

BETWEEN PRAYER AND PROTEST: GULLAH IDENTITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF
THE CHARLESTON SHOOTING

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ABSTRACT

Elijah Heyward, III: Between Prayer and Protest: Gullah Identity in the Aftermath of the Charleston Shooting
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

“Between Prayer and Protest: Contemporary Gullah Identity in the Aftermath of the Charleston Shooting” explores contemporary Gullah identities through the lens of the horrific shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Coverage of the event highlighted the prayers and forgiveness by Mother Emanuel’s members, with little attention paid to the cultural context of Charleston’s Gullah population. Through a critical exploration of Gullah spirituality, Gullah familial networks, and Gullah expressive culture, my project endeavors to complicate the narratives so often told about Gullah people, by exploring the often overlooked role of subversion and agency that has historically sustained the community. My fieldwork in the Gullah diaspora is complemented by a historical investigation of how Gullah identities were crafted by cultural outsiders.

Gullah consciousness guides and informs Gullah community life. Through interviews with Gullah natives, my dissertation interrogates the commodification of Gullah identity, while exploring how Gullah people reclaim and wrestle with the imminent impacts of migration and economic barriers in the 21st century. The work of counter-curators explicitly and implicitly encourages a re-examination of what it means to be Gullah, and invites us to explore Gullah identity in provocative and nuanced ways. Artist like Charmaine Bee and Sheldon Scott explicitly challenge historical tropes through their multi-media art projects that explore racial violence, gender and sexuality, and Gullah futures. The implicit work rests in the everydayness of Gullah traditions that, when explored beyond the surface, highlight the dynamism of cultural practice that transcends outsider representations. For

instance, the intentionality around godparenting in the Gullah context persists as an example of the Gullah community's singular commitment to child rearing and the transmission of values. This exploration takes readers beyond the South Carolina Lowcountry, to a discussion of the ways that Gullah values are creatively employed by Gullah people within a broader diaspora. This diaspora, which I refer to as the Gullah diaspora, functions as a literal and theoretical framework for engaging evolving notions of community.

To Cynthia Hurd, Suzie Jackson, Ethel Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor,
Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Singleton, and Myra
Thompson, May your witness to the world inspire others for generations to come,
as it has so deeply inspired me.

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When I was younger, I recall walking around the playground alone during recess and watching groups of friends play with one another. I daydreamed about the day that I would have friends of my own. I am fortunate to have amazing individuals in my life who happen to also be tremendous friends. I am grateful for the Elite Eight and my Institute brotherhood for making my childhood daydream a reality. I also happen to have the best friends in the world. Thank you for the midnight calls that kept me company during my drive home from the library; the apple music shares and playlists; walking with me when I injured my foot after falling down a hill and giving me rides after an accident totaled my car; allowing me to sleep in your guest rooms and on your couches during my visits; praying with me and dancing with me at stressful moments; the pep talks and tough love; responding to the copious emails, text, and Instagram messages during prolonged study

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A) Charleston

I was in Charleston when the news broke, sitting in my aunt's elongated family room. Charleston was my second home. For six years, my mother commuted from Beaufort to Charleston for work, and my father fulfilled his reserve service at Charleston's Air Force base. Since Beaufort was a great deal smaller, we frequented Charleston to shop and to spend time with family and friends. I was in town for an early morning flight the next day. My visits with my aunt were formulaic: I negotiated conversation with her while watching her watch television, between checking Instagram and Twitter. Our sweet spot of coexistence was interrupted when a phone call elicited an uncharacteristic tone of concern in her voice. The call was from one of her sorors (my aunt is the president of the Beaufort/Jasper alumnae chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., an international African American Sorority founded in 1913), who was Sen. Clemente Pinckney's cousin. She had been summoned from Yemassee, SC, to join her family in Charleston.

I was certain that my aunt's concern was unfounded, and that the news media was yet again sensationalizing a minor dustup. I wish I were wrong. I wish the despair of that night was the dream I hoped it was when I woke up the next day. Instead, the reality became clear after fielding social media, after speaking to my friend whose parents left the church before the assassin's arrival, and after consoling more family and friends than my divinity school training ever prepared me to manage. The slain members were a part of our extended family. The church network among Gullah people of the Lowcountry stretched between Savannah, Beaufort, and Charleston. We all had

cousins in all those cities, and fellowshiped with one another on occasion. This loss cut deep. Rev. Pinckney was one of my mother's former students. The community elders uplifted him as a man with a future as bright as President Barack Obama, before we knew who Barack Obama was. Our extended community had been hit, and would never be the same.

In the subsequent days, I found myself engaged with social media in a way I had never been before. I was comforted by every tweet, international and national call, and email. I combed Twitter and Instagram attempting to grieve and make sense of it all, anticipating which public figures and celebrities stood with us and expressed their thoughts, prayers, condolences, or calls to action. Beyoncé posted a picture; no word from Justin Timberlake yet. My feeling of loss did not compare, but I felt solidarity with Trayvon Martin's parents and other key figures forced to grieve publicly. @Deray became my virtual Lester Holt, offering voice and reason to the pain I sought to understand. I had not lost any family members that night, but I lost the sense of security in knowing that the one place Americans feel secure (churches, temples, synagogues, or any place of sacred significance) was not safe, that the man who was South Carolina's Barack Obama was murdered as he and his congregants extended hospitably to a stranger (a hallmark of our shared faith and Gullah background), that the ghost of racism found an agent to challenge any notion of the post-racial moment that our first African American president symbolized for our community and the world.

I waited and watched for my region's response. I had critiqued the riots in Baltimore and Ferguson, but I now understood. In the moments after we learned exactly what happened, I watched with the world. My friend had already confirmed that the accounts on the news were nowhere near accurate. The death toll was far larger. It was indeed a massacre. Knowing this, I waited for the news to catch up with our reality, and waited for a response. The immediate response seemed appropriate: prayer. News cameras filmed members of Mother Emanuel holding hands, engaged in fervent prayer.

In the days that followed, I thought about it more and more. I thought about the senseless act, the irony of Mother Emanuel's legacy of social justice and a pointed public witness and the horror of the moment. This was no different than 9/11 or gas chambers or any loss of life. Yet, I wanted to see a passionate response. I wanted to see the 2015 version of Spike Lee's "Fight the Power." This was not the time to affirm the generations-old image of the docile African American; this was our time to rise up in the spirit of Demark Vesey and speak truth to power with our anger and presence. This was our time to show Baltimore and Ferguson up. Instead, we marched in peace with Stephen Colbert, almost giving in to what seemed to be a strategic attempt to silence public grief and suppress any uprising. Maybe such strategy was needed to provide a space for activity as we all sought to understand? Unlike Ferguson and Baltimore, the deaths in Charleston were not associated with the police, so I guess the response should not be the same? This is understandable from a leadership standpoint. We needed to avenge Walter Scott, we needed to avenge those massacred, we needed to avenge . . . but how do we avenge the real source of it all, a source so multidimensional and ephemeral that it is intangible yet ever present?

Bringing down the Confederate flag was presented as an answer, yet the flag offered no recourse for the economic injustice experienced by black and brown South Carolinians, the disparities in education and healthcare, or the neo-plantation system that hinders true progress and racial reckoning. It's a reckoning that Edward Baptist welcomes in suggesting that the commodification, suffering, and forced labor of enslaved Africans is what made the United States powerful and rich (Baptist 2014). We needed more than politics; we needed our traditions affirmed and understood. We as a people and a culture needed to be understood. This act by Dylan Roof—like so many others, as President Obama mentioned in his eulogy for Rev. Pinckney—was an act of control to incite fear (Obama 2015). This moment was not new, but was instead very familiar, which means the response that we all saw had been practiced. Faith was built on the understanding of a

larger purpose despite the circumstances. My answer emerged in the subtlest way. It did not present itself immediately or with ease. I came to realize that the act of prayer and forgiveness displayed by the families of the victims was more volatile than any riot or march. It was so familiar that I almost didn't recognize the nature of what was happening. It was Gullah at its best.

B) The Nouveau Gullah

My sister had just returned from her friend's fortieth birthday party in suburban Atlanta, a cookout in the true "southern" tradition. Her college friend, from the US Virgin Island of St. John, initially clicked with my sister Monica and our family upon visiting us in Beaufort, South Carolina. During her visit to Atlanta for the milestone fete, my sister couldn't help but draw a distinction between the southern experience that was projected upon her by virtue of her hometown and graces, and the southern experience she aligned with from our lived experience beyond the outsider gaze. Her brand of southernness was deeply rooted in her identity of being Gullah, an identity she aligns with her friend's Caribbean sensibilities and the values and traditions rooted in our family. My sister communicates the new frontier of Gullah identity.

The Gullah imaginary fits into the framework of the greater southern fantasy of the plantation South. Both the southern and Gullah narratives are far more complex than portrayed in the media and the arts. Pervasive southern motifs malign minorities to static roles of servitude and caricatures that minimize agency, intellect, and achievement. Thus, Gullah people are more often than not only viewed as "Bubba Gump's Mother," the mother of five from the film *Forrest Gump* who cooks shrimp for wealthy white southerners. Paula Deen echoed this vein of the southern imaginary in describing the theme for her brother's wedding, featuring an "entire waiter staff [of] middle-aged black men, [with] beautiful white jackets with a black bow ties" (Tepper 2013). The southern imaginary, as defined by Barker and McKee, presents evocative, over determined, and contradictory impulses and its many critical and theoretical resonances (Barker and McKee 2011).

Barker and McKee cite Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* in constructing the southern imagery's role in film, where the South is as much imagined and represented as it is concrete, as much created and performed as it is organic (Barker and McKee 2011).

In many instances, our reality (both Gullah and Southern) felt like a jovial pastime that the masses “picked up” an exotic identity to engage, critique, and evaluate before “putting down” to returning to normalcy. Philip Deloria (1999) explores the idea of non-Indians invoking Indian culture to live out fantasies based on their limited perception of Indian life. In this vein, the new, or what I term *nouveau*, frontier of Gullah culture is an identity that contradicts images of men and women donning plantation attire, singing spirituals, and speaking in dialect for tourists. It is an identity that is cosmopolitan, yet down-home. It is owned, claimed, and crafted *for us by us*. Across the country, there are young men and women with deep ties to the Gullah region (in this regard South Carolina) and their families, who live out their roots in ways that pay homage to their ancestral foundation, while complicating the pervasive depictions found in the media.

There is Charmaine Bee, a former model turned visual artist and photographer, who creates conceptual art installations and runs “Gullah Girl Tea,” a website selling teas inspired by her grandmother and their shared Gullah heritage. Charmaine is currently a Master of Fine Arts student in Los Angeles. She is also a student of Brazilian and African spirituality, and is inspired by the idea that common practices exist throughout the African Diaspora.

There is Andrea, my best friend from back home, who works as an accountant for the Internal Revenue Service in Atlanta. Like me, she grew up on the church circuit, and speaks to the value of the elders (past and present) in her life.¹ She is a local success story, having earned scholarships to attend college and graduate school, and is married with two kids living in suburbia.

¹ LeRhonda Manigault Bryant explores this specific component of Gullah culture—communication with ancestors—in her book *Talking to the Dead* (2014).

When you peel back a layer, you find that her grandparents—whom she says favored her above her cousins and even her youngest aunt—nurtured her Michelle Obama-esque sensibilities. Andrea most recently attended Beaufort’s tax sale prepared to bid on seventeen acres of property, to keep the land in her family. She is always concerned with how to give back to our island community, and most recently convinced me to present at this year’s Beaufort County Youth Conference.

There is also Soterica, or “Tori,” who is planning her wedding to Samantha. Tori lives just outside of Charleston in Summerville, and is helping to raise her partner’s children. Her home is patterned after our mutual experience growing up on Coosaw Island, where you were welcomed into everyone’s home, never leaving without a meal. Our grandparents bartered livestock, seafood, and crops. Our aunts and uncles were raised as siblings through familial ties. We were baptized at the same time, and experienced the same process of initiation leading up to the religious and communal rite of passage. My grandaunt was her water mother. Tori shows our island’s hospitality to friends and strangers because it’s all she knows, and she now raises her children in the same tradition.

The nouveau Gullah generation retains strong ties to the culture, but in a different manner than the generations before us. Our parents’ and grandparents’ generations wrestled with negative connotations built upon perceptions of backwardness, negative attitudes towards African identity, and external as well as internalized racism. They lived in constant response to the outer gaze from white counterparts, and the inner gaze from African Americans who were either from the area and did not identify as Gullah, or who objectified the culture from outside of the community. Now, it is not uncommon to hear a Gullah phrase used intentionally among the nouveau Gullah generation or to see outward expressions of identity not driven by tourist aims. This nouveau Gullah generation creates and sells t-shirts canvassed with “Gullah Native,” cooks, bakes, and worships in the style of their ancestors, champions the causes and activism relevant to their families and region, and uses art

as an outlet to communicate their values. This identity can be claimed by any individual who wrestles with passing on and living out the traditions of home in places and spaces beyond the region.

What makes a person Gullah? While the answer to this question varies based on whom you ask and which scholarly sources you cite, there are particular things that are easily identifiable: food, faith, and family. My conversations and my fieldwork would suggest that the nouveau answer is that the particular relationship between food, faith, and family is still important, yet in refashioned ways. Practices such as baptism and seeking, the initiation process leading up to baptism in the Gullah Baptist context, socializes youth into a particular type of Gullah identity.

I shared that I joined Andrea as a presenter at the Beaufort County Youth Conference. The conference—created by Mrs. Carrie Major, a local philanthropist and evangelist with strong Gullah roots—is one of the more public institutions with mass appeal founded by a Gullah native. Mrs. Major, as we call her, and Andrea both attended the same church, St. Joseph Baptist Church, or Bethesda. After the conference, Andrea and I visited my Aunt Julie. We entered her house through her back door, a sign of respect, and found her in her kitchen cleaning fish for us to eat. We made no mention of being hungry before arriving (I did ask Andrea, upon accepting her invitation to tag along, if Aunt Julie was going to cook), but the fact that the food was prepared within fifteen minutes of our arrival was not uncommon. It was expected. We sat in her kitchen, talking while she cooked, and recounting our experience—picking up as if we were still kids visiting her as we did in high school. Marcel, Aunt Julie’s son and my god brother, called during our visit: “Your sister is here,” Aunt Julie remarked. Andrea was raised by her mother, Ms. Lillie Legree Harris, and her grandparents, but was “adopted” by Aunt Julie during high school when her cousin and church elder, Ms. Ella Mae, got her a job at Beaufort’s Housing Authority. This led to Aunt Julie adopting Andrea into her family, mentoring her, getting her a second job at the same movie theater where Aunt Julie was a manager, and stepping into the role of mother. What Andrea and I experienced

mirrored my experience in various Gullah households in New York, Maryland, and New Jersey where family members migrated.

We all have several families, or a composite “village,” that supports us and fills in the gaps. When Andrea comes home she will likely stay with Aunt Julie, who considers her a daughter—not *like* a daughter, but a daughter. Aunt Julie and I are not related. She grew up on Warsaw Island, an island connected to the Sea Islands by causeway, and a short boat ride from my native Coosaw Island. Aunt Julie was my Auntie Singie’s classmate (she was Viola by birth, but Singie by Gullah basket name for her knack for entertaining). My Auntie Singie is Aunt Julie’s son Marcel’s godmother, thereby making Marcel my god brother, since we share the same godmother (a fact that I enjoyed growing up as the younger of two). After Aunt Julie’s mother died in the early 1990s, my grandmother “adopted her.” She has the status of a daughter, not just *like a daughter*. She is my aunt. This family dynamic is not uncommon where we are from. At Andrea’s church, the person who takes you out of the water becomes your godparent, thereby granting you what has become known as a “bonus family.” For my parents, when Emily Brooke McIntyre was christened as their goddaughter, she became an extension of our family. Christmas, birthdays, school programs, graduations, and sleepovers were common. What is also common is the extra support she receives when facing life’s challenges. Brooke has a permanent place setting at our dinner table, a spot she occupied the day of her mother’s funeral, when our role of family shifted into high gear. We’ve spent every Christmas Eve and Christmas of our lives together, a tradition that recently has helped our mutual grief. Our parents’ shared values cemented our bonds, but our parents’ commitment to the Gullah approach to family and connectedness made the relationships work. Our shared heritage ties us to our ancestral home and informs how Monica, Charmaine, Andrea, [Cousin Omi, Brooke and so many others show up in the world.

What unites A and B?

Common threads that lead to the same place unite the vignettes. Although different, they speak to the foundational structures of connectedness in a particular community that happens to be Gullah. Familial ties and values, coupled with spirituality, provided a framework to respond to economic injustice and racism. Resistance is at the core of both vignettes, but offers only one approach to exploring the narrative of Gullah people. Spirituality, for example, has long been discussed as a tool of resistance for enslaved Africans. Religious gatherings among African Americans were outlawed in Charleston, South Carolina, after Denmark Vesey's foiled revolt attempt, which led to clandestine worship. Thus, the act and secret organization of worship itself became a form of resistance. However, the centrality of spirituality to some Gullah identities also honors quietude, through prayer and Christian inspired forgiveness, as practices of restraint and discipline. As Americans wrestle with the question of personhood in the face of police brutality, and seek to heal amid a resurgence of racial tensions, the Gullah community offers a timely glimpse into how a people have sustained their identity in the face of challenging circumstances. Gullah identity emerges in three key ways: spirituality; a unique approach to familial bonds; and aesthetic claims to identity that defy/challenge the southern imaginary.

We watched a group of African American men and women praying after the act of domestic terrorism that resulted in the death of nine African American members of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, prompting South Carolina governor Nikki Haley to differentiate Charleston from Ferguson and Baltimore in stating, "In South Carolina, we don't riot; we pray." At first, I took pride in Haley's comment, yet this pride was short-lived, as my frustration took over. Haley's statement communicated a form of passivism and submission that affirmed the trope of the conciliatory southern African American. Although race was not mentioned, Haley overlooked the particularity of the group gathered. The men and women were the progeny of a congregation who mobilized in response to slavery, Jim Crow, and racial injustice. Historian Reginald Hildebrand

(1995) has chronicled the role of the African Methodist Episcopal church in crafting the post-emancipation social agenda for formerly enslaved Africans. These men and women were additionally the progeny of Gullah men and women who crafted a unique and subversive response that was rooted in familial bonds aimed to prepare youth to thrive despite economic and racial injustice. This spiritual, and not merely religious, worldview created a barrier between the lived reality of oppression and the body. Such a unique expression of Afro-futurism transcended the body and physical barriers to creatively embrace the promise of otherworldly reward despite limited means and access.

Gullah people have lived under the gaze of a tourist- and anthropology-driven enterprise that minimizes the agency and advances of the group in favor of the economic interests of the neo-plantation system. Although food, vernacular arts, and religious practices have long defined the culture, the most significant factor in the cultural preservation of the Gullah people is the familial bond—often among individuals who are not blood related. This bond transmits important survival skills to resist the impact of racism, while at the same time inspiring hope.

Another important realm of resistance rests in the aesthetic domain, particularly among the nouveau Gullah generation. The arts offer a path for an aesthetic re-imagination of identity that expands and contradicts projected notions of Gullah community life. Such revision is important because it allows future generations to claim an identity that aligns with new realms of possibility.

My dissertation will explore familial ties, spiritual networks, and the arts as frameworks to understand contemporary Gullah identities. The project will foreground racial and economic injustice as a force that Gullah people have battled for generations. It will also define the outsider gaze as a tool employed by anthropologists and the tourism industry to commodify Gullah identity, and discuss how Gullah people live within and beyond said gaze. Resistance through familial ties is a

construct of the “village” adage taking shape as a means to inform and empower youth to think beyond what might otherwise be a limited perception of their future.

The idea of familial bonds between non-related individuals is integral to understanding Gullah culture. Individual after individual that I interviewed during my field research spoke about the integral role of community members who either served as their godparents, or who raised them in addition to their birth parents. Godparents and "water mothers/fathers" sought to prepare young people for an unjust world, where the black body is a target. The world, as Charleston reminds us, can be a bleak place with limited opportunities. In his book *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates describes a world stymied by police brutality targeting black bodies. For Gullah people, in addition to the beset body, economic injustice, cultural misappropriation, and various other environmental factors impact the prospects for the future. The future is the key theme that binds the Gullah community. Yet hope undergirds the preparation for life in the Gullah context. It was this same hope that inspired members of Emanuel AME to pray, and family members of the slain to offer forgiveness. What makes these Gullah communities unique? Why is the preparation inherent in the seeking and god-parenting relationship so important?

During my season of exploring these questions in light of my research, *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) were fitting conversation partners. I recognized the evolution of Atticus Finch from my own southern experience. Harper Lee offers an honest portrayal of a reality that my community considers a constant. Coates's book was also important. It gave voice to this political moment, and is empowering a generation of young men and women from all backgrounds, but particularly African American, working through their agency in light of police brutality and violence.

However, reading Coates left me yearning for something more. As he offered insight to his son, a strategic approach to address a wider audience, he effectively communicated the reality of

what it means to be African American, and particularly male, at this moment. The fear, concern, and anxiety of his words ring true and clear. However, what seemed to be left off the table was something that was integral to my own experience as a Gullah youth and now Gullah adult. Like Michelle Alexander, I align more with the perspective offered by James Baldwin, who, “in writing to his nephew, does not deny the pain and horror of American notions of justice—far from it—[but] . . . repeatedly emphasizes the young man’s power and potential and urges him to believe that revolutionary change is possible against all odds, because we, as black people, continue to defy the odds and defeat the expectations of those who seek to control and exploit us” (Alexander 2015). I find the missing emphasis on agency through my community’s engagement of the artistic, familial, and spiritual networks to inform, resist, and prepare. When my grandfather crafts a bench, sings a hymn, or makes tea from “life everlasting,” he is engaging in subversive acts passed on to him as a way to transcend and sustain his personhood.²

Gullah communities boast a rich cultural legacy, one colored by resilience and shaped by traditions that suggestively privilege commonalities across the African Diaspora. Gullah descendants, live lives enriched by a singular language, distinct faith practices, and a diet nurtured by tradition and access to waterways. My childhood was spent in the river with my grandfather and father, in worship in the Baptist (as baptized) and Methodist traditions, and in a community defined by the hospitality of countless individuals who enriched my life.

I was born and raised in Beaufort, South Carolina, with familial ties to the Coosaw Island, Sams Point, and Eddings Point (Mary Jenkins) communities. Friendship Baptist Church, located on Coosaw Island, is my family church. My fondest memories include attending events hosted by Penn Center and fellowshiping with our fellow Old Ashley Baptist Church Association congregations at

² Life Everlasting is an herb that is boiled and used to treat common maladies such as colds.

afternoon Usher Anniversary programs (Old Ashley is based on Johns Island, South Carolina). Leaving home to attend Hampton University facilitated a fuller understanding of my unique childhood experience. I visited Penn Center's museum—dedicated to the school founded for enslaved Africans emancipated during the Civil War—the week before my departure to attend college Hampton University. It was at the museum that I learned about the link between Hampton Institute and Penn Center.

In the same period, I was asked to read aloud our church's history at the annual church anniversary program held in conjunction with Brick Baptist Church, the parish located on Penn Center's campus. Unbeknownst to me, I was seated next to Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Browne. Browne was a Hampton and Penn School graduate who was born on Coosaw and held the distinction of being the first African American in South Carolina to be elected to public office since Reconstruction. When I returned to my seat after reading the history, he remarked, "only a Hampton man could read like that." This exchange mirrors the beauty of my childhood. At every turn, there were positive images of support and encouragement. This Hampton/Penn Center link, and my experience with Mr. Browne, validated my decision to attend Hampton, while affirming the work that would become the foundation of my scholarship.

What it Means to Be Gullah

To fully understand the nuances of how Gullah people engaged familial bonds, spirituality, and the arts as forms of resistance, it is important to unpack Gullah identity. For generations, stereotypes and an outsider's gaze have defined the culture for America and the world. Historian Joseph Opala defines Gullah natives as a distinctive group of African Americans from the rice plantation zone of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, where enslaved West Africans from the region now known as Sierra Leone came together in large enough numbers and over a long enough period of time to leave a significant linguistic and cultural impact. Many scholars contend that

geographic isolation and a vibrant community life allowed African American residents of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands to preserve more of their West African cultural heritage than any other group of African Americans. In recognition of this cultural singularity, Congress designated the region extending from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida, as the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in 2006.

Cultural outsiders from beyond the Gullah region have long been fascinated with African Americans in the Sea Islands, and have crafted popular portrayals replete with mysticism, generalized claims of African “survivals,” and the trappings of an often-romanticized plantation South. Ideas and interpretations are projected on a group that is far more complex than is often portrayed. In her book *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (2017), historian Melissa Cooper argues that a constructed romanticized and static view of Gullah culture occupies a dominant space in the American psyche. Additionally, for many Africans and African Americans, the region fulfills a longing for a home in a country where they exist as minorities. Popular representations such as Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess,” Julie Dash’s critically acclaimed film *Daughters of the Dust*, and the “Getaway” episode of the popular NBC sitcom *A Different World* (which featured a visit to a fictional “Devil’s Island,” S.C.), as well as features in such publications as *National Geographic* and *USA Today*, all contribute to characterizations that are at times complex, yet more often alarmingly simplistic and one-dimensional.

A key part of this popular narrative is the claim that Gullah culture is on the verge of extinction. Jordan G. Teichner posted a recent example of this in his 2014 *Slate* article, “A Unique African-American Culture, Hundreds of Years Old, That Could Go Extinct.” Gullah natives do face many obstacles that challenge the retention of their tradition and values. The development of the Sea Islands by non-natives, for example, has displaced many longtime residents, while limited economic opportunities encourage other residents to seek opportunities beyond their native islands.

The complexity of such issues, however, is challenged by simplistic portrayals of cultural life.

Simplified, surface-level representations ignore the deeper currents of Gullah culture, currents that the nouveau Gullah are very much maintaining through their fundamental Gullah sensibilities.

Methodology and Literature Review

“It ain’t go’n’ be like this always.”

The table was our town commons. It facilitated the sacred family time of Sunday evening dinners, and all-hands-on-deck Saturday breakfasts. It was the proving ground for guests pushed into the social dynamic of parties filled with loud kitchen-table talking, spur of the moment meals, and ‘who can out-talk who’ contests that blurred the contours between relatives and fictive kin. It defined family, community, and the transmission of values. It was where my parents, in a *Blackish*³ kind of way, recited Langston Hughes’s *Mother to Son* in unison to my sister and me. In the same manner, they used the table to share stories in dialect, like that about “The Packing House.” Men, women, and children of their generation earned meager fare laboring in the fields, or picking crabmeat at what was colloquially known as “the packing house.” My mother used her experience in the packing house to fuel her own ambition. She recalls a much older cousin, Miss Etta, working alongside her in the air-conditionless warehouse, prodding her with the encouragement that felt like an ephemeral hope—“come on Vernelle, come on Vernelle, ain’t go’n’ be like this always.” She was indeed right; like many in her generation, my mother and father both attended South Carolina State College, and returned to start their careers in Beaufort. However, like most of their peers, including those others who did not gain a post-secondary education, they returned home to wrestle with identity and injustice. On one hand, it was *not* like it always had been. African Americans could now

³ *Blackish* is a half-hour ABC comedy that explores race and identity among African American kids growing up in a predominately white, upper-middle-class neighborhood. The patriarch of the family regularly expresses concern for his children’s true understanding of what it means to be African American in light of their access to, and socialization in, a predominately white context.

engage more of the privileges associated with citizenship and see progress from the packing house days. On the other hand, life was *very much* like it always had been, in that despite advancements, relics of the past still influenced life in the lowcountry.

