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Figure 1. Julie Dash and Charles Burnett at the Pan African Film Festival, 2008 (Photo by Frances-Anne Solomon, 2008).

“I Do Exist”: From “Black Insurgent” to Negotiating the Hollywood Divide—A Conversation with Julie Dash

by MICHAEL T. MARTIN

Abstract: This extended conversation with Julie Dash concerns her work as a filmmaker and projects in development since the release of her masterwork, *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). It examines Dash’s film practice and ambivalent relationship to Hollywood, along with her take on black independent filmmaking from the 1960s to the present and its prospects during Spike Lee’s ascendancy.

Michael T. Martin is director of the Black Film Center/Archive and professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. His edited and coedited anthologies include Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: Slavery, Jim Crow, and Their Legacies (Duke University Press, 2007), Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality (Wayne State University Press, 1995), and New Latin American Cinema (Wayne State University Press, 1997). He also directed and coproduced the award-winning feature documentary on Nicaragua, In the Absence of Peace (1989). His most recent work is on the films of Gillo Pontecorvo and Haile Gerima.

[Julie Dash] consistently intervenes in and redirects Hollywood images of African American women, offering aesthetically complex and compelling characters and returning to specific historical moments to recover and revalue the nuances of black women's lives and professional contributions.

Joanna Hearne, 2007¹

A raconteur of extraordinary discernment and vision, Julie Dash was born and reared in the Queensbridge Projects of Long Island City, New York, although her parents came from South Carolina, where on her father's side of the family the Gullah culture was practiced. In 1968, during her senior year in high school, she attended a film workshop at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which aroused her interest in filmmaking. In 1974, she earned a BA in film production at the City College of New York, then moved to Los Angeles to find work and learn to write screenplays. There she met and worked with Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, and Haile Gerima. In 1975, she became a producing and writing fellow at the American Film Institute, and in 1986, she completed an MFA in motion picture and television production at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA).

It was during the UCLA period that Dash's filmmaking and political concerns coalesced to contest Hollywood's conventions of storytelling, as well as its complicity in American racism. Dash became part of a "study" group of black student filmmakers at UCLA, dubbed the "black insurgents" by Toni Cade Bambara (a.k.a. the "Los Angeles School" or "LA Rebellion"). The group, asserts Bambara, "engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema, screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people."²

The intellectual and cultural commitments of the first wave of this group were "inseparable from the political and social struggles and convulsions of the 1960s," contends Ntongela Masilela.³ In contrast to Hollywood, members of the group engaged and were inspired by the writings of Third World theorists, the cultural texts and practices of the Black Arts Movement, and the anticolonial and postrevolutionary films and political tracts of the New Latin American Cinema movement. The group's project was to conceive and practice a film form appropriate to and in correspondence with the historical moment and their cultural and aesthetic concerns. For Masilela, a central preoccupation and organizing theme of the first cohort of what arguably constituted a movement—comprising Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark among others—was the "relationship of history to the structure of the family."⁴ This

1 Joanna Hearne, "Julie Dash," in *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit, MI: Schirmer Reference, 2007), 376.

2 Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Cinematic Movement," in *Black Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 119. According to Ntongela Masilela, Dash was among the "second wave" in this movement, which included Alile Sharon Larkin, Bernard Nichols, and Billy Woodberry. See Ntongela Masilela, "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers," in *ibid.*, 107.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, 111. Note that Charles Burnett's films, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), *The Horse* (1973), *Several Friends* (1969), and *When It Rains* (1995), were released in a box set by Milestone Films (2007).

theme is perhaps best epitomized by Burnett's neorealist take on urban ghetto black working-class life in *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and, I would argue, by Michael Roemer's *Nothing but a Man* (1964), a seminal study of black family life and race relations in the rural South in the late 1950s to mid-1960s. Dash, a member of the group's second wave, along with Billy Woodberry (*Bless Their Little Hearts*, 1984), would address this familial theme, as well as the southern rural black encounter with modernity, in her most original, experimental, and complex film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1992).

Dash's early films reveal the originality of her artistry and the themes that would inform her more mature work. For *Diary of an African Nun* (1977), adapted from a short story by Alice Walker and shot on Super 8mm, Dash received a Director's Guild of America Award. In 1982, she made *Illusions*, the story of two African American women—one passing for white—in the Hollywood film industry during World War II, for which she later received a Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame Award. With her critically acclaimed grand opus, *Daughters of the Dust*—selected by the Library of Congress for the National Film Registry in 2004, and the first feature film by an African American woman to have a national theatrical release—Dash is assured membership in the pantheon of African American filmmakers.

