

Acculturation in Exile: Ideological Constructs of Migration in Julie Dash's Film *Daughters of the Dust*

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Only the powerful decide whose values and beliefs will be deemed worth adopting by the group, which historical events are worth commemorating, which future is worth imagining. Cultures and especially national cultures, resonate with the voices of the powerful, and are filled with the silences of the powerless. Both words and their silences contribute to shaping ones own and others culture. (Kramsch 9)

Assimilation has been Americas genius and triumph.
(Farney 189)

Controversies of the American Experience have provoked the imaginations of scholars both inside and outside the United States for more than two centuries. The intricacy of American democracy was already perceived by early witnesses to American ironies, among them J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber. Their observations concluded that democracy is complex and often intangible. This may have been the result of intricate social processes of migration and its ideological constructs such as exile, acculturation, and assimilation that not only gave birth to but continue to form and reform American society even in our own day. The terms are widely discussed and understood from entirely different aspects, however, the dynamic nature of the processes is a basis for consent. The present paper intends to show the complex relationship of these concepts as well as to interpret Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* from the perspective of migration and its ideological constructs.

Migration is as old as mankind since it tends to be an inherent wish of all humans. The first migrations are traced by the Bible as well as accounts of archeological research. Whether voluntary or forced, migration always justifies the innate wish of becoming less space-bound. Establishing the American colonies and later founding the United States of America have triggered what is probably the largest migration in modern history. Forging the American nation as well as its national identity is a result of processes involved in a broader interpretation of migration. One direction which entails leaving one's current home, that could be identical with the birthplace of the person, to settle down in the United States is referred to as immigration. However, because of the vastness of the country migration that takes place within its borders bears considerable significance, too. New immigrants not only

settled down but some of them kept moving within the boundaries of the United States mostly for economic betterment. The last decades of the nineteenth as well as the commencing decades of the twentieth century are times especially marked from the perspective of migration, primarily due to the extensive urbanization and macro-economic prosperity. Since then migration, including internal migration, has crystallized as a core American value the spirit of which left very few Americans untouched. *Daughters of the Dust* depicts how one Gullah family, the Peazants, react to the overall frenzy of migration at the turn of the century. For them, as for many others, migration signifies the road toward the American Dream, although none of the family members wishing to move understands how distorted this dream could be because of the radical cultural as well as linguistic dislocation it involves. Eventually they all find themselves in exile, the voluntary or forced severance from their homeland which opens up new perspectives in seeing themselves and others.

The cultural aspect of such disruption is acculturation, one of the key constructs of migration, which has a crucial role in shaping social and cultural identities. It can be defined as a process in which changes in the language, culture, and system of values of a group happen through interaction with another group with a different language, culture and system of values. Cultural theorist Claire Kramsch approaches acculturation as the internalization of the culture (i.e. system of standards) of a discourse community, and relates the notion to socialization, the course by which a person internalizes the conventions of behavior and cultural schemas imposed by a society or social group. In the film the members of the Peasant family who decide to cross over to the Mainland (*Daughters of the Dust*) will have to conform to the social-cultural expectations and standards of mainstream American society as well as the larger African American community. These two dimensions of acculturation will be referred to as dual acculturation.

Assimilation, a third construct of migration occurs when intergroup relations are less significantly characterized by the cultural and linguistic demarcation lines and a dominant group seeks to solve minority problems via eliminating the minority by absorbing it. The notion refers to a process in which a group gradually gives up its own language, culture and system of values and takes on those of another group with a different language, culture, and system of values, through a period of interaction. Therefore, groups with distinctive identities become culturally and socially fused. Two major paradigms of assimilation can be identified within the United States. One is the melting pot tradition which was once considered a most noble ideal, until ethnic leaders in the mid-twentieth century complained bitterly that it was the result of an Anglo-American conspiracy to destroy their cultures, to deracinate them, and to strip them of their cultural vitality (Ravitch 181). The term's glorious past traces back to the traveler-writer of the Revolutionary era, Crèvecoeur's legacy according to which peoples and cultures would produce a new people and a new civilization mainly by means of intermarriage. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons now have wives of four different nations.... Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men (61).