Stories like “ain’t go’n’ be like this always” are integral to expanding the notion of Gullah people beyond the cartoonish image sold to tourists. My project rests on the effective pursuit of an ethnography of a particular Gullah diaspora. The nucleus of this ethnography is the Sea Islands of Beaufort, South Carolina, with a particular focus on the Frogmore/St. Helena Island community. I am interested in exploring identity and familial bonds among African American Gullah people, both those who currently live among these islands, and those who migrated away from this region to take advantage of professional and educational opportunities. The Gullah community’s relationship to ethnography is complicated. Individuals from beyond our region have manipulated and cast the narratives of Gullah people in unfavorable ways. As a “native son” I embrace my access with caution, being careful to engage my consultants with integrity and approach my fieldwork as a collaborative project. The table remains our town commons, the place where intergenerational dialogue still occurs and community-affirming values are sustained. My ethnography will bring me to *many* tables along the Sea Islands and the greater Gullah Diaspora.

Beyond ethnography, it is important to create a historical context for racial injustice. My project will rely upon primary historical documents and literature about Gullah people, including historical accounts of life on Gullah plantations and resources that address trends within the Gullah Diaspora relating to spirituality, artistic expression, and familial bonds. Fictional accounts like *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin 1935), and “The Getaway” episodes of the popular sitcom *A Different World* (Allen 1990) will buttress my argument about the nuances of Gullah life and shape the discussion about Gullah identity in the popular imagination.

The earliest documentation of Gullah culture in Beaufort was by missionaries and federal agents associated with the Port Royal Experiment that later evolved into the Penn School. These first accounts shaped the outsiders' gaze that has so powerfully come to define the culture; and given rise to resistance. For this reason, the Penn School will ground my discussion of the gaze and the roots of Gullah "otherness." The Penn School served as a community hub for thought, spirituality, artistry, and activism. It is also a common link for the nouveau Gullah generation. Like college and high school graduates who return to their alma maters for homecoming, sea islanders return to Penn Center for the annual Heritage Days Celebration. Penn Center was a focal point of the Civil Rights Movement, and epicenter of the Gullah community's response to injustice.

The early mission of the institution, as described by Willie Lee Rose in *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* (1999), was to solve the federal government's quandary over what to do with formerly enslaved island residents, who had become contraband of war after the Union army captured the area. What emerged as an educational institution aimed at instructing Gullah natives about citizenship later became a school in the model of American Indian boarding schools. Penn also provided an education to island residents, many of whom remained locally engaged. Other residents moved away to join the military, or attended colleges and universities such as Hampton Institute. The emergent relationship between Hampton and the Penn School—who shared a president and chair of trustees, in Hollis B. Frissell—fashioned a Hampton-bound pipeline for area students.

My research builds upon the foundational work of scholars like Guy Johnson. Dr. Johnson, a University of North Carolina sociologist, collaborated on one of the earliest academic studies of the Sea Island community, *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island* (Johnson 1930, 417). Johnson's study helped to frame the outsider gaze that much of this project seeks to unpack. He later highlighted some of the gaps in his project; however his work—albeit unintentionally—offered only one perspective on Sea Island life. It could be argued that the later image-making and identity-affirming

work of Penn Center was in response to Johnson's claims that served as a basis, for better or worse, that shaped early perceptions of Gullah identity. Johnson is not discussed directly in this work; instead, I rely upon more contemporary voices who either cite his work or offer more nuanced approaches to the exploration of Gullah life.

To explore the unique familial ties that created the values upon which Gullah people call, I will draw upon Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1976) and John Blassingame's *Slave Community* (1979), among other sources. Each book offers a glimpse into the dynamics of life among enslaved Africans and the institution of slavery. These resources describe the unique circumstances of plantation life that facilitated the need for and longevity of the sea island's cultural identity. Mosquitoes, humidity, and harsh summer weather led planters to retreat from the coastal islands, leaving enslaved Africans with limited interactions with cultural outsiders. This isolation continued through the early twentieth century, as islands were not assessable by roads and causeways. These histories will allow me explore the relational and systematic dynamics of plantation life, showing how enslaved Africans and their progeny defined community through and beyond the period of enslavement.

It is also important to unpack the source and presence of racial injustice in this region by chronicling specific acts of violence that long predated the Charleston massacre, and that contributed to the emergence of a neo-plantation system that found African Americans working in positions of servitude on the land and in households where their forebears were enslaved. Genovese (1976) begins this work through his exploration of paternalism, casting slavery in light of the institution's economic infrastructure. In *Half Has Never Been Told* (2014), Edward Baptist continues Genovese's work to explicitly explore the neo-plantation system's roots in the success and proliferation of slavery. This economic framework remains prevalent in the rural South. The literature also includes narratives of agency in the face of said injustice, stories of individuals who

mobilized their communities to fashion responses to fear. In this light, it's worth remembering that Beaufort was once considered a mecca for black progress. The Port Royal experiment was promoted as a beacon of hope for African American communities. The political engagement and presence of leaders like Robert Smalls, who achieved the status of South Carolina state senator in 1870, proved that Reconstruction just might work.⁴ In 1874, he defeated P.M. Epping for the U.S. Congress seat representing his southeast South Carolina district. In Smalls's hometown of Beaufort, African Americans outnumbered whites seven to one (Uya 1971). Smalls and many other leaders continue to live in the region's African American oral tradition. Such narratives of agency are important because they challenge the notion of African Americans with limited opportunities, access, and achievement. Smalls's extraordinary achievements speak to worlds of possibility in the region; in so doing, they detract from the commoditized plantation narrative.

As I've already mentioned, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) inspired my project's evolution. I found solace in Coates's words as I wrestled with the tragedy in Charleston; at the same time, however, I was not fully satisfied, because his perspective did not fully represent my experience. I certainly knew fear. I knew the danger attached to the black body. What was unfamiliar was the despair that marked his particular urban narrative. Hope and agency defined *my* experience. My namesake (and paternal grandfather) took his rifle to our town's main street to protest the Klu Klux Klan. He confronted his white neighbor when he mistreated my father, teaching my father that his race did not impede the importance of standing up for himself. Hope came through community and familial ties. Our agency and confidence in the face of injustice is the fruit of past sacrifices that the next generation walks into the future appreciating.

⁴ Folklorist Michelle Lanier created a lineage of what she termed "Gullah Gentry," middle class Gullah people who engage the culture in a particular way that she dates back to Smalls (Lanier 2008).

I hope to expand Coates's exploration of racial injustice to include the solution offered by Gullah people by way of interconnectedness. In doing this, I will call upon such sources as Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949), Melissa Cooper's "They Made Gullah" (2007), and the writings of the Georgia Writers Project (especially *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among Georgia Coastal Negroes* [1940]). These works offer a foundation for Gullah identity at the moment when the culture was becoming a commercial source of fascination and commerce.

The arts provoke and prod the idea of Gullah identity for natives and those beyond the Diaspora. Gullah artisans like my grandfather and bateau maker Deacon Samuel Moultrie drew upon their craft for purposes that were both practical and spiritual. In the later part of the twentieth century, Gullah people started seeing mirror images of themselves in the media. These important contemporary images—as found in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and the Gullah festival as a diasporic convening—cultivated a sense of community and allowed us to consume the culture in spaces beyond our tables.

Spiritual life is also key, as Raboteau outlines in *Slave Religion* (1978), and Lawrence Levine elaborates in "The Sacred World of Black Slaves" (1977). Ras Michale Brown (2012), Yvonne Chireau (2003), and LaRhonda Manigault-Bryant (2014) speak to the contemporary Gullah experience as an exploration of duality and syncretism. Spiritual life as a transcendent agent and subversive protecting force is a key component to understanding the dualities of the Gullah culture and spirituality as resistance. The insular culture consistently engages in dialogue with itself around living within and beyond the veil that Du Bois so eloquently unpacks (Du Bois 1903). In this instance, the double consciousness is trifold, as natives wrestle with various identities. These identities include American Citizenship, African American identity within American citizenship, and Gullah identity within the Southern, African Diasporic, and American contexts. What does it mean to honor your Christian faith while also acknowledging the role of traditional African spiritual

practices? The answer to this question is one of the things that make the Gullah experience so dynamic. This dynamism is key to understanding the roles of the body and spirit in resistance to physical injustice.

Resistance, in its many forms, will be a central theme of my work. I aim to explore how Gullah people, as modeled in Charleston, have long used their faith as a lens to respond to racism and injustice. Raboteau (2004) and others describe the clandestine faith practices of enslaved Africans who fashioned an identity that helped them to transcend their earthly station to achieve a spiritual identity that surpassed enslavement. The Studio Museum's recent exhibit on Afrofuturism, in turn, symbolized a people re-envisioning their future as a mechanism for agency and transcendence. Through language, song, and other practices, Gullah people have long used subversion as an agent to protect, promote, and preserve sanity. They lived under a hierarchy during and after the period of enslavement that Genovese (1969) describes as paternalistic and rigid. The Gullah language facilitated the communication of ideas among community members and a sense of identity that was sacred, insular, and a in resistance to forces of spiritual, physical, and economic oppression. Subversion is as nuanced as spirituals, with double meanings, that helped facilitate the Underground Railroad. The inherent agency found through this cultural understanding was passed on to youth through the seeking process.

The processes of seeking and baptism are not widely discussed in scholarly literature. When they *are* discussed, individuals who had not personally experienced the process, or who had little context for the reverence of the experience, interpret the accounts. Seeking is important for two reasons: 1) it reveals the nuances of syncretism as it plays out in the Gullah religious experience; and 2) it foregrounds the centrality of interconnectedness and community identity as forms of preparation and resistance. Keith Cartwright's *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways* (2013) offers one of the most comprehensive discussions of the seeking process, widening the tradition to discuss other

similar practices in the African Diaspora. Cartwright also connects the Gullah culture to the Caribbean. Manigault-Bryant's ethnographic work in *Talking to the Dead* (2014) contextualizes the voices of community women who share their seeking experiences. The theme of interconnectedness, as it relates to fictive kin and Gullah life, facilitates a wider discussion about family systems and inter/outer family adoption. Turner broaches this topic, but a more in-depth exploration of this idea is key to understanding its centrality in Gullah communities, and thus to redefining the culture beyond its static representations.

Artistic resistance is an important part of my project. I will consult the work of David Driskell (1996) for a broad discussion of the way art acts to define personhood and to show up as a form of protest and resistance to commonly held notions that limit justice and progress. A brief exploration of the Black Arts Movement and the role of the arts in countering racism will advance a discussion of Gullah art forms that do similar work in the South Carolina Lowcountry. This will also offer background for the significance of the artistic expression by the nouveau Gullah generation.

The role of fictive kin in the Gullah context is integral to understanding community dynamics. I broached the idea previously when discussing the work of Williams (2013), Blassingame (1972), and Raboteau (2004). My ethnographic work also highlights the important role of fictive kin in the lives of my consultants, who in their own way privilege relationships with non-blood-related community members who carry out important familial roles. Turner (1973) offers insight into how Gullah familial bonds and structure mirror those in West Africa. Further clues to similar ties can be found in many of the already mentioned sources. Unpacking the role and contours of interconnectedness in the Gullah context will further support the idea of its relation to Gullah resistance.

Chapters

My introduction began by exploring my initial response to the tragedy in Charleston. It also foregrounds the nouveau Gullah generation as my inspiration for exploring Gullah notions of resistance through spirituality, familial interconnectedness, and the arts. What emerges is a framework based upon my literature review, personal experiences, fieldwork, and post-tragedy realizations. The dissertation as a whole puts personal narratives, provocative vignettes, and others' stories in conversation with historical and theoretical literature. The narrative flow set up in this introduction will continue to shape the ensuing chapters. Throughout this work, I argue that Gullah people have used spiritual fortitude, familial interconnectedness, and artistry to define Gullah identity on their own terms while resisting economic and social injustice.

The second chapter focuses on Gullah spirituality as a mechanism of agency that transcends traditional religious tropes to recast spirituality as a portal of subversion. The Gullah language, spiritual practices, and uniquely crafted traditions resist mainstream cultural norms. This resistance was bred by isolation, which allowed the culture to thrive. Gullah culture's formation was necessitated by circumstances germane to the experience of enslaved Africans on the Sea Islands. Reframing the Charleston shooting as a tragedy impacting Gullah people considers the event in light of a community who responded in a manner reflecting their identity, which is rooted in spiritual practice. Such an approach to Gullah identity aligns Sen. Pinckney, a political activist with a vibrant social justice ministry, with Denmark Vesey, an activist from a different era with strong ties to Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Mother Emanuel). The chapter does not see Christian practice as an end, rather it determines how Christianity in the Gullah context can be viewed as a tool for activism with afrofuturistic aims.

Historian Jason R. Young indicates that so much of the Gullah story is based on the idea that the region and the people are stuck in the past, and affirms that, "Sometimes, this past refers to Africa, sometimes to slavery, but it is always backward looking" (Young 2017). Young suggests that

new instances of Gullah culture can open the field in exciting ways. One such “forward looking” discussion explores Gullah identity through an afro futurist lens. The creative act of envisioning and enacting a spiritual dimension to embrace futurity is what links Gullah spirituality to Afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as the intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. Gullah spirituality builds on tradition while providing a framework for activism that allows us to consider a Gullah future focused on liberation and hope.

The third chapter ventures back to my experience as a first grader at Mossy Oaks Elementary, the predominately white school that I attended after my family moved from the Sea Islands onto Beaufort’s mainland. It was a pivotal year, as we negotiated our new life as the only African American family in our neighborhood, new schools, and a new sense of connection to our relatives and community on Coosaw Island and neighboring Sams Point. It was also the year that I joined the church and concluded the process leading up to baptism with my fellow baptism candidate Tori. Our experience opened us up to a new world of mysteries. We completed the process with elders who still respected the spiritual realm of seeking, even though we existed in a Gullah church that sought to embrace contemporary notions of faith. It was also the moment where fictive kin became alive as our respective water mothers stepped up to honor our achievement.

This chapter explores how Gullah people sustain and create familial ties through fictive kinship ties. Coates (2015) outlines the challenges that accompany living in America in a black body, but stops short of offering a solution. In the Gullah experience, we find examples of people who have created a system of familial ties to cope, at first, with enslavement, and then, in the years since, to resist the various incarnations of racial injustice. The role of water parents, godparenting, and rituals such as seeking are investigated as examples of the centrality of family to Gullah identity. Baptism is an important rite of passage that assumes particular significance in the Gullah context. Sea Island Baptist congregations, like the members of the Friendship Baptist Church on Coosaw

Island, took initiates through a process called “seeking” that preceded their baptism. On the surface, this rite of passage—which involved prayer in the wilderness, and dream interpretation by community elders—suggests yet another reflection of Christian devotion infused with African mysticism.

I argue that rituals such as seeking, culminating with baptism, prepared Gullah youth to survive and thrive in a world of known limitations, by culturally infusing them with spiritual fortitude. The ability to transcend. The ability to retreat. The ability to call upon elders, both alive and dead. The entire community played a role in passing these important skills down from generation to generation, thereby affirming the notion of interconnectedness in the face of societal injustice. Baptism also offers a glimpse into the idea of familial ties among non-related individuals. The chapter, in turn, shares how the Gullah community sought to mend these fractures through unique familial network sustained by godparents, water mothers (and fathers), and fictive kin. These ties establish what I describe as the Gullah diaspora.

After exploring the spiritual roots of resistance and establishing the contemporary lens of interconnectedness, the fourth chapter builds on the previous two chapters to unpack yet another—and somewhat less obvious—realm that calls for resistance, the production the art in response to the persistent and controlling gaze of outsiders. The chapter begins by discussing how African Americans have sought to pursue representational justice through the arts, and ends with a discussion of the Gullah image in popular culture. The second part of the chapter focuses on approaches to crafting the Gullah image by cultural insiders and outsiders using *Porgy and Bess*, *A Different World*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Gullah Gullah Island*, and visual artists of Gullah descent to frame the discussion.

Gullah people have been the object of the outsiders’ gaze for nearly a century. What started as anthropological fascination and touristic intrigue evolved into the commodification and of a

people and their culture. The profitability of the southern imaginary led to the objectification of Gullah people. Hence, one finds “Gullah Culture” listed alongside natural treasures and threatened animals as an “endangered species” by *USA Today* (2004). This gaze, as Jason R. Young suggested, suspends the culture in time, and then—in the case of the Gullah—creates economic structures that insure said suspension. This chapter defines the gaze, and then expands Melissa Cooper’s work in *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* to explore the widespread commodification of Gullah culture. A discussion of the Gullah image in the public imagination will catalog the implications of the most pervasive examples (including those invoked earlier in this proposal). This gaze not only frames the experience of those within the community, but also frames that of the Gullah Diaspora. Therefore, individuals who identify as nouveau Gullah live within a world where notions of what their home community is becomes a constant projection of who we presumably *should* be versus the complex contemporary manifestations of who we are.

I argue that the act of artists claiming their Gullah identity—beyond that of a more broadly defined African or African American one—is an act of resistance modeled by nouveau Gullah men, women, and children. “Nouveau Gullah” describes Gullah individuals who claim a strong connection to the Gullah region, yet live their identity beyond the region in ways that contest the power of the gaze. Every day, they face the struggles that their community prepared them to surpass, yet instead of retreating, they draw upon tradition and familial networks (either created to model their home experience, or based in their own family) to gain strength and perspective. Multi-platform artists like Sheldon Scott and Charmaine Bee personify this movement through their artistry. They are creatives who use the arts to raise important questions that expand the perception of Gullah identity in the 21st century. Artists decidedly engage artistic expression, as a way of resisting societal ideas of what their culture “requires” them to be. In so doing, they continue the legacy of their forebears who used creative expression (through spirituality and family networks) to

achieve practical as well as transcendent aims. I argue that spiritual transcendence finds voice in artistic endeavors that continue to play a role in how people in the Gullah Diaspora define community and personhood.

After having a moment to fully sit with the events of 2015's shooting, I found myself back home at my grandmother's table. We had fallen back into the routine that defined every Sunday of my life on Coosaw Island. There is the early morning hustle to prepare for church—only pausing to eat breakfast—and the post-church crescendo of Sunday dinner served at lunchtime. Dinner was where everything converged. The non-church goers show up in their street attire. The Churchgoers enter, peeling off layers so not to tarnish their finery. The family dynamic converges to recount the highlights of the service, exchange local gossip, field phone calls from near and far, and partake in a meal prepared by my grandmother. This routine, one that is more familiar than old, is home. It's a home on the property that has been in our family for more generations than can be counted. My grandfather sat at the feet of his great grandfather on this property, the same way I sit at his. It defines me just as the river and expansive landscape of Coosaw Island just beyond the doors of the family home define me. It also reminds us all of the greater network that defines us as a culture, one that for generations has, in the face of injustice, figured out how to get up another day in hopes that it ain't gone be like this always. The truth was, things would indeed never be "like this always."

CHAPTER TWO: GULLAH RELIGION AND RESISTANCE

“Do you have any thoughts on the shooting?” I prompted my friend Charmaine with measured intrigue. “It’s weird, because I happened to be home. I was in Beaufort (South Carolina) at that time.”⁵

Thus began an extended conversation between two friends with shared Gullah heritage and commitment to the culture’s future. We had known each other since high school and remained good friends despite currently living on different coasts. With this question, the levity that had characterized our reunion up until my inquiry transitioned to a more serious tone.

“Numbness, shock, and fear were my immediate feelings after finding out about the shooting,” she offered between bites. We were sitting outside having lunch at Yuko Kitchen, a quintessentially Southern California eatery in Los Angeles. “Something about being in the South again for the first time in a while, and encountering that sort of violence.”⁶

“What do you mean?” I probed. She recalibrated and continued in a different manner. “I had become used to the very passive racism of the Northeast, which is just as violent as the Southern version, but to encounter that sort of physicality around it. . . .”

The mounting frustration that she, and many of us, had been wrestling with was more than evident as she spoke. “I felt that a lot of my hate and anger was put toward what appeared to be manipulation, as an attempt to exploit Black spirituality and faith traditions to

⁵ Charmaine (friend of author) in personal discussion, May 24, 2016.

⁶ Charmaine (friend of author) in discussion with author, May 24, 2016.

suppress outrage. The goal was to communicate that ‘We are forgiving people, remember that’ . . . What about the conditions that supported this situation happening, or the manner that religion was used to suppress the protests and rage that led to riots in other cities? In the process, the function and significance of spirituality to the community became minimalized despite the dynamic influence of Gullah spirituality on our worldview. The circumstances in Charleston were different. Unlike in Baltimore, Ferguson or New York, the deaths were not at the hands of police officers; however, the deaths were decidedly racially motivated. The outrage Charmaine alludes to is rooted in how the dynamism and complexities of our spiritual practice were minimalized. Is there room for being a “forgiving people” and the expression of the rage, grief, and outrage that stemmed from the horrific act? Our understanding of Gullah spiritual practices would say “yes.” Although the tragedy was recent, the pain was generations old and familiar. Racially-charged violence against Black communities, Mother Emmanuel particularly, was nothing new but just as painful to experience because of the loss of life, the loss of the sanctity of sacred spaces, and the sobering reminder of the fragility of race relations.⁷

We both believe that the future of Gullah people depends on expanding the narrative of who we are, as our conversation about the shooting prompted us to consider. Historian Jason R. Young suggests that the aim should be less about authenticating Gullah traditions and focus more on historicizing and contextualizing the prism of Gullah identity beyond expected norms. In the case of the shooting, forgiveness and prayer were expected without deeper reasoning that could be expanded with greater contextual and historical insights about the role of spirituality in Gullah life (Young 2007, 15).

⁷ The shooting was not the first act of violence against the church. Mother Emanuel AME was burned in 1822 after Denmark Vesey’s attempted slave revolt. The congregation was forced to meet in private after an 1834 law prohibiting black churches from worshiping without white oversight was enacted.

As I aim to craft a discourse that re-imagines Gullah identity, Charmaine, in so many ways, conveys what it means to be Gullah in the twenty-first century. By coincidence, she had relocated to Los Angeles shortly after the Charleston shooting to pursue an MFA. This new adventure emerged after a professional journey that has included modeling, graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago, teaching art in Brooklyn, and traveling around South America to explore Gullah's connection to diasporic spiritual practices. Charmaine's art engages spirituality and personal histories through photography, installation, video, textiles, and herbalism.

With my inquiry, our conversation swiftly evolved beyond the pleasantries of family updates and childhood anecdotes to discuss something relevant to our lives and work from a deeply personal vantage point. The Charleston shooting thrust us unwillingly into a unique opportunity to explore twenty-first century Gullah life through various lenses, particularly the lens of spiritual practice through religion. Charleston is often referred to as African Americans' Ellis Island because approximately 40 percent of enslaved Africans arrived through its port city (Wood 1974, xiv). During the 18th century, three out of four African-born enslaved Africans were brought to Charleston either to be traded or sold (Ashton 2010, 3). The city is also at the epicenter of the Gullah Geechee Corridor, designated by Congress in 2006 to honor the culture's presence from Wilmington, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida. Scholarship on the Gullah community rightfully celebrates robust vernacular traditions based on the notion of subsistence, as Mrs. Georgia Bryant, a Beaufort, South Carolina native who currently lives in Orlando Florida shares:

Oh my goodness there were so many of us girls back then on [Coosaw Island, SC] our little barrier island. As teenagers we had no clue how big the world was because we were so loved and protected, by not just our mother, but everyone on our little island looked out for you. We grew up living off the land and as I've shared with many of you—we didn't have a bridge to the island until 1965. We had to take the rowboat to catch the school bus. (Bryant 2017)

Isolation required community members to depend on one another, to pursue an agrarian lifestyle, and to rely upon the bounty of waterways for food and in part travel. Foodways, material culture,

and spirituality continue to be sustained through the echo of my grandfather's songs guided by the river breeze on Coosaw Island, the cadence of the pressure cooker at Auntie E's house, and the respect that many of us maintain for burial sites and liturgical occasions like watch night service.⁸

Traditional discussions of Gullah life seldom considered the question of futurity.

Envisioning the Gullah community beyond the contours of its 19th-century aesthetic is important to its future because it expands the definition of Gullah identity and celebrates nuanced approaches to engagement. Historian Jason R. Young cites Frantz Fanon's discourse on the danger of experiencing one's being through "anthropologists, historians, missionaries, and colonial agents who devote themselves to laying bare the other," often defining communities, including Gullah communities, through their perceived deficiencies (Young 2007, 13). A re-envisioning that celebrates the best practices of community life, not its deficiencies, empowers Gullah people to move beyond the outsider gaze to control their future.

This chapter focuses on Gullah spirituality as a mechanism of agency that transcends the traditional tropes of a quaint cultural backwardness and endeavors to recast spirituality to function as a portal of subversion.⁹ Being Gullah in itself is an act of resistance. The Gullah language, spiritual

⁸ Local African American Christian congregants gather for an annual Watch Night service on December 31. The service is a roughly two-hour worship experience. At my local parish, the final five minutes of the service are spent in corporate prayer. What is unique about this segment of the service is that a "watchman" is appointed to serve as a time keeper who alerts the congregation about how many minutes remain until the New Year. He is prompted by another parishioner, generally a deacon or male appointee, with some version of the following phrase: "Watchman, Watchman, can you tell me what time it is?" and he responds, "It is 11:58, and all is well." Prayer, testimony, and song fill the first portion of the service, culminating with a brief homily by the pastor. This service is customary and takes a very similar format along the Sea Islands. Similar worship experiences are observed nationwide. Much emphasis is placed upon the idea of "praying in the New Year" surrounded by family and friends. For most of my childhood, I read the Emancipation Proclamation at our parish's service, a tradition promoted by Penn Center in recognition of Emancipation Day, January 1, 1863 when the proclamation was first read in Beaufort.

⁹ Christianity was used as a tool to manage and transform enslaved Africans to benefit the institution of slavery. The relics of such aims are inherent in southern economic and social disparities. To this end, tropes of obedient African Americans in servitude like Uncle Tom, Mammy, or Aunt Jemima occupy a prominent space in the southern imagination while in some instances casting Christianity in a dubious light. Howard Thurman reflects on the role of Christianity in the status of African Americans: "More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World . . . The men who

practices, and uniquely crafted traditions resist norms. It is a resistance bred by the isolation that allowed the culture to thrive. Gullah culture's formation was necessitated by circumstances germane to the experience of enslaved Africans. Reframing the Charleston shooting as a tragedy impacting Gullah people considers the event in light of a community that responded in a manner reflecting its identity. Gullah identity aligns Sen. Pinckney, a political activist with a vibrant social justice ministry, with Denmark Vesey, an activist from a different era with strong ties to Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Mother Emanuel).¹⁰

Forgiveness and prayer are synonymous with the Christian ethos that has defined southern blackness for generations. My work accepts the important role and function of the Christian faith in my community; however, my work also invites other approaches to exploring the topics of faith and community life. How can forgiveness, for example, be seen as a radical act? For many, the act of swift forgiveness was unexpected, given the horror of an incident that many deemed unforgiveable.¹¹

bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery" (Thurman 1949, 13-15).

¹⁰ The shooting took place at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina. Mother Emanuel, as the church is often referred to, was in 1816. It is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) church in the Southern United States. The A.M.E denomination was the first independent black denomination in the United States.

¹¹ Journalist Anthony Bradley suggests that the families set the tone for how others should respond to the shooting: "By publicly forgiving Roof at the outset, the families at Emanuel A.M.E oriented Charleston and the whole country toward love, peace and justice. Their act was a pre-emptive strike against social unrest, more violence and greater racial division. Forgiveness provided an opportunity of lament" (Bradley 2015). Given the devastation, it was hard to contradict any approach led by the people who were closest to the grief. The response was swift, so swift that it shocked many people. The following might explain why, "At the same time, the forgiveness expressed by some surviving family members left as many questions as it answered. Can murder be forgiven, and if so, who has that power? Must it be earned or given freely? Who benefits from forgiveness—the sinner or the survivor? And why do we forgive at all? Is it a way of remembering, or of forgetting?" (Von Drehle 2015). More questions than fitting answers about how to forgive arose. There was also a great deal of awe. Many people were surprised by the public statements rooted in love and faith. *CBS This Morning* anchor Gayle King shared her reaction on her Instagram page: "Relatives of the victims who died during shooting at the Charleston church address the accused killer. HOW are they so gracious and forgiving? Does he FEEL their pain? Does he CARE? My heart hurts and I marvel at their grace" Gayle King (@gayleking June 19, 2015).

