

Home Going:  
A Spirit-Centered Ethnography Exploring the Transformative Journey of Documenting  
Gullah/Geechee Funerals

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## **ABSTRACT**

MICHELLE LANIER: Home Going: A Spirit-Centered Ethnography Exploring the Transformative Journey of Documenting Gullah/Geechee Funerals  
(Under the direction of Trudier Harris, Glenn Hinson and Valerie Johnson)

This thesis explores the transformative and spiritually-affirming impact that can occur when a folklorist of faith engages with a community's faith practice. In this case that faith practice is the tradition of "home going," or funerary mourning, within the Gullah/Geechee community in and around St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Furthermore, this thesis reveals a narrative of personal and communal healing as the author engages her own loss in the presence of grief, within a community that she has, at times, called home. "Home going" serves as the vernacular vocabulary for funerals and their associate wakes, repasts, and memorials in a contemporary, Gullah/Geechee context. "Home going" also serves as a birthplace for the concept of a Spirit-centered ethnographic journey. This thesis both defines and utilizes *Spirit-centered ethnography* as an ideology that intentionally moves the ethnographer through vulnerability (as defined by Ruth Behar) to a place of reciprocity and service.

i dedicate *home going* to my true home—  
the Love of my Creator.

*Luke 24:1-10*

*“You hear my Mother who speaks through me.”*  
—Edwidge Danticat

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Traveling home, the act of “home going” even when the Truth of “home” actually resonates from within, can be a long and epic work. This work has been an act of faith born of faith. Many have helped me as I “journeyed on.” For this help I begin my thanksgiving with ancestor Jack Johnson of St. Helena Island. Jack Johnson was an elder of grace, humor and song. Johnson’s dignity still humbles me to this day. I thank funeral director Edith Galloway for taking precious time out to speak to and hear from me—to even wonder of my experience with my mother’s death, “Did you ever get closure?” Here’s testament to that sacred closure, an opening, a portal to something new.

I thank the Atkins family who housed me in the heart of a Gullah family while I conducted research, only allowing the gift of my grandma Anne’s salmon croquette recipe in exchange for full access to home and kin. I thank Emory Campbell, elder statesman of the Gullah diaspora, who still embraces me as one of his own and who has declared me Gullah. My nine year-old self also thanks you for pointing the way into my calling and vocation as a passionate public folklorist and historian.

If Campbell is right and I am somehow Gullah, then for that identity I must thank Helen Green, friend to my mother and village mother of mine, whose love held me close. On her land I learned to pick blackberries and wild plums and dig for fossilized shell and to hear Gullah—maybe even to speak it some.

I must acknowledge the sensitive and beautifully brilliant woman that was/is my mother, Margaret Odell Caution McCullers. You rode with me in the physical boat that first took me to Daufuskie Island and in the spiritual boat that led me to the concept of Spirit-Centered ethnography. In grieving the loss of you, my biological mother, I have been called closer to the Great Mother who births us all. I thank all the mothers and sisters and all the brothers and fathers who have cheered me on through this work.

Blessed is the scholar who has gracious and expansive paths blazed before her! For these paths of prolific and innovative African American literary research; invigorating, spirited and selfless ethnography; and service-centered, spiritual and nurturing pedagogy, I sincerely thank Trudier Harris, Glenn Hinson and Valerie Johnson. I also thank and acknowledge Patricia Jones-Jackson (*in memoriam*), Karla Holloway, Robert Ferris Thompson, Barre Toelken, Renato Rosaldo, Gloria Anzaldua, Michael Lawrence Murray, and—yes, yes, yes!—Ruth Behar, for your scholarly offerings.

Most present in my life, is Eden, my daughter. I thank you for continually asking, “So Mommy, how’s your writing coming along?” And, “How’s this Gullah/Geechee project going to make our lives better?” I pray that you receive your answer in the peace that the completion of this work has ushered into our lives. I pray that one day you will read this and know. I thank God for the ministering and *wise* angel who kept you safe while I researched and visioned and wrote. I thank all who help me know that it is possible to go home.

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## I. Introduction

I am reminded of my family's and those of African descent's belief that birds represent the spirit world. First there was one then another, striking white egret, skinny as match sticks looking out at the roadside; then there was a black vulture wearing his death mask. My mind asked, "Who are you?" Remembering that an Aunt had said "Blow a kiss at a red bird for good luck," and that my mother *knew* that her father's spirit was near when a blue-jay came close. 12 May 1998

I have taken these words from field notes I wrote while conducting research on burial societies on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, research that has evolved into my thesis project. I had received a research stipend from the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to discover what caused the demise of burial societies in this community . . . or at least that was what I thought I would be researching and documenting. My consultants and my heart had other ideas, and I was obliged to listen and follow.

Ultimately, I worked with all three funeral homes that served the St. Helena community in the late 1990s. Sherman Funeral Home was the only such establishment on the island, while Marshel's Funeral Home and Helen Galloway's Chisolm Funeral Home were located a short distance away, in Beaufort. I conducted interviews with the directors of the three establishments; however, I developed a closer working relationship with Edith Galloway of Chisolm's funeral home. Thus, I will focus my documentation and analysis of funerary performance on the funerals Ms. Galloway directed, which will become a major part of the thesis.

How had I come to the notion of studying black people and mourning, specifically mourning in contemporary Gullah traditions? Even I am amazed at the complexity of the answer to this question. The most obvious response stems from research I conducted in the “Art of Ethnography” seminar in the spring of 1998. My project was to work with a Durham, North Carolina, funeral home (African American-owned and operated), and my choice of topics was driven by my personal knowledge that within black churches, neighborhoods, and communities in general, funeral directors carry a great deal of importance; in many ways, they are bearers of cultural practice and tradition. In fact, most of the prominent black families in my hometown of Columbia, South Carolina, own funeral homes. This is the obvious, objective and academic response, and there is some truth to it; however, mourning and grieving traditions as a significant component of black experiences is extremely compelling and intriguing to me on a personal level as well.

I lived on Hilton Head Island, a sea island turned resort, with my mother for two years. I was less than ten years old, but old enough to understand the irony and pain that many of the neighborhoods on the island were called “plantations” and that most of the people who looked like me (brown) worked on those plantations. My mother and other community members made me aware that after slavery, much of sea island land belonged to African Americans. I was told that the tourist industry had pushed many families off their lands, “providing” the African American community with menial jobs hearkening back to the major theme of slavery—black bodies exploited for the comforts of wealthy whites. I also have a memory of traveling with my mother by motorboat to Daufuskie Island for a somber celebration. Island residents organized a festival of sorts to

commemorate the history and culture of Daufuskie Island. The event was less than festive, as all present understood that the island would soon follow in the touristic tradition of Hilton Head Island, home of the aforementioned “plantations.” While the children ate Beaufort Stew (a low country boil of seafood sausage, potatoes and corn, sometimes called Frogmore stew), drank punch and played, the adults spoke bitterly of Daufuskie dunes morphing into “luxury” golf courses. I understood from this day and the conversations around me that *something* vital but not tangible had been damaged on Hilton Head.

This *something* was/is the living traditions of the Gullah community. Even on the tourism-ravaged island, I understood that the spirit of Gullah ways had suffered several economic and cultural blows; however, this spirit prevailed. My life on the island was rich and distanced. Rich, in that neighborhood children and babysitters embraced me as an extension of their family, influencing my own use of Gullah. Distanced, in that I was always aware of my mother’s and my differences from islanders, as we were from the “big-city” capital of Columbia. My mother died less than a year after we moved from Hilton Head Island. Her funeral joined a string of funerals that I unconsciously linked as markers on an ancestral timeline. Phases of my life could be divided by funerals. This may seem macabre to some, but for me funerals were a time when my family and other families seemed the strongest, the most unified. Neighbors brought home-made pound cakes, pies, and casseroles and we were dressed in lace-trimmed socks for the girls and clip-on ties for the boys. We were important on those days as we rode in the elite “family car,” led by the gentle hands of funeral directors. I never felt that these deceased relatives had truly left me and by the time I entered college, I sensed a cloud of angels hovered

near by as I walked through the gates and onto the scenic campus of Spelman College.

It was in my Junior year at Spelman that I began to fulfill a long-term desire to return to the Gullah culture of the South Carolina Sea Islands. My Senior Thesis covered the ideologies that emerge from Gullah folktales and folksongs. As I read stories about hags and restless spirits and looked over songs about graves and the Holy Land, I became intrigued by how sea islanders spoke and sang of death easily and often joyfully or humorously. There was healing for me in this approach to death. And the more I sought out books or articles on Gullah beliefs about death, funerals, or burials, the more I saw a need for this research. While interesting, the little information I did find had more of a historical focus and looked almost entirely to the material tradition of burial ground decorations.

John D. Combes, author of “Ethnography, Archaeology, and Burial Practices Among Coastal South Carolina Blacks” (1972); Harold Courlander, author of “Traditions and Recollections in the Sea Islands” (1996) and John Michael Vlach, who features Sea Island grave decorations in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1990), specifically deal with Gullah material culture as it relates to spirituality and death. Several historians also provide valuable information about the development of Gullah culture in South Carolina. Ronald Daise and Edith Dabbs address St. Helena history in *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage: Legacy of Freedmen on St. Helena Island* (1986) and *Sea Island Diary: a History of St. Helena Island* (1983), respectively. Elaine Nichols’ textual presentation of South Carolina funerary artifacts from the museum exhibition “The Last Miles of the Way: African-American Homegoing Traditions, 1890-Present” (1989) is a priceless addition to my research, in that it is one of the only publications

directly pertaining to death among South Carolina blacks. Even more vital to my thesis is Margaret Washington Creel's article on the funerary practices of enslaved Gullah, entitled "Gullah Attitudes Towards Death and the Supernatural" (1988). Beyond the realm of written text I have found two documentaries extremely useful towards understanding the Gullah Diaspora, from Sierre Leone to the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. *Family Across the Sea* (1990) lays a strong foundation for the study of African retentions as they emerge through Gullah folkways, and *The Language You Cry In* (1998) documents the scholastic inquiry into the origins of a supposed nonsense, Gullah song. Scholars finally recognize the song as a burial dirge that begins "Everyone come together, let us work hard. The grave is not yet finished . . ." (1998). This film has as its center a Gullah woman singing an African burial song, an historical moment I must deal with as I examine death and Gullah traditions.

I am fully aware of my quasi-insider position as a researcher of Gullah tradition. This is a position I embrace and see as a rarity in a field where scholars from outside cultures often study and circumscribe the Other, thus emphasizing their Otherness. I seek to develop and reflect on my position as insider (African American, Christian from South Carolina with ties to the community) and outsider (urban, member of the academy). Gloria Anzaldua's work in mestiza self-ideation as scholarly discourse bolsters my work as a scholar's view from the borders of identity. Crucial to my work as well is that I view Gullah folkways through a lens of dynamism. I will consciously identify emergent traditions of grief that reflect Afro-Atlantic/Gullah worldview, rather than survivals of West African tradition. This is in direct response to texts like *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (1987) by Patricia Jones-Jackson. Jones-

Jackson clearly sees the demise of tradition, whereas I call for a more detailed analysis of contemporary traditions that reveal an improvised and fluid continuation of worldview and cultural practice. Beyond a concerted effort to examine dynamic traditions, I also align myself with oral historians, such as the Federal Writer's Project researchers featured in *Before Freedom, When Just I Can Remember* (1989), who recognize the power of testimony to fill in and correct document.

Finally, I will include my personal experiences and beliefs about death, as I know that they completely color my intention and motivation for my work. For this I turn to Ruth Behar and Renato Rosaldo, recognizing their contributions to reflective/reflexive ethnography, vulnerable observation, and the art of writing one's grief and life into the work. Vulnerable observation and ethnography provides a firm and established foundation for me to move into the newly-defined work of Spirit-centered ethnography—a methodology that embraces faith as its core tenet.

I will structure my thesis around the central claim that the acknowledged power of the life-death cycle is pervasive within the Gullah community as it flows through the living traditions of various folk institutions in a number of ways: 1) communication with the dead through material culture (writing correspondence on obituaries or placing a variety of grave markers in such a way that they appear to be for the benefit of the deceased), grave-side visitations, "the final glimpse" tradition of island funerals (the practice of allowing mourners to view and touch the body of the deceased after the eulogy and before burial); 2) the rallying of the community around the family of the deceased, particularly before and after the funeral; 3) a maintenance of space for the dead in memoriam, within the household; 4) an improvisational and emergent

purposes/roles of funeral homes and directors within the community (having worship service within the chapel of a funeral home).

This concept of permissive boundaries or improvisational cultural expression, especially in regards to the secular and sacred, is not new to African Diaspora scholarship as is evidenced by Lawrence Levine's work on gospel in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977). I will look to the funeral as folk institution and as the nexus between the living and the dead, with lesser but equally significant commentary on family, neighborhood, church, and club-organization responses to death. My work will examine the unifying force of funeral homes and funeral directors in regards to the above-mentioned folk institutions.

I will strive to blend African Diaspora ideology (through a lens of dynamic folk theory) with the theory and history of death studies and the study of funerary practices. As I gathered information about death I found a plethora of writings, which I chose to divide into three categories: 1) philosophy of death; 2) funeral directors and the funeral home; and 3) burial practices. (All of these texts are fairly contemporary studies).

My continuing field work on St. Helena is central to the development of my thesis and is based on interviews, observations, experiences, field recordings, and photographs. I was exceedingly fortunate with my field work experience, in that community members allowed me to record and photograph funerals. With the emotional nature of grief, mourning, and the funeral as ritual, I was extremely conscious of my role as outsider with regards to the grieving family. Instead of being alienated from the funeral process, I was drawn in by the funeral directors and family members. For example, the musician at one funeral asked me to sing a song (thankfully there was not time for a folklorist's



performance at the funeral), and I was invited to dine with the family after the services. This positioning allowed me to experience the funeral as an extension of the family; in response to this access, I consider the thesis as a resource for viewing various funerary scenes with a minimum of post-fieldwork editorial intrusion. In this spirit, I have included several appendices that offer “un-interpreted” texts and images.

In an effort towards honest engagement, I declare the vulnerable, ideological and, most importantly, spiritual nature of this work. As David Hufford writes “activities that are primarily ideological and rhetorical in nature . . . are by no means out of bounds for academics or anyone else, but they are most honestly engaged when they are clearly identified in advance” (1982: 55). Taking Hufford’s advice and acknowledging the “ideological” nature of this work, I offer a framework for the Spirit-centered ideology presented in this thesis.