A projection of the race consciousness in forthcoming centuries may be that the author did not acknowledge that American Indians or *Africans* might become part of the new race, yet the logic for their inclusion was present (Ravitch 181, emphasis

added). The anticipated broadening of the notion occurred in the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote that in this continent— asylum of all nations—the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles and Cossacks, and all the European tribes—of the Africans, and of the Polynesians—will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature (qtd. in Ravitch 181). Assimilation in the case of the Gullah would, however, be much different from the process encountered by European immigrants and their descendants. As a result, a more homogeneous African American community would emerge which has yet to tackle a deep existential struggle to define and redefine its presence in a multiethnic American society.

The other paradigm is the Americanization tradition which interprets American culture as an essentially finite product on the Anglo-Saxon pattern, and which has insisted that immigrants give up their cultural traits for those of the dominant American group (Vander Zanden 261). Americanization is the process of conforming to American characteristics through acculturation and assimilation usually associated with pressures on immigrant groups. It is also referred to as Anglo-conformity supported by the belief that the basic economic and political institutions of the USA followed the models of antecedents in England so newcomers should conform to the nation's essentially Anglo-Saxon heritage (Ravitch 181-82). An attempt to define the content of Americanization, from one perspective, equals reviewing historically the place of ethnicity in the tradition of thinking and writing about American identity. The sociocultural use of the term identity has been coined and popularized by social psychologist Erik H. Erikson who claims that "we begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time of history when they become a problem. For we do so in a country which attempts to make a super-identity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants" (qtd. in Gleason 31). As opposed to the so far outlined macrosocial level the film *Daughters of the Dust* depicts one particular segment of the African American community as well as how these people are affected by migration and its ideological constructs: exile, acculturation, and assimilation.

The story is set in Ibo Landing on the Sea Islands in a Gullah community in 1902. The Gullah, or Geechee as they are known in Georgia, are an extraordinary group of African Americans who live in small farming and fishing communities on the sea islands of the South. These are a low-lying chain of sandy islands off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Because of their geographic isolation, these people have been able to retain more of their African heritage than any other African Americans, developing a distinct culture and dialect. Their ancestors ability to cultivate rice and their high resistance to malaria due to the sickle trait, a heritable hemoglobin characteristic, are common links to Africans from the Windward or Rice Coast of West Africa (Coastal Georgia Historical Society 1). Ronald Daise, Gullah language translator and dialect coach writes,

Today, Gullah denotes a way of life for a peculiar and special group of African Americans who have maintained the purest forms of African mores in this country... Gullah bonds its speakers with others of the African Diaspora. About 90 percent of the vocabulary is English, but the grammatical and intonational features are largely West African. Our West African forebears skillfully developed Gullah as a communication system effective enough to make themselves understood in a strange

land where even their talking drums (which could transcend cultural and lingual barriers) were prohibited. When the enslaved Africans were brought to the coastal islands of South Carolina and Georgia, their secondary, or trade language, became the dominantly used Creole language, known today as Gullah. They've maintained their African-born speech patterns and customs because the unbridged waterways isolated them from the mainlands for years. (1)

The great migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, terminated the complete isolation of the inhabitants of the Sea Islands, and they learned the patterns of migration, exile, assimilation, and acculturation as vital forces in shaping their present-day ethno-cultural identity. The Diaspora of African Americans in that period of history was multidirectional, including the North and the West as well as Africa (Franklin and Moss 278-345) meaning much more than physical movement and resettling. Even though massive resettling was initiated in the mainstream of American society, its impact is much more discernible in the case of marginal cultures or subcultures such as the Gullah.