The inherent agency and unexpected nature of the families' forgiveness made it radical. In what follows, I engage the community's spirit-informed response as a subversive one, synonymous with how Afrofuturism's African spirituality-inspired futurity merges the past with the future. I define Afrofuturism as a radical space for an African diasporic envisioning of futures and liberation beyond the systematic limitations of racism, economic injustice, and identities crafted from the crucible of prejudice. Afrofuturism leaves room for critique and for multiple Gullah identities, such as those who pray, those who had the urge to protest, and those who embraced the stillness of quietude. The agency inherent in crafting various futures when the future is not certain is revolutionary. In bondage, enslaved Africans used spirituality to envision life beyond forced servitude to cope in a world where freedom was not a reality. I am particularly interested in the intersection of Afrofuturist thought and Gullah spiritual practices, as both engage the aspirational aims of liberation.

I build upon general understandings presented by scholars such as historian Margaret Washington Creel and Georgia Writers Project supervisor Mary Grainger to underscore the formation of the canon of Gullah faith practices. For example, Creel highlights "Gullahs'" limited knowledge of Christianity, favoring "things of the spirit" above the basic teachings about Jesus Christ (Creel 1988, 262). Creel's premise is a starting point to understanding past explorations of Gullah Spirituality. Researchers also refer to "the Gullahs" in a tone that offers little respect for the complexities of cultural origins and practices. My attempt to reconcile the Gullah experience presented in Grainger's *Drums and Shadows* (1940) with a contemporary version is an ambitious undertaking given that so much has changed over the years. What seems within reach is a reframing of the dated exotic characterizations that such publications promote. These early scholarly treatments fail to emphasize agency, intellect, and spiritual awareness that predated Gullah forbearer's entry into the United States. Instead, enslaved Africans are more often than not portrayed as animalistic beings who required the molding and guidance of slave owners and others.

Gullah people existed at the intersection of such attitudes, as the culture represented the ability to build upon African ancestral traditions in the Americas.

I follow in the steps of a new generation of scholars who give voice to Gullah people through enlivened insights, one of whom is Africana and Religious Studies scholar LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant. Her ethnography of South Carolina Gullah/Geechee women explores the interconnection of folk traditions with Christianity (2014). In addition, literary scholar Keith Cartwright's *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways* (2013) tackles the notion of "invisibility" in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to address modernity and the interconnectedness of the trans-Atlantic world. He discusses the kinship between Gullah and the Caribbean, the centrality of spirituality to Gullah identity, and asserts that "the more carefully we consider Gullah/Geechee culture in its Atlantic context, the more we may see a certain cosmopolitanism and far reaching intercultural agency" (Cartwright 2013, 44). Historian Jason Young, to whom I previously referred, explores the presence of the Kongolese in the Lowcountry in what Historian John K. Thornton underscores as a departure from Anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits and Sociologist Franklin E. Frazier's "search for survivals of African life in contemporary America" (Thornton 2009, 129-130). Jason Young delves into African culture at their time of enslavement. He contends that Christianity has been in the Kongo since the 15th century, debunking prior criticism of the Gullah community's limited awareness of the Christian faith (Young 2007, 19). Young's contention also debunks claims that Christianity was introduced to enslaved Africans on Southern plantations. Young argues that African Atlantic religious traditions used faith as a mechanism for resistance. Finally, Ras Michael Brown also looks at West-Central Africa's impact on the Lowcountry (Brown 2012, 79). Young, Brown, and others contextualize Gullah spiritual life in a manner that was omitted from the widespread coverage of the shooting.

Media coverage of the Charleston shooting gave little attention to the cultural context of the slain members of Mother Emmanuel that Young, Brown, Cartwright, and Manigault-Bryant so attentively deconstruct through their work. Instead, Gullah became a metanarrative that contributed to Charleston's sense of place. This sense of place is characterized by the tourist-driven frame of the antebellum South and the narrow views of Gullah crafted within said frame.¹² This sense of place celebrated a community of Christians who upheld their faith despite difficult circumstances. Such an assertion is very accurate, noble and true; however, it is also limiting. The lack of a more complex narrative also underscores the difficulty of discussing the period of enslavement in contemporary times. The descendants of slaves continue to encounter varied disadvantages in a society to which they have contributed but receive a disproportionate economic benefit in return.¹³

Christianity was used as a tool to promote obedience and mount an argument that affirmed the enslavement of Africans, as former slave Charlie Van Dyke recalled: "Church is what they called it but all the preacher talked about was for us to obey our masters and not lie and steal" (cited in Mathison 2001, 299). Van Dyke affirms the fact that God was and remains a central force in the Gullah community. Secret meetings were held in "hush harbors," symbols of resistance and agency where enslaved Africans worshiped on their own terms. Gullah in real time is of the "hush harbor"

¹² Melissa Cooper's *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (2017), explores how folklorists, anthropologists, and the tourist industry crafted and commodified Gullah culture. Cooper argues that Gullah natives have fulfilled the race fantasies of various groups over time based on shaped the perceptions of their distinct connection to Africa

¹³ A tangential example of erasure came to the forefront through recent studies on the impact of the institution of slavery on American colleges. Brown University's former president Dr. Ruth Brown created the Committee on Slavery and Justice to investigate the university's historical relationship to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Since the completion of that investigation, other universities and institutions such as Georgetown have acknowledged how they benefited from the institution of slavery. The book *Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2016) chronicles the role of slavery in buttressing American capitalism. These studies offer evidence for the substantial economic benefit and the resultant disparity and erasure as only recently have said contributions been honored through restorative acts and acknowledgements. Americanist Ruth Mayer, who explores revisionist markings of the Middle Passage, suggests that, "The Gullahs epitomize a central predicament of contemporary African American culture: the fact that black history is both there and not there, evident in countless traces, scars, and memories yet largely submerged when it comes to written accounts and first-person documentations of the past from the viewpoint of victims" (Mayer 2000, 558).

tradition. It is dynamic, not docile; engaged, not passive. The outsider gaze that documented what appeared to be broken English and curious rituals during the 19th century and early part of the 20th does not fully honor the impact of the community's intentional values. The forgiveness offered by the family members was an act of grace and self-preservation. We are living history, a history that will haunt the victims' families indefinitely, and we are a community wrestling with a continuum of rage that tempers forgiveness as an act of Christian justice.¹⁴

The generous and noble acts of prayer and forgiveness in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting became critical moments for Mother Emanuel's members; however, for others the acts symbolized docility and passivity. Deeper contextualization frames the actions as more empowering, as theologian Howard Thurman suggests in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1947), where he employs an argument that served as a basis for the direct nonviolent action approach to activism championed during the Civil Rights movement. Prayer, forgiveness, and stillness were framed by Thurman as empowering actions. Gullah people's spiritual orientation within and beyond this Christian frame speaks to a similar dependence on such power.

The chapter also explores the concept of quietude. Resistance in relation to Blackness is often categorized as visible, dramatic, or outwardly expressive (Quashie 2012, 3). Theorist Kevin Quashie uses the pivotal statement by John Carlos and Tommie Smith, who raised their fists in solidarity with the Black Power Movement at the 1968 Olympics, to underscore the power of quietude. Carlos and Smith's public statement was visible, silent, and had a solemnity marked by

¹⁴ The shooting was rooted in hate, the antithesis to the values that the victims sought to share with the world, yet the victims' family members found the dignity to do just that. Their forgiveness helped to quell potential uprisings and gave the world a model to follow. However, it was tough for me to digest so quickly. It was indeed the appropriate and the right thing to do, but the loss and multi-level assault on so much that was sacred to me and others made the act of forgiveness a complicated matter. Nadine Collier, a family member of one of the victims, noted that she learned that "forgiveness isn't weak," at the shooter's bond hearing. "It's not resignation or a duty done begrudgingly. And it is not easy" (Smietana 2016). Although the gesture of forgiveness was discussed, not all of the family members felt that his life should be spared. Gracyn Doctor, considered the act of forgiveness more of a work in progress, "You are Satan. Instead of a heart, you have a cold, dark space," Doctor said at Roof's sentencing (Tribune News Services 2017).

bowed heads resting in a posture synonymous with prayer. Quashi argues that there is a prayerful sovereignty within moments of quiet political defiance. The aftermath of the Charleston shooting showcased a similar type of unconventional resistance that was visible yet relied upon inner strength: a public and visible circle of prayer with men and women with bowed heads, like Carlos and Smith, as well as their equally visible statements of forgiveness. Gullah can be championed as a thread of black resistance that is not solely outwardly expressive, but inward and intimate. It is through such a paradigm shift that we can begin to embrace the futurity of life beyond resistance, beyond the confines of dated dimensions of cultural identity. The notion of outward resistance and the quietude of prayerful sovereignty speak to the existence of multiple Gullah identities.

I am interested in the thin line that scholar of religion Yvonne Chireau contends exists between religious fervor and the supernatural (Chireau 2006, 56). This space invites an exploration of Christianity in the Gullah context that reaches beyond the contours of what Charmaine referred to as Gullah people being a “Forgiving people.” Chireau expands the idea of Gullah religion within her larger exploration of the African American conjuring tradition, taking it beyond this one-dimensional designation. She highlights healing traditions, the Gullah rite of passage referred to as “seeking” (which will be explored in depth in the next chapter), and the supernaturally charged subversion of Gullah Jack. Denmark Vesey’s co-conspirator Gullah Jack, referred to as the “religious embodiment of the movement,” mobilized Gullah natives (Chireau 2006, 66). Jack’s role called upon a thread of the Gullah experience that challenges norms to view spiritual practice as a tool for liberation.

Thus, Gullah religion is spiritual, subversive, and futuristic. It is evident that every person who identifies as Gullah is not Christian; however, given that the shooting occurred within a

Christian context, the chapter will focus on Christianity.¹⁵ I am going to focus on three aspects of Gullah faith: its spirituality, its subversive nature, and its futuristic orientation. Christianity in the Gullah context becomes a dynamic portal of communication with the spirit world and nature and offers a keen understanding of place within the greater narrative of humanity. God is enacted and encountered in a particular way. This spiritual consciousness is evident through worship and the seeking process of church initiation that calls upon youth to spend time praying in the wilderness. It was also a key factor of faith for enslaved Africans who were physically bound by the institution but found freedom through a spirit that could not be bound. Through Christ, they would find freedom and liberation.

Gullah religion has been engaged as a tool of subversion. I define subversion as a real-world engagement with the divine whose aim is not wholly apparent beyond the outsider gaze. Religious subversion, the undercutting of the power and authority of a system or institution such as slavery, was used by enslaved Africans and their progenitors to fashion physical and spiritual liberation beyond bondage to accomplish the strivings of liberation theology.¹⁶ One example of the use of subversion is the spirituals that allowed enslaved Africans to communicate coded messages. The institution of the African American church is a place of worship but also one of sustained personhood and identity to support the goal of liberation. Such a duality is not underscored enough. The church could be a community center, food pantry, and a strategic headquarters. Gullah culture,

¹⁵ There is evidence that Christianity was not the lone faith tradition among the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, where the Gullah Culture thrived. Sylviane A. Diouf points to Muslim names in the Sea Islands and the opening prayer by a Muslim woman in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* as divergent indicators of the presence of Islam in the region. She also cites Lorenzo Dow Turner's hypothesis about the Arabic origins of the word "shout," derived "shaut," which references the presence of Islam in the Sea Islands (Diouf 2013). Diouf and Turner not only affirm the presence of other faiths among the Sea Islands but also the creolization of Gullah faith traditions. This encourages a wider view of Gullah spiritual practices to consider Gullah people in a more dynamic frame of references.

¹⁶ Liberation theology offers an interpretation of Christianity from the perspective of the poor. In *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), James Cone, arguably the father of contemporary liberation theology and the foremost scholar of Black religion, defines the field as a "theology of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment."

with its complex spiritual practices, language, and customs cannot be taken at face value. The insularity of the Gullah community created a dynamic where spiritual practices had a particular meaning among Gullah people, one that was not readily apparent to individuals outside of the community.

Finally, Gullah religion can be interpreted as being focused on the future. The future is the end of what DuBois might refer to as our “spiritual strivings.” Subversion always has a goal. Enslaved Africans including Frederick Douglas leveraged their literacy to attain freedom. The notion that life exists beyond oppression creates a tangible purpose for the spiritual fortress promoted by Gullah spirituality. The ability to transcend physical and mental harm, the ability to engage tradition to prepare future generations, and the ability to create a dimension of existence that is both innovative and creative in spirit achieves a form of futurity that looks beyond the present to a hopeful beyond. An Afrofuturist reading of Gullah religion considers the futurity of a culture.

The complexity of what I aspire to achieve is framed by my friend Charmaine’s shock and anger. Resistance, as an enduring coping mechanism became particularly relevant in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. What does the Gullah community’s response—most visibly noted through the prayer circle documented by news cameras and later through the voiced forgiveness—reveal about the values and traditions of Gullah people in the 21st century? Should the public displays be embraced at face value, or are they better investigated as subversive acts rooted in the particularity of intentional spiritual practice? I contend that the latter is the case, and in developing this argument, I will strive to add nuances to the idea of Gullah life in the 21st century. Is it also fair to consider that particular acts are representative of Gullah people? It could be argued that any Christian community, albeit an African American community in this instance, would have a similar response. The burden then becomes teasing out what is definitively Gullah or at least what is unique about Gullah people in this instance. Historian Margaret Creel suggests that if community was the basis or substance of

Gullah life, spirituality was the superstructure upon which the foundation was posited (Creel 1988, 4). To understand the fullness of the Gullah experience in the 21st century, it is imperative to foreground the centrality of spiritual practice through and beyond the context of religion.

As our conversation continued, Charmaine reflected on Mother Emanuel's pastor, Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney. We were both working through complex feelings in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. Charmaine's reflections took me back to my childhood and to my own memories of Rev. Pinckney. She went back to the evening of the shooting as she sat with her family members: "And to hear stories from my mom and aunts, about 'Oh, I heard him preach that one time,' or 'Oh, he was a wonderful man.'"

"He was indeed a wonderful man," I thought, and not merely in the polite frame often cast upon the dearly departed. My parents presented Pinckney to me as a role model when I was younger. He was an achiever by every definition of the word, and I vividly remember having trouble pronouncing his first name. He was a staple of my mother's youth job training program, which was comprised of young men and women from my native Beaufort and Jasper counties.¹⁷ Even as a teen, he distinguished himself with a dignity well beyond his years. He did everything early. He graduated from school early, became a minister in the AME church early, and climbed the political ranks of state government earlier than many expected. Pinckney's ascent led to comparisons to forbearers

¹⁷ Beaufort County, South Carolina, has a population of around 180,000, with African Americans comprising 20 percent of that population (U.S. Census Bureau). In *Black Majority: Negroes in South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1996), Peter H. Wood contends that "the population of one of the thirteen colonies [South Carolina] was well over half black at the time of the nation's independence" *Black Majority: Negroes in South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), xvi. This majority, facilitated from Charleston's port and the region's dependence on enslaved African laborers, transitioned into what scholar Robert Bland describes as a Black renaissance of political, cultural, and social leadership led by men such as Robert Smalls (Bland 2015).

including “the Gullah Statesman” Rep. Robert Smalls.¹⁸ Pinkney was our community’s Barack Obama before President Obama was widely known.

Like me, Charmaine was in the South Carolina Lowcountry the evening that Pinckney and the others encountered the unexpected. She stated that,

It’s weird because I happened to be home. I was in Beaufort at that time. It was when I was transitioning to move to California. I had gone out for a late-night dinner at IHOP with my sister, her kids, and my aunt. My sister’s blood sugar was out of control, so we were trying to figure out how to balance her blood sugar. My aunt looks at her phone and said, “Oh my God! There was a shooting at a church in Charleston. Nine people died! That’s a shame—they went in that church and shot those people up. (Bee 2015)

As Charmaine paused to gather her thoughts and emotions, I shared my account of getting the news at my aunt’s house and living the experience in through national news outlets, text messages from friends near and far, and social media. Reactions to the shooting unfolded in real time thanks to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Hashtags such as *#prayforCharleston* and *#charlestonshooting* dominated my feeds. At first the shooting felt distant. I was in North Charleston, the site of Walter Scott’s shooting months before. Now another shooting captured the attention of the country, this time downtown at a black church located at the epicenter of an affluent white community. It is important to note the distinction between the location of Scott’s shooting and that of the Emanuel Nine, a true personification of the variance between church and state.¹⁹

Hearing Charmaine’s memories took me back to that night and how I felt reading the tweets and following the story beat by beat. There was a strange power in engaging the story as it unfolded through social media posts and news coverage. Unlike following past shootings at San Bernardino, Fort Hood, or Newtown, I now found myself intimately connected to the event and feeling raw,

¹⁸ Robert Smalls is a Civil War hero from Beaufort, South Carolina. He delivered the confederate ship *Planter* to Union forces on May 13, 1862. His act of heroism led to his freedom. He went on to serve in South Carolina’s State House and the United States Congress.

¹⁹ Walter Scott, a United States Coast Guard veteran, was fatally shot eight times in the back by North Charleston Police Department officer Michael Thomas Slager on April 4, 2015, in North Charleston, South Carolina.

rudderless, on an endless waterfall with no solace in sight. As I figured out how I felt, the tweets offered me community and a reminder that although I felt alone, I was not alone in my despair and questioning of why this was happening.

I did not share my memory of the tweets with Charmaine. I attempted to keep the details of my experience limited so as not to interrupt the organic flow of our conversation. It was evident that the trauma of the event lingered, as we both acknowledged the challenge of discussing such a devastating situation. Theologian Serene Jones suggests that the impact of traumas like the Charleston shooting cut deeply into our minds, and although physical healing appears sufficient on the surface, the deeper emotional toll lingers and expands (Jones 2009, 13). Jones notes that gatherings like the Bible study that the slain members of Mother Emanuel attended function to mend such wounds. Although peace marches and walks abounded, there was a subconscious air of disquiet that was not easily penetrated. The sanctity of safe spaces was no more.

Bible study at Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina, starts promptly at 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday nights. The Bible is the draw at this weekly gathering attended by Christians of various denominations, class, and ethnic backgrounds who convene to fellowship and advance their knowledge of what many refer to as “the Good Book.”²⁰ It is a space to check in with family and friends. It is a space to pray, a space where the foundation of so many church communities is laid.

The church is positioned prominently in downtown Charleston’s historic district, a district that, over time, has rebranded itself as a tourist destination synonymous with international brands including Spoleto Festival USA, the George Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess*, and architecture

²⁰ For African Americans, there is a deeper significance beyond the spiritual merits of the Bible. The Bible was a vehicle to literacy for enslaved Africans and helped mount a moral argument against enslavement (Williams 2009, 23). It also presented an allegory of hope in the story of the Israelites, who were enslaved like the forebears of Mother Emanuel, yet reached freedom and the “promised land” (Dubois 1903, 10).

reflecting *Southern Charm*.²¹ The district's boundaries contour a racial and class divide that is simultaneously invisible and poignant. Historian Peter Hinks likens Mother Emanuel's building, built by Charleston's free and enslaved blacks, to a symbol of black resistance to white hegemony and a reminder of the collective aim of freedom

Methodists of African descent, like the members of Mother Emanuel, have long enjoyed unique autonomy in Charleston. The African Methodist Episcopal denomination was founded in 1794 by Richard Allen (Newman 2008, 14). In 1817, the Charleston African Association was founded as a distinct body that established churches separate from the White congregations, among them Mother Emanuel (Creel 1988, 149).²² President Obama captured the presence and significance of Mother Emanuel in his eulogy for Sen. Clementa Pinckney:

Mother Emanuel is, in fact, more than a church. This is a place of worship that was founded by African Americans seeking liberty. This is a church that was burned to the ground because its worshipers worked to end slavery. When there were laws banning all-black church gatherings, they conducted services in secret. When there was a nonviolent movement to bring our country closer in line with our highest ideals, some of our brightest leaders spoke and led marches from this church's steps. This is a sacred place in the history of Charleston and in the history of America. (Obama 2015)

Months after the shooting, I visited Mother Emanuel for Watch Night Service. I recall Mother Emanuel's white edifice being hard to ignore. I expected to meet a congregation in solemn contemplation and was surprised to enter a sanctuary filled with spirited song and the hope of renewed faith despite the circumstances. I ventured down to the fellowship hall to use the restroom just before the beginning of prayer. The sanctuary's wood paneled fellowship hall is where Bible study was held on June 17. The fellowship hall is on the ground floor of the building, one floor below the sanctuary. The pastor's office is also on this level. As I made my way through the

²¹ *Southern Charm* is a Charleston-based reality show that chronicles the lives of seven affluent white men and women who live in the city. The series premiered on March 3, 2014 on the Bravo cable network. The show prominently features Charleston's historic architecture and allure with little mention of the city's rich diverse cultural landscape.

fellowship hall, I felt the room's eerie spirit of tragedy mixed with the joy of church gatherings, community dinners, wedding receptions, and the many memories created in it, a place dedicated to the goings-on of church life. It is the church's commons, a family room in the house of the Lord, where paths cross with intention, and time is spent with discerning care. It also held the spirit of activism present during the organizing that led to its racially charged destruction in the 1830s and of the fortitude to sustain and transcend. Church leader and activist Denmark Vesey walked its halls, using biblical prophecies of deliverance to plan his historic slave revolt with the help of Gullah Jack.²³ He mobilized members under the cover of Bible studies (Robertson 2009, 129).

As I mounted the steps to rejoin the first Watch Night Service since the shooting, I considered the fact that I never anticipated that Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney would capture my attention in my adulthood as he did during my youth. Throughout my childhood, I had been encouraged to emulate Rev. Pinckney in the same manner some parents today might encourage their children to model themselves after LeBron James or Venus Williams, a common practice in the Bible belt where role models from the church were privileged over pop culture icons.²⁴ The news of his death hit home, and sent shock waves through our community. Like other heroes, he died in service. Beyond our personal connections to individuals impacted by this senseless act, he and the eight other parishioners joined a litany of black death at the hands of what many described as racially charged actions. The best way to describe how I felt was fatigue. Hashtag fatigue, grief fatigue,

²³ Denmark Vesey bought his freedom for \$600 in 1799 after winning \$1,500 in the lottery (Johnson, 2001, 916). He was a carpenter and leader at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church where he paralleled the plight of his community members with the story of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Charleston repressed the AME church in 1818, a leading factor in the enslaved African rebellion that Vesey and others planned to take place on June 16, 1822. With the support of 9,000 enslaved Africans, they planned to burn Charleston and kill the city's white inhabitants. The plan was revealed, and Vesey was hung along with 36 co-conspirators.

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates argues in his piece "Delusions of Grandeur" (1991) that, "In reality, an African-American youngster has about as much chance of becoming a professional athlete as he or she does of winning the lottery. The tragedy for our people, however, is that few of us accept that truth." Pinckney was a model who challenged the notion that success for African Americans was confined to sports and entertainment, which is a critical component of understanding the ethos of the community.

fatigue from frustration of the injustice of it all. There was a psychic toll that became a burden from the news of yet another tragedy that seemed to emerge every week. I wrestled with the subtleties of our shared Gullah influences, our shared Christian faith, and of how both informed our community's response to the tipping point of generations of racially motivated violence that occurred on June 17, 2015.

Charmaine's reaction and my own reaction intersected at the point of wanting some target for what we were feeling, even though it was nearly a year later, even if our understanding of the shooting's cause was unspeakable, unspoken, or unexplainable.²⁵ The world felt more like 1956 than 2016. We were living a future that our forbearers fought to eradicate. Yes, advances were evident and abounded, yet the tensions that once lined the pages of our high school American history books now filled our newsfeeds and comprised the content of the 24-hour news cycle. The tragedy that became the focus of our shared trepidation reflected a space that theologian Howard Thurman presents as the challenge of Christianity in the African American context: "What, then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs *against the wall*?" (Thurman 1949, 13). Like us, the victims had a relationship to Christianity, yet they met an unfortunate fate that affirmed the limitations of a faith that exists in a world where African Americans and others find their backs against the proverbial walls of racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic injustice. Thurman argues that Christianity is at its best at such a moment. Yet as Charmaine and I sat together, comforted by the crisp Southern California air, our spirits were still working to embrace Thurman's notion, despite his idea appearing to be the option that our forbearers had leaned into for generations.

²⁵ My use of "unspeakable and unspoken" pays homage to Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" (1988), in which Morrison examines, in part, the African American influence on the American literary canon by shaping the "choices, the language, the structure the meaning of so much American literature". Morrison holds this influence in tension with what it reveals about American society. In a similar fashion, I am intrigued by the influence of Gullah people on American life and in this chapter what can be gleaned by the spiritual practices of my community in the face of tragedy. Morrison appears to raise a quandary over attribution, whereas my concern builds upon that to explore the contours of the trauma that resides beyond the quandary.

What came next surprised me, because Charmaine then gave voice to a feeling shrouded in personal guilt:

Charmaine: I felt that a lot of my hate and anger was put toward what appeared to be manipulation, as an attempt to exploit black spirituality and faith traditions to suppress outrage.

Me: I didn't want folks to burn down the city, but I wanted some outlet for grief, anger, some type of emotion. It felt like a muting.

Charmaine: It was a muting. I feel like that is the perfect answer.

Me: Was the flag coming down a strategic way to quell an uprising?

Charmaine: What about the conditions that supported this situation happening? What about Pinckney's political positioning? Things were being called into question, and that conversation was unmuted.²⁶

Charmaine was ultimately unsettled by a sermon focused on forgiveness delivered on the day after the shooting at a church in Beaufort when we were all seeking to make sense of what had happened. She and I were both raised in a Christian tradition that championed the centrality of forgiveness, and in this instance, it appeared to be an act to preserve sanity. For Charmaine, it was deeper, "I had to go," she recalled, "I sat through the prayer out of respect, but ultimately, I had to leave because I was disappointed, angry, and frustrated by this rush to forgive that is a historical pattern in our community, and in that space. But this space was also historically used to activate and to charge and to strategize."

We shared a common frustration but had different reactions. My initial reaction was compounded by the image of prayer that, coupled with the forgiveness granted by the victims' family members, has since defined the aftermath of the shooting. I prayed, but I wasn't sure if I could forgive. Over time, I embraced what I soon deemed to be the bigger picture. This acceptance was a gradual process laden in heartache. Both acts were admirable, but, as Charmaine and I

²⁶ Charmaine (friend of author) in discussion with author, May 24, 2016.

discussed, they felt too soon, too familiarly docile; more pointedly, they appeared to be ineffective methods to assuage the pain.²⁷ It was important for the community to come together, but questions still remained about the hatred that precipitated the event. There was also the deeper, unacknowledged narrative; the muting or lack of acknowledgment of the Gullah influence by media reports from Charleston spoke louder than words.

