Title
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OPENING NIGHT OF L.A. REBELLION FEATURE FILMS BY JULIE DASH

FOUR WOMEN AND DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST IS A MASTERPIECE

Opening night of “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema” featured the screening of new prints of two films by Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust (1991) and Four Women (1975). The series—organized by professors Allyson Field of UCLA and Jacqueline Stewart of Northwestern University, with Jan-Christopher Horak, director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive—comprises the first large-scale retrospective of the alternative Black cinema movement in Los Angeles. The program is part of Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980, the unprecedented collaboration, initiated by the Getty Foundation, bringing together more than sixty cultural institutions from across Southern California to tell the story of the birth of the Los Angeles art scene.

In the late 1960s, in the aftermath of the Watts Uprising and against the backdrop of the continuing Civil Rights Movement and the escalating Vietnam War, a group of African and African American students entered the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, as part of an ethno-communications initiative designed to be responsive to communities of color. These first generations of African American UC filmmakers, given access to equipment, instruction and eventual mainstream distribution mechanisms, would come to represent the first sustained undertaking towards an alternative Black cinema practice in the United States.

The scope of the endeavor “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema,” undertaken by the UCLA Film and Television Archive to collect, catalogue and preserve films from this movement (as well as record interpretations of the films and the experiences of the filmmakers in the ongoing oral histories project), went well beyond the mustering together of a few films already in distribution, instead resembling, in Jan-Christopher Horak’s words, “a full-fledged archaeological project.” The continuing L.A. Rebellion initiative represents the most holistic and ambitious project the Archive has ever undertaken, with the majority of the film artifacts irredeemably lost or subject to irreparable damage, despite of course the movement’s occurrence rather recently in cinema history. The underpreserved state of the majority of the films testifies to the social and political
Four Women (1975)
adversities faced by these first waves of Rebellion filmmakers, both in the UC system and in their careers beyond. The surviving body of work, along with the more well-known works of the canon, reveals the legacy of a coherent ideological thrust, social concern, and cumulative aesthetic, despite the broad diversity of content.

Inherent in *Four Women*, Julie Dash's student film is what Dash describes as being among the earlier stages of her ongoing search for an authentic Black aesthetic in terms of subject and expression. Set to the Nina Simone song of the same title, *Four Women* enacts, through identification in dance routine, four reductive stereotypes facing African American women, pairing these reductive stereotypes of historicized, racial essentialism with the reductive politics of racial liberation: the transformation of longstanding stereotypes into “oblique, critical angles.” Speaking of the film, Dash explains the heightened significance placed on the technical aspects of the work—for instance, in her and her colleagues experimentations with film stocks that may or may not accurately depict African American skin tones (Kodak, she mentions, is one such “intolerant” brand). Through her *The Diary of an African Nun* (produced in 1977 and screened for the November 19th program alongside Haile Germina’s *Sankofa*), we witness the development of Dash’s thematic dealings with authentic cultural memory, as well as a continued subject matter within issues related to gender and the perceived images of women of color.

Two decades in its conception, *Daughters of the Dust* was Dash’s first full-length feature and historically the first feature by a female African American director to receive general theatrical release in the U.S. One of two films from the movement to be included in the Library of Congress’s National Registry thus far (with Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* being the other), *Daughters of the Dust* is an exemplar of the Rebellion’s dictum of cultural specificity. Narrated from the perspective of an unborn child, the film tells the story of three generations of Gullah women (the unborn child’s ancestors) in the decades following the U.S. abolition of slavery. Informed by West African griot tradition, the film is concentrated thematically on notions of ancestry and the womb, of the meaning(s) of an African heritage, of tradition and of the power of recollection. Through the evocation of numerous historically-derived symbols to hearken an African specificity is Dash’s push for a distinct cultural authenticity made: namely, in recurring reference to Congolese ritual and belief
and in Dash’s implicit narrative construction of complex character pairings with mythic Yoruba deities.

In many ways, the film embodies what cinematographer Arthur Jafa refers to as the “alien familiar,” the representation of a distinct cultural authenticity that is, in its very portrayal, an opposition to the mainstream genre in its reductive and often derisive image of African Americans. For instance, in *Daughters of the Dust*, the visual and narrative (and linguistic) immersion in a specified, reconstructed yet seldom explained or contextualized African tradition and mythos can be understood, in one sense, as simply a restoration of proper and accurate cultural representation, and in another, as a device towards potentially defamiliarizing the viewer against his or her own misconceptions. In such fashion does the “authentic” representation—the quotidian image of a specified group—transcend the mere polemics of an alternative film movement against its mainstream opposition. Thus against the genealogical mainstream cinema history does Dash employ visual techniques inherited from her “alternative” predecessors—from James Van Der Zee’s experimental superimpositions (evocative in Dash’s layered dissolves) to the “race film” aesthetic of Spencer Williams.

*Daughters of the Dust* can certainly be viewed as the maturation of the self-authorizing ethic and aesthetic of the Rebellion, which developed in previous decades in the cumulative work of the collective. In Dash’s own words, the aesthetic is (or verily aims to be) transparent to the experience itself, sublated in the “specificity” of race, community and gender, “authentic to the culture, even if, so be it, at the cost of a wider accessibility.”

Following the screenings, a panel discussion featured a handful of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, including Larry Clark (*Passing Through, Cutting Horse*), who articulated the goals of the collective. Extending far beyond a polemical response in theoretical, technological and aesthetic film grammars to sociohistorical misconception and stereotype, Clark explained, the “Black aesthetic” is that which lives distinctly in the community. In Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, in Jamaa Fanaka’s *Emma Mae*, in *Daughters of the Dust’s* engagement with Georgia Sea Island people, as much as in the other films of the retrospective, the shared wealth of quotidian images and evident improvisation reveals the strong sense of community in the production process. The individual filmmaker’s place in the community, as Charles Burnett emphasized, serves as the experiential support for the film’s representations, requiring then only a good faith in the resultant accuracy of the portrayal and of the aesthetic as it develops.