The film captures one day in the life of the Peazant family who are indeed peasants. Film critic Toni Cade Bambara emphasizes that they are not victims (123), but they are objectively bound to the land by their own wish as sharecroppers, and subjectively they are bound because it is their ancestral home. At the moment the viewer joins the life-story the family is about to leave their ancestral home and move to the mainland. With this step they risk the loss of their identity as well as their African communal values. The story unfolds over the course of a farewell picnic, considered by some sources a ritual last supper, which brings together the conflicting elements among the familys women. During the subsequent string of events the joys, secret celebrations and sorrows of African American womanhood can be witnessed. Concerning the importance of the Gullah language in the film, critic Roger Ebert admits that there are times when the viewer understands only the emotions but not the words (22) of the mixed Gullah and English dialects. The fact, however, that the dialogue is sometimes difficult, is not the least disturbing element. The viewer is invited to be part of the events at the picnic, which is far more important than to understand every detail of the discourse. With its special setting the film successfully describes the remote past, the spiritual life of slave communities while at the same time projecting the future. The importance of keeping the past alive is part of the spiritual baggage Africans could once bring with them to the New World. By the time slavery was outlawed by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution most African Americans had acquired the ability to gain inspiration from their ancestors. Regarding the atmosphere and significance of the locale sociologist-philosopher William Edward Burghardt Du Bois wrote,

then in war-time came the singular Port Royal experiment after the capture of Hilton Head, and perhaps for the first time the North met the Southern slave face to face and heart to heart with no third witness. The Sea Islands of the Carolinas, where they met, were filled with a Black folk of primitive type, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt. Their appearance was un-

couth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. (265–66)

Daughters of the Dust has dual narration by the youngest and the oldest members of the family. The Unborn Child, a girl to be born to a young couple named Eula and Eli, is evidence by her physical being to the survival of the recessive culture against the dominance of the mainstream one. She does not interpret or comment on the events of the family reunion, she rather acts responsibly by recalling the family's past. While doing so she helps perpetuate the African oral tradition which is essential to cultural adjustment. The Unborn Child takes several faces, which film critic Manthia Diawara understands as the reincarnation of the ancestors. She travels through time, and she is present at different settings in the film.... Like the ancestors, her role is one of a mediator in the family (16). The fact that her mother, Eula was raped by a white lynch mob only strengthens in-group cohesion against white supremacy. Eula represents continuity in the Peasant family. It is her husband Eli for whom the process of shaping a shared culture rooted in African as well as Western traditions against forced assimilation loses its significance at the time the dominant society demonstrates its violence.

Nana, the family eldest, possessor of the family saga, is the second narrator. She has the power to contact the family's eighteenth-century African ancestors, by means of which she attempts to control the migration and settling down of those family members who opt for leaving. When the family reunites to decide about migrating north or staying behind they are already two generations away from slavery, and Nana is the only person born into slavery and who has experienced what it was like being property and working for others without remuneration. It is her memories that are shown in the film as flashbacks into the times of slavery. Her narration is much more biased than that of the Unborn Child, since it is culturally loaded with the inherent features of the African oral tradition, serving the aim of cultural survival and development in times of forced physical relocation. Migration thus becomes a means of defining the self, essentially through assimilation and acculturation which refer to the initiation and integration of the psyche into the target culture. The ultimate state reached during these processes is exile, the self-imposed or coerced absence from one's home. Eva Hoffman identifies two fundamental manifestations of the concept (44-45). Exile as a universal experience is an essential part of every human being, since there is an "ideal sense of belonging" measured against which people are ejected from their authentic selves. Space-bound migration is no prerequisite for encountering this universal, though internal experience. Exile as a social, political, economic, and religious concept refers to one state of mind in the wake of physical relocation.