Prayer as an act of worship for a community that was previously banned from worship, is rooted in a spirit of historical defiance. However, a connection between said defiance and resistance is not as legible as contemplating the responses to the shooting as not monolithic but multi-dimensional expressions of Gullah identities. Forgiveness and prayer were not the only responses; nor were they agreed upon by everyone. Sharon Washington Risher, for instance, is an ordained minister who is a member of Mother Emanuel. As a Christian, her faith teaches about the power of forgiveness. However, after losing her mother, a friend, and two cousins in the shooting she realized that she was less receptive to such a utopian view of faith: “I was shocked, I was angry, thinking, ‘how could this be?’ Forgive? Who had time to even digest what had happened,” she recalled. “I

²⁷ The idea of docility has long been associated with African Americans particularly in discourses about the South. Although since been debunked by more contemporary scholarship, the following stereotypes were associated with enslaved Africans in the antebellum South: “the typical plantation slave was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and sealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration” (Frederickson 1989, 206). These stereotypes and others helped to define the southern image of African Americans in films such as “Gone with the Wind,” and was even reflected in more recent films like “The Help” that featured African American women with limited agency beyond what their white female counterparts bestowed. Another example is provided by notable author Harriet Beecher Stowe who asserted that “Negroes were confessedly more simple, docile, child-like and affectionate than other races” (Stowe 2015, 25). In *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987, George M. Frederickson argues that Stowe’s appraisal of enslaved Africans, and likely freed men and women, pinpointed their ripeness for childlike evangelical piety (Stowe’s appraisal in this instance transforms figures like Uncle Tom into the personification of the “facility for forgiveness,” “gentleness,” and a “childlike simplicity of affection.” Conversely, the image of animalistic African descendants capable of beast-like violence was also prevalent.²⁷ Journalist and activist Ida B. Wells was involved in the issue as it related to the lynching of black men that was in response to this notion. She found that the source of the issue was what Ava DuVernay would later describe as the post slavery criminalization of African Americans (DuVernay 2016). In *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells* Barnett (1991), the author states, “No other news goes out to the world save that which stamps us as a race of cut-throats, robbers and lustful wild beasts. So great is Southern hate and prejudice, that they legally hung poor little thirteen-year-old Mildred Brown at Columbia, South Carolina” (Wells-Barnett 1991, 44). Such ideas remained synonymous with the identity of enslaved Africans and later of African Americans in the South. Thus, in the aftermath of the Charleston Shooting, a racially motivated event impacting southern African Americans, the dominant image making by the media at times fell into traditional tropes.

wanted and needed people to know that that wasn't how everybody felt. Here I am, a woman of the cloth, talking about there is no instant forgiveness for me. I wanted time to process my thoughts and be authentic about what I felt" (Muskick 2018).

The grief was still raw when the family members' public witness of faith set the tone for the Charleston community and world. The act was moving, yet sparked a meaningful discourse on the ritual of forgiveness and its relation to racial injustice in America. Risher was not quick to embrace forgiveness. She presents the important fact that not everyone felt like forgiving, and that to forgive was not the only Gullah response. Rather, to ease into forgiveness was human, an act that tangibly critiqued the racialized structures that used forgiveness as a tool, as writer Roxanne Gay suggests:

What white people are really asking for when they demand forgiveness from a traumatized community is absolution. They want absolution from the racism that infects us all even though forgiveness cannot reconcile America's racist sins. They want absolution from their silence in the face of all manner of racism, great and small. They want to believe it is possible to heal from such profound and malingering trauma because to face the openness of the wounds racism has created in our society is too much. I, for one, am done forgiving. (Gay 2015)

The shooting unearthed past manifestations of racism, and tacitly used forgiveness as a mechanism to assuage the situation without a deeper exploration of the wombs that tragedies like the shooting uncover. Gay, who honors the choice not to forgive, links the shooting to America's traumatic racist past that sought forgiveness for slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, and microaggressions (Gay 2015).

The prayer echoed longstanding perceptions of African American docility, which contrasted with the violence seen in other cities. Negative stereotypes have long been associated with being Gullah. LeRhonda Manigault -Bryant shares the view of one of her consultants, Lucille, who distances herself from her Gullah ties because of what LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant equates to negative associations with the use of "Gullah" and "Geechee." Manigault-Bryant notes that the term

“Geechee,” which was traditionally used to distinguish inhabitants of Georgia from South Carolina, was also used as a pejorative that characterized Sea Islanders as primitive, backward, slow, and country. Gullah religious practices were also negatively stereotyped. These stereotypes were exacerbated by the tragedy that put the church, the community, and its people under a microscope--even if they were not readily identified as Gullah.

Living within the vortex as an insider processing outsider perspectives brought its own challenges. I resolved my frustration by allowing any reaction to the shooting by community members near or far to reveal deeper truths about my own Gullah identity. Charmaine shares this spirit; however, I will conveniently use her decision to leave the aforementioned worship service to give voice to an alternate view. Before doing so, it is important that I frame her actions as sincere and far more complicated than I can ever adequately communicate. Like Charmaine, many around the country felt unsettled by the idea of swift forgiveness because of the gravity of the offense. However, the majority of the criticism came from beyond our community.

Most people do not associate Charleston with the Gullah, yet the city’s tourism industry promotes the culture heavily, as evident upon arriving in the “holy” city. Despite the influence of Gullah culture on Charleston, responses to the shooting were generalized to the southern frame of Black Christianity. For Charmaine and me, our response primarily stemmed from our ties to Gullah as our cultural identity. The gaze that has long held the Gullah experience in a suspended static narrative, the gaze that has long presented a monolithic view of African American religiosity in the Christian context, the gaze that oversimplifies so much of the southern experience, found a ripe target in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. Forgiveness fit into a comfortable narrative framed by a classic stereotype.

This frame appeared over and over. The gaze was so focused on Charleston as an historic city, the omission of any mention of the Gullah influence on the community and Lowcountry was

faint at best. It was erasure of the context of the people and the full narrative that built the city. Media expert Ruth DeFoster notes that the four key frames that emerged from the coverage of the shooting were as follows: (a) a narrative that emphasized that the shooting had violated the sanctity of the black church in a context of a deeper American legacy of racism, (b) a narrative that emphasized the unforeseen and tragic nature of the event, (c) a narrative that reignited the debate over the Confederate flag, and (d) a narrative put forth by Fox network that framed the shooting as an act carried out by a “spiritually sick” individual who had been a product of America’s ostensible embrace of evil culture (DeFoster 2017, 141-143). The discussion was global, focusing on the general themes like “the black church,” and “racism.”

In this moment of grief, I consulted various articles to gain insight into how the media was portraying the shooting. I happened upon two pieces in *the New Yorker* by the publication’s editor, journalist David Remnick. The pieces appealed to me because they broached the ideas of black liberation and resistance. For this reason, I often cite Remnick in this chapter. His writing helped me process many of the key components that I thought about during this season, while also offering a perspective that diverged from standard tropes to explore more nuanced views of our community. Remnick’s pieces “Charleston and the Age of Obama” and “After Charleston” cast the tragedy in a context of southern politics, race, and resistance.

Gullah native and painter Jonathan Greene suggests that it is easy to neglect the Gullah narrative in Charleston, a city so enthralled with its plantation aristocracy that it has neglected to celebrate its black heritage or Gullah culture (Stodghill 2016). Beneath its core, the city is a reminder of a brutal chapter of American life, as a *New York Times* feature explored. Charleston exists in the shadow of Jim Crow and Ku Klux Klan violence, and like other southern cities, was sustained by slave labor for nearly two centuries. Despite this paradox shouldered by Charleston’s African

American community, the city enjoys a legacy defined by cobblestone streets, Gothic-style churches, Greek Revival storefronts, restaurants (like those most recently featured on the Emmy award winning cable show *Top Chef*), and five-star hotels. This image coupled with the narratives of the “black church” and “racism” defined the coverage, which rarely mentioned Gullah people (Stodghill 2016).

The aftermath of the shooting was, in part, soothing. “President Obama was swept up by the feeling during his eulogy for slain Emanuel pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, and shifted into song: “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .*” Blacks and whites filled the miles-long Ravenel Bridge in a show of unity, and within days the most contentious public symbol of South Carolina’s Civil War past, the Confederate battle flag, was removed from the state capitol grounds with relatively little of the controversy that had surrounded it for decades” (Drehle, Newton-Small, Rhodan 2015). The most poignant moment occurred at the shooter’s arraignment. One after one, the victims’ family members offered forgiveness to the shooter:

You took something very precious away from me,” Nadine Collier, the daughter of Ethel Lance, said, addressing the accused. “I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. But God forgives you and I forgive you.” Myra Thompson’s husband said, “I forgive you and my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most: Christ. So that he can change it, can change your ways, no matter what happens to you, and you’ll be O.K (Izadi 2015).

Family members wanted to quell any potential uprising or chaos. They were living out their faith in a manner that aligned with the values of Mother Emanuel and Rev. Pinckney. Yet I also suspect that forgiveness was very much an act to allow them to move forward and beyond the traumatic moment.

Rev. Darby, pastor of Morris Brown AME in downtown Charleston, echoed the idea of the muting that Charmaine and I discussed. Charleston is a city “infected with raging politeness,”

according to Rev. Darby. He also found the city to be “relentlessly courteous to the point that no one’s doing much of anything” he said, “courteousness is emblematic of the South. It’s a tradition draped in the antebellum lost-cause stuff, the old Southern chivalrous tradition, and it depends on an African-American population that has to go along to get along” (cited in Remnick 2015). Despite strides to quell unrest, there was an undercurrent of dissent, albeit metaphysical, brewing. Public intellectuals and citizens alike voiced discomfort with the rush to forgiveness. Some invoked the spirit of German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a champion of resistance to Nazi Germany, who wrote about the limitations of what he termed “cheap grace” (Bonhoeffer 1937, 44).” One such exchange occurred in a twitter exchange between writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and sports journalist Jamele Hill.

Coates also highlighted the issue of cheap grace: “Still a lot of talk about how moved folks are by victims’ sense of ‘forgiveness.’ One way to reflect this is by taking down the flag” (@tanehisicoates 22 Jun 2015). Hill responded, “Yep. In Christian terms, this expression of grace ought to bring new behavior” (@jbouie 22 June 2015). Coates followed up by exclaiming, “Of course not! Because what folks often want is “cheap grace” . . . “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (Coates quoting Bonhoeffer 1937, 44).

In quoting Bonhoeffer, Coates conveys what many felt. Bonhoeffer, a Christian theologian, lost his life standing up to social injustice. If forgiveness was indeed offered, the consensus among those holding this sentiment was that it must only be offered contingent upon action. Christianity should be held to the standard of being a social witness, beyond what appeared to be forgiveness without accountability. Journalist Julia Craven suggested that forgiveness silences a black person’s

pain. She argues, “We’re accustomed to our screams being hushed in the wake of tragedy. We’re accustomed to our grief being shoved aside in the rush to find mercy for those who have trespassed against us” (Craven 2016). Faith, according to Craven, is presented as an asset yet becomes a burden that limits the ability to fully embrace sorrow. What was missing from forgiveness in the case of the Charleston shooting was the critical step of repentance on the part of Roof, which would require an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, a step that many felt was not fully embraced. “We aren’t allowed to waver. . . . We’re either demons or saints. And I think that sort of superhuman—that sort of super Negro narrative is really still harmful to us because it’s been so heavily indoctrinated into American culture” (Jones 2015). Craven cited a *USA Today* podcast by fellow writer Jalessa Jones, with the crowning reaction, “Jones is right. Turning the other cheek is too often what we are expected to do—even when a white gunman kills nine of us” (Craven 2015). The preceding responses reflect the reactions of individuals beyond the Gullah and coastal South Carolina community.

Black Liberation Theologies

The object of Dylann Roof’s vengeance was a familiar one. Theologian James Cone suggests that Roof was “striking at black resistance, and Denmark Vesey and the A.M.E. Church represent black resistance that is rooted in the 19th century” (Remnick 2015). Resistance in this context is any action that counters the influence or aim of racism and injustice. Denmark Vesey planned a slave revolt to liberate enslaved Africans, and the A.M.E. church was established to achieve the aim of spiritual liberation beyond the limitations of worship in a predominately white context.²⁸ Theologian James Cone suggests that the discourse on African American rebellion dates

²⁸ The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) denomination was formed as an act of resistance against discrimination. African American worshippers were not allowed to worship at Philadelphia’s St. George’s Methodist Church. Led by formerly enslaved Richard Allen, they established the Bethel A.M.E church in 1794 to achieve religious autonomy and freedom from racism. The A.M.E church, initially a mutual aid society, was the first Christian denomination founded by African Americans in America. Other congregations were established in cities like Charleston, following suit.

back to the auction block or the decision for enslaved Africans to take their life to resist living their lives as enslaved persons. He points to the physical resistance against human bondage as well as the more clandestine functions of the spirituals as equally effective challenges to bondage (Cone 2000, 16). These acts were a part of a greater consciousness of what has been termed “slave religion,” which emerged as an adaption of Christianity, African diasporic practices, and the experiences of life on the plantation. This clandestine “invisible institution” established the foundation for what became the contemporary African-American church (Kleiner 2011, 1).

Liberation from bondage was the goal, and spiritual liberation persisted when physical liberation was not an option. It is important to take a moment to expand the trajectory of Black Resistance to include Gullah spirituality, an oft-discussed idea that can be both nuanced and complex. Vesey’s revolt mobilized Gullah people. Gullah spiritual practice, as suggested by its roots in the clandestine worship of enslaved Africans, is subversive at its core, and aligns with what has come to be known as Black Resistance.

Ari Colston-Johnson describes her experience growing up in the Gullah A.M.E context as one that privileged a liberating theology rooted in the radical Black past. A millennial and an Emory University joint Juris Doctor and Master of Divinity candidate, she provides an important voice to this discussion of contemporary Gullah identity. Her piece for *the Black Youth Project* tackles subversion in context of Gullah spirituality. She asserts that churches are “among the most authentic warehouses of Gullah-Geechee culture and historical memory” (Colton-Johnson 2017). She also argues that subversion functioned as a tool to preserve said historical memory as well as a tool of resistance:

Would we be successful in attempting to explain that one-dimensional notion of Black Christianity to the myriad ancestors and present-day Gullah-Geechee peoples who subversively use it as a means of preserving their original religious traditions? And how can we devalue and discard the Black Church(es) with the knowledge that present Gullah-Geechee peoples and countless other Black subcultures integrate into Christianity for survival? (Colson-Johnson 2017)

Colson-Johnson's experiences speak to a dynamism that shaped her perception of faith as a tool for activism and social change. She challenges exploration that moves beyond the surface to explore the intentionality of our forbearers. For example, the act of creating independent worship experiences, apart from white masters, and communicating through clandestine spiritual practices were decided acts of resistance that indirectly inform the practices of the men and women of Mother Emanuel in the twenty-first century.

Dating back to David Walker, a contemporary of Denmark Vesey, there is a tradition of Black leaders who used the very Bible that was engaged to facilitate their enslavement as a tool for their liberation. For Walker, Allen, Vesey, and other black leaders, Christianity and the church were portals to resolving the "painful paradox of vigorous independence and degrading submission that they observed in African American society" (Hinks 2010, 39). David Walker lived in Charleston, South Carolina and was a member of Mother Emanuel AME.²⁹ Historian Peter Hinks suggests a link between Vesey and Walker, namely through transcripts from Vesey's trial that reveal similar ideas to those found in Walker's 1829 *Appeal* (Hinks 2010, 30). The *Appeal* offers an argument for resistance rooted in Christian equality and justice:

Are we MEN!!--I ask you, O my brethren! Are we MEN? Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we? Have they not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we? Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours?--What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself? How we could be so *submissive* to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are *as good* as ourselves or not, I never could conceive. However, this is shut up with the Lord, and we cannot precisely tell--but I declare, we judge men by their works. The whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority. (Walker, 1829 20)

²⁹ Many free blacks, like David Walker, moved to Charleston in the 1810s because of the city's established class of free black men and women and economic opportunity. A 1823 list of skilled occupations of free blacks in Charleston includes more than thirty-five trades, ranging from carpenters and tailors to fishermen, hairdressers, and bricklayers (Hinks 1997, 25). The city also offered tolerance among local whites for the existence of a broad free black population, in large part because of the integral role that they played in the local economy (Hinks 1997, 25). Charleston's free black population numbered 3,615 in 1820 out of a total black population of 265, 301.

The Black religious experience is one shaped by history coupled with radical secularity, and oppression. Walker's writing conveys a view informed by the spirit of the American Revolution, as he expresses an understanding that there are particular rights that all children of God are due.³⁰ Founding Father Thomas Jefferson made these rights very clear in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson 1776). Walker and other thought leaders of the time used Jefferson's assertions as a premise to argue for the personhood and rights of enslaved Africans. The Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787 had rendered enslaved men three fifths of a person, and the dehumanizing conditions of chattel slavery buttressed any legal devaluation of enslaved people being physically and spiritually inferior to white people. At the crux of the rhetoric of Vesey and his contemporaries was the hypocrisy of slave owners who manipulated Christianity to both justify slavery and limit the mental, spiritual *and physical* liberation of enslaved Africans.

Christianity created a mutually beneficial relationship for enslaved Africans and their white counterparts. Frederick Douglass, another forbearer of the resistance that James Cone cites, like Walker, used his understanding of his faith to mount an argument against enslavement. The moral argument of the equality of the enslaved African is eloquently presented in Douglass's lucid writing and speeches. His critical look at the White Christian presents the conflict between what he deems the "impartial Christianity of Christ" and "the partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (Douglass 1845, 153). He paves the way for the notion of enslaved Africans' inhumane status to be

³⁰ Walker's *Appeal* is a part of the American jeremiad tradition. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses (2010) suggests that a pre-Civil War Black jeremiad allowed blacks to present themselves as chosen people to Northern whites, who they denounced for their participation in slavery, thus setting up a thread of Black messianic nationalism. Historian Perry Miller dates the American jeremiad back to the Puritans, who fashioned themselves on an "errand from God" as chosen people to save the world (Miller 1952, 2). David Howard-Pinty (2012) suggest that the jeremiad did not only exist to combat the institution of slavery, but remained a mechanism before and after the period of enslavement to protest racial injustice.

debunked with the assertion that White Christianity is immoral. The immorality of White Christianity emboldened the pursuit of worship that aligned with enslaved Africans' view of God and justice. Enslaved Africans assembled separately to enjoy the freedom of ideas and worship that being in the presence of white masters would not permit. The permissibility of worship worked in both directions. Christianity was a space of trust for whites, who used it to mold enslaved Africans for greater docility and productivity, while Blacks like Vesey used the sacred space of worship not only to strategize but also to instill spiritual confidence.

Denmark Vesey offers a case study in religion as a tool of subversion. Similarities between Walker's *Appeal* and Denmark Vesey's trial transcripts show how Walker's rhetoric, grounded in Christian spiritual thought, influenced Vesey's consciousness as a leader. Both men applied the teachings of the Bible to slavery to assert the equality of all men and women (Hinks 1997, 30). The "faith in action" underscored by the Second Great Awakening also linked the men. Vesey was emboldened by his faith to carry out what he felt God had called him to do. According to Fink, White Charlestonians made a direct correlation between the African church and the plot's development. "the designing leaders . . . availed themselves of these occasions to instill sentiments of ferocity by falsifying the Bible . . . the Israelites were quoted to mislead them, the denunciations in the prophecies, meant to deter men from evil, were declared to be divine commands which they were to execute" (Hinks 1997, 38). For those involved in the revolt, the church took on a new role. Through this role, it functioned as a mechanism where the Social Gospel of the Bible was enacted through strategy and action.

The role of subversion was rooted in a carefully crafted spiritual dimension of Gullah identity. Charleston is lauded by travel publications as one of Gullah's epicenters, where cuisine and crafts by Gullah people enrich the city and region (Hargrove 2009). What is not as lauded is the independence of blacks dating back to the 18th century, the Black economic contributions that

sustained the city, and, most relevant to this argument, how the spiritual fortitude of blacks (uniting all three) led to religion-based black consciousness of freedom and a plan that engaged religion to achieve freedom.

Vesey and Walker were forefathers of liberation theology, a strain of thought that buttresses black theology and rests on the notion of a revolutionary Black Christ who “‘preached good news to the poor,’ ‘proclaimed release to the captives,’ and ‘let the oppressed go free’” (Cone 1997, 10). Faith, as they modeled, could be engaged to celebrate their value and personhood as well as to achieve tangible goals like freedom. Vesey and Walker personify the “questioning” tradition theologian James Cone raises that led enslaved Africans to reject biblical traditions that whites used to justify slavery. Instead, as DuBois cites in the *Souls of Black Folks*, a greater affinity persisted for the Old Testament Israelite’s liberation motif. Like them, the Israelites were enslaved and on a journey to the promised land of freedom (Cone 1997, 7).

“Gullah” Jack Pritchard represents the African spiritual lineage synonymous with Gullah culture. He personifies the complexity of spirituality in this context. Spirituality and religion are not mutually exclusive; spirituality can exist within a Christian frame while also honoring African spiritual tradition. Led by Vesey and Pritchard, Denmark Vesey’s revolt aimed to mobilize 9,000 enslaved Africans in Charleston and the surrounding barrier islands. Vesey and his colleagues manipulated the confines of Christianity, using Bible studies to plan the insurrection and piety to gain the trust of their white counterparts. Gullah Jack was born in Angola and was the religious embodiment of their movement, serving as a priest, interpreter of the supernatural, and doctor. Vesey was credited as its chief theoretician, Peter Poyas as its chief strategist (Creel 1988, 153). Gullah Jack Pritchard bridged the gulf between urban and rural enslaved Africans. The Gullah Society, a subset of the movement that Pritchard is credited with organizing, was “the most unified and trusted group of conspirators as well as the most resolute . . . they revealed nothing even as they

approached death (Creel 1988, 156). Pritchard had proposed rebellion as early as 1818 when the church members' rights were suppressed (Fink 1997, 37). Many Africans were members of the African Methodist Church but feared and revered Gullah Jack as a diviner (Creel 1988, 157).

Vesey's rhetoric was buttressed by David Walker's and Toussaint Louverture's arguments, the Bible, and Gullah Jack's persuasion (Rodriguez 2001, 556). Vesey used intimidation to gain allegiance, and Jack's conjuring aided his aims. As Dubois suggests, conjurers helped to encourage slave resistance throughout the Americas, influencing the slave population by serving a myriad of roles from that of a healer to interpreter, comforter, or avenger of wrongdoing (Rucker 2001, 85). Pritchard's mystical power promoted invincibility, as one member of the community testified. Speaking with caution, this [person told her questioners,] "I must beg the court to send me away from this place, as I consider my life a great danger from having given testimony . . . I was afraid of Gullah Jack as a conjurer" (Creel 1988). Gullah Jack convinced enslaved Africans that they would be invincible from harm if they wore the charms that he distributed. He first recommended a fast on corn and peanuts the night before the revolt followed by charms fashioned from crab claws (Rucker 2001, 135). The dimensions of his role speak to the inherent spiritual fortitude of his practice, respect for conjuring, the role of conjuring in resisting danger, and the connection to Africa that Jack represented (Wharton 2015, 433). Jack was known as the 'little man who can't be killed, shot, or taken by whites' (Rucker 2001, 135).³¹

The goal was simultaneously to isolate Charleston at six points using an approach proven in Haiti, with Jack's role being to lead the "Gullah Company" to seize arms and raid white businesses for weapons (Rodriguez 2007, 564). Members of the company communicated in what Historian Walter C. Rucker refers to as a "hidden transcript" of the Gullah dialect. This transcript

³¹ The relationship between conjuring and Gullah spirituality is one that I am not interested in beyond this case study as historically, it has been used to characterize Gullah people without reasonable exploration.

was a subversive tool used to criticize and mock slaveholders and to make plans to rebel against authority. Religion was another “hidden transcript,” as the plot reveals. Vesey and many of the conspirators were affiliated with Mother Emanuel, and a key player, Philip, used his ministerial role as a tool of subversion. Philip, a conjurer who happened to be blind, was known to have a “caul,” the ability to communicate with ghosts and see the future. He was a priest yet hosted planning meetings at his home to further Vesey’s plot (Rucker 2001, 138). Jack thrived within the Christian context yet also engaged in African-based conjure as a tool of subversion to achieve his desired ends. Jack, a prominent member of Mother Emanuel, leveraged his status to recruit others to participate in his clandestine plan to seize Charleston’s arsenal and raise an army, thus permitting enslaved Africans to escape to freedom. The portal of transcendence is what makes this case study decidedly unique. Gullah Jack inspired loyalty through others’ belief in his invincibility, and he also transcended traditional Christian practice in a manner that empowered and challenged those around him. In addition, he inspired others to engage the power of belief to shape the world around them, a power that instilled confidence and hope. For charms to work the person wearing the charm had to believe, a radical act of resistance to those who preached and taught enslaved Africans the opposite.

What, then, is subversive about a prayer circle or forgiveness? Both public displays were critiqued in large part by cultural and regional outsiders. So much of Gullah spirituality is unknown to the greater world because of “hidden transcripts,” or the insularity of its practice. This insularity was a function of worship among blacks being outlawed in Charleston, as it was there where concerns arose about blacks organizing after Vesey’s attempted insurrection. Insularity was also fostered through the separate worship experiences and the reinterpretation of scriptural texts to affirm the black experience from the antebellum period to today. Worship in the African American context has a great deal at stake. With every new case of police brutality or injustice, the church

becomes a source from which to gain perspective and to grieve.³² The separation and cultural isolation that allowed the Gullah people to be sustained creates a gulf of understanding between outsiders and insiders. Thus, it is unfair to project perceptions upon a cultural context that is worthy of sophisticated examination. Any attempt to do otherwise minimizes the complex attributes that sustained the Gullah community for generations. Subversion functions as a tool to keep Gullah spiritual life sacred.

I will now transition to explore a general conversation about forgiveness before revisiting the idea of Gullah spirituality. The actions of Mother Emanuel's members after the Charleston shootings can be contextualized within a greater narrative of African American grief. For so long, Gullah people have been discussed as a detached group. By speaking to the general before the specific, I hope to offer a space to consider how grieving in African American religious traditions is a necessary step in understanding the centrality of forgiveness. The idea that forgiveness and prayer could be read as resistance contradicts the tradition that Douglass, and especially Walker, created. Swift action, versus a more gradual response, had always been the accepted standard for black revolutionary gain. Moreover, many perceive forgiveness as bound to a path of redress that appeases rather than challenges white supremacy. For example, Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of Medgar Evers, a Civil Rights leader who was gunned down outside their home, was moved to tears by the immediacy of the Emanuel families' forgiveness (Hill 2015). For her, forgiveness was a lengthy process that ultimately motivated her activism, despite the thoughts of vengeance she harbored for

³² Generations later, at the time of the anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells, African Americans found themselves on the stage of a new millennium seeking justice despite criminal characterization. Her thread of Black resistance mobilized people through writing. The fruits of freedom were in many instances short lived, concluding with the emergence of campaigns to promote fear. What is most pervasive is what Wells magnifies about a society where the lynching of African Americans, at unjustifiable rates, did not correlate with the fear of God on the part of her white contemporaries. There is no refuting pure, untainted facts. In a tone shaped by the blood-stained hands of her white counterparts, Wells reported from the scenes of lynchings to solidify her position. The state of fear imposed by lynching can be seen as a matter of heightened racial turmoil fueled by the deeper issues of miscegenation and identity.

the 1963 murder of her husband. Raymond Winbush, the director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University, suggests that those who commit crimes against African Americans are emboldened by unconditional forgiveness: “African-Americans have been expected to forgive for slavery, discrimination, Jim Crow segregation, attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and police violence. By meeting that expectation,” he said, “it's almost like white America is telling us, 'Help us to forget the past by telling us that you forgive us'” (Hill 2015).

The Civil Rights movement, as psychologist Ansley M. LaMar argues, was effective because it was a nonviolent movement that championed forgiveness in the spirit of Gandhi and Howard Thurman, yet the tension remained that despite forgiveness being present, there was also resistance. LaMar asserts, “Being forgiving doesn't mean being a wimp. It doesn't mean, white folks, you can walk all over me. It means I forgive you, but I'm not going to let this happen again” (Holland 2015). Like LaMar, the family members of the Mother Emanuel victims approached their public offering of forgiveness as a power play. Daughter of victim Ethel Lance Nadine Collier felt that, “Forgiveness is power. It means you can fight everything and anything head on” (Smietana 2016).