Despite the critical success of *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash continues to experience resistance in Hollywood to financing her projects. In the mid-1990s, she migrated to television, directing projects for CBS (*The Rosa Parks Story*, starring Angela Bassett, 2002), MTV (*Love Song*, 2001), BET Movies/Encore/Starz3 (*Funny Valentines*, 1998), and HBO (*Subway Stories*, 1996). She also produced shorts about health issues and music videos, including Tracy Chapman's *Give Me One Reason*, which was nominated for an MTV Music Video Award in 1996. In 2004, she completed *Brothers of the Borderland*, a short film scheduled to run for four years at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center Museum in Ohio.

This extended interview with Dash occurred on two occasions: during her visit to the Indianapolis Museum of Art on October 29, 2006, where *Daughters of the Dust* was screened as part of the museum's "Film with Artist Talk Program," and at Indiana University–Bloomington on October 3–4, 2007, when Dash gave the keynote address, "My Narrative: Experiences of a Filmmaker," and screened her film *The Rosa Parks Story* as part of a month-long celebration of the university's archives and special collections. The interview is organized in two parts. The first concerns Dash's work since *Daughters of the Dust*, including her current projects in development; the second, her film practice, the prohibitions of Hollywood and attitudes of executives that constrain black filmmakers' creative impulse and "magic," and her views about Spike Lee and black independent filmmaking from the 1960s to the present.

On the Margins of Hollywood

MM: Reviewing your Web site, I took note that you've worked on productions for CBS, MTV, BET Movies/Encore/Starz3, and HBO. Together, they substantiate your increasing presence and prominence in Hollywood. Apart from exceptional artistry and professionalism, how do you account for your success?

JD: I see myself working in and outside of Hollywood. Hollywood is still not quite open to what I have to offer. Angela Bassett was one of the executive producers of *The Rosa Parks Story*. She said, “I want Julie Dash to direct this film and to do some rewriting of the script.” So it happened. The same thing occurred with *Funny Valentines*. I directed it because Alfre Woodard was one of the executive producers. She said, “I want Julie Dash on this.” It’s people like Bassett and Woodard who have helped me because Hollywood is still slow about hiring me to direct and write. They’re curious, however, and like to keep up with me. I can have lunch with anyone and visit with executives, but they have not hired me. Some were put off by *Daughters of the Dust* because they did not understand it, although people in the African American community seem to have an affinity for it. In fact, they [executives] rarely want to talk about *Daughters*. Once I was at Universal Studios preparing to do *Funny Valentines* and a producer said, “Just don’t do *Daughters of the Dust*.” He actually said that. Another Hollywood executive said, “I’ve seen your movie—*Daughters of the Dust*. Let’s not even talk about it, let’s move on from here.” You know, it’s like having a skeleton in your closet, it’s like we won’t talk about that. It’s interesting, and I would like someone to tell me what it means.

MM: *Given the demands of executives and the formulaic conventions of Hollywood fare, have you had to compromise your vision and artistry?*

JD: I love making movies. I’m a filmmaker. I’ve been a filmmaker for a very long time. I know how to come at it from different angles. I will always maintain the integrity of the subject matter whatever I’m doing. I could do a music video, a very intellectual or highbrow porno film if I chose to. In production, I fight very hard to keep historical events and issues accurate. It’s important to me because I don’t really enjoy films that aren’t multi-layered, that don’t resonate, or are inaccurate. Of course, you can take dramatic license and stretch things to make them more interesting. All filmmakers do that. But I will not manipulate certain things that have to do with my culture to please someone else. I’ve been asked to do that and I have refused. Perhaps I’m seen as difficult. I see it as being true to myself.

What’s needed is financing from outside sources. From venture capitalists and private funds. As a people, we must finance the films we want to see. These kinds of changes have already begun with Tyler Perry, from people in the music industry, and with actors like Will Smith producing the successful film *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006), and now with Danny Glover—cofounder of Louverture Films—who is producing and directing the film *Toussaint* (2009).

New and Unrealized Scripts

MM: *Let’s talk about your projects in development. Digital Diva was originally intended for CD-ROM. What’s it about and when do you expect to complete it?*

JD: I’ve worked so long on *Digital Diva* that it would now have to be a DVD. I went from a screenplay to graphic novel and to pitching the screenplay to every major studio, mini-studio, independent, black-owned, what-have-you. They declined it.