I have structured my thesis into four chapters that function in two ways: 1) to develop a vulnerable and spirit-centered foundation; and 2) to identify, contextualize and analyze Gullah home goings or funerals. In the first chapter, I elaborate upon the concept of Spirit-centered ethnography, placing its roots in Ruth Behar’s vulnerable observation. I outline the tenets of this practice and offer examples of how each these tenets have manifested in my own work as well as the work of others—notably two anthropologists and two Gullah cultural-activists.

The second chapter offers an internal revealing of my “hidden journey” or call into this work, a necessary transparency of vulnerable ethnography. Shifting from self to service, the third chapter invites the reader into the realm of the funerary world of home goings on St. Helena Island. After a thorough description of the funeral as process,

ritual, and performance from the perspectives of the family and funeral home workers, I examine of the greater meaning of significant funeral traditions. For example, I discuss the importance of viewing the body to this community. I look at the material culture of clothing, burial accoutrements, and flowers as a physical message from those in attendance to each other as audience and to the deceased as audience. I also include the verbal contribution of the choir, the speaker and vocal mourners. Finally I examine the dramatalurgical or theatrical aspect of funeral as the community's organized performance of grief.

Whereas I examine the funeral in the third chapter, in the fourth chapter I look at the home going tradition in the context of a larger Gullah-Christian belief system. After acknowledging and drawing out African Diaspora connections, I highlight the emic or communal-spiritual identity as overwhelmingly Christian, rather than a syncretic faith-tradition, which masks African beliefs behind Christian practices. This is significant, in that most contemporary Gullah scholarship has focused so much on diasporic connections between West African and Gullah life and language (Turner 2002, Thompson 1984, Vlach 1990) that the Christian self-identity of most Gullah becomes a footnote or an aside. The exceptions are Creel (1988) and Jones-Jackson (1987) who document distinct Gullah-Christian beliefs and rituals.

The final part of the thesis will consist of three appendices. A transcription of a Gullah funeral comprises the first appendix. The second appendix presents excerpts from interviews with funeral director Edith Galloway. The third appendix includes a funeral program and a number of funerary photographs.

As Behar writes in "Death and Memory," the first essay and impetus for the

collection *The Vulnerable Observer* (1997), “This essay tells two stories. It is a lament about death, loss, and grief, inscribing my mourning, a double mourning, as an anthropologist and a granddaughter. But it is also about the effort to remember, and the need to remember, my effort and my need to remember, compelled as I am by my duty-memory” (1997:81). This thesis is also an act of mourning in the Gullah tradition. It is a return home to declare the held truths of the lives of those I have documented on St. Helena Island and the life of the ethnographer doing the documenting. This thesis calls for a new tool of analysis (Spirit-centered ethnography) in order to draw out the conceptual realities of a folklorist of faith connected to a community of faith, both moving and working in faith. This thesis, like a Gullah home going, mourns loss while celebrating the hum of life all around, the continuance of life in this work. This work both documents and participates in the act of home going and returning home—moving through mourning, burial, and vulnerability to synthesis, declaration, and faith.

## II. Spirit-Centered Ethnography

Spirit-centered ethnography is a practice of engaging cultural documentation from a place that both acknowledges, and roots itself within spiritual beliefs. As a folklorist may ground herself in post-modern deconstructionism, the dialogic journey of hermeneutics or the self-reflexivity of vulnerable observation, spirit-centered ethnography is ultimately, guided by a connecting concept of Spirit that directs the work in the field, in the analysis, and in the editorial/generative process (writing). There are ten identifiers of this form.

- 1) Spirit-centered ethnography *acknowledges a creative force*, which is larger than both the scholar and the community or individual at the center of the work. This force both encompasses and connects the ethnographer to the consultant community. In my case, I call this force God in the Christian tradition, a tradition that deeply connects me to the Gullah community I document.
- 2) Within this ideology, an ethnographer is *called* into the work, a process analogous to the notion of being called into ministry.
- 3) The *work is sacred* and requires humility.
- 4) Spirit-centered ethnography requires *discernment, reflection, and meditation*, and in so doing links public and academic folklore or applied and academic history/anthropology. It requires study or scholarship as an act of discernment (similarly to the work of self-reflexivity) before and during the engagement and completion of public or applied work.

Applied work is required of this form as service. Again, connectivity between academic and community-centered or *public* folklore is intrinsic to this form.

5) Spirit-centered ethnography is transformative and often healing. There is an intentionality to the notion of *healing and transformation*, in that the spirit-centered ethnographer expects these outcomes while releasing the particulars of how transformation and healing will manifest.

6) Spirit-centered ethnography acknowledges the guiding presence of Spirit even beyond the notion of *the ethnographic call*, thus requiring moments of prayer, stillness, and quiet.

7) *Prayer* and/or meditation in the field and at the pen becomes a necessary tool for the work of a Spirit-centered ethnographer. This spiritual tool centers and grounds the practitioner before moments of documentation and within the writing process. Prayer and meditation also open the ethnographer to insight—a literally increased ability to *see* what and who is being documented.

8) The notions of reciprocity and collaboration, while present within the ethical groundings of many ethnographers, become charged acts of faith within Spirit-centered ethnography. Reciprocity and collaboration serve as acts of reverence to the sacred nature of both the work and the connections between the practitioner and the consultant community.

9) Spirit-centered ethnography honors the concept of *blessing*. The ethnographer sees the work as a blessing to self and ideally community. Small moments of vulnerability, remarkable human connections, and generosity received and offered all fall in the realm of *ethnographic blessing*.

10) Lastly, Spirit-centered ethnography places a high value on *wisdom seeking as spiritual conversation* with individuals within the consultant community and within the collegial field.

Some notes of clarity are perhaps in order at this point. Spirit-centered ethnography is not an ideology of proselytization. This is not an invitation for ethnographers to turn to consultant communities as a source of redemption. Also, it is particularly important to note that this framework does not release the ethnographer from ethic and academic responsibilities, which potentially open a portal for spiritual trickery in the vein of Carlos Casteneda (Noel 1976).

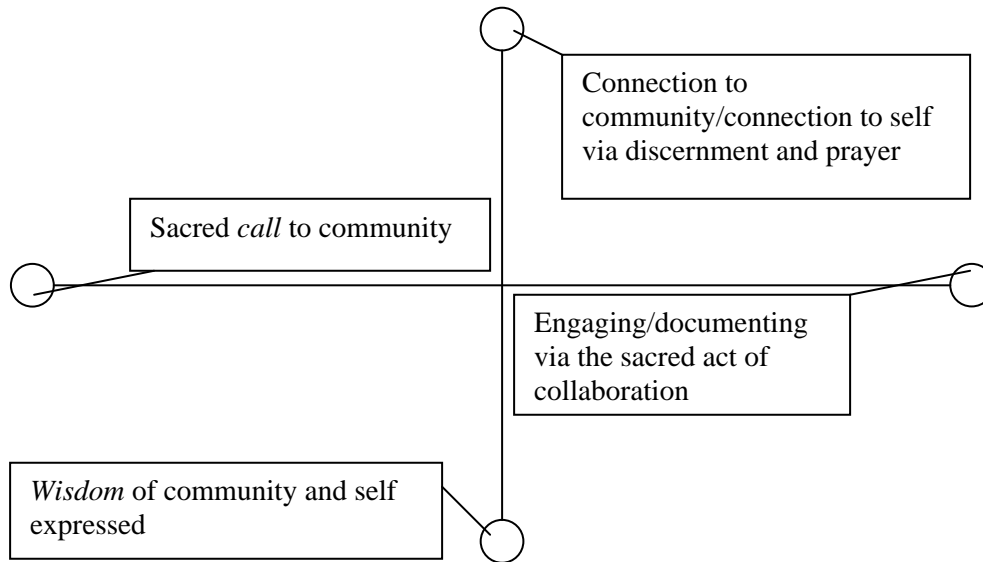
Spirit-centered ethnography embraces and affirms the reciprocal and reflexive/reflective stances characteristic in some, general ethnographic practices and claims these practices as spiritually sound, as well as academically and ethically sound. Spirit-centered ethnography simply recognizes the relevant impact of faith within the field and invites ethnographers to recognize their stances, to place themselves and find within their identity matrix that which is useful to the work. Faith is useful to this work. Faith is required in Spirit-centered ethnography.

The notion of Spirit-centered ethnography emerged in my work within the Gullah community in a number of ways. This work called me and my life called for this work. Even before the trauma of my mother's death solidified my bond to Sea Island culture, there was the compelling moment on Daufuskie Island, where I recall looking across the Sound and sensing the ancestral spirits who came to this place by force, who lived and thrived and died on the island, who cooked rice and stew and cast nets for shrimp from the banks of that island. As a nine year-old, I heard them and felt *called to do something*.

The spirits were with me—*literally*. This calling carried me to devout kitchen table listening sessions with my raconteur cuisine artist and Geechee chef, Aunt Vertamae. This calling led me at 14 to seek out the independent movie theater to soak in the language and cinematography of the Gullah cinema experience that was *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). Then *Mama Day* (1988) devoured one hot summer during my high school years; then came Afrocentric Saturday classes with a Carolina doctor. Then I pursued my Senior Thesis at Spelman, where I read and re-read Gullah narratives, tales, and song lyrics seeking out an ethos around death, a worldview around surviving through mourning and release. My fieldwork served as a double home going, in both the funerary and restorative sense. While I was studying funerals, the Gullah celebration of a soul returned home, I was also reunited with folks who had not seen me since my mother's death; some folks burst into tears at the sight of my face. And even now in North Carolina, somehow there is this new recognition of the Gullah culture in the state's low country and I find myself a torchbearer for the northern tip of the culture. I was and am called.

Here I welcome the concept that it is acceptable and *useful* to honor the voice of the ethnographer, particularly, in this case, as one who carries a set of beliefs consistent with her consultant community. It is ethnographically useful to honor the passionately subjective native-voice. In accepting the voice of the believer documenting a community of believers, we gain intimate insight. There is a greater likelihood that the community may recognize themselves, and that the outside community may bear witness to cultural practices and attain understanding of these practices in a way that more closely resembles the consultant community.

The diagram below illustrates the *call* and journey of the ethnographer.



Those familiar with Robert Ferris Thompson’s African Diaspora concept of a Kongo cosmogram will recognize that I have designed this spiritual-personal mode of movement based on a theoretical concept rooted and dynamically present within the Gullah community. (I will touch on this model as it relates to Gullah *communitas* in Chapter three.) The movement in this form begins with the *call* that initiates the work, thus drawing the ethnographer towards *sacred connection*, which manifests through intentional discernment and prayer. The trajectory continues into the realm of documentation or the interchange of seeing and being seen, of hearing and being heard. This dialogic *communitas* is guided by Spirit and requires a generosity of work in the form of collaboration or Spirit-filled work-sharing. The joint-efforts produce increased communal and self-wisdom on several levels. The work edifies and transforms the ethnographer as she gains more insight into her life and the lives of those she documents. The consultant community gains more collective insight into its identity and personal



insight into identities and perhaps collective and personal values and needs. The cycle does not end with wisdom. Unless there is a spiritual break, the motion continues forward with a call to “home.” The ethnographer’s work returns to the community, responding again to the *call*, a potentially infinite relationship of sacred call-and-response.

In its wholeness, Spirit-centered ethnography acknowledges a creative force, is motivated by the calling of that force (God), recognizes the work and the relationships within that work as sacred and acknowledges the mutually-healing and transformative nature of the work. It invites in Spirit pervasively and particularly with prayer, and uses the tools of applied and scholarly folklore to move from a place of vulnerability and discernment to reciprocity and collaboration. This is a spiral-journey, often flowing in and out simultaneously—spiritually impacting the community while also transforming the ethnographer.

Often when conducting interviews, and particularly pre-interviews, I place myself spiritually. If my interviewee asks of my well-being, I reply that “I am blessed,” a recognizable sign that marks me as a part of the interviewee’s faith community. Within the realm of the Gullah-Christian experience, where personal testimony and daily interaction knit together, my declaration of personal blessing is a declaration of faith and an invitation to discuss the culture from a place of personal testimony. In one such pre-interview conversation, with funeral director Edith Galloway, my self-disclosure as a “woman of faith” led to a more intimate exchange. As we were discussing my own journey in mourning my mother’s death, Galloway felt comfortable enough to query me, “Do you have closure?,” to which I responded, “I have faith.” Moments later, she shared

her own funerary experiences from several perspectives: as a bereaved family member, as a witness bearer to her own culture, and as a mortuary professional. At one point she described placing candy in a deceased cousin's casket, sharing her encounters with family grief in the presence of mine (Galloway 2008). Self-disclosure and personal-spiritual testimony led to a deeper level of sharing—a more intimate documentary experience, in that I was not asking my interviewee to do anything I was not also willing to do.

While we stood together in a sacred space, I additionally invited the guiding force of God into the conversation within the realm of an interview. I recognized the shared space as sacred, Spirit-filled, and Spirit-led. There was an increased level of comfort, perhaps, in invoking the cultural practice of testifying, a communicative/performative mode that consecrates the sharing of story, that names the story sacred and glorified. Testifying is a foundational tenet of the Gullah praise house tradition.

My experience with Spirit-centered ethnography moves beyond the written page and into service. It would have been impossible for me to stop this work in its written form. While this thesis is an act of service and an offering to a community, via documentation, the *calling* requires (of me) continual advocacy in the form of community meetings to discuss preservation of Gullah culture; oral history training sessions with local folk, which empower individuals to name and claim their own stories; and advocacy that supports the policy aspect of heritage preservation.

While I offer resources to the Gullah community, the community has offered me a resource of healing through faith. Much of my mourning over the loss of my mother has occurred within the research, fieldwork, and writing of this work. I am changed by that

truth. In doing the work with personal-spiritual considerations well in-hand, I become more emotionally available to the work itself. The community becomes strengthened through the reaffirmation of cultural practice; through the continued argument that the culture is alive and dynamic; and through the increased proclivity for the larger community to value, even treasure the role of Gullah culture within the national story.

What are the blessings of this work? Continued advocacy for community rights, cultural preservation, economic development, a strengthening of community identity—the experiences for healing and transformation. In this way the Spirit-centered ethnography flows with Grace through academic, grassroots, and political realms. Grace manifest as blessing, through Spirit-centered ethnography can and does emerge even through the work of those who would deny the presence of Spirit. Service-oriented and reciprocal work can take place without the Spirit-centered ethnographer; however, it is within the guiding framework of Spirit-centered ethnography that “service-oriented” and “reciprocal” become claimed as “blessings.”

How does Spirit-centered ethnography manifest in the work of others? In *Vulnerable Observer* Behar shares the moments of a poignant response to some anthropologists critique of Rosaldo’s scholarly/emotional response to his wife’s death in the field. As she begins her talk, her words are charged with Spirit. She suggests, “I should try, as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh urges, to dwell in the present moment. As he says, we ought not ‘to sacrifice the journey for the sake of the arrival.’ So I remind myself that I am here, at the meeting of the American Ethnological Society, for a very good reason: to defend the kind of anthropology that matters to me” (161). Behar goes on to name this anthropology the kind to “break your heart” (177).