Muhyidin d’Baha would have been the leader of the type of protests and rallies we saw unfold in other cities such as Baltimore and Ferguson, yet the suppressive actions limited his influence. As a Charleston based Black Lives Matter leader, he understood the forgiveness at Dylann Roof’s hearing to represent the context of the black church and the legacy of Civil Rights era thinking, despite his limited hope for the merits of Respectability Politics. He shared the following:

That was Charleston that was accommodating white feelings and white superiority. It was ‘Yes, Massa, can I have another?’ But, at the same time, it was **spiritual fortitude forged in a crucible of terrorism**. It speaks of a spiritual level that I haven’t attained. What it also meant to Charleston was that, without the families’ backing, we couldn’t demonstrate at the pitch we wanted. Walter Scott’s mom said the same thing. When the families give these signals, and the pastors instill in the families a sense of grace and forgiveness, the anger never reverberates. No leadership arose demanding to have this pain recognized. Again, it’s let me accommodate you so you’re not scared, we’ll just get on the bridge and hold hands,

Jesus is good, we're over it. There has been an arrangement here, created over generations, to be able to endure terrorism. At this point, this is the way it is. We endure. We don't ask for more. (Remnick 2015)

I want to speak to what d'Baha eloquently described as “*spiritual fortitude forged in a crucible of terrorism*,” a level that he notes “I haven’t attained.” D’Baha’s frustration resonated with many people. He speaks to leaving room for anger and the acknowledgement of pain, which is what Charmaine also seemed to be looking for in the aftermath of the tragedy. It is important to redefine forgiveness as a spiritual practice rooted in agency that does not negate the expression of anger. The family members who sought forgiveness enjoined the public to bear witness to their sorrow, thereby entreating the public to engage a larger conversation. Forgiveness is not only something that is merely bestowed, as the world witnessed during the hearing but also a ritual that others were called to and invited to engage in. It becomes an imaginary for a shared future that suggests “by coming to this place of forgiveness, you are bound to us, and we will engage this work of community together.”

The racial injustice experienced by Gullah people led to the forgiveness and prayer that so many, including me, critiqued. The Honorable Bernard McIntyre, a “cum ya” (a Gullah phrase for a member of the community who was not born and raised in the area) and a magistrate judge who married a Gullah native from Beaufort, South Carolina, a “bin ya”, offered the following reflection:

I don’t know if any other culture would have responded the way that the native Gullah residents did because of the conflation of religion, art, and the family vernacular that mediated the sense of forgiveness that spills out not only to this person, but to an entire city, entire state . . . so it was almost like the walls of Jericho coming down. (McIntyre 2017).³³

³³ In Gullah a “Cum ya” refers to a resident in a Gullah community who was not born or raised in the area. ‘Cum ya’s’ are generally welcomed and embraced, but are seen as distinct from “Bin ya’s” Gullah natives who were born and raised in the area.

McIntyre invites a deeper reckoning with the cultural dynamic that would foster such an approach to reconciliation. McIntyre's views are buttressed by the experience of the enslaved Africans who are the forbearers of Gullah people from the Lowcountry.

Gullah Forgiveness as Resistance

Historian Jason Young suggests that the enslaved body was both the site of brutality and a vehicle of resistance, seen through slave revolts, spirit possession, and flight (Young 2002, 12). The attainment that d'Baha, a cum ya, refers to is the hallmark of what it has always meant to be Gullah. In this instance, the actions of a few represented generations of spiritual fortitude forged in the crucible of inescapable circumstances: chattel slavery, discrimination, legal limitations to worship and citizenship. Historian Eugene Genovese describes this idea as "resistance within accommodation," suggesting that the religious practices of enslaved Africans allowed them to fashion some morsel of agency within their bondage (Raboteau 1978, 330-331). One example that illustrates Genovese's point in the Gullah context is grave decoration. This tradition persists, albeit on a smaller scale, than in past generations. It is customary for graves to be adorned with items that represent or literally feed the soul of the dearly departed, for example, food. Historian Ras Michael Brown suggests that the tradition speaks to a connection between the "land of the living and the land of the dead" rooted in an understanding of the relationship of physical and spiritual landscapes shaped by the knowledge of ancestors (Brown 2012, 11). It is this cultural agency that persists as an expression of resistance to societal norms that honors lineage.

African Americanist and Religious Scholar Albert J. Raboteau builds upon Genovese's concept by exploring how African "perspectives, habits, preferences, aesthetics, and styles of American descendants of Africans shaped religious choices within the context of religious life among enslaved Africans" (Raboteau 1978, 330-331). Violence was countered by the creation of culture. Young cites political scientist James Scott, who argues that enslaved Africans used disguised

critiques, previously referred to “hidden transcripts,” of power outside the purview of the master class.³⁴ Some looked for these “hidden transcripts” in voodoo and root workers, as Historian Melissa Cooper suggests, there were the “hidden transcripts” of institutional life represented by churches and schools that fostered Gullah identities and empowered a consciousness designed to rebuff racist designations (Cooper 2017, 118). Cultural resistance directly affected the larger political discourse through material culture, folklore, and religion (Young 2002, 12). Gullah culture, by virtue of its longevity and isolation, represents among the purest examples of this notion. Within this frame, prayer can be interpreted as resistance, as can other actions that shape collective coastal identity.³⁵ Historian LaRhonda Manigault-Bryant frames this form of agency in her ethnography of Gullah women in Monks Corner, South Carolina:

This notion of being brought “thus far” by faith, as the popular African American hymn celebrates, resonates with each of the women. . . . This does not mean that they live their faith blindly, and that they are not at times troubled by the difficulties they face. Rather, they envision themselves as rising above their circumstances and being empowered by their faith in God, which is in part lived out through their participation in local African American churches (Bryant 2014, 31).

The women note a feeling of empowerment in the ability to rise above their circumstances by virtue of their faith. This tactic, proven effective from their purview of being “brought thus far,” is rooted in a deep understanding of the power of faith to be a transcendent tool to resist worldly challenges.

³⁴ Raboteau quotes political scientist James C. Scott’s term “Hidden Transcript” to discuss the subversive nature of slave culture in relation to dominant white culture. He notes how enslaved Africans created a subculture, what can be deemed a ‘hidden transcript’ in opposition to their own social domination. Domination, according to Scott, creates a hidden transcript in that a discourse emerges that is excluded from the public transcript by subordinates (Scott 1990, 27). Scott expands the idea of agency to include spirituality as a realm of power exacted against dominance.

³⁵ Prayer is a portal to achieve spiritual transcendence. Raboteau discusses this idea in describing an enslaved African who prays as he is the object of brutality from his master, “he was determined to whip the spirit out of me, but he could never do it, for de more he whip the more the Spirit make me content to be whipt” (Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave religion: The “invisible institution” in the antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 308). This anecdote illustrates what Raboteau frames as a “victory of the spirit over brutality.” Prayer, effective because both masters and enslaved Africans believed in its power, functioned as an invaluable tool for enslaved Africans who used it to transcend their physical state.

Gullah spirituality can, in part, be defined by creolization. Like the culture as a whole, spiritual practices depend on a mixture of traditional African religions, Christianity, and localized forms of spirituality. Community leader and former executive director of Penn Center Emory Campbell describes Gullah spirituality in this manner: “Our spirituality has always been secured by an abiding faith in varied historic beliefs that may transcend religions and denominations. Some Gullah people on occasions combine Christian beliefs with those of ancient Africa to satisfy their spiritual need” (Campbell 2005). Gullah faith is not prescriptive; community members borrow what is needed from the abundance of a creole culture. According to Colston-Johnson, “The unapologetic way in which Gullah-Geechee matriarchs mixed Christianity, Root, and Conjure didn’t always make sense, but the matriarchs taught me that it didn’t have to—these women were challenging notions of ‘correct’ Christianity and strict religious categorizations imposed by white western thought” (2017). Margaret Creel designates the markers of sacred medicines, ancestor reverence, and beliefs about immortality as central to the merger of African-Christian synthesis in the Gullah community’s African spiritual customs (Creel 1988, 2). My personal experience with this notion is personified through my maternal grandfather, who lives to honor the sacred nature of the environment, namely plants and animals. He also refers to the healing power of such herbs as “life everlasting.”

Life everlasting is an agent of sustenance, a symbol of agency, and a tool of physical and spiritual empowerment used for healing and care. My grandfather offers it as a soothing balm when I have a cold, and it also represents our interdependence as a community that relies on one another for love and support, for a life that indeed aspires to be everlasting on earth and more importantly beyond. The notion of “beyond” affirms the idea that we are all striving for something that is beyond this life, be it an afterlife or level of significance that transcends earthly interpretation. It rests on an understanding that my grandfather fashions each time he nurtures the herb, steams it

into a tea, and offers it to loved ones in hopes that, if only for a moment, they are comforted and reminded of their place in the line of folks who found healing in the same tea. This ritual suggests that “they used faith in all its forms and manifestations to survive and thrive, and so will you.”

Sociologist Josephine Beoku-Betts explored the use of this remedy in her examination of Gullah women and food. According to Beoku-Betts, “[Velma] [a Gullah community member] also learned the various folk remedies that had been passed down in her family for generations, such as life everlasting tea for colds or leaves of the mullein plant for fever. Velma recollected that when she was a child, her mother kept these herbs on hand in the kitchen and stood over a reluctant patient to make sure every sip of the tea was consumed” (Beoku-Betts 1995, 282). Creel suggests that traditional African spiritual cosmology and beliefs found a home within Gullah Christian practices. She notes that religion acts as a realistic explication of human experience. For Gullah people, this point is exemplified by the use of sacred medicines, reverence for and communication with ancestors, and their overall beliefs about immortality (Creel 1988, 55).³⁶

Since Creel’s study, various scholars have taken the field of Gullah Studies in new directions. LaRhonda Manigault-Bryant’s research investigates the practice of talking to the dead to convey the particularity of the Gullah religious experience. Ancestors play an important role in African spiritual life as well as in the Gullah community. There is a consistent relationship with loved ones as sources of wisdom and inspiration after their deaths. This relationship is illustrated through the practice of adorning burial grounds with items or being near the water so the soul can swim back to Africa (Blassingame 1972, 25). Gullah people exercised independence within by transcending Christian mores through spirituality. Religious autonomy, mirroring the autonomy of life on barrier islands,

³⁶ In *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, Historian Albert Raboteau defines magic as “an integral part of religious life for many African peoples. It is intimately related to medicine in traditional African belief because illness and death are not due to natural causes alone but to spiritual causes as well.” Medical Anthropologist Faith Mitchell investigates the medicinal dimensions of Gullah spirituality in her study *Hoodoo Medicine* (1998), in which she underscores the role of magic in herbal remedies.

among Gullah people, meant the incorporation of African-derived traditions and the synergy between folk religions and traditional Christianity (Manigault-Bryant 2014). The emergence of spiritual practices that were distinct from the Christian practices of their white counterparts was resistance at its best. The resistance of the aforementioned practices comes from the act of envisioning a world that *countered* the world that was forced upon them. This meaning making and celebration of traditions created a worldview that challenged attempts to stifle identity continues to inform Gullah life.

What exactly is Gullah spirituality (or religion)? Religion is a framework, whereas spiritual practice permeates the framework of all areas of life. Worship can take many forms from gardening, cooking, or singing. It is making art or anything that feeds the soul. It is the community at work, a community nurtured through self-reliance and mutuality. In the Gullah community, spiritual practice comes to a head on one day each year, New Years Eve. As the saying goes “If they were out anywhere besides church [where many of the neighbors spent New Year’s], “def spend o’time out day house den in it’ during the coming year,” Dafuskie Island resident Sallie Ann Robinson recalls (Robinson 2003, 132). Community happens in the everydayness of bartering seafood or crops among island residents or the celebration of milestones such as weddings, birthdays and funerals. However, there are few occasions where there is a “quorum” of community members who gather to share and bear witness to one another. New Year’s Eve draws the saved and the secular, those present for good measure or to be a part of the family fold. To understand Gullah religious life is to understand December 31st.

Watch Night Service occurs on December 31st. The customary first meal of the New Year to ensure wealth, good health and prosperity follows the service. The meal is like an insurance policy, the same policy we avow year after year through our presence in the pews of the Friendship Baptist Church, the only church on Coosaw Island. The routine is seamless. Service lasts from

10:00 PM-12:01 AM, with a repast of Hoppin' John (also referred to as peas and rice) and greens following the final amen.³⁷ Local food writer and retired Sea Island educator Ervena Faulkner equates Watch Night Service, and especially the accompanying food, to the influence of Gullah spirituality's dance with luck and what some refer to as voodoo. Certain practices were done out of respect to the spiritual world and the customs that linked generations. Generations ago, enslaved Africans on the Sea Islands gathered, awaiting news of emancipation on January 1, 1863. The "watch" was for freedom. The era of the "Big Gun Shoot," or enslavement during the Civil War, came to an end on the eve of the New Year.³⁸ Thus, my community marked the milestone by reading the Emancipation Proclamation at 12:01 AM. Reading the piece was my task as a youth, something that I did with great pride, particularly as the congregation responded in concert to certain parts.

The gathering centers on prayer, singing, and testimony. Many rise to share sentiments of thanksgiving for the year past and hopes for the year ahead. A selected few use the platform for aims that should only remain between them and God. All in all, the tradition was a fun and worthwhile moment for the community. Attendees' faithfulness or spiritual beliefs notwithstanding, those present found themselves in the pews flanked by family, uplifted by the songs of our grandparents and great-grandparents, and filled with a spirit second only to eating a full meal of peas and rice, greens, and fried chicken at midnight. Colston-Johnson recalls how the service and liturgy of Gullah worship connected her to her West African ancestors: "Hidden within the call and response of worship, the communal "laying on of hands" at the altar, and the Watch Night services at the end

³⁷ Hoppin' John is made with field peas or black eyed peas; varieties of meat, generally pork., black eyed peas of varieties and meat.

³⁸ Some refer to the "Day" of the "Big Gun Shoot," as the event marking the Union capture of Beaufort South Carolina's Sea Islands in the Port Royal Sound on November 7, 1861 (Holloway 1989).

of every year were the echoes of ancestors across the Atlantic. Countless times I felt their presence enveloping and empowering me in ways I still struggle to articulate” (Colston-Johnson 2017).

Colston-Johnson underscores how the ritual of gathering sustains memory and a connection that fosters communal understanding. On the surface, our New Year’s Eve observance was no different than assemblies of likeminded Americans across the country, be it in a family home or club or at a gala, yet further interrogation reveals a tradition that speaks to our deepest affinity to gather in a sacred and safe place. It is easy to assume that the pews of the church are filled with devout worshippers who attend church weekly and contribute to the financial needs of the body. It is not uncommon for community members to attend Watch Night Service and leave after midnight for social offerings beyond the sanctity of the sanctuary. Watch Night Service also honors the freedom that has become more precious, as the perception fueled by tragedy that our collective safety has been taken away. The freedom to practice religion the way we saw fit enabled my congregation to find freedom in religion and a form of spirituality formed by being Gullah. This freedom is built upon a connection to ancestors through shared hymns, convening as our forbearers did on the brink of the New Year when they first tasted freedom, and a reverence for the centrality of community. The spiritual fortress mentioned by d’Baha coalescences through this tradition.³⁹

The impending “freedom” that enslaved Africans waited to hear about on December 31st generations ago was not really free. Enslaved Africans in turn used spirituality and religion as a

³⁹ Quote referencing D’baha’s remarks: “That was Charleston, that was accommodating white feelings and white superiority. It was ‘Yes, Massa, can I have another?’ But, at the same time, it was **spiritual fortitude forged in a crucible of terrorism**. It speaks of a spiritual level that I haven’t attained. What it also meant to Charleston was that, without the families’ backing, we couldn’t demonstrate at the pitch we wanted. Walter Scott’s mom said the same thing. When the families give these signals, and the pastors instill in the families a sense of grace and forgiveness, the anger never reverberates. No leadership arose demanding to have this pain recognized. Again, it’s let me accommodate you so you’re not scared, we’ll just get on the bridge and hold hands, Jesus is good, we’re over it. There has been an arrangement here, created over generations, to be able to endure terrorism. At this point, this is the way it is. We endure. We don’t ask for more (Remnick 2015).

portal to transcend their state, envisioning and living into a futurity not limited by the physical and invisible constraints of oppression. It could be argued that after the end of the period of enslavement, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, Civil Rights Acts, Fair Housing Legislation, and other strides like Affirmative action reaffirmed, that “freedom” was not free but came at a cost of protest to Black Codes, Jim Crow, and contemporary murders that still lead folks to question whether black lives matter. They mattered for generations within the confines of religion and a spiritual world that existed despite societal reminders that they did not. Black lives mattered within the four walls of the church, where a person could see pride and affirmation in the eyes of every attendee at Watch Night Service. Outside the church walls, celebrants faced the burden of generations of discrimination, economic injustice, and challenges but for the two hours that closed out every year they gathered looking to the future believing that what was to come would be far better than what was behind.

How can a worship experience like Watch Night Service function as something laden with futurity? Gullah and futurity are connected through the lens of Afrofuturism as a theoretical space, like Gullah, rooted in African identity. To appropriately frame my discussion of futurity and Afrofuturism, my assertion that Gullah is “spiritual” must be explored. The subversion of Gullah spiritual life was discussed as a central factor in Vesey’s revolt and more importantly as a tool of mobilization that showcased the community’s ability to use religion as a complex space of fortitude and action. Watch Night, in its futurity and practice, transforms isolated worship into preparation for what is to come. What follows will be a synopsis of how Gullah spiritual life has been surmised from varying vantage points.

Gullah Futures

So much of what community members understand about the Gullah experience is unspoken. It just is. Linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, who conducted the seminal study on Gullah language,

Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (1949), that ultimately linked Gullah to African root suggested that, “The Gullahs say that they fared so badly at the hands of strangers that they are suspicious of anyone they do not know very well” (Turner 1949). Turner faced apprehension from Gullah people during the first portion of the twentieth century, who, despite their initial reticence, eventually opened up to him after trust was gained.

Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect connected the language of Sea Islanders to the continent of Africa, while also crafting a framework to explore spirituality. Spiritual practices, like the language, had a unique West African connection. However, the unspoken nature of spiritual practices created potential misunderstandings. Could what was documented by early scholars and anthropologists during the first half of the twentieth century truly reflect the Gullah experience if Gullah people determined to keep their practices secret because of suspicion and sanctity? Colston-Johnson suggests that a relationship between Black Christianity, history and Gullah heritage co-existed. She states, “I remember our pastor reading out of the newly published Gullah Bible translation. I remember church mothers switching seamlessly between the creole dialect and ‘proper’ English” (Colston-Johnson 2017). Language emerged as one way that made Gullah spiritual practices unique.

A distinction can be made between what Raboteau and others have termed “slave religion” and what is more narrowly designated as Gullah spirituality. Privileging Gullah does not negate cultural retentions in other parts of the country, as it can be argued that places including New Orleans and Africatown, Alabama share common threads of retentions that were sustained.⁴⁰ However, the particularity of my project challenges me to narrow in on how my community defines itself through the influence of transatlantic African culture beyond the purview of scholars who have imposed their interpretations.

⁴⁰ Sylviane Diouf (2007) recounts the story the last slave ship to arrive in America, the *Clotilda*, which landed in Alabama fifty years after the slave trade was outlawed. The passengers of the *Clotilda* settled in Africatown, Alabama and retained languages and customs like their counterparts in the Gullah region in South Carolina.

The acknowledgement of this synthesis and its past significance is central to the construct of Gullah spirituality. What is less clear or relevant is how such a construct functions in the twenty-first century and will continue to function. Exploring how Gullah spirituality might be read through an Afrofuturistic lens complicates this narrative and facilitates a different engagement of the community's reaction to the Charleston shootings.⁴¹ The creative act of envisioning and enacting of a spiritual dimension to embrace futurity is what links Gullah spirituality to Afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as the intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. Leaning on Ingrid LaFleur, she highlights Afrofuturism as a mechanism to imagine possible futures through a black cultural lens (Womack 2013, 9). Afrofuturism also offers a countercultural critique of blackness that challenges traditional notions of respectability and practice.

I am redefining Afrofuturism to invite a new reading of Gullah spirituality. The spiritual strivings of Gullah religion and spiritual practice transcends the confines of tradition to embrace a worldview that is as invincible as Gullah Jack, resourceful as my grandfather's fashioning of life everlasting, and as future-facing as Watch Night service. Afrofuturist thought challenges norms to envision a future beyond tragedies like the Charleston shootings. This future for Gullah people aligns with the spiritual practice of past generations that empowered us to move beyond the challenges of this world to strive for greater things. It relies upon agency to craft our world with the support of forbearers. While technology is one of the key concepts of current understandings of Afrofuturism, and a component of Gullah life given the kinds of innovations (like irrigation and horsemanship) that enslaved Africans brought to America, my discussion focuses on the audacity to

⁴¹ For example, English scholar Elizabeth McNeil uses Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* to frame Gullah life in an unconventionally. McNeil presents Marshall's work as a demonstration of Gullah rituals as mechanisms for resistance (McNeil 2009, 185-209).

hope and envision inherent in Gullah spiritual practice.⁴² While futurity is the defining link, Afrofuturism can be seen through varying lenses. For example, the Studio Museum's 2013 exhibit, "the Shadows Took Shape" explored Afrofuturism through contemporary visual art in their exhibition that defined Afrofuturism as a creative and intellectual genre emerging as a strategy to explore science fiction, fantasy, magical realism and pan-Africanism. The show's curator Naima Keith suggested that in the museum's treatment the genre was used as a way to prophesize the future, redefine the present, and re-conceptualize the past.

The period of enslavement is the starting point of this creative reckoning, as writers Toni Morrison and Ta-Nehisi Coates explore. Coates articulates what slavery *is* in the following lengthy excerpt from an essay published in/from his book *Between the World and Me*:

"Slavery" is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains (Coates 2015, 70).

Toni Morrison argued in a 1991 interview with Paul Gilroy that the African subjects who experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. Morrison buttresses her argument on the premise that they underwent "real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern" (Eshun 1991, 288). As Andrew Rollins suggests, Afrofuturist thought, equips us to face the challenges of postmodernity. Thus, the trauma of what Morrison

⁴² Technology, like spirituality, is something that is engaged consistently with little understanding about how it works. We use mobile phones, for example, yet few have insight into the intricacies of how the phone works. We benefit from the inherent power of technology and spiritual practice.

describes is not only engaged but transformed into a tool of empowerment through the frame of futurity. It is as simple as assigning meaning to life everlasting as a healing agent, representative of identity and lineage, and aspiration of longevity. It is a reclaiming, redefining, and an active re-envisioning of the world. The crucible of enslavement facilitated a necessity for prophecies to envision survival and innovative approaches to maintaining sanity. This transcendence from bodily harm was central to survival, as was the creation of an ethos and ritualistic world that protected the mind in the midst of unimaginable circumstances.

For me, envisioning our present required a sound understanding of the past and how it informs our future. We find a similar yearning in the notion of Gullah spiritual life. Gullah people engaged faith to create a present and future beyond the limitations of physical life. They constructed their own standards of beauty (sweetgrass baskets), found recreation in unique ways (worship and song reflecting diasporic tradition and folktales), and paused to uplift and celebrate (Watch Night service). Colston-Johnson honors the impact of these traditions on her view of futurity: “My unique experience with the Gullah-Geechee A.M.E church also allows me to imagine a future in which the church positively shapes others the way it has shaped me: serving as my first introduction to radical Black history, liberation theology, and ‘Black girl magic’ ” (Colston-Johnson 2017). The genre of Afrofuturism is in many ways about possibility. It reflects the will and desire to imagine a future and celebrate the scientific achievements to get there. Viewing Gullah through this lens becomes the antithesis of Afro Pessimism, which Fred Moten classifies as an expression of exhaustion, offering a theoretical reason not to believe (Moten 2013, 737). Instead, Afrofuturism embraces the possibility of an aesthetically-driven, speculative artistic expression that through literary, visual, musical, and intellectual endeavors intersects with race, space, time and technology to do the work of post-soul cultural production (Heath 2016, 172). This creative space considers such ideas as agency and

freedom within a realm of no limitations.⁴³ This lack of limit—usually impressed upon black peoples through sanctioned violence or everyday racism—then posits futurity’s possibility.

Afrofuturism’s contemporary resurgence relates to the uncertainty surrounding the idea of the Black future. The increased and overly visual (thanks to social media and the 24-hour news cycle) loss of Black life provided an impetus for the Black Lives Matter Movement, which acknowledges the value of Black personhood with the aim of assuring that black people could enjoy the same future as their non-black counterparts. This concern has been long standing and was also reflected in how the future is cast. If art imitates life, or in this instance forecasts what is to come, the lack of black characters in films and television denies African Americans a future in that place called “the imaginary.”

Whoopi Goldberg recalls the impact of black representation in visual culture: "Do you not know that, prior to your show [Star Trek], there were no black people in any sci-fi, anywhere? . . . When I was a little girl, it was like, 'Oh, we are in the future.' Uhura did that for me" (Nemetz 2014). Goldberg’s excitement was echoed in the emergence of *Luke Cage*, a Marvel character given series treatment on Netflix. Beyond the cache of having an all African American Marvel franchise was the notion of an African American superhero/protagonist who is bulletproof in the era of enhanced police brutality and surveillance. Coates underscores *Luke Cage*’s significance by asserting the following to his son, “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage” (Coates 2015). *Luke Cage*, like Gullah spirituality at its best,

⁴³ English scholar Ramzi Fawaz suggest that the African diaspora functions through collective agency and world-making. Through the frame of the forced migration of colonialism, “racially motivated flight to outer space works to re-signify the meanings attached to diasporic identity by articulating the “blackness” of space to Black and African American cultural identity; in turn, outer space itself was reframed as a generative discursive ground for producing previously unimaginable alliances between a variety of subjects who shared the experience of abjection and social exile on the basis of cultural or biological difference (Fawaz 2012, 1103). Alien Africans were transported across the globe to a foreign place, akin to a different planet, where they used technology--exemplified through such innovations as rice production. They adapted, created, and crafted a future buttressed by spiritual practice. The motif of planetary exile is prevalent in the genre of science fiction.

personifies the power of spiritual fortitude to withstand assaults to the mind and body but not the soul. The body houses the soul, which cannot not be permeated. The terrible irony of the institution of slavery is that it was built upon the very body it sought to destroy. Bodies labored in servitude to fortify the wealth of planters. Bodies produced offspring who sustained the institution for future generations, as objects in a grand scheme limiting agency, power, or purpose beyond commerce. As Coates points out,

You must struggle to truly remember this past. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children (Coates 2015, 70).

Gullah people created an identity drawing upon various African cultures and influences to create distinct spiritual practices aimed at transcending the body to embrace what is to come, if even the reward is life after death or to sustain future generations.

The Legacy of Ibo Landing encompasses the best of the Gullah tradition as an example of transcendence and futurity. Ibo Landing is a folk tale about the Africans who flew, transcending their fate as slaves. In 1803, there was a failed slave revolt aboard a slave ship on Dunbar Creek on St. Simons Island in Georgia. Seventy-five Igbo captives refused to acquiesce to being enslaved. The event is remembered as an act of resistance, power, and agency.⁴⁴ The decisive act of “flight” was

⁴⁴ Many of us were introduced to the idea of “Flying Africans” through the work of children’s book author Virginia Hamilton. Her book, *The people could fly: American Black folktales*, (1985), offered a meditation of spirit and practice that mesmerized me as a child. I later drew connections to African American spirituality, particularly in the Gullah context. Hamilton offers the following context in her author’s note: “There are numerous separate accounts of flying Africans and slaves in black folktale literature. Such accounts are often combined with tales of slaves disappearing” (Hamilton 1995). Flight could refer to a myriad of things such as running away, spiritual transcendence, physical flight or embracing the uplift of the Holy Spirit in worship. Toni Morrison embraces this folktale in *Song of Solomon*, as Susan Blake suggests “is a variant of a well-known Gullah folktale about a group of African-born slaves who rose up one day from the field where they were and flew back to Africa (Blake 1980, 77-82).

documented as a mass suicide but remains an example of heroism by individuals who crafted their future on their own terms. There is a tradition in Gullah communities of graveyards being located near water based on the idea that souls swam back to Africa. This tradition holds true for Coosaw Island, a couple of miles away from where we gather for Watch Night service. On Coosaw rests the former church graveyard overlooking the intercostal waterway. It is where forbearers of our community, including my great-grandfather and great-grandmother are buried.

