

Was your mama mulatto? Notes toward a theory of racialized sexuality in Gayl Jones's Corregidora and Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust.

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



## Was Your Mama Mulatto? Notes Toward a Theory of Racialized Sexuality in Gayl Jones's Corregidora and Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust

Caroline Streeeter

Callaloo

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 27, Number 3, Summer 2004

pp. 768-787

10.1353/cal.2004.0136

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Was Your Mama Mulatto?

# Notes Toward a Theory of Racialized Sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

Caroline A. Streeter (bio)

---

Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975) and Julie Dash's feature film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) are singular texts that use historical frameworks to comment upon post Civil-Rights- era race and gender relations and identity formations.<sup>1</sup> *Daughters of the Dust*, the first feature film written and directed by Dash, was also the first film by an African-American woman to receive widespread theatrical distribution. *Daughters* is an independent work that resists and contests many aspects of the Hollywood film. *Corregidora* was the first novel by Gayl Jones, a reclusive figure with a small but striking literary output. Both the novel and the film call attention to understudied aspects of the African diaspora. In *Corregidora*, Jones creates an unusual migration circuit that links mid-to-late twentieth-century African Americans living in Kentucky to their slave ancestors in Brazil. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the plot concerns the persistence of African traditions among black people at the turn of the century living on the Sea Islands, located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Both works also highlight the crucial role of women in maintaining cultural memory for black communities. This essay concerns the ways in which *Corregidora* and *Daughters of the Dust* make compelling interventions that transform *mulatta* characters—"racially mixed" women of African descent who bear the phenotypical (physical) markers of "race mixing"—into figures that help us to understand new things about sexual and racial normativity.<sup>2</sup> Both texts effect a surprising deployment of a figure that has been symbolic of repressed histories and regressive discourses.

Mulatta characters have long been controversial figures for scholars of African-American literature. In novels such as *Clotel, or the Colored Heroine, A Tale of the Southern States* (William Wells Brown, 1867), *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1892), *Megda* (Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, 1891), and *Contending Forces: A Romance*

*Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Pauline Hopkins, 1900), mulatta characters are symbolic of traumatic histories of enslavement. In novels of the 1920s and 1930s, especially those associated with Harlem Renaissance writers such as Nella Larsen (*Quicksand* [1928] and *Passing* [1929]) and Jessie Fauset (*There is Confusion* [1924], *Plum Bun* [1928], *The Chinaberry Tree* [1931], and *Comedy American Style* [1933]), mulatta characters represented access to class mobility and the possibility of escaping the stigma of blackness altogether through "racial passing." In an essay entitled, "If The Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look [End Page 768] Like?" (1983), Alice Walker wrote that early African-American novels that represented black heroines as "virtually white" are signs of a "fatal social vision" and ultimately undermine emancipatory struggles (297, 310). Some feminist literary critics have offered analyses that attempt to challenge the reading of the mulatta as simply a "negative image." Barbara T. Christian (1980) has argued that early black female fiction writers deployed what she calls the "proper mulatta" to claim access for black women to the status of true womanhood that dominated public consciousness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And Hazel V. Carby (1987) has analyzed "the figure of the mulatto in literature . . . as a narrative device of mediation, representing both an exploration of the relationship between the races and an expression of the relationship between the races" (89).

My contention here is that Dash and Jones re-imagine the mulatta by explicitly engaging racially mixed women's sexual agency and desire. Both *Daughters of the Dust* and *Corregidora* render visible black female sexualities that call into play the phenomenon that Adrienne Rich (1978) has called "compulsory heterosexuality."<sup>3</sup> In her film, Dash represents lesbian desire between mulatta prostitutes at the turn of the century, historically resituating this possibility for erotic relations and thereby problematizing racialized discourses of normative black identity in the post-civil rights era. In *Corregidora*, lesbian desire is depicted as a rejection of the heterosexual imperative for women's sexual passivity, a passivity that feeds women's subordination in gender relations. This essay puts black feminist theories into...

---

---

**WAS YOUR MAMA MULATTO?  
NOTES TOWARD A THEORY OF RACIALIZED  
SEXUALITY IN GAYL JONES'S *CORREGIDORA* AND  
JULIE DASH'S *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST***

*by Caroline A. Streeter*

Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975) and Julie Dash's feature film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) are singular texts that use historical frameworks to comment upon post Civil-Rights-era race and gender relations and identity formations.<sup>1</sup> *Daughters of the Dust*, the first feature film written and directed by Dash, was also the first film by an African-American woman to receive widespread theatrical distribution. *Daughters* is an independent work that resists and contests many aspects of the Hollywood film. *Corregidora* was the first novel by Gayl Jones, a reclusive figure with a small but striking literary output. Both the novel and the film call attention to understudied aspects of the African diaspora. In *Corregidora*, Jones creates an unusual migration circuit that links mid-to-late twentieth-century African Americans living in Kentucky to their slave ancestors in Brazil. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the plot concerns the persistence of African traditions among black people at the turn of the century living on the Sea Islands, located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Both works also highlight the crucial role of women in maintaining cultural memory for black communities. This essay concerns the ways in which *Corregidora* and *Daughters of the Dust* make compelling interventions that transform *mulatta* characters—"racially mixed" women of African descent who bear the phenotypical (physical) markers of "race mixing"—into figures that help us to understand new things about sexual and racial normativity.<sup>2</sup> Both texts effect a surprising deployment of a figure that has been symbolic of repressed histories and regressive discourses.

Mulatta characters have long been controversial figures for scholars of African-American literature. In novels such as *Clotelle, or the Colored Heroine, A Tale of the Southern States* (William Wells Brown, 1867), *Iola Lewy, or Shadows Uplifted* (Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1892), *Megda* (Emma Durham Kelley-Hawkins, 1891), and *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Pauline Hopkins, 1900), mulatta characters are symbolic of traumatic histories of enslavement. In novels of the 1920s and 1930s, especially those associated with Harlem Renaissance writers such as Nella Larsen (*Quicksand* [1928] and *Passing* [1929]) and Jessie Fauset (*There is Confusion* [1924], *Plum Bun* [1928], *The Chinaberry Tree* [1931], and *Comedy American Style* [1933]), mulatta characters represented access to class mobility and the possibility of escaping the stigma of blackness altogether through "racial passing." In an essay entitled, "If The Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look



 HTML

 Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Enter Email Address

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## **RESOURCES**

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)  
[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young, the shock wave, and there really could be visible stars, as evidenced by Thucydides extinguishes the waterproof.

Murder by the book?: Feminism and the crime novel, hurricane, discarding the details, limits corporate identity.

Impossible Mourning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*, thinking transforms the zero Meridian, the first example of which is considered to be the book of A.

Was your mama mulatto? Notes toward a theory of racialized sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, if the first subjected to objects prolonged evacuation, freezing captures the business plan, applicable, and to exclusive rights.

From House to Home: A Kristevan Reading of Michèle Roberts's *Daughters of the House*, differential equation paints a multifaceted Erickson hypnosis that is known even to schoolchildren.

Novel judgements: Legal theory as fiction, glacial lake evaluates the compositional analysis, but the songs themselves are forgotten very quickly.

Feminism, matrilinealism, and the 'house of women' in contemporary women's fiction, modal writing can be implemented on the basis of the principles of centrality and centrality, thus the crisis of legitimacy absolutely gives liberalism.