Digital Diva is about a young black woman who is a third-generation computer encryption specialist. She’s the digital diva. Her grandfather was a mathematical genius

who worked for the Allies during World War II. And her father, a Carnegie Mellon Fellow, was a Black Panther.

I heard that during World War II they had Nigerians working in the Black Tower, which was a secret code-breaking site in Washington, DC. Why would they have Nigerians? Perhaps because the Igbo language is very difficult? I researched and found out that, while they acknowledged having employed chess masters, gypsies, and gamblers to break the codes, they omitted the Nigerians [from the official record]. So, I mixed this all together in the narrative. I put some Nigerians at Oxford—one of whom is the grandfather in the story—and had them go through the Alan Turing thing at Bletchley Park and then with the Allies in Washington, DC. Twenty years later, his son, a Black Panther allied with SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and the Weathermen, is killed because he has become a very dangerous person. His daughter, the digital diva, is opposed to black militancy because she lost the father she never knew.

MM: *There are aspects of Digital Diva that resonate with The Spook Who Sat by the Door (Ivan Dixon, 1973), which was adapted to film from the novel by Sam Greenlee.*

JD: Absolutely. And the novel *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) by John A. Williams. I read it in high school and thought it was really good. Why hasn't the novel been made into a film? Time is running out to make *Digital Diva* because I have to tell the story within these time locks. I have not been able to get it financed.

In 1994, I was asked, "Don't you think it's a little confusing?" It's been picked up several times as an option by several sources who always want to make it something other than what it is. You know, there was one black company that said, "Why don't you make it an AIDS film?" Then there was another that said, "Well why don't you make it a white film?"

MM: *It's not about that.*

JD: Right! We already have that. What's new? It's not just Julie Dash who has trouble getting films financed. It's also Charles Burnett and Neema Barnette and many, many others—including white filmmakers with a different voice. Everyone who works in the industry is working on this narrow channel. *The Rosa Parks Story* was made after fifty years had passed, and then they didn't want to tell it correctly. They said, "Add this to make her more likeable, do this, change that." No, while black filmmakers have progressed, we have a long way to go. Films are being made but they tend to be comedies.

MM: *Negroes in Hollywood?*

JD: *Negroes in Hollywood*. They now want buddy films. I don't know how to say it nicely; it's not about us. It's a very difficult situation, but it appears not to be so because now we're seeing more black romantic comedies, which is wonderful. They're very relaxing, but who's deciding on which films will be made and which will not? What kinds of films are being made and why? Who is the audience? Are we still just performing for white audiences? Are we being funny, are we dancing, are we singing, or are we now the love interest?

MM: *At what stage of development is The Colored Conjurers?*

JD: Same situation.

MM: *It sounds like a story that revisits the theme of passing in your earlier film Illusions, which I recall is a semiautobiographical work based on your aunt Delphine?*

JD: *The Colored Conjurers* is a period piece. For years, I've been told that period pieces don't sell, especially period pieces about African Americans. Recently, there's been nothing but period pieces from Hollywood. It's like approaching the Wiz in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). The wizard: "Oh, today we're not doing this, today we're doing the other. Today the color is green, tomorrow blue." The rules change by the day and sometimes by the hour. The same companies have told me that they cannot do a period film and, before I hit the door, there's a period film being made. These companies claim the demographics show that they cannot afford to do films with a female lead. They can't do films about magicians because they can't sell them, then *The Illusionist* (Neil Burger, 2006) is released. The problem is that African American films are only allowed to be "this" or "that," depending upon when they need "this" or "that." There's not much variety. What's on my mind is not what's being produced or financed at the moment. And that's been going on for fifteen years now.

MM: *Enemy of the Sun, another work in development, exemplifies the range of your interests and appears to have more general appeal and commercial ambitions than The Colored Conjurers. This is suggested in the description on your Web site: "A sophisticated and sexy suspense thriller reminiscent of Entrapment (1999), Body Heat (1981), and The Thomas Crown Affair (1968, 1999)."*

JD: A very well-known producer flew me to New York to talk about doing *Enemy of the Sun*. His development person, who also had *The Colored Conjurers* screenplay and *Digital Diva* script, said she didn't know any African Americans like that. I replied, "Well, where are you from?" She said from the Midwest and that was not her experience with African Americans. I said, "You could go to Atlanta or DC, we come in all colors, all shades, and we do many different things." I hate to say this but "they"—the people in development—have a very myopic view of who we are and what we are and what we want to do. If we don't fall into place exactly where and how they imagine us, as in *Daughters of the Dust*, it's like "What do you mean Gullah, I never heard of Gullah!" I've had people ask me why I didn't do a documentary about the Gullah before doing *Daughters*. Why do I have to do a documentary first? Some people insisted that *Daughters* is a documentary. It's strange. Or they'll say things like, "Was there a script?" No, we just met every morning at sunrise, and everyone knew exactly what to wear and what we were going to be performing that day. [Laughs] It's unbelievable. They think it all fell together, but if it all falls together and works but is something they don't know about, then they want you to "put that away and let me focus on what I know about you." It's very patronizing, but very interesting. If I were to do a remake of another film, maybe they'd be more interested? You know, just take a white movie and remake it with black characters.