The audacity of Igbo landing is Afrofuturistic, *in deed*, as is its act of agency and transcendence. The future the inhabitants envisioned is one of freedom, if not physical, spiritual. This point cannot be stressed enough. There had to be some meaning making on the part of enslaved Africans who were limited in their physical mobility but who found ways to live limitless lives spiritually. The body could be bound but not their minds, their spirits, or their aspirations. Lowcountry narratives of “Flying Africans” comprise a pervasive canon. This canon affirms what Historian Ras Michael Brown characterizes as the challenge of African Americans to define a past of resistance to captivity while claiming a distinct cultural heritage defended by African ancestors. Like the space travel broached by futurists Janelle Monet and Pharrell Williams, the Africans in these narratives rejected enslavement and oppression through collective flight.⁴⁵ Historian Michael Gomez points to something more profound: “suicide was the ultimate form of resistance, as it contained within it the seed for regeneration and renewal” (Brown 2012, 141). Gomez frames the collective action as an offering of consecration to the land and waters that assigned spiritual meaning to the

⁴⁵ Janelle Monae’s alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, is a silver metallic android sent to earth to free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide, which is a secret society that uses time travel to limit freedom and love (Womack 2013, 104). Cindi emerges as a central figure in Monae’s space saga yet functions to solidify Monae in the canon of Afrofuturist thought and practice through art. Monae joins a lineage including Sun Ra, and George Clinton, who also used music to transport and transform contemporary notions of blackness. They all broach the idea of flight, but from what to what? If we were to engage the paradigm of the “Great Divide,” these artists use flight as a metaphor for a life beyond worldly constraints. There appears to be an acknowledgment of the limitations of blackness and a solution to quell said limitations. Monae offers commandments during performances, including Commandment 9: “By the show’s end you must transform” (Womack 2013, 76), that suggest a transformation is indeed the aim. Through travel we will be transformed.

landscape through the presence of natural spirits. The Africans defined their own future, one of lasting significance to a community that celebrates its resistance to slavery. The focus here is not on death by suicide but on the avoidance of spiritual death through enslavement.

Sandiford uses the myth of the Flying Africans as a basis for her interpretation of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. *Praisesong* uses the "Legacy of Igbo Landing" as a plot device and mechanism that contextualizes the protagonist's narrative. It also offers an insightful discussion of Gullah spirituality through the author's fictional account of Gullah identity. Travel is key. As Cartwright reminds us, "the word 'travel' is one of the most significant in (Gullah) language, and comprehends all those exercises, spiritual, visionary and imaginative, which make up an experience . . . travel genres help members claim the authority of their own experience (Cartwright 2013, 41)." In part, travel refers to the seeking process. The term defines the spiritual experience of the "seeker" during her time in the wilderness (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter). Gullah natives participated in the seeking process as church initiates in the Christian context. It also refers to the spirit's mobility and ability to transcend the body. Being "under the influence of the holy ghost" or "holy spirit," is a common occurrence during worship. The mass action at the landing represents personhood and agency in the name of spiritual resistance. In Marshall's novel, the protagonist Avery has an encounter with the spiritual world; "When Avery was seven, her great-aunt Cuney issued an imperious directive that Avery should be sent to spend each summer with her in Tatem, surrounded by forests primeval, timeless people, and enchanted tidewater. From the very beginning, therefore, Avery's life was not her own. Those wily and wary Ibos whose heroism and memories brooded on the face of the water, and whose heroism and whose spirits hovered around the woods, had claimed her for themselves" (Sandiford 1986, 373). Understanding the communication and reverence for the spirit world, as LaRhonda-Maigault Bryant's study *Talking to the Dead* suggests, is critical to honoring spirituality in the Gullah context. Avery's being is

encompassed by a tradition that she was born into and that was sustained from a mere act of resistance: “The memory of their pride and defiance was venerated and kept alive by succeeding generations, the cult currently being practiced by Avery’s great-aunt, a redoubtable Ibo Matriarch named Cuney, presumably the heroes’ oldest surviving descendant” (Sandiford 1986 373). As Sandiford suggests, Gullah people were born into a legacy of understanding that shaped their being. The myth of Igbo landing is but one of several that shaped the community’s perception of their relationship to the world. This embrace of transcendence within the overt institution of slavery connects Igbo to Gullah spirituality to the prayer and forgiveness offered after the Charleston shooting. The scene after the shooting re-imagined through a Gullah lens challenges us to consider that such acts cannot be taken at face value. Prayer and connection engages a generations’ old tradition of religion as a vehicle of resistance, and spirituality as one of fortitude and hope. Charmaine and I were two friends exploring the depths of the unimaginable. The shooting was but the tip of the iceberg. The topic beyond our grief was our future. How do we as Gullah people in the 21st century envision a future as an act of agency and resistance to the very forces that claimed the lives of our community members and stymied the expansion of our multiple identities? We moved on in our conversation to consider family.

CHAPTER THREE: GULLAH FAMILIAL TIES

“After Thanksgiving, the family’s collective focus should transition to planning Gemma’s fourth birthday party,” my Auntie Dottie announced during Sunday dinner, flanked by my grandparents, her siblings, and me. Auntie Dottie was Gemma’s godmother, and offered to host the party. Gemma’s grandmother, Cousin Wanda, insisted upon my aunt being Gemma’s godmother because she trusted her and knew that India and Gemma would be in good hands with her recent move to Florida. She was right. However, their arrangement came with one condition: “I wanted to be her only godparent,” my aunt insisted. “Floyd [her husband] and I, that is. I do not want to share, or have to deal with anyone else,” she specified when asked about her terms. It’s uncertain whether my aunt was seeking to avoid the tensions that sometimes arose when multiple godparents had to negotiate how they show up in the child’s life, or whether she simply considered herself the best fit over and above anyone else. What is certain is that being a godparent was a role that she took very seriously.

The role of godparenting is not taken lightly in the Gullah community, as it was treated (in spirit and deed) with the care of adopting a new child. Cousin Wanda and her daughter India conceded. Four years later, members of our immediate family were recruited to play various roles in planning Gemma’s party. For instance, I was on the set-up team, which meant being ‘Chair’ of blowing up the balloons. Planning birthday parties, anniversary parties, weddings, wedding receptions, and funerals has always been a family affair carried out with collective engagement and care.

It was a crisp December afternoon when we convened for the party, which was held on family land. Gemma, named in honor of her great-great-grandmother Geneva Wilson, my great-grandmother's youngest sister, entered her party with the measured focus of a championship sprinter exiting the starting block. The route of her sprint could be likened to the march from our family's church to the shore where most of our relatives were baptized. She was focused on her destination and the renewal she would gain from each encounter. She ran from person to person, hugging them with excitement and glee, her hair and pink ballerina skirt flowing unencumbered. Our great-great-grandmother's--Mama Rose's--house was located on the property where the Sams Point-Coosaw Island community center now stood. Our family donated the property for the building, which has been the site of many of Coosaw Island's family reunions, wedding receptions, and parties over the years. Today it hosted an oasis of fun as the community's youth convened for Gemma's fourth birthday.

This moment was a tipping point for our family. There we were, hosting Gemma's party on family land, land that our ancestors owned and lived on. Mama Rose's porch was the site of the first Smith-Glover family reunion 62 years ago--among the first held by an African American family in our area. Since then, our family has gathered annually on the former site of her home for the reunion. Several generations had passed through her doors and had walked the very land where we stood. Today, we convened again as family to nurture the next generation, just as we had been nurtured. We were on sacred land; yet could we ever appreciate the journey that made this moment possible? Uncle David, my great-grandmother's brother, left the island generations ago to attend Tuskegee Institute, where he was mentored by George Washington Carver and lived in the shadow of Tuskegee's founder, Booker T. Washington. He would go on to become a restaurateur, committed to sending money back to support, protect and preserve the land where we stood. He later donated the land to build the community center. The legacy of where we stood was endowed

by Uncle David, and by countless others who remained and never left, who did their part to protect Coosaw Island's legacy for us to enjoy in this moment.

This chapter explores the centrality of family to Gullah people. I will first explore the ritual of seeking, which leads up to baptism, as a significant rite of passage that sustains Gullah familial ties driven by fictive kinship. Seeking is a process of initiation that adolescents in the Gullah culture complete before they are baptized and gain membership into a Baptist church. The discussion will then move beyond baptism to explore godparenting, a relationship forged for some during the baptism period. Godparenting is an important concept that offers insight into the complexity of community relationships. These relationships originate in a local context but have lasting influence beyond the region. Next, I will examine the Gullah diaspora and how the culture is preserved beyond the coast. I am particularly interested in the impact of migration away from the region and how traditions are kept alive through such portals as foodways. Gullah people have a special manner of viewing and engaging the idea of family, which persists as a key indicator of cultural identity.

The important endeavor of expanding understandings of contemporary Gullah identities as an insider is a challenging undertaking. There is an inherent bias based upon my sheer proximity and compassion for the community, its people, and its future. There is also the quandary over countering the deep wounds of racialized historical categorizations that have plagued the wider African diaspora internationally, and Gullah people locally. Thus, what follows is an ethnographically grounded chapter that explores one Gullah community and one approach to how this community lives out its Gullah identity. The community, and my discussion about familial bonds, is clearly but one of many expressions of Gullah identity. The people are real and complicated. They are members of families that wrestle with many of the challenges that most families encounter and overcome. They are survivors who also know failure and despair quite well. My discussion of family in this context does not aim to idealize. However, there is an emphasis on the structures that the community sees as core

to its identity, versus an emphasis on the challenges that many of the consultants and their families face.

In addressing the intricacies of lived community, I will be spending a great deal of time talking about imperfect institutions, namely the Christian church. The church was a safe haven for me and many of my family members. Our local congregation was not faultless, but it offered us love, and laid an important foundation that has had a lasting impact on my life. The overall institution of the church is ripe with the fractures of humanity. It was only two decades ago that my childhood pastor invited a woman, who happened to be his wife and who was an ordained pastor, into the pulpit. With this gesture, he offered a corrective to his policy that limited the leadership roles of women. Many congregations, including my own, still don't allow women to serve as deacons or pastors. This glass ceiling reduces women like my grandmother to the roles of secretary, deaconess, or member of auxiliaries like the "pastor's aide" society. Despite not having official titles, however, women are the backbone of the black church and fill in the gaps that gender would not allow them to be fully honored for.

In addition to gender, sexuality is a topic that Gullah communities, like many communities beyond the region, wrestle with. Sex and sexuality are not easy topics to address. Congregations are still determining where they stand theologically and how to best engage youth about the topic in an ever-evolving society. Ethnomusicologist and ordained minister Alisha Lola Jones explores the silencing of queerness in many black congregations through her work on black men's performance of gender and sexuality in gospel music (Jones 2016).

Class dynamics also emerge as the pageantry of presentation offers a visible demarcation between the "haves" and "have nots," facilitating a performance of affluence. The quaint congregation that I grew up in was not immune from flaws, but remains a place where the discord was more rooted in personality than any social upheaval. There is a fascinating luxury afforded with

access that allows my peers and me to have a vocabulary of critique to leverage with new eyes on the islands that we grew up on. However, growing up among working-class individuals who led worship the best way that they knew how, and were looking for a reprieve from the world, shielded us for better or worse from these discourses. Parishioners were less concerned about what divided them (there was plenty of time for that after worship), and more concerned about hearing from God about how to make it, how to feed their families, how to maintain their sanity, and how to provide a better life for the generations to come. Church was therapy; the music, worship, and prayers were all curated opportunities to escape and connect with God, the source of everything.

There was indeed discord, which was reserved for the less sacred after worship hours. I recall, for example, post-worship debates over the official color for the annual Woman's Day program that my great grandmother founded to offer local women a platform, discord between my grandfather and a colleague over a liturgical matter, and family members who spoke daily yet were not "speaking to one another." What I found was that despite discord, when things mattered—be it through tragedy or mere circumstance—folks put differences aside to live into the community ethos that continues to sustain them. Prodigal sons and daughters—who faced challenges resulting from the proliferation of drug use that crippled our community (like many others across the country) during the 1980s and 1990s, financial burdens that precipitated a return home after high hopes "up north," or any matter of relational strains—were always invited back and offered a seat at the table. It is this welcoming and imperfect yet important dynamic that becomes the focus of this chapter.

Gemma represents the future that activists and institutions like the local church worked so hard to prepare for. As hopeful as it was to see Gemma's youthful exuberance, the concerns of my father and previous generations echoed in my ear. He continuously expressed concern over our community's future, and in this instance, over Gemma's ability to be shaped by the cultural traditions and memory that influenced many of us, particularly the pre-baptism initiation process

called seeking. Even though my seeking experience was quite different from that of my parents, the shared tradition linked us and facilitated the promulgation of a cultural memory that continues to inform my life. The island, once a majority African American enclave, had increasingly become a desirable location for development, which has meant the wholesale loss of land owned by African American residents. A major source of contention is how best to negotiate the division and use of heirs property, property purchased by African Americans and held within families for generations without clear title (Rivers 2006, 148). The future of familial land, and decisions related to selling property or maintaining, it can be a source of discord only intensified by the financial strain of developments like those on Sapelo Island that impose major tax burdens on Gullah people (Severson 2012). Roads that were once dirt are now paved, the waterways that once existed uninterrupted are now connected by bridges and causeways, and both are now influenced by regulations that limit access to the abundance of seafood the rivers once provided. As I shared my intent to spend time in the river, one of my favorite pastimes, my grandfather lamented across the dinner table during a recent visit home, “You need a permit to go crabbing.”

Family remains an important pillar of Gullah culture in the twenty-first century. It took me travelling thousands of miles away to South Africa during the fall of 2016 to fully understand this point. I gained a greater appreciation for family as a tangible construct of familial relation as well as a figurative notion of diasporic belonging (like that illustrated by such films as Tim Carrier’s *Family Across the Sea*).⁴⁶ Pilgrimages to ancestral lands are often portrayed in American popular culture as romantic endeavors and have defined the ethnic complexity of our national experience for some

⁴⁶ Tim Carrier’s 1990 documentary film documents language and other connections between Gullah people in South Carolina’s Sea Islands and Sierra Leone.

time.⁴⁷ Although I was not travelling to the exact West African homeland of my progenitors, I still experienced an excitement that accompanied my return to my ancestors' continent of origin. My time in South Africa felt familiar. The visual affirmation of seeing a reflection of my image as a majority was like a hospitable embrace. The country appeared to deal with many of the same issues that we deal with in the United States related to class, race, and complicated histories. It was apparent that the wealth disparity was much wider, and that the nation was still transitioning from Apartheid—which was only a generation away.⁴⁸

I was in town to present research related to tourism, Gullah artists, and representation. During my presentation, I could hear the moderator of the panel responding to my remarks. I learned afterwards that her family spends Thanksgiving at Penn Center, formerly the Penn School, located in the Frogmore area of my hometown in Beaufort, South Carolina. The moderator urged me to consider how Gullah identity is shared and owned by folks beyond the region, given that nearly thirty percent of enslaved Africans arrived through the port of Charleston, South Carolina. According to her, "We all have a stake in Gullah culture." With that conversation, my understanding of the significance of the region shifted. Shortly after this exchange, I shared my research with two friends over dinner in Cape Town, South Africa. One was Spanish; the other American had ancestral ties to Nat Turner. After I concluded what has become an all too familiar elevator speech about my

⁴⁷ From Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, to Malcolm X's autobiography, diasporic travel emerges as a mechanism to achieve greater cultural understanding and connection to one's identity. The romantic element is inherently suggested in the privileging of such an experience as an indicator of greater self-awareness and ethnic pride.

⁴⁸ In a lecture entitled "Afro-Optimism: Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far?" former Kenyan president Raila Odinga embraces what has been termed "Afro optimism," an expression of hope reflecting development and economic growth in Africa. Odinga also acknowledges the poverty, conflict, preventable infectious disease and other challenges that influenced *The Economist's* appraisal that the continent of Africa was "hopeless" (Odinga 2014). The *Journal of African* proclaimed that Africa was rising, a shift underscoring the continent's great economic potential (Adibe, Seifudein, and Yoroms 2014, 5). American scholars like Fred Moten have interrogated Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism in light of the African American experience. My experience in South Africa reflected strains of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism. It feels irresponsible not to acknowledge the privilege our delegation enjoyed as scholars engaging the culture as visitors.

research, my American friend sat in awe. “You have something special,” he shared. “Many of us have a gap between the slave ship and now. You have something—you have a link between Africa and now that is meaningful, instructive, and rich.”

These two isolated interactions challenged me to consider a more outward view of Gullah’s place within the greater African Diaspora, and as a shared personification of home and family.

Growing up, my outlook was insular and protective. Within my community, there is an appreciation for the richness of our culture; but I wrestled with keeping the balance between this pride and the historical notions of what it means to be Gullah that were defined by the tourist industry and the commodification of the plantation South. Like artist Sheldon Scott, my assessment was influenced first by my community; “I didn’t understand Geechee [Gullah] to be anything different than who I was.” But Scott also notes, “Then my experience became contextualized through someone else’s narrative” (Scott 2017).⁴⁹ The narrative Scott references was shaped by individuals from outside our community who projected their perceptions of what Gullah identity was upon us. Such influences prompted tension among Gullah people. Retired educator and Columbia, South Carolina native Ervena Faulkner offered the perspective of a “Cum Ya,” an individual who moved to the area who

⁴⁹ A major part of being Gullah is speaking the language, a common practice that now is embraced by community members with pride. However, speaking the language was not always popular among Gullah people or educators who sought to prepare Gullah youth for professional life. Sheldon Scott points to the complexity of influences from inside and outside of the community. Speaking Gullah was something that was frowned upon as my aunt, Mrs. Cheryl Brisbane, suggests: “I have to hear the language to speak it effectively. My daughter Gabby gets frustrated because she wants to be able to speak Gullah better. In 5th grade someone visited her class to give a presentation about Gullah, including the language, but did not go in depth. I told her that when we go home to Beaufort it will not sound like that because we are speaking it naturally. When I came from New York to spend the summer with my grandparents, I never heard them speak Gullah. After I moved down, my family might have said some Gullah stuff, but they never spoke true Gullah. When I first moved in the 7th grade, I was in the gym— with a girl from California, she was a Daise but had also recently moved—another girl spoke in Gullah, and a girl from the Sea Islands criticized her. I had a conversation about what happened with another new girl. Back then, how you represent yourself had a great deal to do with not speaking Gullah in public. It correlated to job opportunities, going to college, and how you presented yourself overall” (Brisbane 2017). Retired Educator Ervena Faulkner reflects on the Gullah language and the decision to encourage youth to speak what was deemed proper English, “They had to learn to speak properly because they had to be employable. If I couldn’t understand, an employer would not understand. We should have made sure the Gullah language was always an in home language, that the dialect and the tone was forever spoken in the home so it wouldn’t be lost. They hire Jamaicans here, so island people don’t really get the jobs” (Faulkner 2017).

has no previous ties to Gullah: “There are many Gullah people not happy to be Gullah. They were teased. Even though Beaufort County is part of the Corridor, Beaufort people [residents from the mainland or city] teased Island people [residents who resided on one of Beaufort’s many barrier islands]” (Faulkner 2017). Faulkner speaks to a local view that reflected the stigma of being Gullah, an identity many wrestled with. The pervasiveness of limiting views, that were not fully reflective of who we were, contributed to my desire to protect my community from negative assumptions about Gullah people. The outcome of experiencing, as Faulkner notes, how such views impacted those around me in negative ways was an added point of concern.

The context of how outsiders viewed our shared Gullah heritage was not always a positive one and was often defined by the re-framing of commonplace practices as peculiar. W.E.B. Dubois notes the initially unfavorable impression that northern soldiers had of Gullah people in 1861 during the Civil War when the region became Union territory. The “Africans” were seen as uncouth in appearance with funny speech patterns (Morgan 2010, 282). The one redeeming quality outsiders noted was Gullahs’ ability to sing and “stir the soul of mankind.” These songs still stir the souls of Gullah people, and the outsiders who gaze upon them still expect to encounter the “funny” speech patterns and statically defined characteristics that freeze Gullah people as particular actors in the Southern imagination.

Historian Melissa Cooper interrogates the seemingly problematic “African Feel” that emerged as a dominant descriptor of Gullah culture in a *New York Times* article titled, “A Georgia Island with an African Feel Fights a Wave of Change” (Dewan 2008). The article characterizes Sapelo Island, Georgia as having an “African Feel” framed by elements such as voodoo-styled superstitions, a distinct dialect, and stories about ancestors from slavery days (Cooper 2016, 7). What is an “African Feel”? Cooper highlights a perceived “uniqueness” about Gullah people that limits them to narrow spiritual practices and universally nebulous African ties. The outsider portrayals that

shape the perception of Gullah people are pervasive and lasting. There is a tension between reclaiming and reframing such portrayals and overcoming the pejorative nature of some outsider views. Connections to Africa, as an idea, have only recently become sources of pride, as Scott explores:

There was a large anti-African sentiment. Anything that resembled diasporic people would be dispelled. We are now less weighted down by an exclusive African American identity. When someone called you a Geechee it was the pejorative's pejorative. It was one thing to be called a nigger, and another to be called Geechee. There are sources for such a sentiment. For example, when looking at the Great Migration, the people who chose to stay were thought less of because they were not seeking the new frontier. (Scott 2017)

Thus, for some time, any connection to Gullah was less a source of pride and more an association with a pejorative identity that reinforced stereotypes. To be Gullah was to speak broken English, carry out pagan-like rituals, and have limited interest in contemporary ideas.

For most of my life, I was told what Gullah meant by individuals who studied the culture from a distance or sought to understand it from a place of difference. The outcome was the categorization of some of our traditions as peculiar. For example, vernacular practices such as burial rituals involving the placement of food at burial sites to feed the spirit of the deceased—my grandmother's sister bemoaned the appetizing fried chicken that adorned gravesites—made perfect sense to me as a kid. I felt a need to protect Gullah culture from attitudes that minimalized such traditions or critiqued what was sacred to our community. This awareness became stronger as I became more exposed to such attitudes as a teenager who confronted life beyond the sacred bubble of our island. Preserving the beauty and everyday-ness of experiences that transcended any explanation is what mattered the most. I felt a need to shield family members and myself from further exploitation.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ A study performed by sociologist Charles W. Jarrett (2003) features a focus group of Gullah people, Jarrett suggests a commonly held notion that the Gullah/Geechee community exists under scrutiny and study from entities such as federal agencies, scholars, academicians, and “do-gooders.” Life under the microscope of this gaze has resulted in distrust and a

My journey to make sense of how to celebrate and preserve our sacred heritage led to many engaging exchanges, bringing me back to my conversation in South Africa. Our story can be used as a powerful tool that individuals outside of our community can relate to, the moderator of the panel in South Africa urged. My two isolated encounters in South Africa might offer a glimpse into why a number of African Americans visit our region for festivals to possibly gain a connection to the African retentions (both perceived and actual) that have defined the culture and to the souls of ancestors who passed through Charleston. Our story also illuminates why the spirit of “welcome home” that I felt in South Africa is mirrored by families back home. Tourists often share accounts of the hospitable embrace of South Carolina’s Lowcountry. We, too, invite visitors to enjoy the comforts of home. Many African Americans connect with the spirit of Gullah in this way. My field work in Gullah communities revealed how Gullah people honor the interconnectedness of family, an honoring that is shown through the way others are treated. We are all looking for family and home, a place to run and embrace the spirit of love like Gemma in the footsteps of Mama Rose.

Family is a fortress that offers a framework for a personal and shared identity, as well as a sense of belonging to something larger than the individual. One could argue that family is the main vehicle through which the arts and spirituality are conveyed. At the same time, familial ties provide an important basis for making such transmissions possible. Gullah family life is defined by an ethos informed by sustained kinship ties from the period of enslavement and beyond, where survival depended upon the mutual success of not only family, but also neighbors and the larger community.

The Gullah family structure fosters the development of youth by immersing them in an understanding of interconnectedness, ritual, and values passed down by elders through such

feeling of exploitation. According to Jarrett, “So many people have come to the Sea Islands with preconceived notions of who Gullah people are--and what Gullah culture should be! Outsiders should not hide away in an archive, read a few books and essays, and then go away saying they know who we are. They need to hear, feel, sense and touch our story. They shouldn't be making money on our everyday lives. We know who we are - we're at peace with that. We are Africans living in the United States. We are Gullah/Geechee. We are forever!” (Jarrett 2003, 1201).

experiences as seeking. These values permeate all areas of life, connecting Gullah people to our progenitors and the greater African Diaspora. This self-understanding of connectedness situates itself in stories that stretch back to the period of enslavement. It is where foodways and language are nurtured and passed down and where survival—of both the spirit and the hinterlands of the coast--was taught. This premise, suggested by linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner and others, has long been that Gullah people were more isolated than other groups of enslaved Africans (Matory 2008, 232). Planters often left the Sea Islands, laden with mosquitoes and humidity, for more comfortable places well into the 20th century.⁵¹ Consequently, African Americans remained segregated along the Gullah region's barrier islands that had not yet been connected by bridges and causeways. The community thrived because of interconnectedness, agrarian self-reliance, and spiritual meaning making.⁵²

The conditions of chattel slavery necessitated a re-envisioning of familial ties. Families were separated during the period of enslavement, leading to the creation of unique familial bonds among individuals who were not actually related but fictive kin. The phrase “fictive kin” refers to a kinship status among people who are unrelated by either blood or marriage but regard one another as family (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994, 297-312). Labor historian H.G. Gutman contends that this version of kinship ties dates back to West African cultures, predating the period of enslavement in America. Gutman offers a framework to consider the origins of the fictive kinship ties that shape

⁵¹ Historian Robert Olwell (1998) highlights the impact of coastal conditions that led most enslaved Africans to exist with limited interaction from planters for a significant portion of the year, “The marshes, swamps, and rice fields of the region were home to mosquitoes that infected humans with malaria and yellow fever.” Charles Joyner shares the account of a coastal visitor who affirms Olwell’s findings: “For nearly half the year he cannot visit his own plantation . . . if he comes back before frost, it is like the return of the banished Foscari, on pain of death” (Joyner 1984, 37).

⁵² Anthropologist Lorand Matory challenges the narrative of isolation. He argues that Gullah people used waterways as they do in Venice, Italy (Matory 2008, 233). Men and women such as my uncle Isaac Moultrie, my grandmother’s brother, used waterways to travel from Frogmore, to Eddings Point and neighboring islands such as Coosaw. Such travel facilitated access and an exchange of ideas. Matory also suggests any isolation was instead an act of great agency because of the control it exacted over who and when engagement occurred. Additionally, the interaction of merchants and other maritime commerce challenges any assumption that Gullah people had no outside influence or interactions. The access to influence and commerce leaves little room for the persistence of such an argument.

contemporary Gullah identity. Kinship in the West African context functions as the normal idiom of social relations in that parents taught children to address older individuals whom they were not related to by a handle of “Aunt” or “Uncle” (Gutman 1976, 218). Such an approach to family facilitated the socialization of youth and unrelated individuals into the slave community through what he deems as reciprocal fictive kinship relations (Gutman 1976, 220). In the face of the relational voids precipitated by chattel slavery, enslaved Africans drew from their cultural beliefs and behaviors and expanded their concept of family (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994, 297-312).⁵³ Enslaved Africans were forced to adapt to a suppressive system that historian Eugene Genovese described as paternalistic at best. In the context of enslaved Africans, the familial ties forged on plantations created a network of kinship buttressed by the mutual obligation of support. The following discussion will explore these ties through a Gullah lens.

The Gullah family structure presents one basis for what the American family looks like in an African American context that privileges interdependence and mutuality. The seeking process, the role of Water Mothers, and the role of god parents are examples of the village model of child rearing in Gullah communities. These examples elucidate Gutman’s framework as they strengthen kinship ties while preparing youth for life beyond the community. Growing up, community elders and family alike often said, “Manners will take you where money won’t.” This lesson was affirmed at church, at the dinner table, and through countless interactions. I never understood what this advice meant as a youth, given my naïveté about the power of money in our country, but I knew it was important because I heard it at the dinner table and it was affirmed at church. Elders were hesitant to engage youth who lacked manners. I stopped in my tracks recently when I read a post from radio

⁵³ Gullah is clearly not the only culture that was shaped by fictive bonds; ritual co-parentage is common in many countries around the world. These relationships are sustained by bonds between a youth’s parents. Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody highlight the role of ‘ceremonial parents’ who embrace reciprocal commitments taking the form of emotional and material assistance (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994, 297-312).

personality ‘Charlemagne tha God’ on Instagram. He was pictured offering his hand to a famous actress who was ascending a staircase with the caption, “My grandmother always said, ‘Manners will take you where money won’t.’” A native of Moncks Corner, South Carolina, outside of Charleston, he has spoken often about his Gullah/Geechee roots, but in this moment there was not only an instantaneous camaraderie but also a captivating reminder of the role family plays in cultural transmission.