In spite of the tragic consequences of forced migration, slavery, and exilic position the film portrays Black women as complex selves. Yellow Mary is one of the three women, met by us in the opening scene, who return to attend the family reunion and farewell picnic from the Mainland. Mary Peasant is called "Yellow" since her skin is much lighter than that of anyone else in the family. She is an archetypal representation of the tragic mulatta who became a domestic servant and prostitute in Cuba and who despite having lost her self-esteem, is now redefined in two contexts: in the narrower one of the extended family and the broader one of the African American community. Despite what she remembers as major tribulations throughout

her life, Yellow Mary, the returning daughter, is capable of rejecting a vision of herself as a person disinherited and colonized, especially as the price of independence has been her ability to have a child. Diawara writes that Grandma Nana, Yellow Mary and the Unborn Child contribute to the survival and maintenance of Black people in America, because their presence makes Blackness diverse and complex (17), an experience rather than a color. Her decision to stay behind in Ibo Landing supports her resilience of spirit and pursuit of personal and social justice as well as a sense of responsibility toward the survival of the community.

The decision also reflects the two-directional dynamics involved in migration, and that the destination is never finite. It also entails the main qualities of exile, namely uncertainty, displacement, and fragmented identity (Hoffman 47). Yellow Mary's experience of leaving Ibo Landing and the Sea Islands behind and her courage to return reflect the allegorical connotations of migration in the film. There are two kinds of homes, one is for childhood and origin, given by fate, and the home of adulthood, achieved only through an act of possession "hard-earned, patient, imbued with time, a possession made of our choice, agency, the labor of arrival" (Hoffman 56). The two might well coincide, and migration in this case means learning to own the original home through metaphoric acculturation which takes place on the level of the imagination.

Trula is Yellow Mary's traveling companion and girlfriend, the second person in the boat approaching Ibo Landing in the initial scene. She is from Nova Scotia, which used to be one of the final destinations of the Underground Railroad, the route of freedom for slaves escaping from bondage. She is the spiritual companion of Yellow Mary, emphasizing the strength of such bonds outside the family. In the film she is placed into the position of the guest-visitor who though omniscient for most of the time, nevertheless, remains apart from the intense family life of the Peazants. As an outsider Trula is a person on the move in self-imposed exile, a state which she intends to terminate by resettling in her native Nova Scotia. Both Yellow Mary and Trula have been acculturated to the norms and values of the Anglo-American society through internalizing its conventions of behavior and cultural schemas. The formers return home to Ibo Landing and her companions wish to act identically, however, prove that for them progress offered by American society via acculturation is not entirely liberating. Kramsch claims that through acculturation culture has a double effect on the individual, both liberating and constraining. Culture liberates people from oblivion and the randomness of nature, and constrains them by imposing on them a structure and principles of selection on synchronic (social), diachronic (historical), and metaphorical levels (6-8).

All these approaches seek to answer the question of who we as social subjects living within a social space desire to be or to become, and emphasize the unidimensional nature of acculturation, where there is a dominant and a recessive culture. However, a minimalist standpoint concerning Americanness would strongly doubt the traceability of a single American identity except in the fundamental creeds of the Founding Fathers that is *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. These ideals leave enough space to create chunks of culture which serve as points of reference during acculturation. Members of the society are allowed not to conform, but instead make this flexible system conform to their norms and needs. Solving the question to what extent the Peazants need to acculturate so that they can have control over life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness requires the knowledge and

experience of the returning family members as well as of Nana. As the oldest family member she seems to understand best this flexibility and that the cultural development of the extended family equals acculturation, the process of creating and complying with the norms and values of the culture of the Gullah community as well as those of the larger American society. Im trying to teach you how to track your own spirit.... We need to be strong *again* (*Daughters of the Dust*, emphasis added). The word again especially emphasizes the overpowering assimilative tendencies, the only choice legitimized by turn-of-the-century American society, which demands immediate cultural revitalization of the African past just before the Gullah Diaspora. Nana's responsibility is crucial in helping her descendants exploit the experience of diachronic acculturation in their synchronic acculturation.

