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Allison Janae Hamilton, *Three girls in sabal palm forest III*, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York & Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton

Misty Shores and Palm Forests: Southern Spirituality Through the Lens of Film and Art

By: Jasmine Weber
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Adorned by luscious, deep greens, murky browns, and bottle blues, the surreal landscapes of the coastal American South are embedded with centuries of racial, religious, economic, and environmental histories. In artworks exploring the region, these unique ecologies are as central to the storytelling as protagonists. Imaginings crafted by visual artists, writers, and filmmakers interweave the histories and futures of these coasts, enmeshing temporal boundaries between generations past and forthcoming. This mode of storytelling, inspired by actual histories, is a particular means of world-building, of reclaiming painful histories—many of which waned or were lost during long journeys across the Atlantic and up North.

A primary result of American assimilation is the burying of traditions into a broader mainstream culture; the contributions of Black Americans from the South have been especially shrouded—from countless recipes that have been whitewashed as "American" food to the shallowness of the mainstream recognition of Juneteenth, and more. In the face of this erasure, the coastal South—with its longstanding cultural connections to the traditions of enslaved African communities—offers image-makers potent ground from which to recognize self and community, to explore their ancestry, and to imagine new possibilities for cultural recognition.

The steamy bayous and misty shores of the Southern coasts operate as dreamlike settings for films and photographs about the region's woes and triumphs. Black artists, in particular, have used this surreal scenery to dissipate the boundaries of time and space through magical realist cinema, writing, photography, and other forms of storytelling. From the sculptures and installations of Allison Janae Hamilton to films like Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), treatments of these sweeping landscapes tell the stories of Black women and girls. These artists reimagine the Southern coast as Eden—the ground is rich and fertile, nearly utopic at a glance, with deep roots winding beneath the surface. The dense forests function as almost mythic, science-fiction-like spaces for artists to imagine new worlds or conceptualize lives previously lived and lost along these waters. Dripping with foliage, the overgrown ecosystems open up a transportive space to explore intergenerational relationships and the nonlinear potential of time. Navigating these bayous and forests, the artists take visual approaches to what Saidiya Hartman has termed critical fabulation.[1]

Still from *Eve's Bayou* (1997)

Daughters of the Dust, the first feature film released in the United States by a Black woman director, utilizes a circulatory form of storytelling—birth and death, beginning and end—set on the Georgia coast in a Gullah community of African slave descendants at the turn of the twentieth century. In experimenting with the film's narration, voiced by both an unborn child and a soon-to-be great-great-grandmother and matriarch of the Peazant family, director Julie Dash revises memories and simultaneously offers glimpses at the future. She captures scenes of a tumultuous two-day period during which the Peazants prepare for their journey to the "mainland"—away from the Georgia islands where their Gullah culture—a unique livelihood steeped in West African social traditions, language, and spirituality—was born.

Omnipresent throughout the film is a tense relationship between Afrodiasporic beliefs and Christianity, one of the greatest points of misunderstanding between the Peazant family members as they prepare to leave Ibo Landing, their home.[2] In forging this theme, Dash hones in on a common spiritual tradition throughout the South and other African diasporic communities: the bottle tree, a means of capturing spirits by carefully placing glassware on the ends of tree branches. In the film, the artifact is among many talismans crafted by Nana Peazant as a means of familial and ancestral protection. Her grandson, Eli, professes his newfound refusal of his grandmother's belief system, catalyzed by his wife's sexual assault by a white man on the mainland—a signal to him that Nana's magic is no protection at all. He smashes the bottles in a gutting scene of frustration and cultural loss. But the elderly matriarch Nana is unfazed: "The bottle tree reminds us of who was here and who's gone on. […] You appreciate the bottle tree each day, as you appreciate your loved ones." Her cool resolve resounds throughout the film, her spiritual conviction undaunted.