In speaking the spiritual, in this case, Buddhist, practice of presence of mind, Behar consecrates her words, the space and even her audience. She calls upon faith to *bless* the space and to embolden her efforts at drawing the personal and painful into the academy. Behar uses faith to call out for the role of heartbreaking, or what I name, heart-expanding, ethnography. This is a Spirit-centered moment in the academy.

Bennetta Jules-Rosette's work *African Apostles* represents a critical moment in existing Spirit-centered ethnography, in that Jules-Rosette documents her own conversion into the faith practice she had been studying. She joins the "indigenous Christian church," the Apostles Of John Maranke, while conducting research in southwestern Congo, thereby living out her belief that "It is precisely through participation that we are drawn to the link between categories and action, between symbolism and ritual" (1975:15). Jules-Rosette goes on to say, "My experience included becoming a member of the group that I studied. While it would be unrealistic to recommend such a procedure as the basis for all ethnographic study, my membership opened a perspective and body of information that I had never imagined before" (1975:22). This opening is one of the "blessings" of Spirit-centered ethnography. While, in the case of Jules-Rosette, the opening is based on an extremely intimate act of joining the consultant community, such opening is also possible as the ethnographer makes herself vulnerable, not only through initiation or conversion, but also through more traditional modes of ethnographic disclosure.

Along with her increased intimacy with her consultant community, Jules-Rosette also notes that as both convert and scholar she is called upon to speak on behalf of the Apostles of John Maranke. This communal call for her voice marks a distinct experience that she juxtaposes with other, more traditional ethnographic research. Jules-Rosette

asserts, “To resolve the conflict between their formal models of indigenous beliefs and lived experience, researchers often settle for loyalty. The models are presented as detached from experience and, therefore, can be seen from a relativistic perspective. Through loyalty, researchers appear to provide translations of members’ beliefs and categories. . . . The turning point of my research, the critical conversion experience, required the step from loyalty to assertion” (1975:256). Her perceived requirement to shift from “detached” “loyalty” to “assertion” represents the transformative and community-focused nature of Spirit-centered ethnography.

There are other examples of Spirit-centered ethnography that come from within the Gullah/Geechee culture. In February of 2008, at an academic conference in Savannah, former Director of St. Helena Island’s Penn Center, Emory Campbell, approached the podium after what he called a “wonderful and generous introduction.” He added, “I feel like this is a funeral!” There was laughter, then the atmosphere of the room changed when Campbell, in a sober tone and after marked silence said, “This is personal for me.”

In that tone Campbell went on to describe the patterns and rhythms of Gullah life with the mourners’ bench, the seeking place, and the practice of praying three times a day. He described how dreams birth one into a spiritual world that gives clarity to the material world. He described the patterns of seasons and days, emphasizing that “for us, the earth was real,” perhaps acknowledging the profound connection to the earth as a source of provision and ultimately rest. In reference to burial practice, Campbell shared, “Loved ones’ most cherished items are placed on the graves.” Again, Campbell claims the space in the room, consecrating it as Behar when he explained “this [his work] is

personal.” The tone of reverence and connection, the depiction of a world stitched with dreams from the “spiritual world” and graves “holding” “loved ones,” evokes the tone of Spirit-centered ethnography.

Marquetta Goodwine or Queen Quet, like Campbell, is an internationally-recognized Gullah/Geechee activist, who seamlessly inserts sea island spirituality and aphorism in her demands for acknowledging, preserving and celebrating Gullah culture and land. In a powerful call to action, presented to fellow islanders, in a local newsletter, Goodwine offered:

As we celebrate history, many times we forget to pay homage to those ancestors that created history and ourstory[sic]. Many times we forget to celebrate our people, especially our elders while they are living. Thus, when they have passed into the next realm we take the time to sing, shout, give them flowers, and say kind words. Not long after they enter the ashes and dust, we go on with the day-to-day only now remembering the funeral service and who was there and what was said. Many times instead of a Mende or other traditional West African burial song, we sing, “Take My Hand Precious Lord” at home going services. The souls emit sorrow at [the] bellow of the singer. Yet, there is encouragement that our islands need now in the words:

“Take my hand, precious Lord  
Lead me on, help me stand.  
I am tired.  
I am weak.  
I am worn.  
Through the storm,  
through the night, lead me on to the light.  
Take my hand, precious Lord. Lead me on.”

We need to be led on as one as we celebrate our history. We also need to be led on to enter the arena to battle for our ancestors and their resting places along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Many of our graveyards, cemeteries, and burial grounds have been locked off to us. Others, such as one in Georgetown County, have been flooded with water in order to make the area lakefront for development lots to be sold. The most extensive desecration other than these things has been the building on top of the gravesites and the removal of headstones as we witnessed with the Daufauskie Island case. Much of the richness and full knowledge of the history of a community is found within the burial areas of that community. Each day, our ancestors wok fo dey clen

til dus'. Their blood, sweat, and tears are throughout our sea islands sand. Their weary bones took rest within the soil as some souls stayed here to protect and guide us and others went back to the Motherland to re-commune. How can we rest at night when our ancestors and sacred ground is disrupted during the night by trucks, bulldozers, and people of no conscience? Sacred grounds should be and remain sacred! South Carolina state law declares desecration of burial areas as a felony offense. However, what good is a law if there is no one willing to investigate and prosecute? It is up to all those concerned about the sacred ground in which our Gullah/Geechee and indigenous/Native ancestors lie to stand together. WE must document our burial areas. We must make it known that we want the gates open for us to enter as do any other peoples of the world. We must stand together to insure that our ancestors and our sacred areas are **ACKNOWLEDGED, PROTECTED, and RESPECTED!** We need to call on the Lord to take one hand and have one of our neighbors or family members take the other as we walk in solidarity toward change! (1999).

Goodwine's entry, in a newsletter directed to the citizens of St. Helena Island, clearly uses faith to identify, document and inspire preservation and activism among her fellow Gullah citizens. She speaks of the "need to be led" on, as in the call notion of Spirit-centered ethnography. She speaks of calling "on the Lord" in community, moving the community to action and coalition—indeed, to connection. This Spirit-centered approach honors the ancestry, while looking to God for support and guidance.

The cases of Behar, Jones-Jackson, Goodwine and Campbell point to the various uses and motives for Spirit-centered ethnography. In Behar's case there is a clear sense of birthing new scholarly concepts, while honoring relevancy of personal/poignant ethnography. Jones-Jackson offers an example of the ethnographer as swept-up into the arms of the community she documents, joining into a temporal community out of personal spiritual responsiveness. Campbell invites the listener into his world, using Spirit-centered ethnography as a bridge towards greater understanding of Gullah

worldviews. Goodwine uses the ideology as a tool towards motivating communal preservation and Spirit-centered grass-roots organizing.

Is there a place for soul in ethnography? Is there a place for Spirit and faith? It seems there has been for some time. Knowledge through the heart and Spirit are as valuable in scholarship as cognitive/critical knowledge. Spirit-centered ethnography is the scholarly acknowledgement of the transcendent experience of Spirit as it simultaneously flows through the vessels of individuals and communities. Spirit-centered ethnography touches, documents, acknowledges and respects the cultural-spiritual dynamic of both the ethnographer and the consultant community. While some of this thesis focuses on the issue of *self*, my work as a public folklorist/historian is marked with an intention towards service with reverence and deference for the sacred nature of supporting the preservation of Gullah/Geechee culture. I clear out and display the inner-workings (Anzaldua) of the ethnographer's vessel and journey in order to move from vulnerability (Behar) to service. The process of inviting spirituality into the ethnographic process can provide for an interconnected, mutually beneficial, holistically transformative, and sacred work. This sacred work, this Spirit-centered ethnography makes room for the personal and requests the revelation of things hidden.



### III. The Hidden Journey—What Calls me *Home* to a *Home Going*?

Moving to Hilton Head Island at the age of seven from less than two hundred miles away was a monumental shift. It was intrastate, yes, but the coast was culturally a universe away from the capitol city of Columbia. I felt culturally disconnected from the life of coastal dwellers, even though my family has been self-avowed “beach people” from way back. I have been known to say that salt water flows in my veins, I recall my first taste of the Atlantic Ocean at two years old. I recall stories of how a six year-old boy and girl first experienced the spark that manifested into my extended family, on a sandy Atlantic Beach road. That same boy, as a Grandfather, would wake the whole house and sometimes neighbors too, and start a beach trip at 4 a.m., on a whim. We would all pile into the wood-grained station wagon with pillows. We learned how to shake sand from towels to avoid each other’s eyes, we learned to eat crab and deep fried sea creatures, and we learned how to ride waves. We were beach people, but we were not from the beach. We would visit. We were outsiders who would come to visit the sea and return to the center of the state where we bought fish for Friday’s dinner at markets rather than catch it ourselves. So when my mother took a job as an administrator at a school on Hilton Head Island, the beach people (my mother and I) became the outsiders who were now beach residents. We spoke differently, as we were from the “City South.” We were not Gullah/Geechee.

Over time our otherness shifted in some ways. I began bonding with the land and the people, and the land and the people of the low country are intrinsically tied. I learned to move in that land and was drawn to her mysteries, most of all. The prehistoric horseshoe crab, I would pull by the tail to make designs in the sand with her feet. The dead jellyfish, who hadn't made it back out to sea, would be subject to my dissecting sticks. The alligator that lived in our neighborhood lagoon, I would feed marshmallows. My mother screamed when seeing a black snake on our back porch; I was intrigued by its flesh, its rhythm. I ate blackberries picked from wild bushes, and ran from trees that seemed to sprout worms in the spring, and dug fossilized crustaceans from white-sand earth. I practically lived with a Gullah family that my mother and I befriended, and remember being told to watch out for biting snakes in blackberry bushes and hearing how somebody had put a "root" (a spell) on somebody. At that age, I don't remember anyone calling anyone Gullah or being particularly concerned about the difference in the way I spoke when at Miss Helen's house on Hilton Head Island and the way I spoke at my grandmother's house in Columbia, on the mainland.

The realization that I lived within a cultural heart of the Gullah/Geechee nation began to become clear during a trip planned by Emory Campbell, former director of St. Helena Island's Penn Center and long-time family friend. As the folk say, he knew me from before I was born. Again and again, I have the memory of overcast and humid skies and sitting in the back of a motorboat with a red lifejacket pressing high under my chin. The motor was burring loud through the intracoastal waterways. The salt water sprayed in my face and I had no clear idea what we were doing. I thought we were supposed to be having fun, but everyone looked somber. Grave faces, gray skies, salt water, opaque

journey. And then we arrived. We had landed on Daufuskie Island. Dark brown male hands helped my dark brown hands ashore and people gathered for the occasion. Emory Campbell delivered the words. I don't remember many of them . . . something about land loss and culture and big hotels and big neighborhoods like the ones on Hilton Head. More stretches of giant houses in neighborhoods called plantations, where black people worked as maids and cooks on land they once owned, but couldn't afford to own anymore. Campbell also spoke of the people across the water, brought here against their will to toil by force and survive by choice. People looked sad and angry and determined.

We ate stew and red punch from styrofoam. And it was over food—when people had, for a moment stopped, talking about land loss, and had commenced to laughing over food, that I stepped away from the group a ways. I walked a bit down a sandy dirt road, flanked by live oaks and Spanish moss. This was an island and this road ended at the water. Here the water was gray with a base of fertile earth that made it impossible to see to the bottom. I looked out and thought about who was looking across the sea at me. I thought about all the souls who had touched Daufuskie. I thought about how Emory told me to remember how important this place is—that it is sacred. Before then I had associated the word sacred with church buildings. In my childhood belly, I knew at once that my days in blackberry bushes and sitting between Gullah knees to have my hair combed, and hearing about a “root” put on somebody—that these things, that island, those trees, that water was sacred. I was determined to remember. And I did.

A year later my mother had been promoted to principal of an elementary school and was dating a local man, a Gullah man who hauled pinestraw and roasted oysters. Something about that, something about my mama being an “outsider,” didn't sit well

with somebody and rumor started spreading that someone had put a “root” on Mama. Now we were Episcopal and “knew better.” But several months after the humid low country air began buzzing with word of dark doings towards my mama, my mother had died.

It is important for me to be clear. Mama died by her own hands, and the Gullah-loved outsider child went back to the city of Columbia, where she “belonged.” It is this place of loss that gave birth to my healing journey that led me to ethnography, that led me to God, that led me to join the two in Spirit-centered ethnography.

Eleven years later, I found myself entrenched in the beginning of an ethnographic investigation of Gullah culture as it relates to death and mourning. My explanation for this choice of study was that I saw powerful African retentions emerging out of the burial and funerary traditions in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia. With the notion that folkloric traditions are dynamic (Toelken 1996:39), I planned to identify emergent sites of grief in the community that I believed had replaced the burial societies with funeral homes. (I came to learn later that groups like Knights of the Wisemen, Young Men’s Social Club, and the Ladies Union still exist to offer aid and support upon a member’s death.) I began my research at the Penn Center. Penn Center was originally the first school for freed blacks on St. Helena Island, and now exists as a cultural repository and meeting place as well as a museum. The Center has as its aim the promotion and preservation of Gullah traditions.

The Center staff gave me directions to the residence of Jack Johnson, an 86 year-old resident of St. Helena Island with whom I had been in contact over

the phone, via Emory Campbell. According to Campbell, Johnson used to speak words of honor on behalf of a deceased member of a burial society. I sat down to interview Mr. Johnson and after some general conversation, I asked him to tell me about burial societies. He answered me with a blank and seemingly confused stare and proceeded to tell me that there had never been burial societies on the island, that the institution was a “New Orleans thing.” I was devastated. His response destroyed my entire premise for going to St. Helena. In order to salvage the interview, I began asking general questions about death, the afterlife, and innovations in funeral ceremonies. This conversation was more than fruitful, but the true ethnographer’s gift arrived when I returned to Mr. Johnson’s home for the second time. I had found documents at Penn Center that actually named two local burial societies: The Knights of the Wisemen and The Young Men’s Social Club. When I asked Mr. Johnson if he knew of these organizations, he informed me that he had been the president of both and that while Knights of the Wisemen had been defunct for several years, The Young Men’s Social Club was entirely active. Again, I was floored. Because I had used the term *burial society*, a term determined by scholars, Johnson denied the existence of a living tradition. This living tradition of aid societies, with substantial funerary traditions, had gone unacknowledged by historians and even local community members. This interview experience enlightened *my* research and served as an epiphany moment about the nature of ethnography. By correcting my misinformation, my primary consultant drew me towards a community-defined significance around mourning practices; that is beliefs surrounding death, the performance of grief during funerals, and funeral homes, all of which act as

pervasive and integral aspects of St. Helena's Gullah community.

