Gullah, African Continuities, and their Representation in Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*

DARA GREAVES  
University of Toronto  
dara.greaves@utoronto.ca

Introduction

The Gullah language is an English-based Creole that exhibits significant lexical, syntactic, and phonetic influences from numerous African languages. It is spoken by the Gullah people, a group of African Americans descended from slaves who live in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. In her 1992 film *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash focuses on a fictional Gullah family in 1902 as its members contemplate their migration from the Sea Islands to the mainland. Dash stresses how African cultural continuities sustained the Sea Islanders through their slavery and continuing oppression. Significantly, her emphasis on African continuity resonates with linguistic scholarship that highlights the African retentions in Gullah. This approach has been criticized by linguists who argue that an overemphasis on African retention neglects the multiple linguistic influences and distinctive innovations that characterize the Gullah language.

In this paper, I will outline the African continuity model, as well as some creolist counter-perspectives that highlight the convergence of multiple linguistic sources in Gullah. Drawing on the work of Johannes Fabian and Mary Bucholtz, I will analyze some of the theoretical and political issues involved in the debate between these two models. After discussing the problematic ideology of ‘authenticity’ often implicated in constructions of African continuity, I will move on to explore how Dash grapples with this difficulty in her film. Of course, *Daughters of the Dust* is a fictional film that does not explicitly deal with linguistics. Following the trend of numerous historians, linguists, and anthropologists, I will parallel cultural continuities and adaptations with linguistic ones. Although these cannot be literally conflated, I think that Dash’s film can be seen as a self-conscious response to linguistic debates about Gullah if these parallels are considered. My main argument is that Dash emphasizes the African ancestry of the Gullah in a way that neither perpetuates essentialist constructions of authenticity, nor precludes the acknowledgement of other cultural and linguistic influences.
Critical Conceptions of Gullah

The Socio-historical Development of Gullah

Gullah, sometimes known as Geechee or Sea Island Creole, developed on the coastal rice fields in the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia. This area was unique because the black slaves vastly outnumbered the white colonizers and indentured servants there from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The Sea Islands are of special interest to many scholars because Africans continued to be imported there directly from Africa until the beginning of the Civil War, half a century after the slave trade was officially prohibited. Moreover, segregation occurred far earlier there than it did on most plantations, as white overseers on the rice fields were rare. Due to this geographical and social isolation, ‘slaves and descendents developed their own language marked as much by its rhythm, tempo, and stress as its vocabulary and grammar’ (Pollitzer 1999, 107). The prolonged segregation of the Gullah people helps to account for the unique features and prominent African influences of the language, which distinguish it from other North American English vernaculars, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Scholarly Debates

Before discussing the African continuity model and the criticism it has provoked, I will summarize some of the scholarly debates about Gullah that provide a useful context. Although the Gullah language is recognized as a unique site for linguists to explore issues relating to creolization and decreolization, there is very little agreement in the field. Creolists differ over the origins of Gullah. The polygenetic perspective suggests that Gullah developed independently in the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia. The monogenetic perspective, however, suggests that ‘all of the various anglophone creoles—including Sea Island Creole, Jamaican Creole, and Saramaccan—around the Atlantic share an earlier common ancestor, which lost its creole features to a greater or lesser extent in each area after being taken there’ (Hancock 1994, 95). Even those scholars who do subscribe to some version of the monogenetic hypothesis have not established a consensus about the identity of this common ancestor. Some linguists believe that a Guinea Coast English Creole existed prior to the slave trade, becoming a source for Krio and all the Atlantic English creoles, including Gullah.

1 While the Low Country comprises the Sea Islands and ‘a coastal basin for as much as thirty to forty miles inland’ and Gullah originally developed in this entire area, it has been most strongly preserved in the Sea Islands due to their geographical isolation (Montgomery 1994, 1). Thus, the Gullah language is today associated almost exclusively with the Sea Islands (hence designations like Sea Island Creole).

2 As Frederic Cassidy explains, ‘[b]ecause of malaria, whites stayed out of the rice plantations as much as possible, leaving the slave communities relatively undisturbed. It was surely this relative isolation of the rice fields that allowed a creole language—what we now call Gullah—to become established and to be preserved’ (Cassidy 1994, 19).
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(Hancock 1994). Other scholars contend that English was initially creolized in the Caribbean, and that Caribbean English Creoles (CECs) were a prominent source for Gullah (Cassidy 1983).