Stepping into the world where kinship ties are made real is an important approach to appreciating the complexity of the Gullah family system. The function of churches on the Sea Islands and their role in supporting familial frameworks cannot be underscored enough. The both/and of these institutions’ centrality to driving community life and sustaining values is a portal to understanding the dynamism of Gullah and what Keith Cartwright describes as “the spiritual and institutional spaces of reassembled black society with respect for their history of soul guardianship” (Cartwright 2013, 60). Not only was church the place where the island worshipped, but it was also a place of activism, entertainment, celebration, and where ideals were affirmed that promoted cohesion; additionally, it was the island’s only marker of African American institutional life for generations. Seeking was the formal beginning of church membership for Gullah people. It was during this process that the community collaborated to teach young people important lessons about faith. My parents, Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr. and Mrs. Vernelle Moultrie Heyward, grew up during an era where “seeking” was commonplace.⁵⁴ My mother was raised on Coosaw Island, where our community’s only churches, Samaritan Baptist and Anteza Baptist, were located at the time. (The churches were once one congregation, but separated due to conflict and later re-joined under a new

⁵⁴ Using Mr. and Mrs. likely feels like an extra measure of professionalism or distance. My parents raised me to always use a “handle” when referring to elders or any individual as a sign of respect. In my community, such a gesture would warrant a person being described as “grown,” arriving at a status that Alice Walker referred to as “womanish,” or maturity. I’ve never referred to my parents by their first names and will honor the cultural context of my upbringing but not doing so here.

name that reflected the reconciliation—Friendship Baptist Church.) Coosaw Island was predominately African American and could only be accessed by boat or ferry until the early 1960s. My father grew up Methodist in a community called Sam’s Point, located across the river from Coosaw Island.

Baptism is an important rite of passage. Historian Mechal Sobel argues that enslaved Africans were attracted to the Baptist grounding because of this denomination’s faith in the ecstatic regeneration of the spirit, the promise of congregational independence, and the compatibility of baptismal rites with pre-existing African practices (Sobel 1988, 129). My discussion of baptism highlights the important, yet dwindling, tradition of seeking and what it reveals about familial bonds in the Gullah context. Baptists are the majority denomination among African American Sea Islanders; while other local denominations, including the African Methodist Episcopal Methodist churches, practice infant baptism, the Baptists on Coosaw Island believe that individuals should be baptized only when they reach an age of awareness that allows them to understand the meaning of salvation and church membership.

The seeking process commences when a child reaches the age of awareness, which varies based on the child. I was baptized at the age of seven and others in the community were baptized in their teens or even as adults. Historian Ras Michael Brown outlines the stages of this process; the preparatory stage, beginning with the candidate for baptism’s gaining permission from the Christian community and receiving preliminary guidance from a spiritual leader; the wilderness, which means getting through a period of isolation and visions; and the final phases of formal instruction by the spiritual leader, public acceptance into the community of Christians and baptism. Artist Jonathan Green is my parents’ age, and recalls the progression similarly:

A person desiring or ‘seeking’ to become a Christian was required to go through a process of reflection, a ‘coming of age’ or ‘rite of passage’ prior to actual baptism into the church. This required an individual to go into the woods apart from others and seek the presence of God. ‘Seeking’ usually lasted anywhere from three days to three weeks and was completed by the

age of twelve. (cited in Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xv)

Green suggests that this preparatory stage is marked by an individual acting on the desire to be baptized. A confession of faith is the first step in indicating an interest in becoming a member of the church.

For many of the youth at our church, the opportunity to take communion and join the choir or usher board made the prospects of baptism enticing. Without formal church membership, such privileges were not an option, and the allure of joining peers who enjoyed such privileges became a generational driving force. As kids, greater involvement in church proceedings and the attractiveness of the much-coveted “church wine,” a non-alcoholic but sweet concoction made by a local gentleman, had great appeal. This appeal and so much more came to light through conversations with Soterica Johnson who is around my age and was baptized at the same time as me. She grew up close to our island, and we were taught the same values. The various commonalities by virtue of our church and familial ties became apparent during my recent conversation with her. In her words, “I went up [before the church to indicate a desire to be baptized] because I wanted to, because of how we grew up. I saw other people being baptized and getting involved in the church. I wanted to be more involved. I wanted to be on the usher board and in the choir. My mother didn’t even know I was going to do it” (Johnson 2017). In response, I admitted, “I remember wanting to take communion to drink the wine you had to get baptized. I wanted to usher too, but the wine was the main thing. I don’t think I understood what everything meant. We must have gone up the same time.”

Before we could partake in the coveted wine and become involved in church activities, we each had to complete the baptism committee’s process, which involved passing on spiritual and formal knowledge about Christian life within and beyond the church context, in addition to experiencing isolation to facilitate an authentic communion with God through seeking. We were

assigned to a committee; others were assigned to a single elder, as Mr. Jonathan Green recalls:

During the seeking process, the individual was given little or no food to eat. The individual was assigned a respected adult of the church or in other words, a spiritual mother or father, who served as his or her point of contact during the seeking process and taught him or her how to pray. When deemed worthy, the seeker would be accepted as a candidate for baptism into the church. (cited in Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xv)

Once the committee of church elders deems the candidate has demonstrated the spiritual maturity, knowledge, and understanding, requisite for receiving baptism, he or she is presented to the church through a formal program that includes a catechism, an oral examination of Christian principles by a pastor or church official that takes the form of questions posed by said official and answers provided by the candidate for baptism. Seeking facilitates community cohesion. In essence, the elder mentors the seeker for the duration of the process. This spiritual parent serves as his or her guide through the journey of the figurative spiritual wilderness. These relationships sustain fictive kinship ties and engage the family bonds central to this chapter's thesis. As Green suggests, the spiritual parent monitors the apprentice's dreams, prayers, and visions for signs that the seeker is prepared for examination. The guide also prepares the seeker to deliver a testimonial (or catechism) to the congregation's examining committee.

The importance of this preparation cannot be underscored enough.⁵⁵ The committee felt accountable to our families, the church's leadership, and God. They took on the sacred responsibility of preparing us as an act of service, but they also knew that they were providing a foundation for our future. Though they were once in our position—filled with questions, fears, and

⁵⁵ African Americans such as Oprah Winfrey, although not Gullah, credits her upbringing in the church context with her demonstrated knack for communication (Lofton 2011, 129). Youth are taught about public speaking at an early age, and prompted to engage in the practice of presenting Easter and Christmas "pieces" (because the short poems were often given to families on a small piece of paper) during the Sunday School program that honored the sacred holidays. The transferrable skills of oral communication, decorum, and the confidence fostered through the expectation of engaging in the program carried over into the educational and professional pursuits of young church members.

youthful distractions—they never revealed their innermost thoughts about the process. Hence, the preparation moved from generation to generation, largely unchanged. In the end, we were representing them, so our success in reciting our catechism would reflect their investment of time and effort. I recall countless hours practicing with the committee and my parents. Since I was seven when I was baptized, I am not sure if I fully appreciated the moment. I do recall being nervous about doing well. Local success stories of church members groomed by community elders who went on to win public speaking contests, become high school or college Drum Majors, become student body presidents (in high school and college), and step into various other leadership roles—all influenced by the foundation of faith and family on our island—are numerous. By honoring the privileging of youth development as a tangible approach to futurism within the realities of Gullah identity, these relationships reshape the cultural understanding of Gullah culture. Gullah communities re-envisioned the Christian practice of baptism to meet the particular needs of their community. The relationship forged between the candidate for baptism, who is more often than not a youth, and the elders who guide her or him through the baptism process represents one of the lasting experiences of Gullah life among a field of dwindling constants. Up until the 1990s, baptism in Gullah communities along the Sea Islands of coastal South Carolina consisted of a “seeking process” leading up to the Christian rite of baptism on the front end and the tradition of “being taken out of the water” on the back end. The next section will explore the process of baptism as enriched by seeking step by step.

Step One: Confession of Faith and Committee Assignment

Some individuals went before the church to indicate their desire to be baptized in response to a dream. Others were influenced by the conviction of peer pressure or by the urging of elders who felt like the time had come to walk the path of greater church involvement and faith. Some parents insisted that their children join the church because of their age, or concern about their spiritual

formation. There are also those who waited until adulthood or even embraced the journey nearing their life's end to "get right with God." For me, it was a mixture of the allure of church wine, greater involvement, and a desire to take my faith to the next level at the ripe age of seven. Soterica and I both went before the church the same week, making us members in the same baptism cohort. Our decision to join the church launched the baptism process that churchgoers refer to as "seeking." This rite of passage takes place during an altar call, an invitation to join the church after the pastor's sermon, and is marked by a public witness of faith in front of the congregation. As a hymn set the tone for the moment of decision, our pastor—Rev. Middleton—would say, "The doors of the church are open." As he spoke, the song "I have decided to follow Jesus" played in a soothing tone with the syncopated coaxing of persuasion. Soterica recalled the moment she expressed her desire to be baptized:

I remember being nervous at first. You know how we were, always family-oriented, and welcoming, and you always had that. Having to go up [to the front of the church to indicate that I wanted to be baptized] was initially scary. I remember when I went up—I remember it being fun at that age. Knowing the meaning of baptism and being baptized, being born again, being forgiven for your sins, you know—the things we were taught at that age. (Johnson 2016)

"Going up," as we called it, was a pivotal first step. We all had to do it, but in our own time and with our own will. Despite these differences, every local church hosted a Vacation Bible School, one of whose purposes was to create a space for evangelism, as my friend Andrea Dawson confirms. She was baptized at the age of ten at St. Joseph Baptist Church, located in Frogmore. She states:

It is very funny because each plantation has a deacon based on where you lived. Deacon Glover was our deacon. I was in Vacation Bible School. I was already thinking I was going to go up. I was talking to Keya [childhood best friend], and she said, 'You know when you go up there and you get baptized, Deacon Glover gives you ten dollars' [Andrea laughs], So I was like, 'Oh man, I'm really going to go now.' It sounds bad, but it's not the only reason I went, but the money was definitely enticing. (Dawson 2017)

Andrea's experience offers insight into the myriad of reasons leading children to make the decision to join their church. She attended church every Sunday, and was heavily influenced by her grandparents, who helped to raise her. Despite the familial ties, however, the influence of her friend

and a potential financial component clearly played a role in her decision—reminding us of the youthfulness of the seekers. She also speaks to the organization of Sea Island communities. Many still refer to their neighborhoods as the “plantation” where their forebears were once enslaved. Andrea’s church assigned deacons based on proximity to various areas of the island.

Next, after “going up,” candidates were turned over to the church’s baptism committee, who shepherded them through the process that includes seeking. There were special markers to indicate a person had reached this stage: Candidates would wear a white headband (to signal the candidate’s involvement in the baptism process), sit on the front pew during church services (another signal of the process that also prompted focus during church services where there was a great deal to learn), and be mentored by elders of the church.⁵⁶ The headband was optional for me. The idea of wearing one at school felt excessive, and my parents did not press the issue. However, I do recall following the rules on Sundays at church. Each household determined how closely the rules were followed. This distinction signaled our vast community’s negotiation of past traditions with shifting values and the access afforded by bridges and causeways. I recall seeing kids wearing a white headband to school, a tradition that continues to this day for certain congregations. The idea of being set apart was important. We were encouraged to consider the importance of the spiritual journey that we were embarking upon and our connection to the individuals who had already completed the journey. Green recalls, “In my own case, my grandmother served as my spiritual mother during my seeking process. I travelled behind our house into the woods for about a half mile to my sacred place. There I found a beautiful canopy of oak trees. I wore a white handmade robe and tied a white string around my forehead (cited in Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xv).

⁵⁶ Historian LaRhonda Manigault-Bryant argues that, “dressing in white demarcated one’s spiritual purity” (Manigault-Bryant 2016, 23).

Each step and marker indicated the candidate was transitioning into a season of greater spiritual awareness and understanding. It was important for the church community and the world to know. When my parents' generation wore white (headbands), they did so daily. My generation wore the band on Sundays, though some kids wore their bands to school. Church elders historically used the seeking process to communicate the serious nature of joining the church fellowship by way of baptism, according to my parents:

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: We had the same process [of baptism], but hers [referring to Vernelle, my mother] was longer. In her case, they had to wear a white rag around their head. (E. Heyward 2017)

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: I was the youngest in my group to get baptized. They said, "When that little one walked down the aisle in church one night, I saw the spirit, she got it." I had Dear [grandmother], and all those people teaching me—Uncle "Boy" Jones, Annie Daisy. We had to go to his house every day and pray; then they talked to you about the Lord, and interpreted your dreams. Everyday, you had to dream, and sometimes you would make up the dream just to have something to share. (V. Heyward 2017)

This process made very clear that there was a family that existed beyond our own and had existed for some time. It was an awakening synonymous with the moment in the film *Antwone Fisher* when the protagonist, a product of the foster care system, meets his extended family for the first time. Like Fisher, there is a feeling of discovery for the candidate, who is turned over to a committee to begin the seeking process. The revelation is that a cadre of community members would now play a new role in our lives. The committee sought to model spiritual devotion and discipline. The experience in itself was an initiation into a particular way of thinking to breed resilience and a renewed perspective on life. The leaders reasoned that seeking, which included isolation, fasting, intense prayer, and experiencing visions and dreams to discern God's will for one's life, would strengthen the seeker's spiritual awareness and understanding of the centrality of faith to their lives. Jesus isolated himself in the wilderness to draw closer to God, thus isolation was considered an important factor that would sanctify seekers and create the needed focus to take the experience

seriously (Luke 5:16 New King James Version). The experience connected families through shared experience while also extending the nuclear family unit to include community members. Dreams and visions became portals of communication that had to be interpreted; the idea was that isolation would open these portals while facilitating a close connection to God and in this context, the spirit world. The spirit world is unseen; it is a dimension of the spirit where the individual and the divine intersect.

Step Two: In the Thick of It: Seeking

I did not realize that seeking, by way of church initiation, was something unique until I came of age and became a part of the process myself. Our process aligned with the Christian tradition of preparation for baptism, but the Gullah spin made it special.⁵⁷ “Seeking” is all about learning how to become a Christian in our Gullah context. The “thick of it” refers to the all-encompassing nature of the experience, as well as the tangible experience of going into the thick of the forest to encounter God, as my father and Mr. Jonathan Green invite us to consider:

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: For the community, it reflected Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, and to model Jesus, they called it “seeking.” They put you under counselors, and they would say you would seek the Lord for a period of time, be it a week or month. (E. Heyward 2017)

Mr. Jonathan Green: Green acknowledges how the process taught us how to engage the spirit and thereby God: “Through separation from others, food deprivation, and location in the woods, the seeking person was placed in a state that induced dreams. They [dreams] were very important to fulfilling the seeking process, and dreams were shared with the seeker’s spiritual father or mother, who also interpreted the dreams. (cited in Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xv)

By the time we reached the stage of baptism, the communion with nature that defined my parents’ seeking experience had dwindled to a mere commitment to daily prayer and study. As Green and my

⁵⁷ Christians are baptized because Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Baptism marks a beginning, or moment of renewal. This is certainly the case among the Gullah—the baptism helps the baptism candidate understand the meaning of the rite and what is to come. Seeking takes this responsibility one step further to engage the practice of spirituality through prayer, interpretation of visions and dreams, and a fuller awareness of the natural world.

parents note, the process was once driven by isolation in the wilderness, the active interpretation of dreams and visions, and a pervasive setting apart that our contemporary lives did not easily facilitate. A shift occurred that impacted the nature of the seeking tradition.

The connection of the Sea Islands by bridges and causeways and increased economic mobility led to families like my own moving beyond the island. As a result, many families commuted to the island to attend church. The proximity that facilitated prolonged time in the wilderness became complicated with the distance of miles and 20th-century innovations. The remnants of that earlier process, though, were still there in every committee meeting, as the elders—who had been our role models and had now been transformed into family by faith—shared their own seeking narratives and spoke with certainty about the spirit world that we would come to know, albeit in a different way. In theory, we would pass down these lessons to our families and the youth that would follow us, as they came to know these lessons from their forbearers and family members.

The isolated time in the surrounding brush was now a state of mind during which visions from God could still be had. It was like the difference between learning how to prepare a meal in real-time and watching someone prepare one on television. The perspective and artistry were still there, and the outcome likely was still the same, but there is nothing like feeling the ingredients with one's own hands. My parents' and I both communed with God. However, the vulnerability they experienced by virtue of encountering God in the isolation of nature was more tangible. Praying. Waiting. Contemplating. Living into something larger than themselves, walking a path that their parents and siblings walked, and that they, too, walked alone.

Historian Margaret Creel describes the endeavor of “seeking religion” during the middle to late 19th century as an initiatory culmination in a period of spiritual travel (Creel 1988, 285). Creeland her contemporaries Michael Wolf and Patricia Guthrie suggest that seeking began in the 1830s, when missionaries put enslaved Africans through a trial process during which they learned how to

pray and memorize scriptures (Manigault-Bryant 2014, 117). LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's interview with a Charleston, South Carolina native reveals the following about the process: "Seekin' was a whole 'nother thing in and of itself! ... It was so special, it was different than anything you'd ever experience" (Manigault-Bryant 2014, 125). This process turned these practices into habits. The apprenticeship, or "thick of it seeking," phase is arguably the most important because a spiritual parent monitors the seeker's travels (dreams, visions, prayer) for signs indicating the seeker's preparation for baptism. This is the process to which both Jonathan Green and my parents alluded.

In my time, the church elders facilitated the process by hosting evening sessions during which they interpreted dreams and visions, always with an eye towards encountering specific themes they saw as particularly indicative of spiritual growth. We were their apprentices in the faith. They were our wise guides. Unlike previous generations, we had no wilderness beyond the ephemeral feeling of isolation from our friends during class sessions or our limited access to television. We heard stories of the wilderness and learned the significance of finding our own wilderness in the years to come. The following accounts offer insight into how the process differed between our generation and that of my parents. Like Soterica and Mr. Jonathan Green, my parents as well as Soterica Johnson remember this phase of their own spiritual development:

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: If you went back to your committee to be evaluated and if you didn't tell them certain dreams, they would say you wouldn't find the Lord—you're just playing, and you had to continue to pray. Once you found the Lord, they could baptize you. During the process you were supposed to stay away from friends, not play outside, and wear white.

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: We were like prisoners.

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: It really set you apart. I can remember all of them [Miss Susan and Mr. Lewis's children] stopped playing with us. They would walk from their house into the woods to pray. (E. Heyward 2017)

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: Miss Susan and Mr. Lewis had all of them under lock and key; they were covered all around. They had no choice. We had us a slide in the woods, right there on the edge; we figured out how to put leaves and how to slide. We use to play instead of pray. We used to walk to Roy's house. (V. Heyward 2017)

Mr. Jonathan Greene: The act of fasting induced a state of trance and the dreams come. I remember light, being completely absorbed by light—not just outside, but also all throughout. I did not feel human at all; I felt like a glow. It was a very mysterious time. I felt fear and really did not know what to do. My dreams began to come. I had dreams about the dangers of my life. I saw a lot of loneliness. I dreamed about the opening of the gate. Grandma said that this indicated new ideas, new horizons. She said that I had indications of helping people to overcome their present state of limitation, leading people out of darkness to see more light. (cited in Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xv)

But the evaluations my parents' and Mr. Greene's generation received had higher stakes than ours. This generation was sent out into the wilderness to pray until they had a vision. There was nothing glamorous about the wilderness. It was dark, and a place defined by childhood fears and concerns. Many older kids and our parents shared stories about how terrified they were during this part of the journey. These admissions humanized the experience while also acknowledging the solemn nature of one's spiritual journey. Their dreams were also interpreted by the committee who sought to find some indication the candidates had communicated with God; the importance of the portal to the divine was understood and respected. However, kids will also be kids. My mother notes that some youth figured out how to limit their time outside by fashioning responses that would appease the committee, sometimes using their time away for prayer to play.

For my generation, the committee sessions were designed not only to convey church doctrine but also to teach us about the dimensions of spirituality. We met in the homes of our church elders, the lay leaders who had themselves experienced the initiation into the fellowship that felt like the unknown to us; however, for them it was a welcome routine as Soterica Johnson admitted:

I was tired of the classes. My grandmother had me at her house wearing white and not watching TV during the process. I remembered [the classes] being frustrating because at that stage I didn't understand the full concept of baptism and what it meant. My grandmother told me it was avoiding the negativity on TV and having limited distractions from learning the catechism, learning how to pray, and other stuff. I am not sure it was important but I do remember it. (Johnson 2016)

This routine of worship was woven into the practice of life, a carving out a sacred space to convene,

like my grandfather who can be heard singing and communicating with God under the shade of the majestic oak tree that offers a view of the river. Our meetings were also held at Praise Houses, which had varying roles. Praise Houses represent another distinctly Gullah marker worth noting because of the role they played in community life and church initiation. Mr. Jonathan Greene's process was mostly conducted at a Praise House, as was the case for others in communities that did not have their own church and pastor who regularly conducted services. As my father recalls, "Most churches didn't have a preacher every Sunday, so communion was big." Communion Sundays were not only important because of the actual communion but also because of the presence of the pastor. Many pastors served more than one parish because of the distance between many of the islands and the limited number of clergy. The Praise House was both a place of worship and a place of preparation for baptism during seeking:

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: I never went to the praise house near Coosaw; I went on Jenkins.

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: The praise house on Sam's point was non-denominational, and it was housed by a deacon. It served the function in the community of spiritual leadership to keep the education consistent when you weren't at church, and preparation for baptism. The pastors only came in circuits, and sometimes you wouldn't see them for a month.

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: At the one on Jenkins Road, Mr. Garfield would teach us how to pray, how to do church stuff. They would sing and try to tear the house down, shout like they were bringing the house down.

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: We went during the week, we would sing and pray.

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: They would teach us.

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: After the scripture was read, they would teach a lesson.

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: Like they do at watch night service. I didn't get it until "Deac" taught us common meter, long meter, how to carry common meter, short version, long version of the hymn, how you supposed to say things and how to pray. He taught us all that.

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: Everyone had to testify or do something. (E. Heyward 2017)

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: It reminded me of the way—all churches don't do this, but they used to say at Friendship [Baptist Church] "don't let the house get cold," a reflection of the

old way, meaning someone should always be prepared to raise a song or testify. (V.Heyward 2017)

My parents highlight the role of praise houses in our community. Mr. Garfield continues to oversee the praise house my mother referenced. He and others in the community used the space, particularly during the seeking process, for the training that went into this period of preparation. They were being taught how to pray, testify, and sing. In many respects, the praise house offered an initiation into many of the practices of the congregation.

The Praise House model was used less on Coosaw, given the size of the island and its inhabitants. Arthur Brown, who joined the church a generation before my parents, recalls a similar experience of dream and vision interpretation as well as prayer that has come to define the seeking process. Brown was baptized by Rev. Jacob Hamilton in August of 1961, a time when he recalls folks travelling around the island via cow, horse, and cart. There was no bridge. My paternal grandfather, Benjamin Smalls, who would become a church deacon, took Brown out of the water and remains a lasting influence in his life, reflecting again how seeking affirmed the expansion of family on the island and beyond. When Brown visits the Island, he can be found at my grandparents' house, maintaining a bond that was sparked through his baptism.

Brown underscored the role of dream interpretation to his seeking process. Dreams were closely monitored and interpreted "Come up with a person that appears in dreams?" they would ask. The notion of "coming up" with a person underscores the centrality of dream interpretation and nods to the role of the ancestors in Gullah spiritual practice.⁵⁸ My mother indicated that youth would

⁵⁸ Why were dreams and visions privileged? There is the fact that God spoke to prophets through dreams and visions, as well as encounters that scholar LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant refers to as "talking to the dead," reflecting the cultural practice of orally communicating with ancestors and also through dreams and visions. According to Peter J. Paris (1995), John Blassingame (1972), and others have noted the similarity between African and Christian theism, to which he attributed to the ease with which Africans incorporated Judeo Christianity into their African cosmological framework in Africa and beyond. They argue that Christianity was less an adoption, and more of an expansion of a spiritual framework that was already in place. Paris also points out that Creel cited the use of sacred medicines, ancestor reverence, and notions of immortality as examples of the synthesis among Gullah people (Paris 1995, 38). Could seeking, then, point to

sometimes suggest a person who they had not actually seen during their time in the wilderness or in their dreams to abbreviate the time of their sessions. In most instances, the person encountered in the dream or vision was a family member or church elder who as deceased. Dreaming of someone from the past extends the seeking process backwards in time, and confirms a historical sense of lineage. The singularity of this Gullah tradition is foregrounded by this very sacred and important community tradition. Brown's classes were led by Cousin Ween, when "kids would go to her house for a piece of bread." He recalled, "The land where the church is located was previously owned by her. He and others met at their home where she would interpret their dreams." Our parents, grandparents, and spiritual mentors often reflected on their experiences. Each account conveyed a longing for the close-knit community life of the past.

Step Three: The Baptism and First Communion

"You would go in front of the church, and they would say "this one ain't ready"
– Mrs. Vernelle Heyward

More than a formality, seeking was preparation for life in and beyond the church. As my mother recalls, the preparation through prayer and with elders led to the day of baptism on which the candidate would be examined before the church. There we stood, as so many others had, our backs to the congregation comprised of community members, family, and friends. We faced the pastor, who sat behind a table, asking us questions about the faith we had to memorize but were also expected to know through our time in prayer well enough to publically convey through testimony without embarrassing ourselves, our committee, and the generations bearing witness, including our ancestors. In many instances, the questioning was a mere formality. My mother did mention times when a youth was not ready, but Soterica and I were approved after sharing our catechism. Upon

an "Africanization" of the Christian initiation process? The enhanced experience was surely tailored to the community's function and reflected the particularities of Gullah people, who are noted for a distinct connection to diaspora practices.

approval, we were ready for baptism.

The actual baptism has a solemn tone. The candidate is cloaked in white from head to toe. Before the construction of Friendship Baptist Church's indoor baptismal pool, the congregation gathered for a procession from the church to a beach-like shore where baptisms took place. Before the 1980s, the church's baptisms were always conducted at "Etta's Beach," land owned by the Grant family (relatives of Mama Rose) that overlooked the inter-coastal waterway. The congregation would sing with the deliberateness of a funeral procession the song "Take Me to the Water, to be Baptized,"

"Take me to The Water . . .
Take me to the Water . . .
Take me to the Water . . .
To be Baptized."

It was a fitting soundtrack, as the church's pastor, deacons and elders, witnesses, and the candidates' families followed those soon to be baptized, who were cloaked in white walking slowly toward the unknown, three-fourths of a mile to the waterway. There is a moment of fear during the procession that the spirituals do not assuage. The following circled my thoughts, constructing a chamber of anxiety as the point of no return got closer with every step with the water that came into view. Questions like: *What will the water feel like? What will it mean to be baptized? What happens if I drown or the pastor waits too long to pull me up?* began to circle in my mind as I waited for immersion. Later, others confided they shared these concerns. *Baptism* marked a moment of spiritual maturity most kids embraced with trepidation.

Once the procession reached the waterway's bank, the pastor, a deacon, and the candidate entered the water until the tide met their waist. With the pastor and the deacon holding the candidate's arms and waist on each side, the pastor would recite a Bible verse and state that the candidate was being baptized, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" before

leaning the youth backwards into the water until he or she was fully submerged, lifting him or her out within seconds. Next, an adult took the youth out of the water. This practice changed during the late 1980s when the church built an indoor baptismal pool. The bridge and greater economic and educational opportunities, and overall progress was tangibly reflected in the church tithing base's ability to fund church additions, including a baptismal pool. With community members like Arthur Brown and Uncle David, who migrated away but sent money back to support the church's affairs, such campaigns took clear shape. Though the songs and spirit remained intact, the procession played a less pivotal role.

