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Sound and Feminist Modernity in Black Women’s Film Narratives

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Feminist film theory addressing black women’s representation in film has steadily developed a series of subject positions that challenge the dominant assumptions of Anglo/Euro feminist film theory. The feminist critical practice by which we designate some filmic and critical work as feminist, and others as black feminist, has preserved the “occult” status of black women as subjects in academic discourse. As a result, the study of sound in black feminist films has been neglected, while sound in European and American aural female subjectivities in film has been explored in some depth. This emphasis on visuality, and Black/ Anglo/Euro feminist film criticism’s prioritization of the black female form, is an inevitable consequence of the ruling archetypes of black femininity in the Hollywood silent film era. Concerted efforts were, then, inevitably focused on discussing, analyzing, and contesting the visual iconography of black women on screen and, consequently, the use of sound in African American women’s film has been an under-researched area. Notwithstanding my discomfiture with the term “black women’s film,” which is simultaneously homogenizing and separating, given the lack of attention to the auditory, I offer some scattered speculation on the value of sound and of studying sound. I use three films that could more usefully be called anti-colonial: Julie Dash’s ILLUSIONS (1981) and DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST, (1991) and Omah Diegu’s THE SNAKE IN MY BED (1995). I explore the hypothesis that sound is imperative to the entrance of subaltern women into modernity, that is, to the rights of all subjects, including the subaltern, to access public entitlements and juridical guarantees. For the female subject, this may be understood as having the right to be portrayed with dignity and the right to self-representation or legal representation. My conjectures and observations seek to foreground some strategies used by filmmakers’ use of sound and its contribution to the participation of black women as modern anti-colonial subjects in film.
The Birth of the Black Voice in Film

Sound revolutionized the film industry in general, but its importance for black subjects as distinct from blacks in film, but including them, is incalculable. The transition brought with it an immense potential to rectify the dominant imagery of the black minstrel tradition and its assumptions about black masculinity in particular. Standard American film histories credit the coming of sound with Hollywood’s release from the likes of the prototypical Uncle Tom of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) and Gus of *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1913). Sound liberated the corporeal black subject on to the screen. Being and “the certificate of humanity” were granted through voice. African American reviewers welcomed this new opportunity enthusiastically, reading the access to sound on screen as a signifier of racial advancement and the promise of greater participation in the public sphere. Daniel Haynes, who played the lead role in MGM’s film *Hallelujah* (King Vidor, 1929), said “the Negro has finally broken through the shell of apathy and indifference and emerged in the light of the screen.” Furthermore, the black actor’s ability to be heard on screen was equated with the new possibility of claiming subjectivity in the public realm: a new birth of sorts that was understood as an “emancipation” from both the silent screen and from silence itself. This promise was, however, not fulfilled by Hollywood, and the “new birth” was overlaid and subtended by the racist template of the silent film era. African American film had to wait for independent film culture to explore fully the key importance of sound for black modernity.

According to Michele Wallace, in African American culture, the visual was the negative scene of instruction, while the aural was the positive. Notwithstanding the layers of complexity that subtend Wallace’s seemingly straightforward statement, her comment helps to explain the overwhelming attention paid to visuality in African American women’s film. For instance, commentaries on Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, which in all likelihood has had more written on it than any other film directed by an African American woman, offer very little information on the use of sound. And this despite the director’s statement that she wanted to be the griot of her people. In African culture, the griot is the repository of cultural knowledge, the poet, and the storyteller of the people. Furthermore, the Los Angeles school of filmmakers that she belonged to had similar aspirations.

For Anglo-Euro feminist criticism, the female voice in the diegesis is irrevocably linked to the physicality of the female body. Thus, in Hollywood films of the studio era, the speaking presence of the female subject was of little importance. These qualities of voice itself, as being subsidiary to the female body and its performative capabilities, were most startlingly illustrated by the Sternberg films featuring Marlene Dietrich. In Mulvey’s formulation, male castration anxiety emerges in the cinema as a fetishization of the [white] female body.
turn, carries over to the voice to leave its traces in the disturbances around women’s speech in sound films. Amy Lawrence notes that this fear is discernible in classical Hollywood film, as women’s voices are often less synchronized than the norm. The lack of perfect synchronization misaligns the voice from the speaking body. The issues to do with sound for non-African American women in Hollywood film are manifold. To begin with, the visualized female body strips the female voice of authority. Secondly, feminist criticism considers female speech a precondition for subjectivity. However, female speech is threatened in classical Hollywood film in two ways: the soundtrack itself is unraveled by the possibility of women’s speech as noted above, and the soundtrack “fractures a woman’s body and voice into irreconcilable pieces.” Thirdly, feminist critics might have been tempted to find the female subject’s voice in the semiotic chora of maternal speech, but this is contested in orthodox psychoanalytic theory by the word of the Father and the interdiction against [female] speech. And finally, any theory of the filmic apparatus’s signifying system cannot afford to distinguish drastically between sound and image for fear of allowing sound to carry the burden of meaning.