Because of the unique history of Africans in America, their acculturation has been more complex than the earlier outlined unidimensional models. There were at least two acculturative processes going on side by side in the New World. As Africans of different experiences lived together, there was an ongoing interaction of the various African cultures. This produced a distinctively new set of customs and practices which were still deeply rooted in the African experience. It was especially true where large numbers of Africans resided in the same place, as in the Sea Islands, where they could preserve certain religious practices and even language patterns. Further on the process will be referred to as intra-group or internal acculturation. The Peazants have already accumulated experience in internal acculturation, though the community they created is restricted to the extended family. Those who cross over will have to cope with the diverse dynamics of cultural encounter, too.

At the same time there was the interaction of African and Western cultures, which doubtless changed the cultural pattern of both groups (Franklin and Moss 25-26). This kind of acculturation integrated both assimilationist and pluralist tendencies, emphasizing the hegemonic role of the Americanized Euro-Western cultural traits. The term extra-group or external acculturation expresses the content best. Nana Peasant envisions how little power her family has over external acculturation, though at the same time she realizes the importance of reattaining as much of the family's Gullah heritage as possible. The dual acculturation consisting of intra-cultural homogenization as well as intercultural dialog has resulted in the current context of race consciousness in the United States of America. However, the question remains as to what extent the African American community retreats into the position of the recessive culture within the dominant one.

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the outsider (Ralph Ellison, qtd. in West 3)

Acculturation came in the wake of the cultural conflict. In the conflict of cultures only those practices will survive whose value and superiority give them the strength and tenacity to do so. On the other hand, the dual acculturation model allows to interpret African American values as the dynamics of a cyclical, Judeo-Christian vision of history interwoven with an image of African Americans as colonized and

disinherited people (Bell 18). This vision allows for stressing their extraordinary spiritual strength and pursuit of social justice in the foster land of the USA. According to Nana Peazant members of her family own this strength, since it is rooted in Gullah folkways, religion and ancestral worship. Some of them though are already doubting because of their firsthand or indirect experience of migration.

Viola Peazant, Yellow Mary's cousin, has already left the family and the Island, and now returns only to help her relatives migrate north, too. She has joined a Baptist congregation, which strengthens her feeling of superiority as well as the conscious rejection of her past and the folkways. Throughout the picnic she goes through a deep identity crisis which signifies her current stage in external acculturation. At the beginning of the film the four of them, Yellow Mary, Trula, Viola, and Snead, a professional photographer, are traveling to Ibo Landing, the picnic site, in a boat. Viola talks about family legends concerning how fresh salt-water Africans were transported to the USA and unloaded at Ibo Landing on the very eve of the Civil War. The photographer argues that the slave trade was officially banned by the US government as early as 1807. Legends are probed against their historical content and truth during the dialogue. As far as factual content is concerned both of them are right; however, Viola has not yet entirely internalized the urban way of thinking, which promotes doubt in the validity of all ancient beliefs and legendry heritage of the Gullah. The two characters represent extreme positions in the course of external acculturation. Snead subordinates his Africanness to achieving success by the standards of the dominant society, and during his visit to Ibo Landing as an outsider, he is overwhelmed by the seemingly untouched yet largely imperiled sights and sounds of the Sea Islands. His striving to succeed is partly due to his Caribbean origins, which Du Bois sees as the grains for becoming "cultural heroes from whom the masses of native blacks could learn lessons of thrift, hard work and independence—true qualities of a representative Negro" (qtd. in Watkins-Owens 3). His case is a prime example of complete acculturation. For him migration from his native Caribbean to the USA is the means to get rid of instability and marginality otherwise inherent in an exilic position. Thus the traditional features of home and exile are exchanged; for Snead, the foster-land becomes home whereas the home takes the role of the exile.

Partly because of the identity crisis she goes through, Viola's attitude is more ambiguous toward acculturation. From the moment we meet her through the farewell ceremony she seems deeply committed to the northern opportunities and cultural values of wealth, culture, and education. It's the Peazant family's past is prologue. I see this day as the first steps toward progress. An engraved invitation to culture and education and wealth of the mainland (*Daughters of the Dust*). She looks at Ibo Landing and the traditional life of the Gullah as an exile and the people being excommunicated from the ultimate cultural development and attainment. During the farewell ritual she even denies the power of the family's ancestors, which she later regrets. Her spiritual journey towards a better understanding of herself and her ancestors is the solid basis of her Africanness, without which no progress in the larger American society can be achieved.

