

## DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST (1991)

WRITER, DIRECTOR: JULIE DASH

A HISTORICAL COMPANION TO THE FILM FROM WESTERLY ARC

*Daughters of the Dust*, written and directed by Julie Dash, was chosen for our Black Voices Film series to honor Dash and Women's History Month. The film is the winner for Best Cinematography at the 1991 Sundance festival and the first independent feature length film by a Black woman widely released in theatres.

The film's historical referencing and themes of inherited customs and traditions, folklore, and symbolism have been described as the best in oral history storytelling. We wrote this companion to the film to be sure you did not miss the historical references that add to the magic of the storytelling.

*Daughters of the Dust* is set in 1902 on a small island along the Sea Islands of South Carolina's coast, called Igbo Island. It tells the story centered around Nana Peazant, the matriarch of the Peazant family of the Gullah community, descendants of enslaved West Africans.

The film follows three generations of women who have managed to preserve many of their African traditions and how they emotionally navigate the pending migration of their family from the beloved island they've called home since their ancestors were brought over from West Africa to the U.S. mainland. It recounts the moments leading up to and including their final dinner together on Igbo Island and eventually, their departure to find work in the industrial economy of the north.

Dash names the island after Igbo Landing, a historic site in Georgia where 75 enslaved Igbo people revolted against enslavement. In 1803, a group of Igbo, who had been taken from

their homes in what is now Nigeria, were being transported on a slave ship to be sold in Savannah, Georgia. While on the ship, the Igbo captives revolted, taking control of the vessel and forcing it into Dunbar Creek. Faced with the prospect of being enslaved, the Igbo captives made a collective decision to drown themselves in Dunbar Creek, rather than submit to the horrors of slavery. The event at Igbo Landing became a powerful symbol of resistance and resilience, and the story of the Igbo captives' self-sacrifice was passed down through oral traditions, particularly within the Gullah Geechee community.

Dash uses her cultural knowledge of the Griot, the West African traditional oral storyteller who uses songs, dances and poems, to narrate the last moments of the Gullah community through an assigned storyteller. Dash's Griot, known as "The Unborn Child," is the spirit of Eula Peazant's baby, whose soul manifests itself physically to guide the family, but is also deeply connected to their ancestors enough to tell of their past. She and Nana are aligned in the narrative, as the youngest and the oldest members of the family.

Indigo dye is used to create a visual metaphor for the period of enslavement, depicting it in a way that had never been seen before. The indigo dye, a byproduct of the Gullah people's labor in indigo fields, permanently stains their hands, symbolizing the lasting effects of slavery and the forced labor they endured. The purple hands, rather than representing punishment, represent the Gullah people's experiences, including their resilience, creativity, and the beauty they created despite their hardships. Nana is the

only one to wear a dress dyed to match her hands, “a sign of slavery refashioned as aesthetic distinction.”

The film opens with a close-up of indigo-stained hands holding Sea Island soil, connecting the past (slavery) with the present (the Peasant family's journey). We hope you too see all the beauty in this film.

WESTERLY ARC

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