Writing on African American sound in film, Ryan Jay Friedman makes a comparison between the status of Euro-American women’s voices and black voices. I would contend, however, that his comparison is not completely persuasive. The physical presence of black women on screen, bodies allied to sound, was politically important in ways that render the subversions effected by an erotics of Euro-American women’s sound through its scission and rupture of the diegetic space incommensurate to the political charge of black women’s diegetic speech. Unlike the white female voice, the black female voice does not suffer the same interdiction against speech. The black male voice does not carry the same authority as the white male voice, and hence its imbrication in the black female voice does not threaten it. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic valence of the white paternal interdiction against white female speech does not hold the same charge against black female speech. Indeed, the black female voice seeks to dismiss the authoritative white male voice, as it holds no paternal authority over black female subjects; rather it is synonymous with political and juridical oppression. Finally, while the black image has been so identified with primitivism, the aural is associated with artistry, articulation, and the expressive speaking voice.

In part, due to the taboos against interracial relationships as translated into the Hays Code of 1929, a close analysis of the role of black women entertainers in early sound cinema presents an impossibly contradictory picture. While the erotic image of white femininity could be exploited for an assumed male spectator, the black female performers’ image was more complex. On the one hand, the specialist performer, such as a singer, could not be visualized erotically, in order to accord with the prescriptions of the Motion Picture Association not to allude to interracial sex. But on the other hand, in her role as chorus dancer the
black woman could be fetishized to such a degree that the suturing process collapses, moving out of the diegetic scene, to present the white male viewer with a complete and total field of erotic surveillance but without impinging on the Hays Code of 1929.

Even as the criticism of the uses to which sound has been put are undeniable, it is crucial to remember that the unison of form and voice exemplified by the non-African American woman on screen was only a glimmer of a possibility for black women. One cannot overemphasize the notion that for black women, sound was imperative if they were to be seen. Sound, however, did not mean that black women would be able to represent themselves fully; here, I am referring to both juridical and aesthetic uses of “representation.” Consequently, notwithstanding the claims made for the political uses of sound in the above discussion, it did not guarantee a public discursive authority that would definitively establish black women’s speech. Modernity, then, was not necessarily a given.

For black women playing entertainer roles, the singing voice may have been significant as a draw to both black and white audiences. However, such celebrations are given short shrift by the uses to which the black voice is put. Following Kaja Silverman, Friedman argues that because black performances were seen as commodity elements, in keeping with the Harlem Renaissance’s fashionable rage for the negro, subjectivity was scarcely to be secured in the context of the myriad encapsulations of the performer. Yet, a film such as The Emperor Jones (Dudley Murphy, 1933) would query that contention in that Brutus Jones undergoes a transformation that leads him to the existential and away from the performative while the film itself is able to capitalize on the performative. Any frame that features lead actor Paul Robeson and a white man shows Robeson dwarfing him, even when the man has the gun, and arguably even when Robeson is in chains. It is as though Robeson, the actor, escapes the diegesis in a threatening manner. The existential and the performative are best seen in the final sequences of the film. Robeson is a modern black figure in the swamp; the décor with its rich suggestions of sin, decadence, and self-indulgence portrays him as fully human, completely aware, and ready to acknowledge that he does not have one human ally on this island. His final confrontation is within himself. These subversions may have gone largely unnoticed and absorbed into the “primitivist” trope that the film plays to. Nevertheless, the literary framework of the film suggests a possibility for more progressive uses of sound in African American film. Friedman’s exploration departs company from Ed Guerrero’s critical perspective, which maintains that “with cinema sound, it [Hollywood] refined and advanced the reproduction of the slavery motif in terms of content, scale, and verisimilitude.” Guerrero further discusses the delusional establishment of slavery as a viable, harmonious institution through the many musical numbers in the plantation films between 1930 and 1935. Examining the scoring of films with some African American presence, one critic argues that the scores of film served as a
“shortcut” to signifying black identity on screen, in keeping with the fetishization of blackness performed routinely in popular venues during the Harlem Renaissance.\(^{18}\)