Johnson corrected the historical text by explaining that what he called "aid societies," such as The Young Men's Social Club (YMSC), play an active role in the death rituals of its members; however, this is not the primary responsibility of the organization. The concept of burial society is only one small aspect of the YMSC. My dialogue with Johnson highlighted the power of oral history and this discipline's ability to emerge through and sometimes subsume the hegemonic discourse of published histories. Additionally, Johnson's words drew me away from concentrating on one group's particular role in death ritual and towards an overarching approach to the community's performed beliefs, which later developed into my central claim: St. Helena Island residents imbue beliefs and institutions surrounding death with significance placed on *life!* Life lived on the earth and *on the other side*.

It was not until I drove down to St. Helena, over a decade after my mother's violent and some would say mysterious death, that it occurred to me that my work—while deeply rooted in African Diaspora studies, and compelling in its ability to convey Gullah identity—had its birth in my own personal pain. I discovered on the road to St. Helena Island that I was working out my mourning through my work: an astonishingly obvious and stunning epiphany that shadowed my work with palpable weight.

The next question that emerged from my painful but telling awareness was, "Now what?" What is an ethnographer to do when she recognizes the intensely personal and painful nature of her work while in the field? What is she to do when she realizes that while her intent is to serve her consultant community, she has actually been looking to them to help her and heal her?

I look to other scholars for examples of any such dilemma. I look particularly to Renato Rosaldo and Ruth Behar as they negotiate the work of mourning in vulnerable observation. Rosaldo writes in “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage” (1993), “I want to talk about how to talk about the cultural force of emotions. The emotional force of death, for example . . . . Rather than speaking of death in general, one must consider the subject’s position within a field of social relations in order to grasp one’s emotional experience” (Rosaldo 1993:2). Rosaldo invites the ethnographer to answer the question: what happens when the grave one studies, the body of the deceased, the land attached to the loss and mourning have a personal connection to the one in the act of study? Rosaldo recognizes that he is unable to comprehend the concept of violent rage emerging out of grief until “after being repositioned through a devastating loss of [his] own” (1993:3).

Reflecting on the earlier conceptual work of Alfred Schulz and Clifford Geertz, Rosaldo identifies the ethnographic journey as a series of positioning and repositioning. He writes, “In routine interpretive procedure, according to the methodology of hermeneutics, one can say that ethnographers reposition themselves as they go about understanding other cultures” (1993:7). (I would argue that the repositioning is not only professional, but also personal, spiritual, and transformative.) Rosaldo cautions his colleagues to acknowledge that preparation and positioning can give the ethnographer “false comfort.” He writes, “Even when knowledgeable, sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, good ethnographers still have their limits, and their analyses always are incomplete” (1993:8). Rosaldo goes on to argue that it was his personal experience with traumatic loss that ultimately gave him insight into Ilongot mourning practices. I share Rosaldo’s analysis, recognizing that the

ethnographer's personal knowledge can often carry the work where positioning and preparation can not. This is not an argument against the ethnographic dance of re-positioning and research; I actually claim these as Spirit-centered acts of discernment, and wisdom-gathering—a meditative *grounding* for the field. Rather, I stand with Rosaldo, Behar, and others in acknowledging both the ethnographic relevance and usefulness of personal/spiritual self-awareness.

Ruth Behar aptly steps into the conceptual paths blazed by Rosaldo. She joins in the sacred act of revealing human emotion in the academy. She joins him in the nerve-wracking work of sharing one's loss and mourning in scholarly setting. Behar writes, "As a student I was taught to maintain the same strict boundary Malinowski had kept between his ethnography and his autobiography. But I'd reached a point where these forms of knowing were no longer so easily separated" (Behar 1997:19). Behar goes on to offer that her impetus for pushing into the realm of vulnerable observation is entirely linked, like my own experience, to the death of a loved-one. Behar writes, "what first propelled me to write ethnography in a vulnerable way was the intense regret and self-loathing I felt when my maternal grandfather died of cancer in Miami Beach while I was doing a summer's fieldwork in Spain" (Behar 1997:21).

Behar writes, "Anthropology is constantly about displacements; the summer I displaced my fears about my grandfather's death onto my interlocutors in Santa Maria, asking them the questions that I couldn't ask my own family . . ." (Behar 1997: 43). Some scholars may be surprised at the number of similarities that exist between the mourning practices on a Gullah island and the mourning practices in a small Spanish village. Perhaps the rural lifestyle, the connection to the land, the connection to ancestry



has some significant impact in forging funerary traditions that are described as emotive, where food is central, where prophecies of death are common. I choose not to focus on the similarities between my consultant community and that of Behar's, or on the more intimate negotiations of my grief around the loss of my mother as they compare to Behar's journey through grieving her grandfather. Rather, I focus on the motives of her work and the ultimate impact of honoring the ethnographer's personal voice as an offering to the work.

I am fascinated by how Behar's exploration of personal grief also intersected with her scholarship. "The notion that memory—which is a form of knowing—always takes place elsewhere, that it is always 'other,' is at the heart of the reflexivity that defines anthropological knowledge. My grandfather's dying and death while I was in Spain brought home to me—because I was away from home—the profound emotional power of the situation of the peasant elderly in Santa Maria. I could share . . . the force of emotion that death and mortality evoked for them" (Behar 1997:82). I share with Behar the notion that sharing personal grief with a consultant community can be a natural reaction to unreconciled mourning, but also stands to connect the ethnographer compassionately to those with whom she works.

In response to critiques of Rosaldo's work "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" as oversentimental and nostalgic, Behar fiercely and tenderly stands up for the value of the work. She calls it "a classical work of vulnerable writing carried out in the service of attaining the most profound ethnographic empathy possible." She continues to describe Rosaldo's loss and journey of mourning, clearly bringing her own vulnerability to that of Rosaldo's:

I think of Michelle Rosaldo falling from the cliff to her death . . . they came to tell Renato. And it was Renato who had to go find her at the bottom of the cliff. And yell at her for dying and not saying good-bye. And take her broken body to her Jewish grave in New York. And leave the Philippines. Leave and not return. And mourn. Mourn. By himself. For a long time. And then mourn with the Ilongots. In memory. With hindsight. And then mourn with other anthropologists, by writing an essay, unheard of until then in the history of anthropology... (1997:167-168).

Behar names vulnerable ethnography, “a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life” and practically sings out, “anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore” (1997:177).

The experience of grief as an ethnographer is one thing. To write it, to read it, to publish and claim it as relevant is quite another. Behar shares her apprehension on the decision to include her own feelings of loss in her work. “Hesitantly, I put down my first impressions in an early version of ‘Death and Memory’ and presented it at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The audience was moved, but I emerged shaken and uncertain. What had I done? By turning some of the spotlight on myself had I drawn attention away from ‘bigger’ issues in the study of the anthropology of death? What was I seeking from my colleagues? Empathy? Pity? Louder applause?” (1997:22).

Similarly I ask myself, what am I seeking from the fields of folklore, ethnography, documentary studies? I am seeking to encourage my colleagues to continue to hone the messy but powerful tools of vulnerable observation and auto-ethnography. I am declaring that within the realm of vulnerability we have made room for one’s ethnic and gendered identity, one’s sexuality and socio-economic status in ways that carve out

spaces for transparency and human connectivity within the ethnographic field. As these personal identifiers impact the work, so too does faith practice. I encourage my colleagues to include spirit-centered ethnography within the family tree of vulnerable observation. Helpful also in the analysis of my hidden emotional-spiritual journey is my initiation into oral history through my own familial tree. For me, it was a matriarch (Grandma Anne) who initiated me into the call-and-response tradition of African American storytelling, at her kitchen table.

I wanted to delve into the hidden meanings of the stories I had heard from my grandmother, my mother's mother—the woman at whose kitchen table I learned, intrinsically and intimately, the power of oral history. This same woman helped establish our family's relationship to Gullah cultural preservationists Vertamae Grosvenor and Emory Campbell. This same woman instilled in her daughters the honor of the teaching profession, a profession that took my mother to the low country.

I wanted to record my grandmother's versions of our family lore and unravel its purpose in our family, while weaving a new hammock or handbag to carry the painfully seductive story of my own mother's death. My internal journey has thus been a practice of unraveling and weaving and weaving and unraveling. I wanted to go beyond what I will call the protective tapestry of legend or lore, to reach a "truth"—a "truth" about human complexity. Add to this life review, historical relevance, and an innate desire to resolve or to solve the riddle of Spirit/self through work and there is a vast and pulsing folkloric tangle. Such a tangle requires tools from several fields, including literature, folklore, anthropology, genealogy, history and documentary. I find an interdisciplinary, interweaving of concepts appropriate for a protective tapestry. The use of literature is

particularly appropriate, because my grandmother's stories are a form of folk literature. She created a canon for our familial folk group.

Barre Toelken writes in *Dynamics of Folklore*, "family folklore may be said to the first and basic dynamic traditional system encountered by most people the world over . . . In our family setting, . . . we learn our language, dialect, and elemental worldview all from hearing and observing others' speech and action" (1996:101). Toelken places family lore as a foundation of identity and belief. My grandmother's tales became both foundation and curtain for my family. Her tapestry has many weavers, including me. It consists of a treasury of tales, all of which are based on actual members of the family. Anne or Grandma would tell her stories in the kitchen or her peach den, in her Columbia, S.C., home. Her inner sanctum plays a major role in her life and lore. There are photographs and paintings of family legends gazing from the walls. Sometimes there is a pot of collard greens or sweet potatoes on the stove—traditional family foods. Outside is a porch swing that her husband assembled. Outside are azalea.

What is this blanket of lore? The oldest relative to exist in these grouping of tales is the Old Indian, a woman whose name has left the familial memory. In my first interview, Grandma Anne relayed a much-told tale about this indigenous woman. She states, "she [the Old Indian] had eight husbands, and funny, none of them survived. They said she poisoned them all. And when Mama and her sister would go to visit their grandma, she would only let them eat food from a basket that she had suspended from the ceiling. Now, why? We don't know . . . well that's one of the family stories," she finishes. Anne later adds that the matriarch was driven to Oklahoma with her tribe, on the Trail of Tears. The Indian, instead of settling on a reservation, returned to North

Carolina, by foot. In the second interview, Anne describes an incident that involved her, then teenage, husband-to-be, throwing a white man off a train for insulting his mother, Ann Eliza. Such action is duly matched with Anne's elaborate descriptions of family members, weddings, accomplishments and homesteads. For example, she recalls a glorious wedding that was described to her by her mother. She states; "My grandfather provided the biggest wedding the town [Goldsboro, North Carolina] had seen. They had horse-drawn carriages and I think my mother said they were all dove-gray leather. They had groomsmen. I remember being told that the whole house was decorated and the church. It was the biggest party they'd ever seen in that town, black or white." Anne adds, as an afterthought, that the happy couple died soon thereafter, from complications with tuberculosis.

Anne's tale-tapestry is richly embroidered and includes many more than the mentioned examples. In the face of these examples, this researcher yearns to gaze behind the tapestry and unveil the taboo mysteries inspired by an Indian woman widowed eight times, a young and lovely couple felled by tuberculosis, and my own deceased mother, who is intrinsically tied to Gullah land.

My journey into this work carries me from my mother's death, to my grandmother's kitchen table, to connection to the land, to my recognition of my role as insider/outsider, and to an overarching question of siphoning subjectivity into service, back—called back into the mothering *home* of faith. Vulnerability, as Behar writes, is a bridge that bonds one to the work not in an obligatory way, but in a way that recognizes the "truth," that the fieldwork has transformed the fieldworker, the research has rebirthed the researcher, thus intrinsically and eternally bonding the ethnographer to her consultant

community/communities. This bond can be denied, but if recognized, in all of its sacred complexity, the bond can become the foundation for continual work that is mutually empowering.

At the formal, academic beginning of this work, I wrote in a grant proposal that, “This project has both personal and communal significance. As I have already begun to research the Gullah or black sea island culture, this project will serve as a continuum of academic investigation, leading to the completion of my Master’s thesis.” What I don’t disclose is just how personal this work is. What I don’t disclose is that I associate the tragic and violent loss of my mother with this work. What I don’t disclose is that I seek healing at the heart of this work. I don’t disclose these intimacies because I am afraid that the academy will shun my motives and desecrate the experiences that inspire my work. My mind-set at the time can best be described in a dialogic, Afrodiasporic litany included in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*

*“Who are you?” I asked her.*

*“I am a child of that place,” she answered.*

*“I came from that long trail of blood,”*

*“Where are you going?”*

*“I am walking into the dawn.”*

*“Where does your mother come from?”*

*“Thunderbolts, lightning, and all things that soar,”*

*“Who are you?”*

*“I am the flame and the spark by which my mother lives.”*

*“Speak to me.”*

*“You hear my mother who speaks through me.*

*She is the shadow that follows my shadow.*

*The flame at the tip of my candle.*

*The ripple in the stream where I wash my face.*

*Yes I will eat my tongue  
if I ever whisper the name of that place  
across the river that took her from me” (1995:44-45).*

Here is the silence of pain and mourning incomplete. This is where I stood in the work. My mother’s death lingered in the spaces around “personal” and “significance.” She was there in voice and “flame” and ripples—the passion and momentum of my work, but in a way that could only be truly acknowledged in my inner world. The disconnect was painful. In revealing the hidden journey I peel back the silence, release the tongue, name the death and claim the life that resonates out of the work. If a dialogic litany could now reflect the mind-set of the hidden ethnographer revealed, of the Spirit-centered ethnographer, it would ask: *Who are you?* And respond, *I have become what we need me to be, in faith.* In this litany the mother is not dead, but lives out in her progeny, on the page, in the stories, in the Spirit.

#### IV. Gullah/Geechee Faith in the Context of Gullah/Geechee Funerals

A Gullah community gathered in funerary practice is at once temporary—organized for the mourning of one soul—as well as ancient/eternal—tied generationally to a people with roots in West and Central Africa, and tied spiritually to a Christian and vernacular/indigenous faith traditions that are timeless. Like many Gullah scholars, I find it essential to acknowledge West and Central African corollaries to Gullah cultural practice.