Haagar is not Peazant by birth, though by having married Nana's son she places herself on equal grounds with Yellow Mary and Viola. The animosity between Yellow Mary and Haagar derives from the uncertainty, a result of racism in American society, as to what extent skin color is decisive in defining Blackness.

Haagar and others attempt to excommunicate Yellow Mary for not being Black enough is suppressed by Eula who reminds Haagar that no person is blacker or purer than the other. In this triangle of characters Haagar is the self-educated, progressive striver, who wishes to get rid of all the ties that bind her family to their African heritage. Migration north is a solution for her to get into the mainstream, even though its assimilative tendencies and other little or unknown hazards await them. Haagar finds assimilation the most appropriate solution to the threatening disintegration of the Peasant family.

What she fails to anticipate, though, is that as a result of assimilation, a group's boundaries become more penetrable and permeable. In some cases minorities may also prefer this approach, as has been the case with European-origin groups in the United States. Dominant and minority groups, however, often approach assimilation differently. Of all family members Haagar is the most committed to leaving the Islands, even at the price of having to assimilate, however, in the end she also becomes very frustrated concerning the decision. Especially when her daughter Iona hops from the boat to ride off into sunset with her Cherokee lover" (Bambara 136), thus disintegrating the family so deeply honored and cherished by her parents. Haagar's reaction attests to a deep-inside commitment to the traditional Gullah priority, the family, bearer of all norms, values and cultural schemes despite her repeated and emphatic assertion regarding the importance of assimilation.

Legendary heritage, religion and rituals appear intertwined in *Daughters of the Dust* to provide a source of resistance to Americanization. The site itself is saturated with legendary tales out of which the most important is the story of the Ibo captives. In order to gain strength against the tribulations in his life, Eli follows Grandma Nana's teachings about the core of African ancestor worship. "It's up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli. Man's power don't end with death. We just move onto another place; a place where we go and watch over our living family. Respect your elders, respect your family, respect your ancestors" (qtd. in Diawara 16). Eli even walks on water to identify with his Ibo ancestors, a people in Africa, transported to America through the Middle Passage to be sold as slaves. The Ibos, brought ashore from the ships in a boat, stepped out on the land, saw what the Europeans had in store for them and turned right around. They walked thousands of miles on the water all the way home to the African motherland (Bambara 131) instead of becoming captives. The legend is about forced migration and physical dislocation as well as their potential consequences which are key issues for the Peasants. There is no ultimate good solution to the dilemma, only the power and experience of the ancestors and the elderly.

Representations of rituals are strongly connected to the thematics of African American history at the turn of the century. A key feature of migration as well as the processes of exile and acculturation is a change in the value system originally possessed by any human being through membership in some community. For the Peasant family migration would mean the loss of identity, with no clear source of a new one. The loss of values, whether voluntarily dropped or forcibly rejected always creates some fissure in the social being which is best described as anomie by Emile Durkheim (qtd. in Vander Zanden 199). The concept refers to a lack of certainty in people of what is expected of them during times of rapid social change. Durkheim pointed out that during times of rapid social change, i.e. industrialization and urbanization in postbellum America, people become unsure of what is expected of them

(qtd. in Vander Zanden 199). They find it difficult to fashion their actions in terms of conventional norms. The old norms of the sharecropping system do not seem relevant to current conditions, and the emerging urban norms are too ambiguous and loosely formulated to provide effective and meaningful guidelines for behavior. This gap of anomie created by transition and migration is to be bridged with the help of communal ties and traditions. Nana Peazant is the link between the old and the new; she holds and wishes to pass on a traditional African based socio-cultural belief system. As the oldest person in the family, her role is that of a teacher. In one of her crucial lines she claims that those eighteenth century Africans, they watch us... Let them guide. Diawara writes of Nanas role that

for Grandma Nana, ancestor worship provides the strongest stability for the Black family in America and Africa. Unlike Christianity and Islam, which are teleological and reserve the final reward for the end in Heaven, the ancestors in Grandma Nanas belief system just move to another world and watch over their living descendants. (18)