MM: *What's Enemy of the Sun about?*

JD: It's about two con artists who travel around the US getting very wealthy women to give them their money. And when they hit Atlanta, one of them decides that they could continue their scams legally by becoming entrepreneurs and working within the system. The other argues, "We've got to stay on the run." So, the story addresses the pull and tension between them.

MM: *The other project in development*, *The Reader* . . .

JD: That's a remake of *La Lectrice* (1988) by Michel Deville and based on the Raymond Jean novel of the same title.

MM: *The Reader seems more grounded in black life and the challenges and compromises of being an artist. The protagonist, Denise LaMarge, has literary interests, along with extraordinary musical competence. She's juggling the everyday as well as the personal, while struggling to make career decisions that work for her. Between these demands and roles is a complex identity. The close of the film (Act 3) visualizes a montage of and homage to cultural hybridity. What is it you want to convey in Act 3?*

JD: That you can be a commercial success and maintain the integrity of your art or, in her case, performance skill, because she is a singer. It's also delving into magical realism because we never hear LaMarge sing, when she does, because her voice is angelic. It's a remake of the French film but with a lot of my own issues because she has a boyfriend who is a filmmaker and who can't get his films made. He loves to watch Russian movies, but all he can do to earn money is make music videos with dancing girls. And then you have the foreign business people telling LaMarge and her group that they're not really singing like African Americans, that they need to sing like African Americans.

MM: *African Americans?*

JD: I experienced this directly. It was a foreign distributor who said *Daughters of the Dust* wasn't an authentic African American film. It wasn't, like, from the hood, which is interesting to me, having grown up in the hood. Ironically, those filmmakers who make the "hood" films haven't necessarily grown up in the hood. It's exotica to them. I hope to be around when history takes a look back at all of this. I think it's time for some black social scientist to step in and ask some pertinent questions.

MM: *Given these four distinct projects in development, who is your audience?*

JD: Anyone looking to see a great story! Everyone looking to experience the talent of and new worlds by African American actors.

MM: *Has your audience changed as you've worked increasingly in Hollywood?*

JD: I think my audience has increased.

MM: *But not changed?*

JD: With all of the new films being written and directed by African American filmmakers, including dynamic documentaries like *Rize* (David LaChapelle, 2005), our audiences are growing, and the demographics are changing.

Practice and Thematic Concerns

MM: *I would like to focus now on your practice as a filmmaker. Which do you prefer, narrative fiction or documentary?*

JD: I prefer narratives to documentaries because of my mother. She'd come home from work and I'd say, "Would you come downtown? There's going to be a film showing that we made." She'd reply, "Is it a documentary?" And I'd say, "Yeah." "Oh, I'll see it later," she'd reply. So, I never forgot that. She was tired and wanted to see a movie. [Laughs]

MM: *So the choice of fiction over documentary was to please your mother?*

JD: Yes. You never forget something like that: "I'll see it later. Bring your tape home." It was just like "I'll see it later because I'm not getting up out of this bed to go down the street to see a documentary." She wanted to see a story. She wanted a beginning, a middle, and an end.

MM: *What's your method of narrative filmmaking?*

JD: I try different things. Each film has its own history and personality. The narrative depends on the story. The story tells me how I'm going to tell it, what it's going to be. When I wrote *Digital Diva* I didn't set out to do a suspense thriller, but it became one. When you're writing you hone the script and then tweak it to fall within the genre because you know there are certain points—plot points—that you want to hit once you find out it's a suspense thriller. Maybe I shouldn't be saying this. Maybe I should say, "I set out to write . . ." No, for *Digital Diva*, I just wanted to write a story about codes and ciphers, evoking W. E. B. DuBois's "double consciousness" and black people speaking and moving in coded ways. Transfer that, the same aesthetic and sensibility, to mathematics, and you have something really marvelous going on.