The polygenetic/monogenetic debate also has implications for the relationship between Gullah and AAVE. According to the monogenetic perspective, AAVE is a descendent of Gullah, merely at a later stage of decreolization. Many creolists (Stewart 1969, Dillard 1972, Baugh 1980, Holm 1984) have sought to prove that ‘contemporary AAVE derived from an earlier Gullah-like creole’ (Weldon 2003, 173), while dialectologists (D’Eloia 1973, Schneider 1989) have argued that AAVE derived from the non-standard English dialects of British colonists. Other linguists (Mufwene 1994, Weldon 2003) have suggested that neither perspective is completely adequate.

While Mufwene denies that AAVE is a decreolized descendent of Gullah, he thinks it would be an error to ‘claim that these language varieties are not related or that no spatial continuities exist between them’ (Mufwene 1994, 55). He points out that AAVE, CECs, and Gullah all developed in similar contact situations, ‘generally bringing European and colonial nonstandard varieties of English into contact with African languages’ (Mufwene 1994, 55). They also occurred in very similar socioeconomic conditions. According to Mufwene, differences between Gullah and AAVE can be accounted for by regional ‘differences in the superstrate-substrate numerical ratios, the substrate ethnolinguistic makeups, and, among other factors, the demographic significance of speakers of individual substrate languages’ (Mufwene 1994, 55). Thus, Mufwene suggests that it is possible to observe some level of ‘linguistic continuity’ (Mufwene 1994, 55) between Gullah and AAVE, without assuming that one is the literal descendent of the other.

Although the relationship between Gullah and AAVE is not central to my analysis, the hypothesis that AAVE is descended from Gullah has ideological implications that are relevant to my focus on the African retention perspective. When linguists position Gullah as the ‘roots of Black English’ (Wood 1974), they conceptualize Gullah as embodying an earlier stage of development. Scholars who seek to emphasize the ‘authenticity’ of Gullah by pinpointing its African ancestry similarly risk constructing Gullah as a passive remnant of the past. In the section that follows, I discuss the African retention approach and its often troubling ideologies of purity and temporality.

African Continuity

Up until the mid-twentieth century, scholars tended to disparage Gullah as an inferior version of English. It was dismissed as a bastardization derived from the ‘lower’ English dialects of indentured servants and the simplified talk that colonizers used to address their slaves. As Pollitzer explains, scholars of the Gullah dialect usually ‘took a condescending viewpoint toward its origin, citing careless speech, clumsy tongues, and laziness’ (Pollitzer 1999, 108). It was also assumed that virtually no African influences had been incorporated into the language. In 1924, George Philip Krapp asserted that it is ‘safe to say that not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or of Negro syntax can be proved to have any other than an English origin’ (qtd in Hancock 1994, 99). Pollitzer notes how Gullah scholars of the 1930s such as Samuel Stoney and Guy Johnson thought that the African influence in Gullah was negligible. For instance, Johnson classified ‘92 percent of the vocabulary standard English, 6 percent
corruptions and mutilations of English, 2 percent archaic English, and less than half a percent African’ (Pollitzer 1999, 108). The extremist view of the near-exclusive influence of English on Gullah has more recent articulations (Schneider 1981), but they have become more scarce and contentious due to the increasing emphasis on its African survivals.

Lorenzo Dow Turner nearly singlehandedly initiated the examination of the African components of Gullah with his 1949 publication of *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Based on over 15 years of research, it provided inarguable evidence of Gullah’s linguistic continuities with African languages. Contrary to the assumptions of previous linguists, these retentions were not limited to a scattering of superficial loanwords comprising numbers and rhymes. Instead, Turner demonstrated that African survivals existed in Gullah’s ‘sounds, syntax, morphology, and intonation’ as well as its vocabulary (Turner 1949, preface). By communicating with native African informants and exchanging information with African language scholars, he proved that Gullah retained influences from at least 30 different African languages, mostly from Western Africa.

Turner revolutionized the field of Gullah studies. In his view, most scholars of Gullah suffered from a ‘lack of acquaintance with the languages and cultures of those parts of West Africa from which the Negroes were brought’ (Turner 1949, 13). Because of this ignorance, there was a pervasive assumption that ‘the British dialects offer a satisfactory solution to all the problems presented in Gullah’ (Turner 1949, 5). In order to rectify this shortcoming, Turner learned five West African languages himself and consulted with experts who knew at least sixteen. But this was just the start. Many scholars have continued to study the African cultural and linguistic continuities in Gullah, and have collectively unearthed the influence of additional African languages. For instance, in *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia* (1991), Baird and Twining examine the African names and naming practices inherited by Gullah. Joseph Holloway and Winifred Vass begin *The African Heritage of American English* (1993) with a biographical dedication to Lorenzo Dow Turner, and they expand his analysis by focusing on the Bantu influence on Gullah. As indicated by the title of his book *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (1999), William Pollitzer also owes a huge debt to Turner.

