to the economy of the male gaze.

What remains to be seen in filmic representations of Black women's rape is a kind of filmic space that allows for plural, contradictory, fragmented, dynamic, and unpredictable intersections of identity, experience, and meaning.

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