In his linguistic exploration in “Gullah and the Caribbean Connection,” Frederic Cassidy queries, “From which parts of Africa did the [Gullah] slaves come?” (Cassidy 1994:19). He turns to Philip D. Curtin’s and Kenneth Davies’ earlier research to discover that “the area from Senegambia south and eastward through the Windward Coast accounted for almost 40 percent of imported slaves; the area from the Gold Coast (present Ghana) eastward through Whydah [present Benin] accounted for 36.6 percent, but slaves from Angola only 12 percent of the total.” These numbers were taken from records during “the time the Charleston colony was beginning to grow” (Cassidy 1994: 20). Similarly, linguists Keith Baird and Mary Twining also seek information connecting Gullah to Africa. They find in Lorenzo Turner’s 1949 work, evidence that Gullah ancestry ranged from as far north as Senegal and as far south as Angola (1994:25).

As modern-day Burkina Faso falls within the geographic space specified by Curtin, Davies and Turner, I turn to anthropologist Malidoma Somé’s *Ritual, Power,*



*Healing and Community* for exploration of one Gullah-antecedent culture and its traditional mourning practices. Somé writes of personal experiences with burial traditions in Burkina Faso, beginning with the compelling memory of awaking to hear screaming in the night and believing that spirits were “singing in the village.” His grandfather informed the child Somé of the village’s cultural response to death as he corrected, “those are not spirits, Brother Malidoma. Those are the women of the village . . . They are announcing to the rest of the village to prepare themselves for the grief ritual” (1997:93).

Somé declares of his people, “for the Dagara, grief is seen as food for the psyche, just as the body needs food, the psyche needs grief to maintain its own healthy balance. As a result, one of the most sophisticated rituals designed by the Dagara for its own people is the funeral ritual, which involves everybody both living and dead . . . . Death is not seen as an ending but rather as an opportunity for a person to take off these ragged clothes we call a body, and walk naked,” (1997:97).

The whole village attends the funeral in order to help the family and relatives express their grief. The villagers also take this opportunity to bring their own unfinished business with their own dead relatives. In the largest sense, the ritual is not only about this one dead person, but is rather a ritualized process that encompasses all the dead of the village up until then (1997:103).

Somé describes a precise order to the grieving process among the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, which holds striking resemblance to Gullah/Geechee mourning traditions. At the onset of death, Dagara men are mostly dispassionate; it is given to the women of the community to respond with the initial vocal grief, while the men prepare

ritual space. Once all are gathered, communal grieving is musical and rhythmic and involves much singing about the cycles of life and death. At the communal gathering, the Dagara men free the vocality of their grief and join in with tonal responses. Certain *cantors* or song leaders offer words of wisdom to this rhythm of mourning. Next is the “re-enactment” of the life of the deceased by those who were “initiated” into adulthood via baptism at the same time as the deceased. This re-enactment appears in the dramatic reading of the obituary, in the sharing of personal stories about the deceased, and in the act *speaking a good word*.

The act of speaking goodness over the deceased is usually carried out by a Gullah elder, ideally a peer to the deceased, one who may have been baptized into Christianity around the same time through the tradition of seeking God and salvation in the wilderness, in dreams, and on the mourner’s bench. Additionally these re-enactors are the griot-like storytellers, witness-bearers, and genealogists of the community-village—often self-selected men and women who are skilled in the use of words. After the *speaking a good word*, the mourners are allowed one last opportunity to view the body.

In Dagara tradition, “the final parting ceremony takes place around the body of the dead, which is sat up and dressed in ceremonial attire” (Somé 1997:113). Among the Dagara, the mourners do not follow the gravediggers to the burial site. The “final glimpse” tradition is extremely strong within the Gullah community. I have witnessed teenagers become despondent at the notion that they would *not* be able to participate in this intergenerational tradition wherein the living release the body of the dead.

One primary difference between Dagara mourning rituals and those of the Gullah/Geechee comes in the practice of family members departing before burial takes

place. I suspect that graveside mourning entered Gullah/Geechee practice as a necessary response to the limitations of bondage, when enslaved Gullah/Geechee mourners were granted very little time to mourn and bury their dead. Slave owners, overseers, and drivers required that this grief work be done at night after agricultural tasks were complete. According to WPA interviewee, Elijah Green of Charleston, “slaves was always buried in the night, as no one could stop to do it in the day. Old boards was used to make the coffin that was blackened with shoe polish” (in Hurmence 1989: 67). Sam Polite, who grew up on Fripp Plantation on St. Helena Island, offers in his WPA interview, that when a slave died, “you can’t knock off work to bury ‘um. You have to wait till nighttime to put ‘um in the grave. You bury ‘um by the light of torch (in Hurmence 1989:80). Mourners seeking solace would have turned to the grave as the ritual site of grief as there was no longer access to a village shrine and not yet access to praise houses, funeral homes, and churches. Within the experience of slavery, Gullah/Geechee mourners included the burial moment through graveside mourning as a necessary extension of the grief tradition, whereas some of their West and Central African ancestors would have reserved graveside ritual for spiritually distinct community members (perhaps the precursors to contemporary undertakers). For the enslaved Gullah, the graveside may have been the only allowed site for shared, ritual grief.

In Dagara burial, the dead are buried “facing east (west for men), next to items that are important for their journey. These items could be a medicine pouch, a divination item, or the whole medicine bag if it is determined that this is what the spirit of the dead wants in its journey to the realm of the ancestors” (Somé 1997:113-114). Low country funeral director Edith Galloway shares a similar practice among Gullah. “We bury them

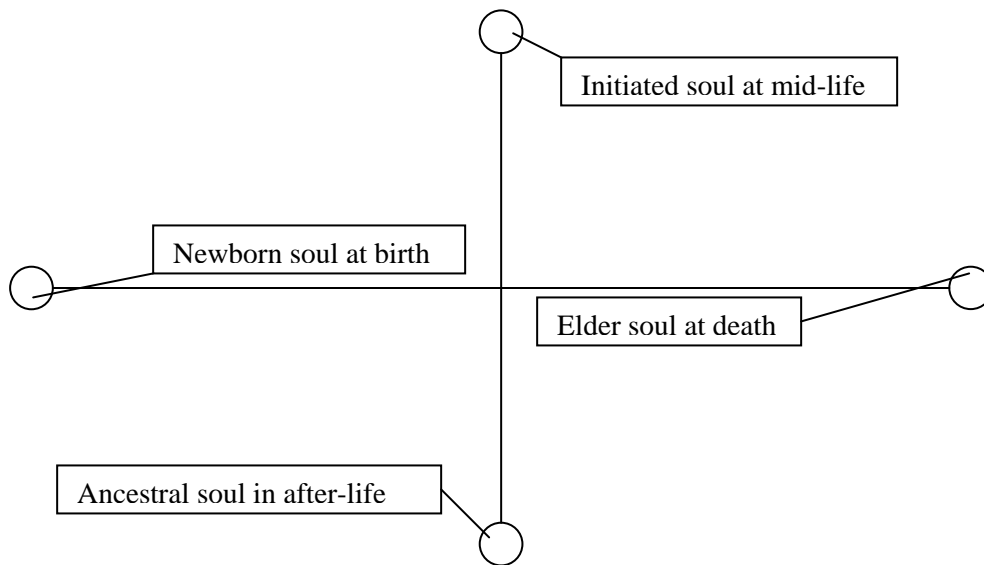
facing east, so that when you rise you will be facing Christ. Christ will come back in the east. The sun rises in the east.” And she has heard some few older people say that they will be going home to the motherland (Galloway 2008). (Most Southern, white burials face east as well. As to whether this practice has a direct relationship to African Diaspora burial traditions, is unclear.)

Somé writes that “children are allowed to take a look at the grave before they bring the dead into it because the children are the symbol of the possibility that the dead will be remembered” (1997:115). Galloway describes a similar Gullah practice.

“Sometimes we pass babies over the grave. It takes two people, one in front and one behind. You need to pass the child so the child will not be afraid.” Creel and Jones-Jackson document this practice as well (Galloway 2008).

The work of the elder is not complete upon death in either Dagara or Gullah worldview. Somé writes, “An elder, being a person who has completed his mission here on earth, is expected to spend a lot of time as a counselor helping the living from the other side. For a while he or she will appear in leaders’ dreams in his or her earthly body. But after a long time has passed, the leader, as an ancestor, chooses to appear in visions as an animal or tree” (1997:115). Again, Galloway’s cultural understanding corresponds with the Dagara ethos. She shares, “sometimes you’ll say ‘She had a dream, she must have felt her death,’ because she’s putting her life in order and saying her final goodbyes. People take dreams very seriously. Sometimes they will speak of their dreams in church. A deacon will predict that a lot of people were going to die soon or that there would be trouble coming. Dreams are still very much a part of the culture. When one is very ill, a lot of times they will be speaking to the dead. ‘There’s Mama,’ they’ll say. They start

seeing their loved-ones who have gone on. When you start seeing the dead or talking to the dead, that means they are going to be joining them soon” (Galloway 2008). This interactivity between the dead also resonates with Robert Ferris Thompson’s examination of Kongo ideology. The following diagram gives visual meaning to the spiritual journey of a Kongo soul.



The Kongo soul moves through life in a pattern identified as “the four moments of the sun” (Thompson 1984:101). The soul dawns with birth, and after initiation emerges into the noon-day of the soul. With the “afternoon” years come the honor of elderhood. Sunset is death, and midnight or night is the powerfully charged realm of the ancestors. Thompson and others would argue that this form acts as the basis for the Gullah concept of the life of the soul.

This concept of highlighting the African antecedents of Gullah tradition flows into the analysis of funerary material culture. In *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1990), John Michael Vlach points to cultural connections in Zaire and

Ghana, when he posits, “Afro-American tradition is seen as the world of the spirits, often the spirits of ancestors. Graveyard goods are a statement of homage; their function is to keep a tempestuous soul at rest . . . funeral offerings are sanctified testimonies; material messages of the living intended to placate the potential fury [unrest] of the deceased” (1990:139). Vlach offers WPA oral testimony about such funerary appeasement: “Sarah Washington of Eulonia, Georgia, commented: ‘I don’t guess you be bother much by the spirits if you give ‘em a good funeral and put the things what belong to ‘em on top of the grave’: and her husband Ben seconded her opinion: ‘You puts all the things what they use last like the dishes and the medicine bottle. The spirits need these same as the man. Then the spirit rest and don’t wander about’” (1990:136). In contemporary Gullah/Geechee mourning tradition, there is still a great emphasis on paying homage to the spirit of the deceased, however; there also exists now and perhaps always has, the notion that funerary offering also soothes and strengthens the spirit of the living mourners.

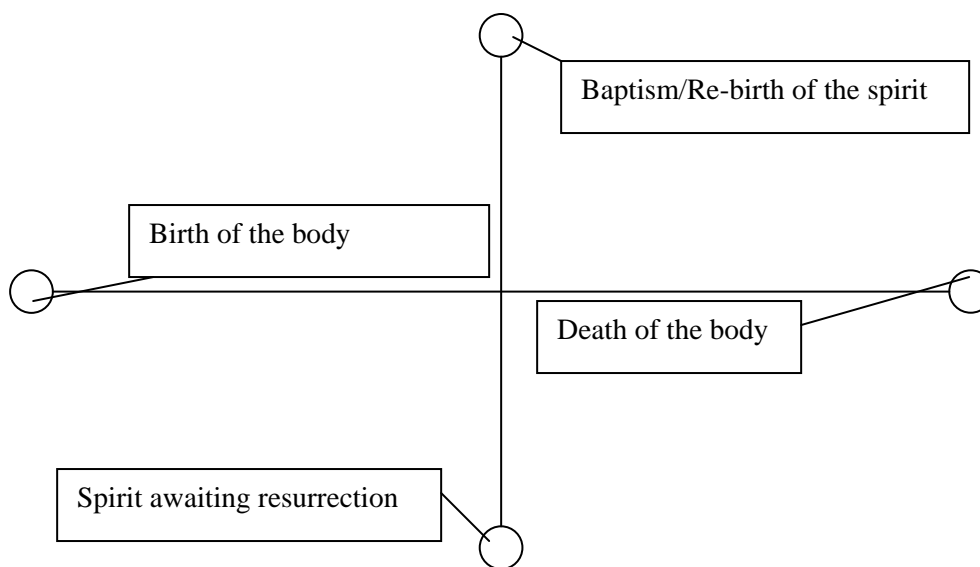
Vlach does acknowledge that burial traditions are dynamic. “New behaviors consistent with the tradition but reflecting new orientation in theology have entered Afro-American burial practice in the twentieth century. Clocks are now a very common grave offering. . . . Most recently professional morticians have provided Styrofoam and floral constructions with clock faces on them. There are two general reasons for the presence of clocks on graves: they are set at twelve to wake the dead at Judgement Day, or they are set to mark the hour when the deceased passed away. The first is decidedly Christian in orientation, while the latter demonstrates the relationship between the object and the deceased person. Hence we can see that clocks, even of Styrofoam, are part of older

grave decoration customs” (1990:144).

Peter Wood writes in *Black Majority*, “it appears that initial efforts to propagate the Christian faith among the Negroes in Carolina had for them a direct impact which was almost negligible and indirect effects which were less than fortunate” (1996:142). Scholars of “the peculiar institution of slavery” in North America must, like Wood, acknowledge the oppressive nature of formalized Christian religion in most cases as it interfaced with plantation culture. To end one’s analysis of the formation of Afro/Gullah-Christianity within the symbolic realm of faith as a containing force of toil would be erroneous and disconnected from the spiritual trajectory of Gullah ancestors and their progeny. The continual re-shaping and defining of Gullah spirituality within a Christian context is complex and dynamic in that it emerges from moments of oppression and resistance as well as ingenuity and survival. Where the written historic record privileges the perspectives of the conqueror, the slaver, or the abolitionist, ethnography serves this work, by documenting the experiences and ethos of the enslaved, the liberated, and their progeny.

Contemporary analyses tend to research and forge connections between Gullah faith practices and West African and Central African faith practices *without* acknowledging the sophisticated take on Christian life that emerges from this community. This faith life, I would argue, is not so much syncretic, as in the example of Cuban Santería, where scholars define the merging of Catholicism and the indigenous Ife/Yoruba tradition of West Africa as one intent on preserving the traditions of the homeland behind the masks of Catholic saints and traditions. Gullah-Christianity, rather than masking one faith behind another, has taken Christianity whole-cloth and imbued it

with the cultural practices and wisdom of ancestors. Those on St. Helena Island and within other Gullah communities may acknowledge root work, ancestral presence, dream and vision experience, and vernacular medicine. To the extent that these practices meet face-to-face with Christianity differs among individuals, households, communities and praise houses. The following diagram provides a subtle but radically distinct cosmogram, demarcating one, traditional Gullah worldview of the life of the soul.