**Creolist Counter-Perspectives**

In recent decades, some scholars have argued that the exclusive focus on African antecedents in the Gullah language neglects the multiple linguistic influences and distinctive innovations that contributed to its development. Michael Montgomery explains that Turner was ‘concerned only with the apparent African component of Gullah’ and ‘knew almost nothing about the processes of creolization’ (Montgomery 1994, 4). While earlier linguists’ privileging of British dialects was clearly inadequate, African retention scholarship risks committing the opposite simplification. Mufwene draws attention to this shortcoming, claiming that any analysis of Gullah ‘that does not consider the possibility of both African and European contributions, aside from innovations, is question begging’ (Mufwene 1994, 40). Moreover, Montgomery observes that an overzealous emphasis on the African influence often results in poor research, which ‘search[es] solely for African ‘survivals’ or ‘retentions’ and [tends] to be anecdotal’ (Montgomery 1994, 3). In his view, these studies have ‘lacked a rigorous, principal
basis and have relied on simple descriptive models that equate superficial resemblances with derivatives from Africa’ (Montgomery 1994, 3). The African retention model tends to depict Gullah merely as a set of preservations from Africa, instead of a complex linguistic system in its own right.

Many linguists have endeavoured to go beyond simplistic conceptions of Gullah as indebted entirely to British dialects or African languages. Mufwene rejects the concepts of ‘retention’ and ‘survival’ altogether because they simplify and exaggerate African influences on Gullah, suggesting that Africans in the New World merely ‘la[id] European vocabularies over African substrate grammars’ (Mufwene 1994, 41). Importantly, he does not deny the existence of African continuities, but clarifies that the concept of African ‘continuity’ must only be applied ‘under the more restricted and selective interpretation of continuity from some African languages and for speakers of these particular languages’ (Mufwene 1994, 51). In other words, African continuity approaches have tended to homogenize African languages as well as the ancestry of Gullah speakers. The slaves imported to the Sea Islands came from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, African influences that occur in Gullah cannot be perceived as direct continuities in the case of Africans who did not speak those particular languages. African vocabulary and language patterns were not simply preserved or retained. Rather, there was a complex process of convergence involved in the development of Gullah.

Mufwene proposes the convergence model to resolve the debate between dialectologists and Africanists by paying attention to both European and African influences. According to this perspective, certain features would have been selected because ‘they were shared structurally by some varieties of both the lexifier and the substrate languages,’ or because they were ‘compatible with other developing patterns’ in the language (Mufwene 1994, 42). As an example, Mufwene mentions the occurrence of done to mark the perfect aspect in Gullah. He explains that it was most likely selected not only because such a usage existed in some varieties of colonial English, but also because ‘a similar construction with a verb meaning ‘finish’ is used … in Kwa and some other African languages’ (Mufwene 1994, 42). If the role of convergence is properly taken into account, many features of Gullah are seen to have multiple etymologies from both African languages and English dialects. The convergence perspective looks at how multiple influences have literally merged, thus foiling attempts to establish pure origins.

Hancock seeks to acknowledge the complex ‘social and linguistic variables’ (Hancock 1994, 95) that factor into the formation of creoles. He views creole development ‘componentially—that is, in terms of the components, or ingredients, present in the formative situation for each’ (Hancock 1994, 96). For Gullah, these components consist of African languages, English varieties, and the creole itself. Noting the Irish influence discussed by other scholars, he adds a close analysis of the impact of southwestern British dialects on Gullah. Moreover, by examining the specific ‘social and historical circumstances’ (Hancock 1994, 106) that gave rise to Gullah, he is able to emphasize the unique adaptations and innovations that developed during the creolization process. According to Hancock, some aspects of Gullah are contingent on its socio-historical and geographical context, and cannot necessarily be attributed to a specific source.