The use of sound, then, while opening some venues and congealing others, was nevertheless crucial to the formation of black identity with reference to modernity. Clearly, the plantation genre imprisoned both African American men and women in an unchanging and romanticized past that bore no relationship to reality and history. Nevertheless, there were some crucial differences in the representation of black women entertainers in comparison to white women entertainers. Received knowledge dictates that these specularized versions of black women singing,\(^{19}\) as in the Lena Horne corpus, severely reduced the possibilities of viewing black women as engaged subjects in society, unlike roles such as Alma in the silent *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920) or the mulatta protagonist, Louise, of the melodrama *Scar of Shame* (Colored Players of Philadelphia: Frank Peregin, 1927). The same is true of non-African American women in silent film, as Amy Lawrence confirms: “In silent film, despite the privileging of the image, women were always represented as speaking subjects.”\(^{20}\) I call attention to this in order to suggest that entrance into modernity had been realized in a select number of silent films by African American directors but that participation in modernity was not so directly apparent in the classical Hollywood sound cinema. However, in mainstream film, neither the insinuations of primitivism—sounds of “jungle” drums in an expressionistic tenor—in the soundtrack, nor the specularization of fetishized colored bodies succeeded in completely stifling black men and women’s public address.

Friedman’s reappraisal of specific films of this period reveals a complex relationship between the spectacle in the diegesis, the soundtrack, the diegetic auditory viewer, and the film’s visual auditor. Such a rereading emphasizes the importance of the soundtrack per se for the African American woman’s representation. He contends that black women performers were not commodified in the same manner as white women. Hierarchically, as commodities, their bodies did not carry the same “exhibition value”;\(^{21}\) however, they did carry some “fictive” value which referred to the real world.\(^{22}\) In the film *On with the Show* (Alan Crosland, 1929) where Ethel Waters plays herself as the singer, the viewer is barred from seeing her as erotic, in keeping with the Hays Code. Thus, even in the most specularized of scenarios, the black female is offered to the viewer directly as a performer, detached from the diegetic-looking apparatus which would signal her eroticism cinematically. In the case of a singer such as Waters, her real world authority, or what Friedman calls her “fictive capital” rather than that which comes from “exhibition,” prevents the white viewer from enjoying erotic surveillance. To conclude, the unity of a black female performer’s body and voice was effective as a public utterance breaking through the illusionistic world of the diegesis. While the case for such an overdetermined address
to the audience should not be overstated, the songs themselves might deal with issues outside the cabaret frame, such as the great migration, through which its real-world referents would introduce a modicum of modernity to the reified illusionistic spectacle offered by the white chorus ensemble epitomized by Florenz Ziegfield Jr.’s lines. Friedman is quite compelling when he concludes his reappraisal: “In the early backstage musical, racial difference from the films’ white norm has the paradoxical effect of allowing African American vocal performers to appear on screen as singular individuals, without being subsumed into the abstract-uniform bodies of the films’ showgirls.” Thus, film sound was successful, at least in interjecting some historical referents into an ahistorical spectacle of showtime with its replication of dominant racial and patriarchal hierarchies.

The Griot in Black Women’s Film

Sound in relationship to black women’s visibility in Hollywood film is the subject of Julie Dash’s Illusions. The film illustrates the dilemma of the black women’s voice in American film history using sound to expose diverse facets of the active exploitation of black women’s voices and suppression of their image on screen. This throws into relief the complex and diverse uses of black voices during the 1940s: namely the invisibility of the black performing voice. Esther Jeeter, the playback singer, played by Roseann Katon, is compelled to synchronize her singing to the white star’s lips in the studio film being produced. Jeeter is not seen in the film that is being scored in the studio, which is of course de rigeur for a playback singer, but it is her singing voice that is synched to the white woman’s lips, not the other way around. In this reversal, her voice is absorbed by the white woman on the cinema screen. Esther also desires to be seen; as her voice is detached from her body, her presence as a black woman is obliterated. And even when the synchronization is deemed successful because of Esther’s care in modelling her singing around the white woman’s lips, her voice is heard a second later than the lips that mouth the words. Dash subtly presents this delay as a metaphor for the blocking of black women’s public speech. Notwithstanding the use of Ella Fitzgerald’s song, the sequence conveys the imperfection of modernisms that fetishize the black woman’s singing persona but block the woman herself. If for Anglo-Euro women the problem was to secure authority through the voice-over or the speech detached from the body, for the African American woman both kinds of authority are evacuated by the transposing of the black female voice on to the white female body. The “phantasmatic body” – the unity of the body from which the voice comes that Mary Ann Doane suggests is the norm for Hollywood filmmaking – is the “illusion” that Esther seeks, a completeness that is denied her by the “substitution” of the white body. The story the
film tells is of the black female voice’s disembodiment and its service for the industry.