The Gullah soul begins at birth, like in the belief systems of the Dagara and Kongo, emerging out of the ancestral realm. The precise initiating rite for the Gullah soul is the rite of baptism, after engaging in the process of seeking and dreaming under strict spiritual guidance. At this point the Gullah soul seeks respect as an elder. A respectable life is one characterized by skill with engagement with land and sea and other human beings, especially descendants. The death of the body is not the death of the soul. It is a release of the soul from the material plane and from the material life of the beloved community. The Gullah-Christian funeral emphasizes life after death, resurrection, and



the peace of the soul that rests in “the Lord.” The home going is a *literal* declaration by the Gullah community that they believe [I believe] that the soul of the deceased has returned to its true home. The “home” implied in home going is heaven for Sea Islanders like Jack Johnson. Johnson described heaven as a place where “you sit down to the table and eat your milk and honey” (1998). Pastor Leonard Ritter, at the home going services of Christopher Holmes, described the afterlife by declaring:

*The Bible says that when we die,  
we go back to the Lord and we rest in a place.  
Our spirits are dormant.  
We don't talk, we don't sing, we don't shout,  
we don't see, I guess.  
I don't know. I've never been there,  
But we lay down.  
Our spirits don't do anything,  
but there's going to be a time,  
when one of these days, at the end,  
when Jesus comes back,  
that same spirit,  
that is laying somewhere dormant,  
it's gonna get back into the body,  
laying somewhere in the earth,  
and it's gonna get up! (Holmes 1998).*

Funeral director Edith Galloway acknowledged another set of commonly-held beliefs, which reference an ability to speak with or hear from ancestors. Galloway shared, “When one is very ill a lot of times they will be speaking to the dead. ‘There’s Mama,’ they’ll say. They start seeing their loved-ones who have gone on. When you start seeing the dead or talking to the dead that means they are going to be joining them soon” (Galloway 2008).

In this spiritual realm, Gullah ancestors are still sensed, spoken to, dreamed of and memorialized to the extent that the ancestors live along with their survivors. The Gullah funerary rite is compelling and magnetic rather than repulsive, calling the entire

community as with a drum or bell. A funeral is literally “the place to be” not to be missed. In this cultural context, a funeral is vibrant and responsive rather than formally static (shifting constantly in the face of spiritual-communal changes); it is generally celebratory rather than somber.

Gullah funerary practices are shored up even by personal, familial, and communal meaning. Each funeral is an event that performs like a tightly tied knot that joins islands, region, family, and church aid societies. If visualized, this interconnectivity may at first appear to be a tangle of complex relationships, but when examined further, when stretched out, what we have is a net—one of the most powerful symbols of Gullah survival. In truth, the image of an interconnecting net may well be applied to the functionality of many communal practices throughout the world, but certainly in Gullah coastal culture, the net feeds and holds families together. The net must be tended. The net must be cast. One must be taught how to make and mend and cast the net. Performatively, the Gullah funeral performs as this net.

Gullah home goings are also a vicarious experience. One may be mourning or preparing for the ultimate physical death of their own body. One may also be mourning the death of other loved ones, represented in the present body of the newly deceased.

Galloway said,

It is a celebration and a lot of it depends on how the person lived. If it is a fruitful life, it is especially a celebration. “Blessed is one when they die in the Lord!” We are leaving this side but we are going with Him. Non-Christian services can be very somber, if you have a question about their soul. Ministers being led by the spirit may make an altar call, especially if it’s a young person who has died or it is a tragic death. Yesterday it was a 96 year-old, so he said a prayer but often times they will ask you to come to

the altar if you are ready to give your life to the Lord  
(Galloway 2008).

The home going is a time for celebrating the eternal nature of all souls—a strong theme in both Kongo and other African Diaspora communities—as well as the Christian emphasis on salvation and resurrection. A Gullah mourner will understand, through a Kongo/Afro-Creole worldview that the soul of the deceased enters into the ancestral realm, while simultaneously pondering the state of the soul’s salvation, through a Christian lens. Such is the meaning expressed as Rev. Ritter spoke of the deceased Christopher Holmes, “He’s not dead! He’s asleep! One day all the dead shall rise up! All those who are asleep in the Lord shall awake!” In the presence of this strict, biblical reading of the afterlife, there are the likes of Joseph “Vernie” Gardner. Vernie cleans and decorates his mother’s grave, speaking to her with full confidence that she hears his words and that he in turn hears hers (Gardner 1998).

The practice of using the spiritual tools granted by African ancestors to engage in a faith into which many were forced to convert affords descendants the cultural preservation of spiritual resilience in the same way that African polyrhythms resiliently emerge and speak out the experiences of the African Diaspora through blues, jazz, funk, and hip-hop. The face of Christianity has been changed by Gullah culture, just as the face of music has been changed by various African American cultures. Rather than identifying Gullah Christianity as a separate entity, I would offer that most Gullah see their faith practices as a distinct way in which to practice Christianity, that their ancestors offered something new to the faith rather than creating a new faith entirely.

## V. The Gullah/Geechee Funerary Traditions of St. Helena Island

“For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, can be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made from hands, eternal in the heavens . . . Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, Who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that, while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith and not by sight.”

—Deacon Nathan Jones, on the occasion of Julia Williams’ funeral (1998)

Deacon Jones chose the above words from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians to bring comfort to Julia Williams’ mourners at Orange Grove Baptist Church on St. Helena Island. In the presence of death, this man chose to use words such as ‘Spirit,’ ‘home’ and ‘eternal.’ With a lively voice, he invoked the ideals of life everlasting and a peacefulness in death. While his quote is biblical, his words reflect not only Christian faith, he also the belief systems of his community. Although, a St. Helena Island native, but also belongs to a larger community that spans runs from Jacksonville, North Carolina, down to Jacksonville, Florida, along the coast and inland up to approximately 35 miles. He is a part of an African Diaspora micro-community known as the Gullah or Geechee. On St. Helena, this is a tightly-knit group, whose daily lives and expressed worldviews are rife with African retentions manifested in language patterns, foodways, material culture, and rites of passage, including the funerary.

Scholars and travel writers documented burial practices among the Gullah even before Emancipation. These practices include(d) burying personal effects with the

deceased and displaying a clock with the time of the deceased's death. (Vlach 1990: 142). While most scholars have chosen to focus on the material cultural practices manifested in Gullah burial and mourning traditions, less has been written about the actual funeral service, and beyond that, the community's overarching response towards death. This may be due to the fact that it is easier for an 'outsider,' as scholars often are/were, to gain access to a cemetery than to the intimate act of burial, mourning, and reflecting back over the life and death of a community member.

St. Helena Island residents, like all people, respond to death in a number of ways and with communal institutions, shared practices, and internal beliefs that work in tandem with the beliefs of their neighbors, elders, ancestors, churches, and funeral homes. There is a woven fabric of mourning tradition, not unlike a woven fabric of language, which securely holds the needs of the Gullah folk on St. Helena to express the rich and complicated understanding of the nature of human existence and demise. Core threads in this net of mourning systems are the local funeral homes, funeral directors, and funerary ceremonies. Mutual aid societies also historically served as insurance agencies in times of need and in times of death. (Organizations would offer a set amount of money towards the burial of a member.) Other core threads—perhaps the most significant, for the continuity of mourning traditions on St. Helena Island—are the intertwined beliefs of the individual islanders, particularly the elders. It is the individual and shared ideas about death and afterlife, which link ceremony, tradition and institution.

Jack Johnson, an 85 year-old resident of St. Helena Island, understands what death means to an islander. He is the president of two aid societies and a long-time member of Orange Grove Baptist Church. Jack Johnson makes it his business to attend

funerals. When I asked him what a funeral is to him, he responded, “It’s a missing, yet it ain’t nothing we can do about it. Because God take who he going to take. You see, He have—it’s a pasture of beautiful flowers and anyone of those flowers He want to pick from that garden, he pick it. I can’t stop it and you can’t stop it. Nobody can stop it ” (Johnson 1998b).

Note the symbology of Johnson comparing the deceased to flowers in God’s field, an image of beauty and peace held against the stern declaration of human helplessness. Johnson is gleeful and confident in his declaration of powerlessness. This tone of assured joy in the face of loss echoed throughout my conversations and witness-bearing of death as experienced by the living of St. Helena Island.

Although Mr. Johnson insists that one stands powerless in the face of death, he uses the power of his personal and communal perception of death to render death useful and to claim its coming as celebration-worthy. He says, “you are happy because you’re done with these old crosses and trials of the world . . . You be happy. You got no more sun burning you. No more confusion. If you one with the Lord now, but if you one with the devil—oh Lord. You worse than you been here . . . But heaven, you sit down to the table and eat your milk and honey. That’s what God tell me, you know.” Johnson sees death as a respite for the faithful Christian, a time to rest and feast on the bounty of the afterlife. Just as the deacon describes Julia Williams’ eternal home, Johnson asserts, “Be sad when one come in the world, see, because that person comes in the world comes in a sinful world. And that person who gone—probably has gone to rest, see forever . . . This is not our home, this is a place we live until a certain time. But if you go to rest that’s a forever home” (Johnson 1998b).

As Johnson spoke of a “forever home” he looked around at his earthly home and shook his head. Johnson is a member of a mostly working-class community whose land is threatened daily by resort builders and other coastal developers. In the face of these and other challenges, Johnson recognizes that life is characterized by labor and facing conflict, while true rest comes only in the afterlife, an afterlife that is peaceful only upon the completion of a faithful life. This reaction toward death—that is, viewing death as a kind of freedom—has its roots in slavery, the Jim Crow South, Reconstruction and on into post-modernity. In addition to the biblical ideology of heaven and the belief of escape from earthly toils, there is also a beckoning to an older African tradition of viewing death as a passage into the ancestor world or the next phase in the life of one’s soul (Thompson 1984:106). In Gullah communities, as is the case throughout the African Diaspora, the ancestors are never far removed from loved ones.

When Johnson recalls losing his mother right after he married, he does not become somber. Instead he laughs and sings and recalls the festive wakes held in memory of his mother and others who died during his youth. He tells of wakes where mourners would “Sing! . . . They’d . . . sing,

These bones, these bones, these bones  
gonna rise again. Dry bones, hip bones,  
shoulder bones. These bones gonna—

And they’d name all the bone—tore bone, knee bone, foot bone, hip bone, shoulder bone, ankle bone, head bone, neck bone—they’d name it all, you know, who can really sing the song. They’d name it all. And man! That house’d be on fire!” (Johnson 1998b).

In Johnson’s memory, wakes functioned as a ceremony where loved ones could mourn their loss, celebrate the heavenly home going of the deceased, honor the memory

of the deceased, reunite family and friends and even encourage mourners to become “saved” so that they will one day enjoy the rewards of eternal life. These home-centered wakes eventually gave way to wakes in the church or a funeral home chapel, where the body lays in state. The transition from home to church or funeral home, as the site of the contemporary wake, can be attributed to modern laws around burial practices (Goodwine 1999).

In the spirit of a resilient and dynamic tradition the physical domain of mourning ceremonies have drastically changed; at the same time, modern funeral has transformed into a new form while maintaining the tone and purpose of older wakes and burials. The traditions have not died a romantic death. The traditions emerge as styrofoam, floral gravemarkers, and grandchildren singing modern pop songs, such as “Wind Beneath My Wings.” These new interpretations of grieving ritual share space with older traditions, such as passing a baby over a grave and maintaining the living quarters of an ancestor.

St. Helena ancestor Julia Williams’ funeral began with tears and ended in salvation. This 78 year-old grandmother, church-member, and usher was honored with a ceremony filled with prayer, praise, song, tears, rejoicing, testimony, and fellowship. Her service mirrored and affirmed the structure of church, family, and geographic communities all at once. The various speakers at her service shared two common themes: 1) rejoice when one leaves in death and weep when one is born into a sin-sick world; and 2) prepare the living soul for the moment of death through Christian salvation. A church deacon delivered a prayer, not in a somber and quiet voice, but in a far-reaching and praising voice. In a spirit of rejoicing for the home going occasion, the deacon beseeched,



Oh God, now I ask you today, Lord,  
Oh God, to bind up the broken heart.  
Oh God, hold up the hang-down head.  
Strengthen the feeble knees.

At the same time that this servant of the church called for uplifted spirits in the congregation, he also asked God to “strengthen” the weak and mourning loved ones. His prayer has the dual purpose of uplifting and affirming the powerful aspects of death while offering comfort for the living. The use of up-beat songs also serves multiple purposes.

When the Chisolm Funeral Home Voices sing to a ragtime piano rhythm:

It's a highway to heaven  
None can walk up there,  
None but the pure in heart  
It's a highway to heaven  
We are walking on the King's highway,

They encourage the listener to consider how one must behave in order to “walk” to heaven, simultaneously holding out the promise that the King's highway is both accessible and worthy of an anticipatory joy.

The performance/ceremony of funeral is not only a testament of religious faith and a source of comfort for the family and friends, but also a celebration of the memory and home going of the deceased. The deceased carries a powerful and present voice, which flows through the often self-designed funeral service as well as through the living voices of friends and family. The collective funerary moment becomes a vehicle through which the spirit of the dead live and speak. Printed on the program for Julia Williams' funeral is a poem, entitled “I'm Free,” which captures Williams' voice. It begins, “Don't grieve for me, for now I'm free, I'm following the path God laid for me, “ closely echoing the song “Highway to Heaven,” as both speak of heavenly paths or literally the pathway to heaven. These songs remind the mourners of Williams' new perspective on

death as an ancestor. She is able to “speak” through the funeral for a place of wisdom. She is able to encourage the living to “live right” in order to follow God’s path to heaven. This message and invitation of right living continued into the climatic heart of the funeral—the eulogy or sermon, as delivered by Orange Grove Baptist Church’s Pastor William Carpenter.

Pastor Carpenter began by saying;

I stand before you to say just a few words  
About our beloved sister, Sister Julia Williams.  
And as I look out among you, I see a lot of saddened  
faces and it shouldn’t be that way. You know, this is a  
*home going service*, and I just don’t think that Sister  
Williams would want to have it that way. [‘Amens’  
resonate in the background.] This should be a joyous  
time for all of us. (1998)

As the pastor continued, his voice rose and reverberated throughout the small church and fell in dramatic silences as he questioned whether the living were ready to stand in “Sister Williams’ shoes.” Towards the end of the sermon, Pastor Carpenter began thumping the pulpit in excitement and marching in the aisles, making eye contact with various attendants. The words ‘Well!’ ‘Preach!’ and ‘Amen!’ punctuated the air. Pastor Carpenter ended his words with a call to salvation and prayer, right in front of Ms. Williams’ casket.

Where some communities might find the pastor’s sermon and call to salvation inappropriate in the face of death, the community present at this funeral supported his choices with their words and actions. Many came to be prayed for that day. Prayer and praise and worship in the midst of death are a vital part of this community’s traditions—traditions rooted in living room wakes, night-time plantation funerals, and African feasts in memory of ancestors.