Scholars such as Cassidy have emphasized Gullah’s Caribbean influence. As a native speaker of Jamaican Creole, Cassidy stresses that it shares striking similarities with Gullah. He
notes that when South Carolinian colonists began importing slaves in the 17th century, ‘they got them from Barbados and Jamaica’ (Cassidy 1994, 17). Although by the 18th century slaves were being imported directly from Africa, Cassidy argues that an earlier Caribbean influence was clearly established in Gullah. He cites linguistic and socio-historical evidence to support this connection between Gullah and CECs, contending that ‘around the end of the eighteenth century, Gullah and Jamaican creole were similar enough to be taken as virtual equivalents’ (Cassidy 1994, 16). Although there is little agreement about the exact nature of the Caribbean influence on Gullah, it suggests an additional component in the formation of Gullah that contradicts simplistic emphases on its African continuity.

African Continuity, Authenticity, and Temporality

Despite these attempts to provide more nuanced perspectives on Gullah development, attempts to unearth its African ancestry still predominate. Drawing on Johannes Fabian’s theory in *Time and the Other* and Mary Bucholtz’s discussion of similar concerns in the socio-linguistic study of African American dialects, I will now demonstrate that over-emphasizing Gullah’s African continuity also risks the perpetuation of troubling assumptions about authenticity and temporality.

In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (2002 [1983]), Fabian argues that Time is a central concept through which Western anthropologists conceive of the relationship between themselves and others. More specifically, the ‘objects’ of anthropological study are created through a ‘temporal distancing’ that is achieved through the manipulation of notions of Time (Fabian 2002, 30). Fabian refers to this temporal distancing as the ‘denial of coevalness’, defining it as the ‘persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of the anthropological discourse’ (Fabian 2002, 31). Of course, this denial of coevalness—which Fabian alternatively designates as ‘the allochronism of anthropology’ (Fabian 2002, 32)—most often results in the relegation of studied societies to an earlier temporal stage. Typological Time aids in this construction of temporal distance: it measures Time according to ‘socioculturally meaningful events’ or developmental stages, drawing thematic distinctions such as traditional vs. modern, primitive vs. civilized, and peasant vs. industrial in temporal terms.

Although she does not explicitly reference Fabian, Mary Bucholtz applies his theory of anthropological temporality to her analysis of sociolinguistic assumptions about authenticity. In ‘Sociolinguistic Nostalgia and the Authentication of Identity’, she observes that the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics were ‘founded on the belief that the scholarly gaze must be cast back from modernity to a prior time—or at least to a place out of modern Western time’ (Bucholtz 2003, 399). This relates to Fabian’s contention that Western social scientists construct movement across space as tantamount to movement across time (Fabian 2002, 12). According to Bucholtz, scholars have been attracted to societies considered untainted by modernity, where they imagined the past was ‘authentically retained’ (Bucholtz 2003, 399). Rural and remote communities have thus been conceptualized as more authentic. As such, ethnographers have tended to privilege ‘non-urban and non-Western’ cultures that are deemed the most distant—spatially, temporally, and culturally—from modern, Western civilization (Bucholtz 2003, 405).
Bucholtz observes that the equation of spatial with temporal distance is paired with another ideological assumption about space. According to the ideology that she terms *linguistic isolationism*, the ‘purest’ variety of language is ‘untouched by outside influences’ (Bucholtz 2003, 405). This association of isolation with purity relates back to Fabian’s concept of the denial of coevalness. Because the most authentic language is one that is unadulterated by outside influences, it is conceived of as static. It is imagined as an originary language, preserved in its primitive form. Bucholtz points out that this ideology ‘overlooks the central role of contact in shaping almost all languages and varieties’ (Bucholtz 2003, 405). Fabian and Bucholtz’s critiques have important implications for the African continuity perspective in Gullah studies, which frequently overlooks language change and contact in order to emphasize the preservation of Gullah’s original roots.

Scholars and activists who emphasize Gullah’s African antecedents frequently perpetuate ideological assumptions about authenticity and temporality. This is exemplified by numerous scholars contributing to *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia* (1991), edited by Keith Baird and Mary Twining. Baird and Twining provide extensive evidence of Gullah’s African continuities, both linguistic and cultural. Yet they express the notion of Gullah as a static remnant of an earlier epoch when they claim that its African retentions mark it as a ‘crystallized stage of development of the total African American community’ (Baird and Twining 1991, 17). Janie Gilliard Moore, herself a Sea Islander, literally refers to Gullah as a ‘remnant’, arguing that it has maintained the ‘highest degree’ of ‘ethnic authenticity’ (Gilliard 1991, 108). Blake et al. also evoke a static notion of Gullah when they portray it as a ‘reservoir’ of African culture (Blake et al. 1991, 153). This image is subtle compared with Moore’s characterization of the Sea Island community as a ‘living museum’ inhabited by ‘Africans in the traditional sense’ (Moore 1991, 110).