The metaphor that Dash uses is not intended to undercut the critique of the limited role of the female black performer in the sound cinema of Hollywood’s classical era; Rather it is to accentuate the double excision of both voice and physical presence on screen in order to enhance the exaggerated visibility of white female presence and black subordination. The mise-en-scène of Cecil B. DeMille’s early DON’T CHANGE YOUR HUSBAND (1919) illustrates this phenomenon. The white female figure is the only one upright at the center of the frame and is surrounded by black cowering figures at her feet, at her left, and at her right. Dash’s scenario in ILLUSIONS is an analogue of sorts with reference to sound rather than visuality.

In DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST, Dash presents the female voice as embodied; she allows black women to write history, narrate the personal, and direct the future. She looks to the oral epic tradition to find the voice of the female griot in a film whose visual imagery would be bereft of historical and cultural import without the speech of three women – Nana, Eula, and Yellow Mary – who represent black women of very different experiences. Dash’s mise-en-scène takes black women out of the kitchens they had been confined to and puts them in cinema studios and wide open spaces. By taking black subjects out of situations or formations that foreground their hierarchical status in American society as iterated in the sound films of the plantation genre, Dash departs from the convention. The Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas in the US is the actual setting of the film and is vital to the plot. On a Sunday in 1902, the Peazant family are recorded having lunch before some of them leave the islands for the mainland. Critics’ response to the film acknowledged its central circle of community, but it is patent that the women, centered in the frame, exert their power through the power of speech that draws the community together. In the frame, they are shown gesturing, talking, and using their bodies to draw the audience into their speech.

When the women speak and urge the community to hold together, their speech itself follows the intellectual and literary as distinct from the musical and entertaining that is normative in the Hollywood sound film. The women assume the authority of leaders of the community in their speech, which functions both as a form of public address and as a modernist rupture of the Peazant family’s special Sunday lunch. The many viewers of the film have registered the difficulty of the speech; its cadence, its non-standard English, a claim to the authenticity of their speech – addressing other intimate members of the community (rather than the putative Cartesian male viewer or the Euro-American female viewer). As insider speech, it refuses to interpellate viewers as anything other than outsiders, distancing them from easy identifications. The listeners in the diegesis are themselves initially alienated, emphasizing the viewers’ discomfort. One critic, for instance, considers the movie “full of verbal and visual disassociation.”
visual could allure the outsider viewer, but the speech forbids it. Eula, raped and carrying a child, addresses the “shame” she and Yellow Mary, the prostitute are expected to carry:

Eula: As far as this place is concerned we never enjoyed our womanhood Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them [...] Even though you’re going up North, you all think about being ruined, too [...] You’re going to be sorry, sorry if you don’t change your way of thinking before you leave this place.

Completely without a skein of melodrama, the director, following the epic formula, allows her heroes to tell their tales, not of a straightforward heroism but a truth-telling of what had not been spoken before: the women’s burden of rape, of slavery, of prostitution.

The speech dares the most sympathetic female viewer to identify with the women, such is the enormity of their experience and the courage with which they narrate it. The *mise-en-cadre* and the cinematography are unabashedly modernist as is the manner in which the narrative emerges: it is built by the visual scenes that tell bits of both the *grand récit* and the local story, for instance in the sequence where Nana and her grandson discuss their lives, their histories, and their futures. The total avoidance of all but one scene from the past links the present and the past conveying the epic narrational style. Dash’s film uses “an imperfect modernism,” a cancellation of realism and its illusory wholeness, while not abandoning the recognizable referent – the real history. And this is adduced through the women’s speech.