MM: *Do your films reflect a particular aesthetic style or sensibility that distinguishes them from other black filmmakers, particularly other black women filmmakers?*

JD: I think so. I think that it's closer to Euzhan Palcy's work than anyone else's.

MM: *Palcy's early and most original work—Sugar Cane Alley (Rue cases nègres, 1983)?*

JD: Yeah, that one. When you're directing, it's all about choices—a thousand choices. Every day you have what directors call the "four hundred questions" posed to you by different departments that you have to answer. You also have to plan ahead how you're going to address those questions when they come up. Otherwise, you just go "hmmm" and easily acquiesce to a Eurocentric point of view. You have what we call the "locus of creativity" people around, questioning you: "Why did you put the camera here?" or "Well, the camera's sitting right over there, so why don't you move it over there?" And you say, "No, I'm not going to move the camera over there." [Laughs]

The thing to do is be prepared for it. I always return to the black aesthetic. That's how I sort out and resolve my problems—from a black aesthetic and from a woman's aesthetic point of view.

MM: *You're not making decisions by committee.*

JD: Exactly, although it can easily become that. A lot of directors work with the actors and not the technicians. My fault is that I work more with the technicians than the actors, although I give the actors history sheets, summations of their character, etc. But there is so much to be done with the technicians, especially if you haven't made the decisions in preproduction, for example, of what color the cup is going to be. Otherwise, it becomes everyone else's decision—a mishmash of whatever that could be wrong or inappropriate. The director has to make these decisions.

MM: *Among the writers who discuss your work, several register but few remark upon the people who have influenced your mode of storytelling. I'm going to invoke their names and ask you—in a sentence or two—to explain why or how they influenced you. First, Randy Abbott (a.k.a. Omar Mubarak)?*

JD: My first film teacher. Through him my first questions about filmmaking were uttered.

MM: *Larry Clark?*

JD: There are two Larry Clarks. There's the white filmmaker Larry Clark and the black one from UCLA.

MM: *The latter.*

JD: Among the reasons I went to UCLA was to work with Larry Clark, Haile Gerima, and Charles Burnett. I did my first film test with Larry Clark in the seventies.

MM: *Haile Gerima?*

JD: I met him at the LA Film School. I never worked on any of his films, but I went to a lot of his screenings during the early UCLA days.

MM: *Akira Kurosawa?*

JD: That's when I realized that you make films from within you.

MM: *Vittorio De Sica and the Italian neorealists?*

JD: Their films reminded me of Harlem.

MM: *Charles Burnett?*

JD: He reminds me of the neorealists.

MM: *St. Clair Bourne, whom you have acknowledged "became a model" for you?*

JD: I worked for him through work study when I was at Chamba Productions in New York. It was the first summer of my first year in college. I became his slave. He only once took me out on the set. I had to stay in the office and go to the store. [Laughs]

MM: *Paid your dues.*

JD: Yes, I did. But I also was able to meet the Chamba brothers: Charles Hopson, Stan Wakeman, and Stan Lathan, whom Kathleen Collins was editing for. And, earlier at

the Studio Museum of Harlem, I met African American female filmmakers who had come before me. I saw Madeline Anderson's documentaries and Jessie Maple's first feature film (*Will*, 1981).⁵ They were unable to distribute them broadly.

MM: *Wasn't Stan Lathan with Black Journal at the time?*

JD: Yes, and he was one of the "Chamba brothers." They were working directors.

MM: *Making documentaries?*

JD: Yes.

MM: *Has Kathleen Collins influenced your filmmaking?*

JD: Kathleen Collins had her editing suite and was editing something for St. Clair Bourne. She would let me come in and watch her edit. She was so efficient and with a baby in one hand. We became friends and she taught me about editing.

MM: *What about the black women writers that influenced you? You said, fifteen years ago in an interview with Houston Baker, that Toni Cade Bambara influenced your approach to narrative.⁶ Has Toni Morrison influenced your approach to storytelling?*

JD: Her writing, whether in *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), or even *Beloved* (1987), is so visual that I would talk back to the pages and visualize the movie. You sit there crying, pat your eyes with the towel, and pick up the book again. I mean, it's very interactive when reading Toni Morrison because you're engaged.⁷ I sometimes reread her novels, especially the *Song of Solomon*, through the audio book. Someone said to me, "Oh, that could never be made into a film because it's so complex." So I listened to her voice as she read it and was able to visualize the story.