Moore’s characterization of her own community as a museum may seem odd, but it is based on the ‘perception of cultural change as cultural loss’ that frequently underpins ethnographic study (Bucholtz 2003, 400). This perception is evident in Moore’s claim that Gullah’s African survivals reveal that ‘four hundred years of the ‘diaspora’ have not decultured us as a people’ (Moore 1991, 108). Her concept of ‘deculturation’ suggests that cultural change can only function as a corruption of authenticity or a reduction of distinctiveness. Of course, the history of slavery and racial oppression in the United States justifiably encourages many African Americans to feel closer to their African ancestry than their American identity. However, constructions of the Gullah language as a ‘reservoir’ or ‘museum’ of African retentions tend to deny its linguistic complexity, innovation, and dynamism. A couple of crucial questions thus arise: can Gullah be viewed as a unique variation of African American existence—and even resistance— rather than a static remnant of African culture? And is it possible to emphasize Gullah’s African continuities in a way that does not perpetuate ideological assumptions about authenticity and purity? I will now explore these questions in relation to Julie Dash’s representation of Gullah language and culture in *Daughters of the Dust*.
In Daughters of the Dust, Dash is undoubtedly invested in the project of reclaiming Gullah’s African heritage. She persistently draws connections between Gullah and African traditions in the film, particularly in terms of spiritual beliefs. In a 1992 interview with bell hooks, she claims that ‘the whole film, of course, is about retention, the saving of tradition’ (Dash 1992, 46). The scholarship on Daughters concentrates almost exclusively on its depiction of the African heritage of Gullah. For instance, Sara Clarke Kaplan (2007) examines the Western and Central African influences embedded in Dash’s visual imagery and narrative techniques. Foluke Ogunleye claims that the Gullah oral tradition depicted in the film is a ‘carryover from the African past’ that enables the Gullah to preserve their ‘ancestral memories’ (Ogunleye 2007, 157, 161). While I do not wish to downplay the importance of these cultural continuities, the frequent emphasis on African ‘relics’ and ‘vestiges’ in Dash’s Daughters of the Dust threatens to perpetuate nostalgic and essentialist notions of Gullah’s authenticity (Ogunleye 2007, 157, 161).

Scholarship emphasizing the African continuities in Daughters also tends to gloss over the complex influences and innovations incorporated into Gullah. For instance, Joel Brouwer states that ‘The Gullah tongue, which Dash took great pains to reproduce faithfully, sounds like its African antecedents, making it a literal echo of Africa’ (Brouwer 1995, 7). The notion that the Gullah language is a ‘literal echo of Africa’ is untenable, considering that Gullah is intelligible enough to most English speakers that there was no need for subtitles in the film’s DVD release.3 Comments like Brouwer’s deny the linguistic uniqueness and dynamism of Gullah, seeing it as a static survival of African languages.

However, the simplifications involved in much of the scholarship on Daughters of the Dust do not mean that Dash’s depiction of African influences in the film is equally naïve. In the following section, I argue that Dash represents Gullah’s African continuity in a way that is neither exclusionary nor essentialist.

Dash’s Destabilization of a Pure and Static Perception of Gullah

In Daughters of the Dust, Dash uses a diverse range of characters to represent Gullah’s African continuities without perpetuating ethnographic assumptions about authenticity, linguistic isolation, and temporal distance. By concentrating on multiple characters with unique circumstances, Dash challenges representations of ‘African American history as static and univocal’ (Michel 2001, 170). Her characters have different voices not only metaphorically, but literally: they all speak varying degrees of Gullah. By choosing to give her characters different speaking styles and levels of dialect, Dash resists an overly homogenous depiction of Gullah. As Mufwene explains, ‘history does not suggest that there was ever any time when all members of the community spoke our academic stereotype of Gullah’ (Mufwene 1998, 179-80). In particular, strategies such as codeswitching, or more accurately ‘bidialectism’ (Mufwene 1998, 178), have historically been quite common among the Gullah. Moreover, Peter A. Roberts notes that linguists generally ignore Gullah’s high degree of ‘stylistic variation’, which enables Gullah

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3 But significantly, English subtitles were used in the film’s theatrical release at PBS’s American Playhouse. This raises issues about the literal and perceived intelligibility of Gullah, and how these relate to the predominant privileging of more ‘standard’ forms of English.
speakers to ‘elect’ one of numerous ‘variants in a given situation’ (Roberts 1994, 91). This neglect has often been politically motivated: consistency, rather than flexibility, is usually counted as evidence of a ‘legitimate linguistic variety’ (Bucholtz 2003, 402). However, attempts to convey linguistic consistency have resulted in ‘a series of simplifications that reduced the complexity’ (Bucholtz 2003, 402) of African American language varieties. With the ‘stylistic variation’ of her characters, Dash refuses this sort of simplification.