It is, of course, a theoretical exercise to posit viewers based on viewing positions, and therefore it may be salutary to explore the responses of women to the film. While the vast majority of feminist non-African American critical scholarship has concentrated on the experimental filmic techniques introduced by Dash, and although mainstream criticism was uneven, African American critics including Toni Cade Bambara and bell hooks have discussed the visual in terms of black female subjectivity. Furthermore, Jacqueline Bobo avers that “Black women viewers reclaimed the film *Imitation of Life* beyond its critical reception as they later would with *Daughters of the Dust.*” The women’s sense of the history of their culture is also conveyed through the use of Yoruba on the soundtrack, which evoked memories of the musical patterns they had experi-
enced in childhood, the sounds that allowed notions of their history to surface. Christian Metz notes that off-screen sound is never really “off”; thus the sound provides a viewing context for the women wherein the real of history is foregrounded.34

One woman specifically commented on the power of Nana Peazant saying to her grandson Ely regarding the rape of his wife, Eula: “You don’t own her” and she then elaborated on its continued relevance to cultural issues in the contemporary moment. Such a strong connection then testifies to the relevance of referential speech, culled from the real, to the entrance of black women into modernity. The insertion of black women as griots, usurping an older tradition in the service of modernity, is a strategy that is used successfully to combine an exigent realism at odds with filmic realisms but entrenched in literary manipulations of realism.

Omah Diegu’s The Snake in My Bed (1995) lends itself to comparison with Daughters of the Dust, as it similarly looks back to the “ancestral archive” to represent the modern condition.35 Extensive discussion on whether the modern can actually be conveyed in a traditional modality has been to some extent resolved by an understanding of the need to research African histories, particularly the non-colonial, and the personal to present an African modernism/modernity.36 Omah Diegu claims an identity as a [cinematic] griot and narrates her own story. Following the traditional role of the griot, she assumes the responsibility of giving her son knowledge of his heritage. The address is intimate as Diegu observes, “As his griot, my son is my primary target audience hence I addressed him directly.”37 The film is comparable to Ingrid Sinclair’s Flame (1996) in the use of “bush narratives” and the authorship of one of the chief protagonists in the voice-over. Both use the female voice-over but where the diaristic and literary models frame Flame and prop up the film, pausing to shift to flashbacks and photo-reportage, Diegu’s film puts pressure on the voice-over and the narrator/author/auteur/griot to trace her own struggle to participate in modernity. Although there is no harmonizing of the soundtrack to the visual in Flame, they combine to close the narrative in a satisfying way even if it leaves open the question of whether the two freedom fighters have found a place in the new postcolonial nation.

The Snake in My Bed matches the visual to the soundtrack using abstract expressionism, realizing its imperfect modernism through the discrepant relationship between the realism of the soundtrack in relationship to the image and vice versa. The film opens with bright imagery and figures in a landscape that seem to conjure up the griot’s imaginative world. The first-person narrator relates, in voice-over, the story of the Ibo princess Onwuero and the prince Isa who walk across the seas. At one point, the prince is transformed into three fish. Both the sea and the skies in this scene are not depicted in a conventional cinematic way. The landscape, for instance, is very different from the vastness de-
picted in Wend Kuuni (Gaston Kabore, 1983) or the majesty of the land before colonization as in Ceddo (Sembène Ousmane, 1977). These films inscribe the geographic reality of Africa and paradoxically also its land as mythical. In many cases, the landscape itself functions as a character in the non-urban films. Rather, the images in The Snake in My Bed mimic the griot’s knowledge of an anterior past. A trenchant, direct question is interjected into the folk story, as the narrator asks the audience what they would do if their prince had turned into three fish so far from home. Should the princess stay in the alien land where her prince has turned into fish, or should she take the difficult road back to her people? If the narrator’s own story – told to her son who serves as the off-screen primary auditor of his mother’s migration to Germany from Nigeria – does not ever answer the question openly, it does insist on the women’s entrance into modernity.

The narrator tells of the child’s father’s courtship; these sequences seem deliberately enigmatic even though the viewer does realize that the father is German and that he had spent eight years in Nigeria. However, the sequences do not really feature him. This is in part to emphasize the importance of the community’s cultural practices and the sense of security the mother feels. It is the father, then, who is the outsider here.

While in the voice-over narration, the griot/mother tells of the father’s courtship that “he was there, every day,” it still does not present him but shows the mother as artist. These scenes are interspersed with shots that are symbolic in literary and filmic registers, for instance, one shot shows the open sky with a bird flying across. Dialogic narration allows the griot to bring witnesses to the story: through a conversation with a fellow artist, the story of the older German suitor’s insistence on marriage and the pressure that he puts on her friends unfolds. The naïve mode of the narration and her explanation of the suitor’s charms alleviates doubts about her one-sided narration. The narration itself is rendered more complex by her complaints about her family and friends, who view the suitor’s persistence in a romantic vein. When the narrator struggles to assert her rights in modernity, the anti-modern tendency of such sentimentalizing is brought to the fore.