Versions of the bottle tree are seen repeatedly in the works of Betye Saar, a California-born artist whose artistic practice draws from the Afrodiasporic religious traditions of the South, American folk archives, and generational memory. In her work *Sanctuary Awaits* (1996), a wooden throne is ornamented with amber bottles. The amber bottles also appear above the entryway of her installation *House of Gris Gris* (1989), co-created with her daughter Alison Saar. The Saars' explorations of Afrodiasporic spiritualism have been a force throughout their respective decades-long careers.

Still from *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Memories of these ancestral histories often faded after African Americans' journeyed north. I grew up hearing my family histories in snippets—never in full—and grasped at details to piece together a complete picture of my family history. Two generations removed from my own family's migration from Georgia, my not-far-off family history of healing and rootwork[3] went unspoken. Nonetheless, they were present in my day-to-day life, unbeknownst to me: my father's reverence for spiders, for instance. *Never kill a spider in the home. We'll lose money.* Superstitions—or so they seemed—like these were steeped in the idiosyncrasies of Afrodiasporic folklore and spiritual beliefs.

In a conversation with artist Allison Janae Hamilton over Zoom, I asked her about the modes in which her own familial and community histories appear. The artist frequently employs her family, friends, and herself as photographic subjects, but I query further into her portraits of a group of young girls—children of her friends, she says—and what they represent about the temporality of the South. Their hair is plaited and topped with bloodred flower crowns; in many shots, the young sitters wear Easter Sunday-ready frocks, not unlike the starched, white, and gorgeously lacy dresses of the Peazant women. With her portraits frequently set in the extraordinary palm forests of northern Florida, Hamilton points to the act of witnessing: "What those trees have witnessed, what these figures of these young children *will* witness," she explains.[4]

These acts of witnessing and documenting are at the core of her practice, as well as those of countless other Black artists. Their ethereal presence—"whether they're meant to be children or angelic, fairy-like figures," Hamilton adds—collapses the earthly and transcendental realms and draws our attention to the circularity and passage of time.

In ruminating on the potential of both the artist and viewer as witnesses, equally prescient in Dash's narrative is the process and significance of documentation. Mr. Snead, a photographer, is tasked by cousin Viola to document the family before their journey to the mainland. Through his lens, as through Dash's, we watch the family's men, children, and close-knit women stage scenes on their beloved coastline, one to which they may never return after their journey across the Georgia waters. The film is marked by gorgeous, slow-moving scenes of Black women cradling one another beneath a ratty parasol, nestled in knotty branches of massive live oaks, splayed in the sand, bathed in golden light, and traversing on boats through snaking waterways.

Along with Dash's directorship, filmmaker Arthur Jafa served as *Daughters of the Dust*'s director of photography and artist Kerry James Marshall as its production designer, lending to these striking visuals. The intimacy in this collaborative image-making between African American artists (who, at the time of filmmaking, were still emerging artists) becomes as significant as the narration and dialogue. In the vein of entangled cultures coming together to form a greater Black culture, the artists' capabilities for carving out worlds among the foliage is only heightened by the union of their collective experience in depicting the fictional Peazant family's life as a reflection of history.

Still from *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Also culling the modern while heavily referencing the past, is one of the few pop-culture portrayals of the coastal South: Beyonce Knowles's *Lemonade.* Directed by Khalil Joseph (a collaborator with Jafa), the visual album takes heavy inspiration from the singer's Southern upbringing as well as *Daughters of the Dust*'s gothic aesthetics and subtle storytelling. Its release in 2016 even inspired conversations about Dash's film getting a new wide release, according to the director in an interview for *Vogue.*[5]

In watching Dash's debut film, I see frequent parallels to Hamilton's practice. Also centering the inner lives of Southern Black people, Hamilton portrays her communities through loving eyes and with a graceful approach. She explained to me that she sees films like Dash's as a mirror, but finds direct inspiration from her own experiences growing up in the South, as well as those of her family and friends.[6]

Allison Janae Hamilton, *Floridawater IV*, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York & Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton

Hamilton's photographs present sumptuous, rich images of similarly verdant landscapes, depicting the beaches, mangroves, and forestry of the Florida coast. Her lyrical scenes of folks from the area allow us a glimpse at the region's thriving contemporary culture. She weaves in Southern spirituality, introducing us to mythic creatures: talismans made from palm fronds, fencing masks, dried seaweed, and animal skulls. In these lyrical depictions, we also often get a glimpse of white dresses beneath the water, ballooning around bodies in a choreographed photograph, with ballet shoes pointing outward with fingers splayed open and elegant body

language frozen in time. In viewing her video work *Wacissa* (2019), we become one with a gushing stream, traversing in a seemingly endless loop through rapid waters over rocks and through seaweed as if unfettered by any weight at all.

These artworks—diligently researched and based on the family and archival histories of their makers—render historical archives visible, in contrast to the gaps in historical records surrounding the inner lives of enslaved people and their descendants in the United States throughout history. Through them, intergenerational trauma is bound as well as broken open. The omnipresent role of Afrodiasporic spirituality is explored through shifting ideas of religion and faith from the past to the present.

Following in Dash's cinematic footsteps was Lemmons, with her debut feature film *Eve's Bayou*, the tale of an upper-class Creole family and their complicated relationship with magic, rife with noir inspiration in the form of black-and-white visions and mysterious deaths.

"You told daddy you don't practice no voodoo," says Eve, the film's ten-year-old-protagonist, slyly to her Aunt Mozelle, a seer (with whom Eve unwittingly shares a gift). The contrast of Mozelle's intuition and innate magic with the rigorously scientific approach of her brother, Eve's philandering father, seeps into every aspect of the plot. Set in the 1960s, *Eve's Bayou* is rich with shots that pan the unique Louisiana landscape—from willowy swamp cypress trees growing out of brackish water tinted green by plant matter to impossibly tall oaks on the family's picture-perfect property.

"Memory is the selection of images—some elusive, some printed indelibly on the brain," we hear as the film closes, by an adult Eve. "Each image is like a thread, each thread woven together to make a tapestry of intricate texture. And the tapestry tells a story, and the story is our past."

In creating this artwork, Lemmons—like Dash, Hamilton, Knowles, and the many other Black women artists centering coastal traditions and spiritualities—is preserving memories and building a historic narrative (albeit a gothic, fantastical version). Through photography and film, these women are crafting worlds without overlooking the real violence and historical circumstances of their protagonists, told via glimpses into their lives.

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[1] Originating in Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," critical fabulation addresses the genre of autofiction—the combination of fabrication and autobiographical storytelling. Specific to Hartman's terminology is the potential to navigate the suppressed histories of oppressed people through the process of writing.

[2] In 1803, Ibo landing (or Igbo Landing) was the site of a mass suicide of enslaved people hailing from the area that is now Nigeria. Historical documentation provides evidence of a brave rebellion by the captured people, who, according to accounts, walked into the water, electing for death over enslavement. The lore behind the historic incident grounds the Peazant family's relationship to the land of their island: it operates as an example of the great bravery of their ancestors; the significance of the waters as a symbol of resistance; and an example of the strong ancestral memory still guiding their community. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the revelation of Ibo Landing's history, as told by Eula and Eli, serves as a revelatory moment toward the film's conclusion as the family reflects on their roots. Against the backdrop of this story, the family members decide their fates: to leave, or to stay.

[3] Rootwork is a practice born out of Southern African American culture, which melds African traditions preserved during slavery, Indigenous knowledge of herbalism, and other cultural influences, often including Christianity.

[4] Jasmine Weber in discussion with the artist via Zoom, June 2021.

[5] Julia Felsenthal, "Director Julie Dash on *Daughters of the Dust*, Beyoncé, and Why We Need Film Now More Than Ever," *Vogue*, November 18, 2016, https://www.vogue.com/article/daughters-of-the-dust-julie-dash-interview.

[6] Hamilton did, however, cite Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* as a series that succeeds in its portrayal of the South as a place continuing to thrive and evolve into modernity, rather than as a place stagnant in history.