Just as the funeral is a significant occasion on St. Helena Island, the funeral home is a significant folk institution—an institution that supports and manifests the communal beliefs around death. Historically, St. Helena funeral homes and funeral directors acted in roles that surpass death, burial, and funeral. These folk institutions act in ways that weave into the everyday lives of the families they serve. In other words, on St. Helena Island, funeral homes work just as much to serve the needs of the living as they do the dead.

Sherman Funeral Home director, Nanny Sherman, explained some of the many roles of funeral directors. She said, “Actually leading up to the funeral time the funeral director . . . did everything. Very few people had telephones. [This would have been during the 1950s and 60s]. So it was our responsibility, as a service to the family, to get a list of all of the relatives that needed to be notified . . . In fact, years ago we took the family shopping, lent them money, for anything, for groceries or clothing. Anything that they needed . . .” Sherman described the funeral director as a civil servant for the living, almost in the same vein as a church pastor. She spoke of lending money and making phone calls, not as if they were a courtesy of the funeral director, but rather as if the job of funeral director entailed an extremely intimate and dependable position in relation to the living community they served. Sherman’s family business effectively blurred the line between life and death as the Shermans prepared a body for burial while providing nourishment for those still alive. Sherman went on to say:

As a funeral director, we carried people to the doctor in Charleston and Savannah and locally . . . The funeral director, in this area, was the person that gave the service to the family in all different ways—even if people got arrested. Many nights, on Saturday nights, my husband would get calls to go and get people out of jail (1998).

This role of undertaker as caretaker becomes even clearer with the act of taking people for healthcare or rescuing them from doing time in jail. Sherman's examples represent a folk institution that is concerned with the health and well-being of the entire community. There is present in her descriptions the notion that the living community expected and required care and support from an entity that also tended to their bodies upon death.

Edith Galloway, a third generation undertaker, is also concerned with the well-being of her surrounding community. While Nannie Sherman concentrated on the funeral director as provider of physical resources, such as transportation, money, and access to technology such as telephones, Galloway talked about how she uses her role to offer spiritual support. Just as at-home wakes have changed with time into more elaborate church funerals while still maintaining a premise of praise and fellowship, the funeral director has also moved, in dynamic ways, while maintaining a core tenet of intimate, community-centered service.

Most of Galloway's clientele now have access to cars and telephones, so her role of caretaker is quite different than the historic model presented by Sherman. In 1996 Edith Galloway decided to begin using her funeral home's chapel for weekly praise and worship services. She explained her decision as being guided by the Holy Spirit. Galloway recalled that "the Holy Spirit just laid it upon my heart to do it. And the chapel is here, it's available—so we just want the community to come in" (1998). Edith Galloway sees the funeral home as more than a place to bring the deceased; she sees it as an extension of the living community. Galloway went on to say, "rather than come to a funeral all the time—at a funeral home—you know, it's [also] a sanctuary—it's a place that you can come and talk to the Lord. You don't have to wait for a funeral. It's just to

say that we are *here* in this community. We're open to the general public. Come in and worship the Lord. It's not about a funeral at that point" (1998).

"It's not about a funeral at that point" are words that exemplify the relationship between the funeral home and St. Helena Island residents. This relationship is based more on the needs of the community's living, breathing beliefs and traditions of mutual aid and support than on the purposes of burying the dead. There were some misgivings when Galloway first began her services. She recalled, "Initially . . . the feeling was, who's going to come, because it's a funeral home and people are basically afraid of funeral homes . . . But people have come" (1998). People have come, indeed. Every Wednesday a group of about 20 people gather to testify, sing, and hear a short sermon delivered by various, invited preachers. Just as Jack Johnson's personal beliefs, an old-fashioned wake, and a modern day funeral all blend religion, community and family, so too does the St. Helena funeral home, which by community design is an extension of the family home.

There is a pervasiveness of ancestry in everyday life on St. Helena Island. The family home I stayed in while completing my fieldwork was rife with signs of the "dearly departed." Upon arrival, I noticed that there was an empty room in the house. While I was invited to sleep in a child's room and that same child decided to sleep with her mother during my stay, this one room remained empty. When I asked the child why she did not choose to stay in this vacant room, the young girl explained that the room had belonged to her great-grandmother. The memory, if not the spirit of this woman, resided in the space, to the extent that others could not find comfort sleeping there. The same young girl who refused to sleep in her great-grandmother's bed also insisted on attending

the funeral of a teenage boy who had drowned while I was on St. Helena. Another member of the household had left several obituaries casually strewn on a kitchen countertop. Someone, perhaps a small child, had drawn a heart on the obituary and had written “I miss you,” under the photograph of the deceased. In yet another instance, I talked to a man at the beach, who had a tattoo which ran across his entire abdomen. It read, “ETERNAL LIFE.” This stranger shared to me that he believed in eternal life after death and that he recalled being present when his grandmother died and that before she passed away she had asked those at her death bed to “help me with my wings.”

From rooms haunted by memory, doodled notes on obituaries, and tattoos to vibrant and lively home goings and fondly remembered wakes and worship services in funeral homes, death and the ancestry visibly intermingle with life. This intermingling of life and death is dynamic and intergenerational. St. Helena responds to death with worship, salvation, song, food pageantry, fear, reverence, and love. These responses poignantly emerge in another funeral I attended while on the island. Three grandchildren composed the following poem that appeared in Edith Galloway’s funeral program. The poem, “Tribute,” reads:

The time quickly ticked away  
You were leaving us day by day  
You looked into our eyes and said  
“Don’t worry about me I’m going home  
To heaven where I’ll be free.  
Free of all my sorrows and pain—  
Just keep your hands in God’s  
Hand and we’ll meet again.”  
Now your eyes are closed.  
You’ve gone away.  
Our hearts are sad  
We wanted you to stay.

But it's okay Grand,  
For your loving memories we'll behold.  
Because you've chosen Jesus over silver and gold.  
Behold, another angel is ringing his bell.  
Grand is in Heaven and we can tell.

Another section of the program includes "Grand's" obituary. Christopher Holmes, Sr., was a self-employed fisherman, a "great disciplinarian," a graduate of a Rosenwald school, a member of a mutual aid society and at 81 years-old, a friend and relative to so many that half of his obituary is composed of an extensive listing of his relations. Fittingly, half of his home going is comprised of his 'voice' speaking through his progeny. For, in addition to the above poem, other grandchildren serenade his memory with scripture and song.

Through the act of mourning, Holmes' and Williams' families, like many St. Helena families, are affirmed, empowered, challenged to righteous living and reminded of their interconnectivity. Jack Johnson's gleeful declaration of powerlessness may be the delight in an alternate, subtle, yet palpable truth. In the face of death, these islanders recognize and devote their shared and personal power to the task of celebrating life.

## VI. Conclusion

Fieldnotes May 11, 1998

“My trip down was emotional because I realized that there is much irony in the fact that I am drawn to the island and culture where my mother’s demise began. Maybe I am unconsciously searching for answers. At any rate since I am studying death/funerals I saw it all around me as I traveled 95 South to 21 South”

I recognize ten years later that death was all around me because death is what I sought. Like my fieldnotes, my pre-fieldwork research of secondary sources focuses almost completely on death, mourning, loss, and funerary rites in the U.S. and parts of the African Diaspora. In fact, my fieldwork took me out of my original call to St. Helena Island and on to other parts of the African Diaspora, including Portobelo, Panama, Ghana West Africa, and Durham, North Carolina, in search of continuity of funerary/mourning practices within the African Diaspora.

I sought answers to grief and loss and came away with a place for shared grief, with very little focus on death, even at a funeral. Perhaps what did draw me and call was the notion that a Gullah funeral has much more to say about life than death. A Gullah funeral is a transformative rite that declares life in the face of death. In the presence of the loss of one soul emerge countless living souls. In the silences and spaces the loved one may leave, many sing, move and shout. While the deceased is no longer able to eat, the entire community declares its life in the feast. It is as if the Gullah funeral sings out to the ancestors “you brought us life and taught us life and we carry life on in your memory and in your stead. We honor your life, and death will not steal that. Death can



not live here in the presence of us; we are too strong and faith-filled, too life-filled for that.”

Spirit-centered ethnography provides a model of deferential ethnography—a call and response journey that began on the Sound side of Daufuskie Island, where I heard something call me, from nine years-old to “Pay attention, because there’s work to do!” I have used vulnerable observation as a tool of transformation, a cleansing and purifying rite that renders me a vessel more purposed towards usefulness. I proclaim and acknowledge the self, while releasing the self into the collective work of a communal net.

I have been inspired by Gullah communities to explore these acts of *testimonial* and *communitas*. The forthright and generous example of Gullah community engaged in the intimate act of mourning, along with the revelation of my own hidden, folkloric journey, enabled me to claim the place of Spirit in the field. In so doing, I open up space for other ethnographers of faith, while honoring the work I do within Gullah community, as intentionally sacred.

APPENDIX I: “In Times Like This:” The Home Going Services for Brother Christopher Holmes, Sr., of St. Helena Island, South Carolina

*Note to the reader: I have not attempted to convey dialect through variant spelling, so as not to distract from the focus of this work, which are the culturally performative, rather than the culturally linguistic aspects of this home going.*

Christopher Holmes, a fisherman, sometimes carpenter, farmer and patriarch, was born on December 22, 1917, and died on May 7, 1998. His home going took place at Ebenezer Baptist Church on St. Helena Island. The service began in layers of voice and movement. Mourners greeted with hugs or rocked in pews, using paper fans to keep cool while the Ebenezer Baptist Church Choir sang the prelude, “Nearer My God to Thee,” and Reverend Ritter recited a litany of scripture. Beneath whispered, sung, and firm voices, slow and dignified entrances, the sounds of quiet crying and the boom of scripture was the foundational church organ—carrying the rhythm of the funerary rite.

Reverend Ritter closed his scriptural reverie as the dirge faded and began a prayer of invocation:

*Let us pray.  
Precious Lord,  
in this sanctuary,  
between these consecrated walls,  
we lift up now, Lord,  
our prayer,  
our petition.  
Maybe that you would look upon the family in their hours of sorrow.  
Strengthen their heart, oh Lord.  
Be a leaning post on every side.  
Build them up where they are torn down . . .  
Have them to know  
that there is no struggle in earth  
that heaven can not heal.  
May the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of my heart*

*be acceptable in thy sight.  
Amen.*

Reverend Ritter moved immediately into a formal declaration of the purpose of the communal gathering:

*Giving honor to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
who is the head of our church,  
at this time,  
we have come  
for the home going services of our dear brother,  
Christopher Holmes, Sr. . . .  
I say to the family,  
be strong in the Lord.  
God will be with you.*

As Reverend Ritter took his seat on the pulpit, an elder, specifically a deacon, emerged, dressed in a black suit and the face of an expectant teacher. The deacons of Ebenezer Baptist Church interacted within the realm of the home going service as guardians of tradition, as elders who guided and directed the order of the ceremony. This first deacon addressed the mourners, reaffirming their purposes at the services while offering direction for ritual/performative expectations of behavior. He began:

*Praise the Lord?  
[mourners quietly responded— “Praise the Lord.”]  
Giving honor to the almighty God,  
to Jesus Christ, our savior,  
the Holy Spirit our comforter,  
we greet you in the name of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.  
We are here to celebrate  
the home going of Brother Christopher Holmes, Sr.  
We come to celebrate! [here he makes clear the emotional/spiritual  
intentions of the services]  
We give you our deepest regrets  
and we ask that you conduct yourselves  
in the order outlined in the program.  
We want you, the bereaved family,  
to know that you have our deepest sympathy  
in times like this.*

The Ebenezer Baptist Church Choir rose next to offer a musical selection, in the Negro spiritual tradition. The choir used four-part harmony with force and ebullience over the organist's accompaniment. Throughout the service, one voice or set of voices responds to another in a literal or conceptual rhythm. As the senior deacon reaffirmed Rev. Ritter's call to comfort the family, he also introduced the notion that home goings are celebrations of life here on earth and in the spiritual realm of the saved soul. The musical selection also affirms and introduces/reminds the mourners of the key and treasured concepts of this community's mourning tradition. The force and the volume of the song affirm celebration, while the lyrics deepen a spiritual message of companionship and comfort in Christ. They sang:

*There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus.  
No not one, no not one.  
None else could heal all our soul's diseases.  
No not one, no not one.  
Jesus knows all about our struggles,  
he will guide till the day is done.  
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus.  
No not one, no not one.  
No friend like Him is so high and holy.  
No not one, no not one.  
And yet no friend is so meek and lowly.  
No not one, no not one.*

The musical focus on Christ codified the notion of worship being central within mourning; this focus on worship and the formality of conventional church service continued with a reading of Old and New Testament scripture. The Chisolm Funeral Home Voices continued the familiar rhythms of a church in worship by providing a traditional hymn. While the previous musical selection centered on comfort, this song offers comfort around a focus on great pain. This song gave voice to the nature of loss

and even class disparity, while urging the listener to “live in the sunshine.” The Voices sang:

*Tempted and tried will oft’ me to wonder,  
why it should be thus all the day long.  
While there are others living about us,  
never molested, though in the wrong.*

*Farther along we’ll know more about it.  
Farther along we’ll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine.  
We’ll understand it all by and by.*

*When death has come and taken our loved ones,  
leaving our homes so lonely and drear.  
Then do we wonder how others prosper  
Living so wicked year after year.*

*Farther along we’ll know more about it.  
Farther along we’ll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine.  
We’ll understand it all by and by.*

*Often I wonder why I must journey  
over a road so rugged and steep.  
While there are others living in comfort,  
while with the lost I labor and weep.*

*Farther along we’ll know more about it.  
Farther along we’ll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine.  
We’ll understand it all by and by.*

*Faithful ‘til death, said our loving Master,  
a few more days labor and wait.  
Toils of the road will then be as nothing,  
as we sweep through the beautiful gates.*

*Farther along we’ll know more about it.  
Farther along we’ll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine.  
We’ll understand it all by and by.*

*When we see Jesus coming in glory,  
when He comes from His home in the sky.*

*Then we shall meet Him in that bright mansion.  
We'll understand it all by and by.*

*Farther along we'll know more about it.  
Farther along we'll understand why.  
Cheer up my brother live in the sunshine.  
We'll understand it all by and by.*

In response to the music, the presiding deacon returned with praise and affirmation on his tongue. “Amen!” he said. “Praise the Lord! Now we are celebrating! Amen?” He invited the mourners to praise and celebrate with him. With his praise, the deacon declared that the intentions of the funerary service have been manifested: *celebration; comfort; acknowledgement of loss, pain, and suffering; acknowledgement and worship of the Christ*. The congregation of communal mourners responded in agreement, echoing “amen” throughout the church. Two more deacons emerged to tend to another sacred component of the funerary rite—*testimony on behalf of the deceased*. These deacons spoke of the life of Brother Holmes. The second deacon stated:

*Giving honor to God  
[and] my pastor . . .  
I must say,  
that I'm glad that I have another day's journey.  
Glad that I have legs to walk,  
glad that I have eyesight,  
glad that the Lord has looked over my mistakes,  
just last night, to give me a chance.  
Some of you have known me.  
I'm going to say to you,  
Brother Holmes,  
Chris Holmes,  
had 81 years to get it right in this life . . .  
Tomorrow is not promised.  
If the Lord allows any of us to see tomorrow,  
it's time to come together,  
in the name of the Lord . . .  
Make room for no one else,  
but Jesus to come into your heart.  
God Bless.*

The third Deacon added his remarks:

*I know Chris 40-something years.  
He would do a favor . . .  
Whatever he do,  
was his business.  
I pray to thank the Lord,  
for the Holmes family.  
Whatever you do,  
do in the name of Jesus,  
because He's coming back.  
Dry those tears.  
God don't make no mistake.*

The two “testimonial deacons” referred to the life of Brother Holmes as more of a touchstone to remind the attendant mourners of the importance of the salvation. While the deacons offered small details about Holmes’ generosity, longevity, and church membership, this is done with little sentiment or description. Their attention rarely strayed from worship and proselytization. It is the upcoming presence of youth, Holmes’ own descendants, that provide genealogical and performative testimony to the footprints of this man’s life. An elementary-school age grandson of the deceased recited a Bible verse and the congregation loudly and enthusiastically replied “Amen!” An adolescent granddaughter sang an a capella version of “Wind Beneath my Wings,” and mourners responded “amen” applauding the child’s soulful version of the popular song. Another granddaughter, named for her grandfather, recited a poetic tribute, ending with a slight bow and a “thank you,” in the manner of a child delivering an Easter speech. Each “amen,” each wave applause, each child’s *performance* affirms the worth and continuance of Holmes’ legacy.