The traditional marriage ceremony, which makes use of ethnographic material, emphasizes the relationship between tradition and modernity, and as the customary marriage rites take up a significant segment, they convey the seriousness of the narrator’s commitment to the Igbo community, particularly, the invocation to the ancestors. Performance elements enhance the griot’s narration here, as the drums, the singing, and the libation offerings are heard. The full extent of the German’s casual disregard for the culture is made apparent in the next sequence, when we find out that he is still married and that his German wife is still living with him.
The narrator’s migration to Germany uncovers the depths of the father’s deception and betrayal. The rest of the narrative is devoted to her efforts to ensure that her son is legally registered as a German national. This search, this journey is, of course, the story of the migration to the West, the loss of home, and the terrible disappointments of modernity.

Diegu’s ethnographic explanation of her culture serves as a masterful and low-key assessment of what is civilized and modern. The visual does not follow the narrative soundtrack except in very oblique ways until the latter part of the film. Set in Germany, here the film uses the conventional format of the interview. The first half of the film, which covers the courtship, is punctuated by shots of lizards in varied scales, and of the female narrator as artist. The visual screen then functions as an analogue to the literary in using symbols. Still images proliferate. There are no flashbacks or depictions of incidents outside the marriage and one meeting.

The tone of the film becomes frenetic with the rapidity of a drumbeat, synchronized to the speed of the fingers braiding the narrator’s hair. The extra-diegetic music is somber and interrupted by the diegetic sounds of the urban environment. Despite the pathos of the story, there is no hint of melodrama. The protagonist’s isolation and fears in Germany are articulated using modernist techniques in the sequence that the protagonist fears for her life. The sharp combination of the large building and the voice produces an abstract expressionism that reveals her alienation, initiated by the father’s doubts about the paternity of the son. Discussions about traditional Igbo practices regarding a child’s claims are interlocked with the narrator’s feminist demands that the child be recognized by his father. The traditional is discrepantly more in tandem with modernity than the bureaucratic modernity that the narrator encounters in Germany. The literary imagery of the narration accentuates the narrator’s isolation. As the father had described himself as a puff adder and had reveled in stories about snakes, the narrator imagines a snake under her bed, a rich literary metaphor for treachery and betrayal.

Notwithstanding the support of two women who are shocked by the indelicacy of assumptions on the part of the German state regarding a black woman’s demand that her son’s status as a German be documented, her insistence on pursuing her claim distances her from all of them. None of them is able to support her fully; a significant point in terms of indicating that the quest for feminist modernity is essentially followed alone. In the penultimate sequences of the film, the visual becomes increasingly more abstract, and while the auditory is deeply tenuous, it steadies itself by refusing to give up the battle for modernity. Geometric designs of cars on the street accompany the story of the departure of the narrator from the city, afraid for her life. The near madness caused by her isolation is shown through an abstract display of colors even as the narrator speaks her way out of the brink of insanity. The narrator succeeds in her quest, but her telling of
her story has dwelt on the difficulties of the journey itself. Diegu's images of feet in motion as *leitmotif* of the stations of the journey, with the voice-over narration carrying the narrative line, suggests that realism is not necessarily imperative for women's entrance into modernity but that the soundtrack would have to carry the burden of the referential for this the feminist march on modernity to progress.

The use of film sound – both diegetic and non-diegetic as orature in complex and discrepant relationships with visual "imperfect modernisms" – has rendered it possible, notwithstanding the visual as the negative scene of instruction, for black women filmmakers Dash and Diegu to claim a speaking space for black women in modernity and postcolonial modernity.

The work of the two filmmakers, both affiliated with the LA school, testifies to a moment in independent black film history when the influence of African forms of orature challenge the Hollywood apparatus of the sound studio. *Illusions* functions as a statement on Hollywood's incapacity to feature both the voice and image of the black woman. Consequently, on screen, black women could not be "seen" and "heard" as modern subjects, even when they ostensibly had access to the legal system. *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Snake in My Bed* rectify this devastating inadequacy in mainstream film by recoding the tradition of the griot. The promise of full-fledged participation in modernity held out by the early sound film era is realized in their films where women speak with the authority of the griot and represent themselves as modern subjects.