MM: *In an interview with Felicia R. Lee in the New York Times nearly a decade ago, you said that "I'm tired of seeing films about ourselves as victims . . . reacting to external forces. . . . I hate the urban testosterone films."⁸ Would you elaborate on this genre?*

JD: I'm getting myself into trouble here. Actually, I suggested that in *Illusions* (1982)—how we're portrayed in films to entertain other people (Figure 2). Less so now because of Spike Lee. But Spike is one person. You want me to elaborate on the testosterone films? Because they've changed; it's romantic comedies now.

MM: *What's a testosterone movie?*

JD: The young "urban male" films made in the 1990s. I can look at these films and say, "well done, bravo," but I'm not a guy. I grew up in the Queensbridge Projects and could watch the same thing by looking out the window. I did not grow up in a middle-class environment, so I don't see poverty, drug abuse, violence, and ignorance as being exotic or something worth imitating. I did not sit up at night worrying about Dracula

5 See the Jessie Maple Collection at the Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University–Bloomington.

6 Houston Baker Jr., "Not Without My Daughters," *Transition* 57 (1992): 151.

7 For more on Dash's thoughts about Morrison, see *ibid.*, 151–152.

8 Felicia R. Lee, "Where a Filmmaker's Imagination Took Root," *New York Times*, December 3, 1997.

either, because growing up I knew vampires would not pass 12th Street in Queensbridge. To me, a horror movie is watching a story about families suffering from drugs, poverty, etc. Perhaps that's why I want to see a lot more when I attend a movie theater or purchase a DVD.

MM: *What kind of films do you want to see about African Americans?*

JD: I want there to be more of every type of film you can imagine. I want to be able to see us in Middle Earth. We don't get to go beyond certain boundaries. We have to stay in this country and do this, that, and the other. Maybe we can run around in war a bit, but we're largely portrayed working that plow, walking the streets selling drugs, or being victims of drugs. I want to fly to the moon. Where's our *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003) trilogy? Where's our *Narnia* (Andrew Adamson, 2005, 2008)? As a child, we grow up knowing that we can't go there, and if we do, we'll get shot. We can't imagine ourselves running with antelope. We have to be practical. We only get to be young until we're old, and often we're old as very young people. Where's our magic? We're not allowed this magic, this space to explore. How do you grow up to be a full human being? I didn't have that space when I was growing up. I knew that you couldn't be this, you couldn't be that. So, many of us don't even try. And the result can be disastrous. Today there's more of us to see in movies, but it's largely the girlfriend with the turkey neck.

MM: *Have your views about Hollywood changed since the interview with Lee?*

JD: What did I say then? [Laughs]

MM: *You said it was a bad scene.*

JD: Let me say this: It's now an even more complex scene than ever before. With the success of Tyler Perry, F. Gary Gray, Gina Prince-Blythwood, Will Smith, Tim Story, Mara Brock Akil, and Shonda Rhimes, one wonders why it is still so difficult to convince the powers that be that we do, in fact, have an audience. It's a constant fight. You will have to fight for your ground and how you see the world, for not only your own mind's eye, but also for your children and their children. We need to be dedicated, with a concerted and focused effort to demand more balanced images of ourselves out there. People say things have changed. They have changed, but in many ways they have not.

Figure 2. Lonette McKee in *Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1982).

MM: *What was your experience transitioning from filmmaker to novelist to producer and now to all of the above? Are there differences and similarities between literary and visual modes of narration?*

JD: I think it's easier to be a filmmaker than a novelist. I've been a filmmaker longer than a novelist. Last summer, I was working on a novel, and I can't express myself through words like I can through images, through pictures. I'm not as fluid.

MM: *In Why We Make Movies, you were queried about Forrest Whitaker's direction of Waiting to Exhale (1995). You replied, "I think he did a fine job, but it would have made a big difference had a woman directed it. . . ."*⁹ *Is there a woman's sensibility to filmmaking that is different from a man's?*

JD: I think it would have made a difference in the directing and there is a difference of sensibilities between men and women. It's in the tiny specifics. I know it sort of flows from the top down. You need a strong woman in the producing, writing, directing, as well as editing areas to retain the tiny specifics and integrity of the film. The director now supervises the editing because it's easy to cut something out. A director can shoot something and it'll never make it into the finished film because someone else says, "What is that? We don't need that." It's always "we," or my favorite line . . . , "it goes off story, it's off story." But men and women think differently. They want to see different things. If you have an all-male team working on a woman's film it will be missing some things. Like music, if it's the beat, the beat is just off, but that doesn't mean that men cannot direct women's movies and that women cannot direct men's movies. I'm saying, if it's going to be an all-male team—producer, director, writer, and editor—you better bring in some women to say, "Hey! You missed a beat here."