The different histories and experiences of Dash’s characters symbolically undermine notions of linguistic isolation and purity. Nana Peazant and her daughter-in-law Eula both represent African cultural heritage and the carrying on of tradition, yet they also undercut static and essentialist notions of African retention. Bilal Muhammed and Yellow Mary represent a convergence of cultural and linguistic influences that subverts the isolationist model of authenticity. Their temporal displacement also challenges the denial of coevalness theorized by Fabian. Taken together, these characters suggest that Dash self-consciously sought to avoid simplified notions of African continuity and authenticity.

Nana and Eula Peazant

Nana Peazant (Cora Lee Day) is the family matriarch, who constantly emphasizes the importance of retaining spiritual ties with the ancestors. She refuses to make the move to the mainland and urges her family not to either, because she feels that their spiritual ties to their ancestors are rooted in the Sea Islands. She spiritually communes with these ancestors, who are perceived in Gullah as ‘guardians of tradition and protectors of the family’ (Weisenfeld 2003, 48). Yet her spiritual bond to the Sea Island environment suggests that she has not merely retained African traditions, but developed a unique set of spiritual beliefs adapted to her socio-historical and geographic context. Nana nevertheless stresses the importance of memory, reminding other characters, ‘Never forget who we is, and how far we done come’ (Dash 1992, film).

However, the recollections that Nana urges are not always literal. In a conversation with Eli (Adisa Anderson), a relative whose distress over his wife’s rape by a white man causes him to yearn for mainland assimilation, she acknowledges that literal memories certainly are passed down. She asks him, ‘Do you believe dat dose hundreds and hundreds of Africans rived here on dis other side would forget everything they once knew?’ (Dash 1992, film). Yet, she also suggests that some of these memories come from elsewhere: ‘We don’t know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them, but we carry dese memories inside of we’ (Dash 1992, film). Thus, Nana emphasizes imaginative memories as much as she does literal ones. It is possible to perceive this notion of dreamed recollections as an essentialist concept of innate cultural transmission. However, it is also possible to place the emphasis on creativity and imagination. Nana Peazant consciously strives to connect with her ancestors and imagine her family history as a way of resisting the disruptions caused by slavery.

But Nana’s strong attachment to the past does not prevent her from building strong bonds in the present. She has a strong spiritual affinity with Eula (Alva Rogers), who has become a member of the Peazant family due to her marriage to Eli. Eula also communicates with her ancestors, such as when she leaves a letter for her deceased mother beneath a glass of
water and receives a spiritual response. Judith Weisenfeld observes that because Eula is not a biological relation, she ‘provides the opportunity for Dash to explore the power the ancestors provide in ways that reach beyond the blood kin of the Peazant family’ (Weisenfeld 2003, 50). That Eula perpetuates ancestral traditions while not being genetically related to Nana Peazant contrasts with essentialist notions of genealogical transmission which have often been evoked in the field of Gullah studies. Similarly, Eula’s rape means that Eli has no way of knowing whether the baby she is carrying is biologically his. But significantly, Nana bypasses concerns of genetic inheritance when she tells Eli that the baby would not have been sent unless it was meant to be his. By rejecting concerns with biological continuity, Nana represents a sense of cultural authenticity that does not rely on essentialist distinctions between purity and adulteration.

**Bilal Muhammed**

Dash further challenges simplistic notions of African retention and authenticity through the character of Bilal Muhammed (Umar Abdurrahman), an extended member of the Peazant family. He is based on a historical figure who was transported to the Sea Islands during slavery. In her interview with hooks, Dash explains that she became fascinated with Bilal during her research because he was a Muslim who ‘never stopped practicing his faith’, continuing to pray five times a day throughout his slavery (Dash 1992, 37). Dash also stresses that he came from the Sudan, which ‘shows that the African slave trade was more widespread than we thought’ (Dash 1992, 36). Because he was from Northeastern Africa, Dash is interested in the distinct and lesser examined influences that Bilal would have brought to Gullah language and culture. Near the very beginning of the film, Bilal is depicted praying with a ‘homemade Koran’ (Dash 1992, 77). Lene Brøndum explains that this is based on the fact that the actual Bilal ‘wrote from memory his own version of a Muslim religious text, the *Risala*’ (Brøndum 1999, 155). While most of the criticism on Dash’s film highlights Western and Central African influences, her inclusion of Bilal suggests that she intentionally highlighted less commonly acknowledged influences in order to avoid homogenizing Gullah’s African continuities.