The poetic tribute read:

*The time quickly ticked away*

*You were leaving us day by day  
 You looked into our eyes and said  
 "Don't worry about me I'm going home  
 To heaven where I'll be free.  
 Free of all my sorrows and pain—  
 Just keep your hands in God's  
 Hand and we'll meet again."  
 Now your eyes are closed.  
 You've gone away.  
 Our hearts are sad  
 We wanted you to stay.  
 But it's okay Grand,  
 For your loving memories we'll behold.  
 Because you've chosen Jesus over silver and gold.  
 Behold, another angel is ringing his bell.  
 Grand is in Heaven and we can tell.  
 Thank you for all the wonderful memories.  
 Loving you forever,  
 Your Grandchildren,  
 Theia, Quannie, Quielle and BJ.*

At this point the services shifted back to the adult realm as Ms. Priscilla Jenkins, a church member, proceeded to read the obituary with an almost theatrical flair.

*Brother Christopher Holmes, Sr., the son of Jesse Holmes, Sr. and Rachel Mungin Holmes; was born December 22, 1917 on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.*  
*Brother Holmes attended Lee Rosenwald School. For many years he was a member of the Ebenezer Baptist Church and the St. Helena Young Men's Social Club. For a livelihood Brother Holmes was a self-employed fisherman.*  
*Brother Holmes was a hard working person who was kind hearted. He was a great disciplinarian. Brother Holmes had many trades including that of carpentry and automobile mechanic. Brother Holmes' favorite past-time was that of farming. Brother Holmes was married to Beulah Daise Holmes. On Thursday, May 7, 1998 as youth had given way to age, his health to sickness and his strength absorbed in weakness, Christopher Holmes, Sr. entered his master's joy from his residence on St. Helena Island, SC. He leaves cherishing loving memories three sons . . . , three daughters . . . , one step-son . . . , two stepdaughters . . . , eighteen grandchildren, twenty-one great-grand children, three brothers . . . , three sisters . . . , two sons-in-law . . . , three daughters-in-law . . . , one brother-in-law . . . , six sisters-in-law . . . , a host of*



*nephews, nieces, cousins . . . , other relatives, other in-laws and  
many friends . . .*

At Brother James Cuthbert stood, proclaiming exuberantly, “Hey church! Amen? Amen! God is good?” Mourners responded, “All the time!” Brother Cuthbert continued the familiar African American call-and-response with, “And all the time?” The mourners completing with, “God is good!” Brother Cuthbert then proceeded to sing a traditional hymn, “Walk Around Heaven All Day” in the cadence of a 50s era street-corner tenor. As he approached the end of the song, he invited participation by gracefully guiding the mourners into repeating the phrase “walk around heaven,” while he sang phrases from the song. Again, the mourners confirm approval with “amen” over the occasional sound of children’s voices.

A hushed anticipation settled over the church pews as Rev. Ritter approached the altar, slowly and with grave expression. He began what the program called not a eulogy, but “Words of Comfort.” The pastor shared these words:

*“He’s not dead!  
He’s asleep!  
One day all the dead shall rise up!  
All those who are asleep in the Lord shall awake!”*

*John 14:3 and 6 says  
“And if I go and prepare a place for you,  
I will come back and take you to be with me,  
that you also may be where I am.”  
And “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father  
except through me.”*

*Jesus was speaking to the disciples—  
That he will come again.  
And he’s coming back for all those  
that have truly accepted him.  
And Jesus knows who they are.  
We can fool some people some of the time.  
He even knows the thoughts that are on your mind*

*He's promising his disciples  
I am coming  
Where I am there you will be also  
That's the question.  
If He comes will I go back with him? . . .  
I want some relief some day  
What about you? . . .*

*The Bible says that when we die,  
we go back to the Lord and we rest in a place.  
Our spirits are dormant.  
We don't talk, we don't sing, we don't shout,  
we don't see, I guess.*

*I don't know. I've never been there,  
But we lay down.  
Our spirits don't do anything,  
but there's going to be a time,  
when one of these days, at the end,  
when Jesus comes back,  
that same spirit,  
that is laying somewhere dormant,  
it's gonna get back into the body,  
laying somewhere in the earth,  
and it's gonna get up!  
And the story's going to be told then.  
We'll know who is who.  
. . . How we die is the way we gonna be resurrected.  
Come on sisters and brothers!  
[Amens]  
If we die in Christ Jesus,  
you can rest assured,  
you're gonna be risen in Christ Jesus!  
That's the supernatural bodies.*

*I'm gonna leave you but I'm coming back again.  
You've got to be watchful.  
He gives them something to hold onto.  
I would like to believe that Brother Holmes left something to hold onto!  
A spiritual substance! . . .  
Sometimes are bodies get weak  
Amen? [Amens]*

*Let not your heart be troubled. He said, believe in me!*

*In my father's house. . .*

[Clapping and organ playing]

*In my father's house are many mansions.*

*It's good to follow somebody,  
who knows where they are going.*

[referring to the scripture John 14:3]

*I'm going but I'm coming back again.*

*And if I go and prepare a place for you*

[Here the pastor began a chant-like rhythm with the deacons humming and responding “amen” and “yes” along with the organ—punctuating the pauses of breath between each declaration]

*Somewhere in my father's mansion,*

*somewhere in a paradise,*

*somewhere where the sun never refuse to shine,*

*somewhere where the chilly wind just don't blow,*

*somewhere where nobody can stop you from giving praises to the Lord,*

*somewhere where somebody can't stop you from preaching!*

*Somebody can't stop you from singing,*

*somebody can't stop you from praising!*

*Jesus said I'm going!*

*I will receive you unto myself!*

*Ain't that a blessing?*

*Wherever Jesus is, the son of the living God,*

*I'm gonna sit by his side!*

[The pastor ended the chant and yet maintained a tone of excitement, settling into a whisper]

*Holmes is gone.*

*We are still here.*

*Hold onto the promise.*

*All God's Children will get up in that great getting up morning.*

[As the pastor took his seat, the sounds of the mourners and deacons calling out “amen” and the percussive chant of the “organ” subside]

Ms. Edith Galloway continued the service by speaking responsively on behalf of the Holmes family, beginning with a spoken quote from Mr. Holmes favorite song. “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone and

there's a cross for me." After thanking all of the mourners for their presence at the home going, the Chisolm Funeral Home Voices offered a song to accompany the final glimpse—the last opportunity to view the deceased. The music was upbeat, an almost ragtime-style rhythm, accompanied by inviting and pastoral lyrics:

*Come and go to that land where I'm bound  
There is Joy, peace, happiness, milk and honey,  
Jesus, sister, brother, we gonna pray  
in that land where I'm bound.*

The "Voices" extended the song until everyone who wished to, had the opportunity to view Mr. Holmes' body. Many lingered at the casket, touching a hand, embracing the living, or leaning over in tears. After a deacon offered benediction, the family moved to the gravesite. Once outside, there was an almost palpable exhale, a shift into casual greetings, reunion, and reconnection. People jovially patted each other on the back or embraced, preparing for the fellowship and food of the repast to come.

## APPENDIX II: Excerpts from Interview with Funeral Director, Edith Galloway

Edith Galloway took over direction of the Chisolm Funeral Home after several generations of her family. The funeral home was founded in 1908 by Joe Chisolm, Galloway's great-grandfather. In those times her people were carpenters and made the caskets by hand. In her contemporary role as funeral home director, Ms. Galloway bears witness to how belief and culture become acted out at Gullah home goings.

### **Of dreams and passing on . . .**

*Sometimes you'll say "She had a dream, she must have felt her death," because she's putting her life in order and saying her final goodbyes. People take dreams very seriously. Sometimes they will speak of there dreams in church. A deacon will predict that a lot of people were going to die soon or that there would be trouble coming. Dreams are still very much a part of the culture.*

### **Of speaking with the departed . . .**

*When one is very ill a lot of times they will be speaking to the dead. "There's Mama," they'll say. They start seeing their loved-ones who have gone on. When you start seeing the dead or talking to the dead that means they are going to be joining them soon.*

### **The practice of visiting and eating with the bereaved families . . .**

*From the time you hear that a person has passed [the family's] house is packed that whole week. After the initial shock, they'll start the celebration long before the funeral. If you're on the island [days before the funeral] there will be a cookout with fish and crab. There's food and company every evening and that goes on until after the repast;*

*[post-funeral meal]. Every funeral has a repast, it is at every one! It's a jubilation, people rejoice! Families have to give away food after the funeral.*

### **The wake . . .**

*The night before the funeral, the wake is usually at the funeral home or at the church, for one to two hours. The family will sit for that hour and the community will come share time with singing, prayer, story sharing, encouragement, scripture.*

### **Children and funerals . . .**

*Children come to funerals because they are the community too. The community just comes together, everyone comes. The children will come to the wake if not the services. Some take the children out of school for funeral services.*

### **A celebration of faith—A Call to Salvation . . .**

*It is a celebration and a lot of it depends on how the person lived. If it is a fruitful life, it is especially a celebration. "Blessed is one when they die in the Lord!" We are leaving this side but we are going with Him. Non-Christian services can be very somber, if you have a question about their soul. Ministers being led by the spirit may make an altar call, especially if it's a young person who has died or it is a tragic death. Yesterday it was a 96 year-old, so he said a prayer, but often times they will ask you to come to the altar if you are ready to give your life to the Lord.*

### **Personal Items for the Journey . . .**

*At a recent Hilton head funeral a 96 year-old had his baseball caps and glasses. When I went to Georgia, I put some candy in my cousin's casket because he was always raiding the candy dish. It was a way of saying, "I remember you." Some people may try and*

*sneak things in the casket. People try to be discreet with some things. Some people put money or a knife, cigarettes and photographs. People often put little testaments [New Testament Bibles] in the casket or a minister's original Bible.*

### **To the Burial Ground . . .**

*Years ago they used to take the bodies back to the home, but we don't take the body back to the home. Every now and then, sporadically, people will request that people [the deceased] will pass by the house before burial. Saying goodbye to house for the last time. Most of our cemeteries are in communities which were previously plantations. Some are getting filled up because there are people who have purchased land within the cemeteries and are building houses. Once they purchase land, then a fence will go up and access is denied. Some communities are in court over that. When u can't visit your loved one and there's no room for you, it's an issue.*

### **At the Burial . . .**

*We bury them facing east, so that when you rise you will be facing Christ. Christ will come back in the east. The sun rises in the east. I've heard a few older people say that they will be going home to the motherland. Sometimes we pass babies over the grave. It takes two people, one in front and one behind. You need to pass the child so the child will not be afraid.*

### **Grave decorations . . .**

*People do put objects on the grave. Crosses, shell, glass, and floral arrangements of Bible forms, floral arrangement with clocks to show time of death. If [the deceased] is a child, they might leave a doll or a bear.*

**After the funeral . . .**

*When the funeral is over you need time to rest because it is very draining on people. We encourage people to continue to visit the family. We also hold a yearly memorial services to light a candle for all those who had died during the year.*



### APPENDIX III: Photographs

Photograph 1: A Gullah/Geechee Landscape



Photograph 2: Penn Center Entrance



Photograph 3: Edith Galloway, Funeral Director



Photograph 4: Jack Johnson, Island Elder





Photograph 5: Ebenezer Baptist Church, Est. 1884



Photograph 6: Ladies Union Members at Funeral



Photograph 7: Young Men's Social Club Member and Mourners at Funeral



Photograph 8: Community Elders at Funeral



Photograph 9: Community Elders at Funeral II



Photograph 10: Church Usher with Obituary





Photograph 11: Chisolm Funeral Voices, Graveside



Photograph 12: Mourners, Graveside



Photograph 13: Family of the Deceased



Photograph 14: Youth Mourners





Photograph 15: Youth Mourner



Photograph 16: Youth Mourner Views the Deceased





Photograph 17: Pastor Views the Deceased



Photograph 18: Preparing to Close the Casket



Photograph 19: Personal Effects in Casket



Photograph 20: Memento of Mourning



Photograph 21: Graveside Arrangements



Photograph 22: Graveside Decorations





Photograph 23: Tending the Grave




Photograph 24: Ethnographer Tends the Grave



Photograph 25: Obituary of Christopher Holmes, Sr

*Home Going Services  
For*

A black and white portrait of an elderly African American man with glasses, wearing a suit and tie. The portrait is oval-shaped and framed by a double-line border.

*Brother Christopher Holmes, Sr.  
December 22, 1917 - May 7, 1998*

*Services  
Ebenezer Baptist Church  
2:00 PM Tuesday, May 12, 1998*

*Pastor Leonard Ritter, Sr., Officiating*

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