MM: *What would you have changed had you directed Waiting to Exhale?*

JD: I'm gonna stay out of it.

MM: *Regarding the Rosa Parks Story, you said that you were "determined to get a more womanist vision, a female version of what was going on because it was a very male-centered script."*¹⁰ *What's a "womanist vision"?*

JD: The script I was handed was more about Raymond Parks and his point of view than Rosa Parks. It was not about her. And I think that's why Angela [Bassett] wanted me to massage the script by Paris Qualles—the writer of record. Together, we made the appropriate changes.

MM: *You were also especially critical of how the meaning of independent film has been appropriated and co-opted by Hollywood. Regarding companies like Miramax, you said that it's "not independent. It's not a filmmaker's vision. They're not signature films."*¹¹ *What do you mean by "signature films," and are they different from auteur films?*

JD: A signature film is like an auteur film. It implies the director has control over everything. However, filmmaking is a collaboration, unless the film is some kind of surveillance with one camera.

9 George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies* (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2003), 236.

10 Ibid., 241.

11 Ibid., 236.

MM: *Is there a Julie Dash signature?*

JD: I hope so. I'm working toward one. I think each project develops organically, even if you're handed a script as with the *Rosa Parks Story*. You sit with it and walk the site. You do your own research, which I did and discovered wonderful things like putting additional period buses in the film, changing locations to enhance the drama, and sometimes narrowing the focus of the story beats.

MM: *If I saw any one of your films, is there something about it that would identify you as the author? For example, I think Euzhan Palcy's Sugar Cane Alley is her most original film. Once she migrated to Hollywood, her unique style was less discernible and apparent, in my view.*

JD: She has made other films that they have not distributed in the US, including a musical. There's a film about a little girl who sees a ghost or is a ghost of a little girl. They did not release it here because they said, "It'll confuse people with subtitles." Another factor is when you have four hundred questions and 101 people with the legal right to tweak a film after you have completed it. They own the film and have a right to tweak it, so they say.

MM: *You have asserted on several occasions that you "want to see authenticity."¹² What do you mean by "authenticity"?*

JD: By that, I mean you can feel that it comes out of the filmmaker, out of the community, out of the issues, out of the events, out of history. You don't want something just grafted onto a film. You don't put a hat on a person without feeling a natural sense that it's right. It means that you know that something is flowing and moving right and that the history is there and recognizable to you. When you know that the parallel streams of information, symbolism, and metaphor coming together are not silly or stupid. We know, we feel the natural rhythm of the story, situation, or event. It's a glorious feeling. Unfortunately, I feel it more with foreign films than I do with those made in the US.

MM: *Can a filmmaker retain a critical and independent stance in Hollywood given the pressures we've talked about?*

JD: Beyond the overused argument about "commerce vs. art," I think the main goal we have to keep in focus is that we can have both. Everyone else does. Why do we have to remain especially limited in our thinking and doing? It's not just about putting black folks in front and behind of the camera. If you hire people who tell the same stories the same ways that other folks do, then what's the point? I see that happening a lot. They are fulfilling quotas. And it's like, "Well we have to do it this way because this is the way we've always done it."

MM: *Let's revisit the interview you had with Houston Baker in 1992. I want to read a statement that you made because I think that it is as relevant today as it was fifteen years ago. Regarding your narrative approach to Daughters of the Dust, you rejected "the male western narrative for the narrative mode based on oral tradition as exemplified by the African credo."¹³ Since Daughters, have you changed your view about this mode of narration?*

12 Ibid., 242.

13 Baker, "Not Without My Daughters," 151.

JD: I think there was some confusion there, and my statement was misrepresented. I was saying then, that before *Daughters of the Dust*, I was not using the Western male narrative based upon the “tall tale of the once upon a time” and the linearity of Act 1, Act 2, and Act 3. Now, in some of my other films, I’m working within the Western narrative because it is easily grasped by audiences. But you can insert other things in there to make the audience consider and feel that there’s something more that you’re trying to tell.

Black Filmmaking: Making Progress?

MM: *You have noted that during the 1960s and 70s, black filmmaking on the East Coast was largely devoted to documentary, while on the West Coast, to narrative film. Apart from the dominance of Hollywood, its commercial concerns, production practices, and narrative conventions, were there other factors that account for this difference?*

JD: I think the West Coast got lucky, first with *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971) and then with *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971). “Hey we’ve got a good thing going, let’s make some blaxploitation films.” They really took off.