Bilal also signifies the Caribbean influence on Gullah. As Dash tells hooks, the historical Bilal was ‘fluent in French, having worked as a slave in the West Indies before being brought to the Sea Islands’ (Dash 1992, 37). In this sense, Dash’s inclusion of Bilal Muhammed foregrounds the Caribbean influence on Gullah explored by linguists like Cassidy. Throughout the film, Bilal is depicted praying in Arabic and speaking in French, in addition to his usual communication in Gullah. Thus, he represents the complex linguistic and cultural blending that contributed to Gullah’s development. Dash’s acknowledgement of the Caribbean influence is reminiscent of Hancock’s ‘componential’ approach to the study of creoles. By choosing to include Bilal, Dash avoids valourizing Gullah as a ‘pure’ preservation of Africa.

It is also crucial that Dash’s inclusion of Bilal Muhammed constitutes a historical anachronism. She portrays him as a living member of the Sea Island community in 1902, when he actually lived there in the early 1800s. Brøndum suggests that Dash’s anachronism subverts ‘traditional standards of historiography’ (Brøndum 1999, 154) by exposing the constructedness of all historical narratives. I would add that it also undermines the ethnographic construction of allochronistic time.
By self-consciously disrupting time within the film’s narrative, Dash upsets the ethnographic tendency to place Gullah in the past. Significantly, Dash self-consciously frames her film through the perspective of an ethnographic gaze. The film starts with the arrival of Viola, a family member who has moved to the mainland to become a Christian missionary. She is accompanied by Mr. Snead, an educated ‘Philadelphia-looking Negro’ (Dash 1992, 77), whom she brings to document her family. Viola and Mr. Snead constitute a parody of the temporal distancing and nostalgic idealizing of the Gullah. Mr. Snead looks at the Gullah as archaic curiosities and Viola epitomizes the equation of spatial and temporal remoteness when she suggests that by migrating to the mainland, her family will be taking ‘their first steps towards progress’. Dash not only undercuts their point of view by presenting it in exaggeratedly parodic terms, but also by including the anachronistic figure of Bilal Muhammed. The self-conscious rupture of temporal linearity he presents complicates attempts to place Gullah at an earlier stage in a temporal scale of progress. In addition to interrupting linear trajectories of progress, Bilal contaminates notions of Gullah’s ‘pure’ African ancestry that situate it as a static ‘remnant’ of an earlier and more authentic epoch.

Yellow Mary Peazant

Yellow Mary (Barbara O) is another member of the Peazant family who disrupts ideological assumptions about linguistic isolation and authenticity. She is a ‘worldly’ woman who has been working as a prostitute in Cuba (Dash 1992, film). She returns at the beginning of the film to visit her family, escorted by a female lover named Trula (Trula Hoosier). Some of the more assimilated, Christian women of the Peazant family reject her because she is ‘ruint’ (Dash 1992, film). Both Yellow Mary’s sexual past and her skin colour mark her as impure. She and Trula are both light-skinned African American women; at the historical moment in which the film takes place, this would have stigmatized them as products of miscegenation. Yellow Mary is not only a figure of racial mixture, but also cultural and linguistic amalgamation. Because she has been living in Cuba, she also represents the Caribbean influence on Gullah. This influence is suggested when Eula asks Yellow Mary, ‘Say gin how dey say wata in Spanish’ (Dash 1992, film). When Yellow Mary tells her that the Spanish word is agua, Eula repeats it a couple of times as if she is memorizing it. Eula’s appropriation of the word agua reminds us of the fact that linguistic contact is an ongoing factor in the development of all languages. Dash’s inclusion of this exchange resists conceptions of Gullah as static and unadulterated by outside influences.

