protest, folklore, and expressive culture, I immediately thought about three things: Celie, Nettie, and The Color Purple.

When I was younger, my little sister and I would sit cross-legged on the shaggy brown carpet in our living room, face each other—with our ponytails, blue-jean overalls, and jellybean sandals on—and play a hand-clap game to the rhythm of this singsong rhyme: “Me and you, us never part. Makidada. Me and you, us have one heart. Makidada. Ain’t no ocean, ain’t no sea. Makidada. Keep my sister ‘way from me.”

My mother introduced us to many Black movies back then, so my sister and I would discuss them and the characters—“Preach” and “Cochise” from Cooley High, Ike and Tina from What’s Love Got to Do with It?, Otis Williams and David Ruffin from The Temptations, and Craig and “Smokey” from Friday—like we knew them personally; but there was something intimately familiar about Sofia’s resilience, Shug Avery’s pride, and Celie and Nettie’s sisterly bond, especially their hand-clap game. “Me and you, us never part. Makidada. Me and you, us have one heart. Makidada. Ain’t no ocean, ain’t no sea. Makidada. Keep my sister ‘way from me.”

Set in rural Georgia in the early twentieth century, The Color Purple film (1985), directed by Steven Spielberg and adapted from Alice Walker’s novel of the same name, introduces us to the complex world of Celie, who, through her letters addressed only to God, details her journey through abuse, poverty, racism, and sexism, but achieves spiritual, material, and emotional independence in the end. I loved The Color Purple then because its visuals—wooden churches, houses and juke joints, quilts, spirituals, and the blues—reminded me of my own family in rural Mississippi. I could easily see glimpses of my grandmother and my aunts in the film’s iconic women characters. I now know that I appreciated this film because it was and remains a powerful example of Black women’s protest, folklore, and expressive culture: Shug Avery sang the blues as an expression of her sensuality, but also her sorrow; Sofia “played the dozens” with Mister, especially about his father, when he insulted her; Nettie witnessed African rituals, like scarification, as a gesture of tribal solidarity; and Mister asserted at the beginning of the film that it was bad luck to cut a woman’s hair. The film remains significant in contemporary Black culture, given that Black folks have taken quotes and other vernacular expressions from it and added them to memes and to our personal arsenals of African American proverbs. For instance, when my sister and I are planning to sit back and observe the outcome of an unfortunate situation, we often quote Celie, telling each other that we will just “stand back and see what the wall gone look like.” From Sofia’s candor to Celie’s spiritual journey of self-actualization to the symbolism of the color purple, the film portrays the depth of Black women and their emotional and intimate lives in the rural Black South at a particular time in history. Each time I watch The Color Purple, I see something new, but it remains a deeply moving film about enduring, triumph, and the formidable bond of sisterhood.

Daughters of the Dust. 1991. By Julie Dash. 1 hr. 51 min. Digital format, color. (Cohen Film Collection, New York, NY.)

Marilyn M. White
Kean University (retired)

Because of the importance of this special issue on Black expressive culture and protest of the Journal of American Folklore, I was glad to contribute to the film section. When the film review editor asked me to reflect on a meaningful film, I chose Daughters of the Dust because it spoke to me from folklore, Black expressive culture, and cinematic perspectives.

When my Black friends and I heard that a new movie was coming out, set in one of the Sea Islands of South Carolina, with a nearly all-Black cast and directed by a Black woman, the film became a must-see event. We knew that it wouldn’t screen in wide release for some time, so a friend and I went to New York to see it at an art house theater in SoHo, Manhattan. The movie, Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (1991), was then—and still is now—an incredible reflection of the Black experience in America, but even more so of the uniqueness of the Black experience in the relatively isolated Sea Islands.

Set in 1902, the film focuses on the celebration of an extended multi-generational fam-
ily, most of whom will be leaving their island for the mainland and more opportunities in the North, a precursor to the Great Migration. The matriarch of the Peazants, Nana, however, refuses to go, as she is tied to the land and the old ways. This is significant because it is especially through her stories that the family has remembered and kept alive its traditional African roots. Children are named after days of the week or season. One cousin has become an evangelical Christian on the mainland, other family members are also Christian, and the film depicts a full-immersion baptism. However, those who stayed on the island still also know the names of deities in the Yoruba pantheon; others practice Islam, have Arabic names, chant Koranic prayers, and have a copy of the Koran in Arabic. One site on the island is Ibo Landing (now Igbo). The film includes multiple references to and family stories of saltwater Africans—those brought to the island illegally in the 1850s and what happened to them: they flew back to Africa, they walked back, they drowned.

Furthermore, African retentions can be seen in the use of the mortar and pestle, African language lessons, and several scenes of characters playing what is widely known as the game of mancala. Africans were brought from Nigeria to the Sea Islands specifically because of their knowledge of the growing and use of rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton. It’s significant for the latter two crops that almost all of the women wear white cotton dresses, and the matriarch—with her hands blue from the dye—wears an indigo-colored blouse.

The Sea Islands are still famous for basket weaving, and the film shows Nana engaged in that practice. Several conversations have English subtitles because they are in the Gullah-Geechee language. There is also a bottle tree, references to conjure, and children playing line games (“Strut, Miss Lizzy”) and ring games. The film presents the range of African-descended peoples in one family, with one person named Yellow Mary, although her cousin, affected by colorism, says that she’s “not very.” With one member of the younger generation ultimately choosing to stay on the island because she’s in love, we see connections with Native Americans, as her boyfriend is Cherokee.

Throughout the movie, Nana has gathered handfuls of dirt and let them slip through her fingers. She is a product and keeper of that dirt, as she and her family—especially her female descendants—are “Daughters of the Dust,” descendants of the old things that she carries in a tin can. In the film’s finale, she puts some of that dirt in a small bag, ties it to a Bible, and has each family member come to her to kiss it—reminding them of their connection to her, their land, their traditions, and each other.

Music and Sound


**Jessica Cushenberry**

Independent Scholar

*Spider Tales*, the debut album from musician Jake M. Blount, combines US folk music, bluegrass, and banjo and fiddle sounds to create a unique take on string band music of the Southeastern United States. Blount is a vocalist, banjoist, and fiddler whose music is pensive yet rich and thought-provoking. The 46-minute album blends the captivating sounds of the South with lyrics and liner notes that encourage the listener to think beyond the sedating and happy styling often associated with the string band music genre. *Spider Tales* positions itself as a bold and forward-thinking work of art that aims to entertain listeners while encouraging the exploration of different perspectives.

The 2020 CD, produced by Jeff Claus and Judy Hyman and released by Free Dirt Records, presents a compilation of known string band instrumental and vocal tracks from Blount’s archival research. Of the album’s 14 tracks, 13 are contemporary versions of traditional folk songs, excluding “Beyond This Wall.” Written by Judy Hyman, “Beyond This Wall” was inspired by a lesser-known photograph of a Holocaust concentration camp’s entrance, and the song fits with the album’s theme of oppression, social justice, and transmission through oral tradition. In the album’s liner notes, Blount