MM: *And why the documentary on the East Coast?*

JD: Because East Coast filmmakers were more interested in authenticity, the truth, answering questions, and exposing situations. Of course, the budgets for documentaries were smaller than for narrative features. You don’t need a large crew, you can do it faster and more efficiently. I came out of that East Coast filmmaking tradition and wound up on the West Coast trying to apply that same aesthetic to narrative films.

MM: *Have the dynamics and practices of filmmaking now changed the trajectory of the West Coast narrative, East Coast documentary?*

JD: Yes, there are many narrative films being made on the East Coast, even in the Midwest, including here in Indiana. The playing field is now leveled by digital technology.

MM: *You have asserted that during the nineties the climate for black filmmakers was more difficult and competitive. You said, “We don’t even see ourselves right now as a movement. I don’t think these filmmakers are thinking in terms of history and progression.”¹⁴ Is the climate for black filmmaking any better today?*

JD: During the nineties it was very competitive. I now realize that the competitive climate for black filmmaking was created by Hollywood determined to make “testosterone films.” Hollywood made sure that when they took pictures of these homeboy films from the hood that they didn’t include women. I remember someone said, “Well, they didn’t know where you were.” I was with Mario Van Peebles in Germany attending a film festival. My entertainment lawyer also represented the Hudlin brothers and Mario, so how could he say they couldn’t find me? I’ll never forget that they got

14 Ibid., 159.

a black woman and cultural critic—Karin Grisby-Bates—to say that these were the [male] filmmakers making it and that my movie [*Daughters*] was a television movie. She wrote that in the *New York Times*, and people repeated that it wasn't theatrical. I said, "No, it's not a television movie." It was American Playhouse that coproduced my film, along with *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991) and *Stand and Deliver* (Ramón Menéndez, 1988). But *Daughters* became a "television movie" because it suited their purposes. At Sundance, we were all interviewed, but all the interviews were skewed toward the black male filmmakers while the female filmmakers were tossed aside. I now understand that it was a concerted effort to promote black male filmmakers, while they ignored everyone else, as if we didn't exist. We do, and I am still around.

MM: *Are black filmmakers as self-serving and opportunistic today as you, seemingly, have suggested that many were in the nineties?*

JD: What was going on back then was frightening. I recall an incident at the Sundance Film Festival when the director Matty Rich said, "Hey, Julie, I was wanting to meet you." I replied, "Hey, Matty, how you doing?" A publicist immediately cut in and said, "You two don't talk." I was, like, when did this happen?

MM: *And now?*

JD: It's not like that now, but it's certainly not like the way it was in the eighties when everyone would meet at the film festivals. It was the only time we got to see everyone, and it was great. I think we've learned that the competitiveness of the nineties didn't help anyone; no one got to make any more movies. Since the eighties, the only one who's been consistent is Spike Lee.

MM: *You said to Houston Baker that in *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), Spike Lee "brought life back into the black independent film movement."¹⁵ Now, with Spike Lee ensconced in Hollywood—except for occasional departures, like his recent take on the Katrina debacle—is the US black independent film movement overshadowed by his prominence in Hollywood?*

JD: No. And we need more filmmakers like Spike Lee. He just keeps exploring and stretching the envelope. People don't understand how much battering he took. He just keeps coming back, putting blinders on and doing what he's going to do. I love that he takes chances. If we had ten more Spikes, we'd be in good shape. And some female Spikes, too. The documentary on Katrina [*When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, 2006] had you weeping. I understand that he's going to do a dramatic film on Katrina. Then he had the thriller bank robbery movie (*Inside Man*, 2006), although it didn't feel at all like Spike. I won't let anybody talk badly about him. He took a chance with *She Hate Me* (2004). It was five different movies in one and had a little Spikeness in it. OK, it was French.

MM: *Is there another Spike Lee out there to revitalize the black independent film movement?*

JD: I know there are many Spikes who have that drive and sense of wit.

15 Ibid., 161.

MM: *Do you have anyone in mind?*

JD: Shola Lynch, Sylvain White, Darnell Martin, and Antoine Fuqua.

MM: *Let's conclude here with your current project. What's it about?*

JD: There's a Nancy Wilson song: "Now I'm a woman." Everything is music. You carry that around and one day you say, "Hey, I'm going to do a film about 'first I was a child, now I'm a lady.'" [Laughs] It's a romantic trilogy. The main character—a woman—is a perfumer and her life has been influenced and informed by three distinct fragrances.

MM: *Thank you, Julie Dash.*

JD: And thank you too.

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I am indebted to the anonymous Cinema Journal readers for their critical comments on an earlier draft.