The presence of different religions is closely related to ancestor worship and the accompanying rituals. Viola and Haagar look down upon the religious practices of the Gullah as a rather motley coexistence of Baptism, Islam, and ancestor worship, and would like to elevate themselves above all. Grandma Nana performs a farewell ritual with those parting with the family by having them kiss her mothers hair tied on the Bible. Viola has already gone through acculturation, which results in different verbal behavior which Haagar wishes to acquire, too. In this scene, also a verbal encounter, Grandma Nana and Viola bring along the blueprints for action that they developed through their socialization and acculturation (Kramsch 28) in the separate spheres of American life. Due to the lack of pragmatic coherence between Haagar, Viola and Grandma Nana they consider Nanas mixed farewell pagan rather than what it actually is a source of cohesion and power to tackle anomie.

The dilemma of whether to stay at Ibo Landing or to cross over to the mainland has deep existential connotations, and the decision is not a choice between the more progressive Americanized life or the static one manifested in the preservation of community and traditions. The overwhelming racism of the domineering American mainstream in the contemporary United States is apparent in the antagonism of the choices they have to consider and decide about. Should they choose to stay behind at Ibo Landing and subsist in a sharecropping system they would be able to keep their Gullah identities. The other option would be to go North to seek wealth, culture, and education at the price of forced and at the same time rejected integration. Neither of these alternatives comes naturally to the African American community and that is why decision-making is so painful. All the three values Viola refers to are highly dubious from the perspective of the Peazant family, since they represent the pursuit of property, profit and happiness identified by the doctrines on which the United States of America was once founded. The split in the family further accentuates the schizophrenic nature of the decision. On the surface level the Peazants have choices to make, whereas truly there is only one issue at stake: how to secure the perpetuation of the transcendent community and the spiritual guidance of the ancestors. Morrison identifies this ideological fissure as the distinctive difference of the New World in its claim to freedom which coexisted with the presence of the unfree

within the heart of the democratic experiment (qtd. in James 8). Furthermore, the concepts of bordercrossing and traveling entail not only the idea of moving from one place to another but also encountering the unknown, and thus the film is about cultural conversion and cultural retention as consequences of migration and acculturation.

Migration and its ideological constructs of exile, assimilation, Americanization and acculturation do have a role in defining the relation between the powerful and the powerless and whether whose values and beliefs will be deemed worth adopting... which historical events are worth commemorating, which future is worth imagining (Kramsch 9). The choice of whether to stay at Ibo Landing or to migrate north represents an existential dilemma for the Peasant family. In this dilemma, however, rational thought has limits and reason does not and cannot account for pain, suffering, doubt or loneliness (Kenan 34), the outgrowths of the social processes that have shaped the American experience. In this scheme of thought the self represents the unity of finiteness and freedom, of involvement in a natural process and transcendence over that process. Focusing on the transcendent community and the African American ancestors while confronting dehumanizing cultural representations and practices (James 8) may become a meaningful way of responding to existential dilemmas. It is even more important that members of the Peasant family realize their freedom in deciding about migration, and they have accumulated enough experience to understand the choices. The sense of community, which includes self, others, ancestors and future born (James 10) plays a crucial role in this process. This community-dependent existence and survival also triggers some insight into the limitations of the Black community, which are partly rooted in African Americans reluctance to accept and be accepted in the community and their refusal to recognize or honor the ancestors and each other (James 10). The Peasants understand and accept the importance of ancestral, family and communal ties, an ideology represented by Nana Peasant, as well as the dynamics of migration, and therefore the film celebrates the overwhelming power of the extended family and community.

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