Although Yellow Mary is associated with impurity, she is welcomed back into the Peazant family by Nana and Eula. When one of the most outspoken Christian women publically denigrates Yellow Mary for being a prostitute, Eula defends her by fuming, ‘Ain’t I ruint too?’ (Dash 1992, film). She then asserts that ‘we’re all good women’, despite being considered ‘ruint’ according to racial and gendered constructions of purity (Dash 1992, film). According to Weisenfeld, Eula confronts the fact that ‘ruination has shaped the women’s individual and collective identities’ (Weisenfeld 2003, 56). Because African American women have historically been perceived as more sexually available, and have been constructed as contaminated when they have had sexual relations with white men, it is all the more important for them to reject ideological constructions of purity. When Eula urges the women in her family to stop ‘living in
the fold of old wounds’, it can be interpreted as a call to reject nostalgic ideas of a purity prior to all racial and cultural contact, and to refuse to perceive themselves as ruined or contaminated (Dash 1992, film). Following this, Nana and Eula both hug Yellow Mary. Embraced by the two carriers of Gullah tradition, Yellow Mary decides to remain with them on the Sea Islands. As a figure of sexual and racial impurity, as well as linguistic and cultural mixing, Yellow Mary transgresses essentialist constructions of authenticity. When Nana and Eula acknowledge her as a core of their community, they completely undermine the ideology that linguistic and cultural authenticity must be protected from the adulteration of outside sources.

Conclusion

The analysis of Dash’s representation of Gullah culture and language in Daughters of the Dust reveals that she was conscious of the potential pitfalls of the African continuity model. As scholars such as Brouwer, Clarke Kaplan, Ogunleye, and Weisenfeld have shown, Dash does emphasize Gullah’s African continuities. Yet her approach is more reminiscent of the ‘componential’ model articulated by Hancock. Rather than focusing exclusively on African retentions, she acknowledges the convergence of multiple cultural and linguistic influences. The character of Bilal Muhammed is a crucial figure of this convergence: his complex background brings the Sudanese influence of Arabic and the Caribbean influence of French, or French Creole, to Gullah. Yellow Mary represents other potential Caribbean linguistic influences, such as Spanish. Her linguistic exchange with Eula also suggests that language contact and change are continuous realities.

In her interview with hooks, Dash discloses that she defied the recommendations of her historical advisor for the film, Dr. Margaret Washington, in numerous ways. This defiance of historical fact included the anachronism of Bilal, as well as Dash’s trope of indigo-dyed hands as a symbol for slavery.4 However, there is one significant way in which Dash did follow Washington. In ‘A Peculiar People’: Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs, Washington claims, ‘I do not argue for “survivals,” a somewhat lifeless term implying passive existence. But I do argue for the presence of dynamic, creative, cultural trends of African provenance among the Gullahs’ (Washington 1988, 6). Dash similarly avoids passive survivals, instead emphasizing how African influences were adapted and integrated into the unique Creole voice and diasporic consciousness of Gullah language and culture.

In Daughters of the Dust, Dash rejects ideological constructions of authenticity that would conceive of Gullah as a pure preservation of African language. Her characters’ varying levels of dialect reflect ‘stylistic variation’ and flexibility rather than homogeneity and stasis. Moreover, Dash eschews isolationist notions of authenticity that would conceive of Gullah as untouched by outside contamination. Her self-conscious depiction of contact and convergence recognizes that no language is unadulterated. As a challenge to conceptions of authenticity as innate and

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4 Dash explains to hooks that Washington advised her that indigo, while very poisonous, would not have left blue stains on the hands of the slaves who worked in the indigo processing plant. However, Dash was more concerned with constructing an unexpected image for slavery that people are less accustomed to, than with being historically accurate.
'primordial', Bucholtz recommends the alternative concept of authentication, which recognizes that 'authenticity' is achieved through 'constantly negotiated social practices' (Bucholtz 2003, 408). Nana Peazant demonstrates this practice of authentication: she creates her own sense of authenticity by adapting a unique set of spiritual beliefs that reflect her diasporic experience, striving to forge creative connections with her ancestors, and embracing non-biological relations as her own kin. Dash’s exploration of imaginative inheritance rather than literal, genetic transmission recognizes that authenticity is not an essence, but a continuous social process. Dash realizes that reclaiming Gullah’s African continuities can be a powerful authenticating tool. Not only does it acknowledge the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of a people who were dismissed as linguistically incompetent, but it also enables Gullah people to forge an identity that resists assimilation to an oppressive American culture. At the same time, as I have argued, Dash finds a way to emphasize this heritage without excluding Gullah’s complexity or essentializing it as a passive preservation.
References

African Continuity versus Componentiality


Gullah Studies


**Gullah Dictionaries and Glossaries**


Ethics of Ethnography


On Daughters of the Dust


Language, Translation, and Viewer Perspective


Narrative Style: Orality, Temporality,Circularity


Subversion of Conventional Cinematic Representation and Rhetoric