For Soretica and me, the process was more concise. We were escorted a few steps to the baptism pool within view of the pulpit behind the mother's bench, where the female elders who served as the church mother sat during Sunday worship services. The water was murky and green. The room looked different, like the difference between a football field during the day--barren and contemplative--and that same field filled with excitement in the air during a primetime evening game. Like generations before us, we were baptized and quickly dipped, so our fears would be allowed to surface. Then we were brought back up and guided while still in the water to the steps where the water mother would be waiting, extending a hand and a smile with a towel waiting to dry us off and protect our modesty because our clothes clung to our water-soaked bodies. My grandfather was Arthur Brown's "Water Father"; however, in my experience, only women have played that role.

There was a sense of pride on the part of the committee who saw the child through to this point as well as on the part of the water parent and family who bore witness to the transcendent moment. Applause and a celebratory song follow the baptism, as did a procession back to the sanctuary in past decades. For us, the procession consisted of a few select steps into the restrooms to change into our communion outfits. For my sister and others, the procession was approximately

the half-mile distance from “Etta Beach” to the sanctuary. The pace walking back was upbeat. All of this occurred after we were bathed, changed into formal attire (often purchased by a god or water parent), and prepared for his or her first communion.

For some of us, communion was the prize. There was a line of demarcation between individuals who could partake in communion and those who could not. Participation marked membership in a selective club. I recall the emotion of feeling left out when my peers who were baptized before me were invited to participate while I watched. After being baptized, we were given our first communion. The moment was a special one marked by a new outfit and receiving the right hand of fellowship. Our clothes spoke to the formality of the moment and our respect for communion. My parents suggested, and I also recall, that out of all Sundays, communion Sunday was the Sunday that we wore our best outfits. This moment of our first baptism was no different. It was our first experience of the church ordinance, yet is also was an important expression of faith. I do not recall who purchased the suit that I wore. I imagine that either my parents or my godmother bought it for me. Soterica noted that her Water Mother, my grand aunt, purchased her dress. This symbolic gesture affirmed our church membership. It also was the beginning of a new chapter. After communion we were invited to select our deacon, who would be our main point of contact for church affairs and serve as a spiritual support. With full membership came the opportunity to join church auxiliaries like the choir and usher board. Participation reinforced many of the lessons of the initiation process. They were opportunities to serve, to engage in community, and to support our island’s institutional life through shared experiences.

Food and spirited fellowship followed the communion and the right hand of fellowship that cemented the candidate’s formal initiation into the church. This meal was a special one. It occurred after our first communion, which honored our connection to the body of Christ. The post baptism repast and fellowship reminded us of our connection to the community who saw us through the

seeking process. It was another form of communion that was a ritual beginning with an offering of grace to the same God who we had just learned so much about personally and collectively. The food, prepared by loved ones who brought “covered dishes” mirrored the ethos of interconnectedness that had kept those before us.

After the repast we enjoyed the newness of our new communal status. We had no idea that we would be one of the last generations to experience baptism as we did. The most significant event that affected island life was the connection of Beaufort, South Carolina’s barrier islands by bridges. With the bridges came increased interaction with non-island residents and access to educational and religious opportunities beyond the single school and church located on Coosaw Island. The bridge initiated a trend of island natives moving off of the island to pursue employment or housing options on Beaufort’s mainland in greater numbers than previously experienced. With these transitions came new approaches to the seeking process. Whereas before the bridge, elders who resided in close proximity to candidates for baptism could easily manage the process, toward the latter part of the 20th century, Friendship Baptist Church became a commuter church, with roughly 50 percent of its membership living beyond the island. This change put limits on such traditions as baptism sessions that formerly endured well into the evening and led to the discontinuation of key elements such as seeking. The challenge of constantly negotiating community life in the midst of a changing world, as Gullah natives continue to do in the face of encroaching development and migration, is sustaining longstanding traditions.⁵⁹ In the end, Baptism still signals a decision to fully embrace the transcendence offered by spirituality in the Christian context and to be shepherded by a family of faith anchored by godparents and water mothers and fathers

Life After Baptism

⁵⁹ This quandary is at the center of Julie Dash’s film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which captures the struggles of a Gullah family to balance the value of tradition with the benefits of leaving their island.

As suggested by Ruth, the Charleston native interviewed by Manigault-Bryant, baptism only marks the beginning of one's spiritual journey:

Seeking marked the beginning of your “spiritual journey—a constant growing in Christ and growing in your faith.” Seeking was therefore interpreted as an individual's first baptism. The second baptism, which was the sign of “true conversion” or salvation, was baptism by the Holy Spirit. [We] recognized at an early age that there was a distinction between seeking, which meant learning how to pray, being baptized with water, and becoming a member of a church, and salvation. (Manigault-Bryant 2014, 130)

Ruth acknowledges an extension to the seeking process that ultimately leads to a full awareness of salvation. With elders as the mentors, the church becomes the place where young people are groomed to engage in both outward spiritual practices (prayer, etc.) and an inward journey. The one who shepherds this post-baptism experience is the Water Mother or Water Father who takes the youth out of the water.

“Water Parents” take youth out of the water when they are baptized and function in a role akin to a godparent. My maternal grandmother's relationship with her Water Mother illustrates a longstanding fictive bond among Gullah people on Coosaw Island and the surrounding area, and it also serves as a generative case study in the function of family. Members of the Friendship Baptist Church on Coosaw Island refer to my grandmother, Mrs. Annie Ruth Smalls, as “Hillary,” a moniker honoring her understated yet pronounced leadership skills akin to the former first lady and United States senator. In a context where leadership by women was confined to just a few options, she stewarded the church's growth and finances by serving as its secretary for over fifty years. My sister gave her the nickname “the Godfather” as a tribute to her administrative and financial acumen, the central role she plays in our island's community life, and, more importantly, the role she plays in the lives of her children, grandchildren, and numerous adopted family members. She is a connector who has always been one with the islands—always on hand to coordinate a funeral repast, raise funds for a family in need, or negotiate a fair deal on behalf of others.

Mrs. Annie Ruth Smalls remains one of the pillars of our community. During the fall of

2013, she found her life in transition as she embraced retirement. However, her newfound leisure was short-lived, as she soon busied herself by taking care of various elderly members of the community, including nonagenarian Ms. Janice Smith. Playing the role of the daughter that Ms. Smith never had, she accompanied Ms. Smith to doctor's appointments, prepared food for her, and ensured that her every need was met. Although my grandmother's new endeavor had no financial reward, the dynamics of the relationship reflected a familial bond characteristic of our island's culture, one in which such bonds are regularly created and sustained between individuals without a shared lineage. When I asked my grandmother who Ms. Smith was, she simply replied: "She took me out of the water."

"Who took you out of the water?" is a common question among Gullah natives in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Asked with a frequency akin to "Where did you attend high school?" the question's response reveals details about one's seeking and baptism experience, familial ties, and church origin. The response also personifies the African-attributed adage brought into the mainstream by then-first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's book *It Takes a Village* (Clinton 1996). To be "taken out of the water" refers to the act of community wherein elders extend a hand to youth after their baptism to help them out of the river or baptismal pool after being fully submerged in water. Although physical in nature, the extension of the hand by a "water mother" or "water father" symbolizes a lifelong commitment to the youth's spiritual and personal development. Water, the life-giving source of nourishment for the body and our earth, and the mechanism for Gullah people's travel and connection, was and, most importantly, is this community's symbol for renewal and hope. This hope stems from the belief that water physically and spiritually connects people to something larger. In this instance, this "something larger" is the community and its cultural narrative of shared values. Having a Water Mother or Father is an important tradition that linked me to previous generations despite a shift away from "seeking" as my parents experienced it.

The simple gesture of an adult extending a hand to reach down and lift a youth out of the water after the transformative experience of baptism illustrates the importance of familial ties and the communal value of supporting and informing the youth. Youth are “taken out of the water” daily by teachers, coaches, mentors, and various other caring adults. It was not uncommon for the elders who facilitated the seeking process to also serve as the person who took the youth out of the water. The assumption of this role is sometimes linked to familial ties; hence, a distant cousin might elect to serve as a youth’s water patron. My friend Andrea’s spiritual mother was also the individual who took her out of the water and became her godmother. My godmother did not take me out of the water, but my water mothers remain an integral part of my life to this day. The criteria varies depending upon family; in my case, there were several individuals within and beyond my family interested in taking me out of the water. My parents were less arbiters of choice and more affable agents who were thankful that so many community members sought to be engaged in my development, living out the family ethos that shaped them and would shape me. As my mother recalled,

There were a lot of people who wanted to take you out of the water. At your age, you were the youngest to join the church. Everyone was amazed at you, because of how you were, and the things you did in church, like reciting the 23rd Psalm as a toddler for the church. You learned that at Beaufort Christian. Your favorite scripture was from Ephesians; you believed in that scripture as a little boy. You learned about fear early in life because you had no fear of others. You once told your father to have faith when you two encountered a snake. You were consistent. Once you got it in you about having faith and believing, that and the influence of Sunday school, allowed you to never have fear about things. Dear [Great Grandmother] always said, there was something special about you that someone could always see. Nana, Vanessa, Miss Vick, and Annie Buck, (because Miss Etta told her to) all wanted to take you out of the water. Your baptismal committee was Nana, Miss Vick, Annie Buck, and Uncle Po Slim. (V. Heyward 2017)

Elders would pick a child to “take out of the water” because of the promise they saw in them, or at times because of what the child’s parents or grandparents meant to them. For example, Gemma’s great-grandmother Myrtle had a special connection to my mother and eventually my sister. It was

because of this connection that she looked out for them. Her daughter Wanda continued her mother's care when her mother passed. "This is because Myrtle loved you," Cousin Wanda would say to my mom and sister the reason for her benevolence. In similar fashion, the cycle of family and connection was cyclical and the memory long. In other cases, it was simply a matter of tradition; for instance, two families may have a history of taking members of each other's family out of the water. In the case of both my grandmother and myself, the elders volunteered for the task because they wanted to encourage us in the faith and support our development. Whatever the cause for the connection, the role stretches well beyond the moment.

When I was baptized, I remember the murky water clearing my face as Rev. Middleton (our pastor) and my grandfather (the attending deacon) pulled me up after leaning me back in a sequence that was over too quickly for me to entertain fear. As they led me to the steps, I remember a Ms. Daise, Ms. Vick, Annie Buck, and Ms. Vanessa all occupying spaces around the baptismal pool. One of them held out her hand, while another held open a towel awaiting a celebratory embrace. Who each person was is a mystery. I recall there being more than one person. My situation was unique in the sense that I benefitted from the collaborative engagement of community members, especially the aforementioned women, who each took a particular interest in my spiritual growth and development. The women whom my mother named mean the world to me. Nana and Miss Vick never missed a birthday, Easter, Christmas, or a "just because" opportunity to show love through time, a spare twenty, ten, or fifty dollar bill, or an "I Love You."

Nana literally fed me every day of high school, where she worked in the cafeteria, refusing to allow me to pay for lunch. Miss Etta was an elder when I was a youth and would send for me during church service to hand me a piece of foil folded up in a small rectangle, including some denomination of money. "This, for reading those announcements so well," she would say on occasion. Annie Buck was always present, and continued her mother's looking after me, speaking

over me before the church during my adult years, as her cousin and my great uncle “Po Slim” also did. They planted seeds of living and about how community was done. These experiences came to a special culmination in high school, when I was invited to attend a conference in Washington D.C. The people I just mentioned found out and decided that they would host a chicken dinner in my honor, raising the money to cover my travel and expenses. There was no motive for their generosity, and many took time away from work and responsibilities to lend their time and resources. It was just what the community did. My only charge was unspoken: “don’t forget that manners will take you where money won’t.”

My grandmother lived this ethos by using her talents and time as a water mother and active community member, as many of the community members did to support one another because of the kinship bonds sustained through baptism and beyond. My mother recalls her mother’s role in the lives of community members:

Your grandmother would make Miss Roy’s [Arthur Brown’s mother] kids’ suits and clothes [for the fourth Sunday], and she would make ours. We were all really close and bonded together since we were younger. She saw how Roy had so many kids to take care of as a single mother. If anyone needed to go to town, Owl [Grandmother] would be the one to carry them. She would carry Francis and Mamie, and Roy’s kids too. We would all pack up in the car. They all came after the bridge. The bridge was built in 1964. And ‘Deac’ would be the one who had a truck. We would ride the ferry over in the car. (V. Heyward 2017)

My grandmother offers a tangible example of the interconnectedness of community life. She herself is a Water Mother, godmother, and an individual who was intricately engaged in the lives of many community members. She and my grandfather treated Ms. Roy’s children like their own, and Ms. Roy did the same. This was the case for many families on our island and the surrounding islands.

It is easy to project a nearly perfect, cohesive model of community life through family when water mothers and fathers acted as engaged agents who, for all intents and purposes, adopted young men and women. The practice of being taken out of the water is an important tradition in my Gullah community that helps explain the importance of family; however, it was not a one-size-fits-all

enterprise. Soterica—whose water mother happens to be my grand aunt and my grandmother’s sister, Mrs. Eleanor Howard—alluded to the uniqueness of each relationship:

Honestly, I mean, at that time, as a child, I know she spoke to me a lot; she bought me dresses; I went to her house, [but] I can’t say she played a major role. Mostly just at church—she was my water mom. I knew she was someone that I needed to give respect to. The community was the strongest tool that we had. I think the statement it takes a village to raise a child was what they lived by. The support and love came from the community, not even being blood family. It was ridiculous how strong it was—it was deep. And I mean you can just go to anyone and get advice, and go to someone’s house and get a hot meal just because someone knows your mom or grandparents; you will be taken care of. I have that today. If I have a house, I will cook a meal for twenty people. I am always welcoming and hospitable because that was how I was brought up. (Johnson 2017)

Not all water parents were as engaged in the lives of the youth as others. My grandmother and I can both speak to the engagement of these individuals, whereas for Soterica, the role was ceremonial in nature. It is evident that my aunt had some influence, but it is clear that her role was not as comprehensive as described in the previous examples. It is also apparent that Soterica continues to honor our community’s values despite her experience with her water mother.

Familial bonds continue to be sustained through the ties to Water Mothers and Fathers who take youth out of the water, who sometimes function as godparents. An interview with one of my childhood best friends, Andrea Dawson, an Atlanta-based accountant and married mother of two, highlighted the distinction between her baptism experiences (having attended church and grown up near Frogmore, St. Helena Island, South Carolina), and those of my relatives on Coosaw Island. She states. “The person who took you out of the water automatically became your godparent. We had to identify our own godparent—that’s how many of us got godparents. Some people got godparents when they were born, but you can also identify a god parent when you got baptized if you take that person out of the water. That was an important process for me, determining who I wanted to take me out of the water. I chose someone who was close to my aunt. I was always with her, so it was natural to choose her. I would go to her house and spend the night, and do a lot of things with her; she became close, and I still have a close relationship with her and her daughter to this day. I

give and get gifts on holidays and birthdays—you know, it’s just family” (Dawson 2017).

I had not heard of this distinction until Andrea shared it with me as we sat across from my Aunt Julie in her kitchen, awaiting the fresh fish she was preparing for us. Dawson remarked that her church was the most progressive in our area because of the youth of their pastor—he, was in his early twenties when he became a pastor. Her pastor stepped away from many of the traditions around seeking that remained a constant for my congregation and others. Although area churches like Andrea’s church, St. Joseph, and others have stopped the practice of seeking in its traditional sense, it still continues, as Aunt Julie discloses:

I met kids from Sheldon [South Carolina] who did the seeking process—I didn’t know it still happened! They did it at my church. We had to wear the white handkerchief. It seemed like that they would only teach the Old Testament back then. That’s one thing I liked about your church [Friendship Baptist Church], the young kids could recite the catechism. (Canfall 2017)

My discussion with Andrea reflects the power of the community’s kinship tradition; Aunt Julie was not a blood relative but functioned as a member of our respective families. As my uncle put it, “Family has always been important, after God and church. Family are God’s angels to us on earth for when we need help and need things done. Someone to reach out to for encouragement, somebody present—they are the village.” I am godfather to Andrea’s daughter, Madison, and Aunt Julie has functioned as a second mother to Andrea. Dawson’s voice and body language became more pronounced as she passionately offered the following remarks:

We are sitting in the perfect spot [to explore the power of fictive kinship ties]. You have people all around you [in our community] who support and look out for you and create opportunities for you. Look at me, Miss Julie [motions to Aunt Julie who is standing at her oven frying fish] and Cousin Ella. They created an opportunity for me at the Housing Authority where I got work experience. That’s where my work ethic began to develop, which contributed to my success as an adult. People look out for you here as if you are their own child, and it’s not like where I am today, where people prefer to mind their own business—‘that’s not your child,’ they say, whereas here everybody was helping everybody? (Dawson 2017)

Beyond our relationship to each other, Aunt Julie had been adopted as a daughter by my grandmother after the death of her mother. She gave both of us our first jobs and remains a constant in our lives. She is like a second mother to us both. We were all interconnected and present in large part because it was the only approach to relationships we knew. These relationships had enriched our lives and the lives of those who raised us. Baptism was the foundational experience that linked us all. At face value, seeking and baptism imparted lessons about faith. However, below the surface, the experience imparted lessons about community and family in action. The role of water parents is synonymous with the role that Aunt Julie plays in Andrea's life. Both women adhere to the tradition passed down to them by previous generations who used the church as a mechanism to promote and sustain familial ties.

Godparenting

Kinship, as explored during the baptism experience, affirms the Gullah idea of the extended family at every step of the process. The matrix of family continuously contributes to understandings of Gullah identity. Godparents, who sometimes serve as Water Mothers or Fathers, play an important role in this matrix. For many of us, having a godparent was the equivalent of having a

place in a family.⁶⁰ As infants, we were christened, wearing white, at church.⁶¹ Parents stood in front of the pastor, flanked by the chosen godparents who vowed to play a spiritual role in the baby's development. This role transcended the spiritual for Gullah people. Although my parents and I grew up in different generations, our godparents played similar roles:

Mr. Elijah Heyward, Jr.: My experience with godparents goes back to Miss Susan and Mr. Lewis, my godparents. They treated me like I was their son. Everything their family did, I did. My mom said they christened me in Coosaw Church. And they really liked me a lot. Back then, people would ask the parents. Nowadays, the parents ask.

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: Back then, the godparent's role was more serious. Back then, they took it on like a real family thing. And that child was like their child. My godmother is Blanche because I was your grandmother's first child, and I was born on Jenkins, and they worked at the factory, and she gave me the name Virginia, and my grandmother gave me my first name. (V. Heyward 2017)

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: I think because they did it that way back then, the role still feels like being a mother to that kid for the younger people. (E. Heyward 2017)

My parents were born before the bridge was built and grew up in a more agrarian era than I did. My father, raised on Sams Point (just across the water from Coosaw), and my mother, raised on Coosaw Island, were shaped by a community comprised of families who depended on one another. There were understandings around sharing the bounty of the sea and harvest and, in the instance my

⁶⁰ Historian Vincent Cousseau (2015) associates godparenting with baptism and also acknowledges examples of ritual kinship in West African contexts. For example, he argues that, "In the American colonial framework, Africans and American Indians were sometimes able to maintain spiritual or mythical forms of fictive kinship, which could coexist with Christian god-parentage and could even have been reinvested through it" (Cousseau 2015). In most instances, within the Christian context, godparents sponsored the individual being baptized, serving as the person who validated and assisted in the process (Gutman 1984, 35). With forebears who negotiated a constant reorganization of family, the role of godparent symbolized the attainment of a particular societal status for African Americans. Family was valued that much more because of interdependence and an understanding of the role of fictive kin. For enslaved Africans who were held in bondage, baptism was a liberating mechanism that ensured freedom through the fellowship of Christ. Value continued to be placed on the practice, if only for its ceremonial privilege of sustaining close familial ties. To stand as a godparent continues to be a great honor in the life of a community. Godparents more often than not have a close bond with the parents, and a commitment to affirming and carrying on the parent's values. In the Gullah context, the christening is almost a ceremony of adoption, marking the all-encompassing engagement of the godchild in the family life of her godparents. The justification for such an approach is suggested by the necessity of establishing significant family bonds for survival during the period of enslavement.

⁶¹ Our community often referred to the ceremony of a baby's dedication or blessing as a christening. The distinction is that christenings often involve infant baptism and naming, whereas in our Baptist context the baby would not be baptized or named. Baptism occurs when the individual is old enough to make a confession of faith. Thus, the ceremony only features a prayer, the announcing of the given name, and the affirmation of the baby's godparents.

parents described, the shared responsibility of child rearing. My grandmother was raised on Coosaw because an island resident offered to support my great-grandmother by raising her for a period of time, while her siblings grew up on Jenkins. The same was the case for other members of my family, including my uncle, who was raised by his godparents—his namesake and my grandfather’s brother, and his wife—in Charleston. Although godparents did not always legally “adopt” youth, the idea was that the child became a member of the family.

Godparents took a vow before the community, church, and God, a promise that was honored beyond its more fleeting contemporary manifestations. Mr. Bernard McIntyre, a magistrate judge and attorney, is my sister Brooke’s father and had the following perspective on the role of the Gullah family:

When you pick a godparent in the Gullah culture, you pick an entire family. It’s like marrying into a family. They become like family. So it is with getting a godparent. These Gullah godparents you take on—the godparent’s parents and their children become their children, brothers and sisters, etc., and their children become your nieces and nephews, and that is a huge part of the Gullah tradition. When you marry you get a family. When you pick godparents you get another family as well, and that truly unfolded. (McIntyre 2017)

When my parents took on the godparent role, they invited my godsister Brooke into the family, not as their goddaughter, but as their daughter, our sister, and the fifth table setting and placemat at our dining room table. My older sister Monica’s godmother, Dr. Shirley Houston Aluko, had a similar approach. According to my father, “Shirley is a good example of the old-school godmother, because she wants to be like a mother figure. Everything she does for her daughter, she does for Monica.”

The process of becoming a godparent used to be a matter of a community member asking to play that role. But conversations with my parents, Brooke’s father, and my sister’s godmother revealed the multiple dimensions of the process and its meaning. Each consultant offered a fascinating perspective on godparenting. Together, they offer insight into the centrality of fictive kinship ties in the Gullah community as well as how said ties are sustained. My parents and Brooke’s

father, Mr. Bernard McIntyre, shared the following memories about how my parents came to be Brooke's godparents:

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: We became Brooke's godparents because of Beverly [Brooke's mother] and my relationship. She said that I would be the godmother. She liked the way I did things the old-time way, and that was how she was raised, and she respected that. "She [Brooke] can have them, and do this with them," Beverly would say in reference to you and your sister being her siblings. When Brooke got here [during Beverly and Bernard's first trip away to Hilton Head after she was born], it was hard for her [Beverly] to let go.

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: I think it goes deeper. She had trust in you in the beginning. It was the trust factor early on. Brooke was a hand baby when she first stayed with us. It was hard for Beverly, not so much for Bernard.⁶² (E. Heyward 2017)

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: I can remember the first time they brought her to the house. Beverly wrote a five-page letter. Her mom said, just ignore her, don't pay her no mind. She called once or twice, but since then Brooke has always been with us, all the time. (V. Heyward 2017)

My parents were engaged in Brooke's life as a support system for her parents. When they travelled or sought help with activities like planning Brooke's birthday party, they participated. What might not be easily discerned from the above quotation is the tradition in the Gullah context of the godchild becoming an integral part of the family. My aunt's five-page letter speaks to her anxiety around leaving her daughter for the first time. The letter contained instructions on Brooke's care, yet was not a sign of concern. The phrase "Brooke has been with us all the time," is more of a figure of speech affirming the fact that Brooke has a permanent place at our dinner table, and the emotional and physical support of our family whenever she needs to tap into it. This model is one that affirms the standard of fictive kinship ties sustained through the seeking process and among families on the Sea Islands.

For Brooke's father, my parents had special traits that he and his late wife, Beverly McIntyre, wanted in their daughter's life. He was a North Carolina native who was initially impressed with the area. He stated, "The coastal setting, water, lowlands, seafood, and grits, other fresh seafood, the

⁶² The term "hand baby" is a colloquialism referring to a newborn baby.

whole smell of the lowcountry—I found it all attractive. Even for me, a country boy who wanted to go home and start a law practice, it was enough for me to want to live here.” He was also drawn to the Gullah approach to family: “Natives were welcoming. A few minutes with a local resident was almost like becoming part of the family. They were always inviting and encouraging you to come back” (McIntyre 2017). All of the factors came into play when he and his wife decided who Brooke’s godparents would be. There is not a prescribed number of godparents. I have one, Brooke has four, and my sister has three. The parents used their discretion, and there were also times where community members took the liberty of volunteering to serve as godparents. Brooke’s father, Mr. Bernard McIntyre, describes how he and his wife selected her godparents:

When I first came to Beaufort, my wife was about to finish her coursework for her doctorate. She was relocating to work on her dissertation. I came back and forth and met friends who were very close to her. One of those friends was Vernelle Heyward and her husband Elijah. We developed a great friendship. We were about the same age, and we were all making our way. They were in education. My wife was in education; I was in law. It just became a very natural fit. They were very kind and loving people. We noticed that they had a daughter and how they reared her, and thought they would be excellent godparents. We had a lot of friends that we met at church and socially, but they were from the lowcountry and that helped a lot. We knew that they would be hands on. We thought we needed that in our life. And we saw it turned out that we were very right.

The other godparents were Beverly’s sister and brother. Her aunt was picked because she and Brooke’s mother were sisters, around the same age, and they grew up very, very close. She didn’t have any children and played a role in raising Brooke. She had one other godchild but it was a boy, and she wanted a girl. The name Brooke—actually Emily Brooke—my wife decided she wanted to name her after her mother. I became very fond of my mother-in-law. As part of the Gullah tradition, they brought me into their home. I stayed in the house as if I grew up there. She treated me like a son. We named her after my wife’s mother, and Brooke was just a name that my wife loved. (McIntyre 2017)

Uncle Bernard, as my sister and I refer to Brooke’s father as, started as a community outsider who became an integral part of the community through his wife’s family. He learned about the strength of local familial bonds first hand and the cultural importance of family that he and his wife in turn sought to establish for their daughter. He shares stories about his desire to attend law school in New England before deciding to attend the University of South Carolina to be close to my aunt and her

family in Beaufort. This decision coincided with their courtship, which involved getting to know Aunt Beverly's hometown, siblings, and culture. This crash course extended through his role as a local attorney and church trustee. He was also invited into the homes of many local families because of the community's emphasis on hospitality. The value placed on community and welcoming newcomers influenced the intentional network of support that he and his wife, Beverly created for their daughter Brooke.

My parents paid similar attention to how they engaged godparents in the lives of my sister and me. There was less fanfare when it came to who my godparents would be. Unlike my sisters Monica and Brooke, who have several godparents, I only have one, my aunt, whom I was visiting in Charleston the night of the shooting at Mother Emmanuel. They say that only children and first children often get more attention from community members seeking to serve in the capacity of godparents than the ones born later, but I can say that despite having only one official godmother, the number of elders, water mothers, and key individuals who have engaged me throughout my life have fulfilled this role without the designation. My parents confirmed that "Singie [Viola Smalls, my mother's younger sister, who was given the basket name⁶³ "Singie" because of her affinity for performance] asked to be your only godparent. Second children have a different experience. The first kid is an experiment for people to practice on. You learn from the first to see what helps you better for the second. After Singie, you didn't need any more because she was in the military. She did not want anyone else but her."

My mother underscored the generational shift that occurred between my sister's birth and my own. My sister was my mother's first child and my grandmother's first grandchild. The excitement around her birth drove our community's engagement in caring for her. My parents, as

⁶³ It is very common for Gullah people to have more than one name. One name is given officially at birth, and the other, a "basket name" is given by a family or community member. The "basket name" often highlights a personality trait as indicated by my aunt's propensity for singing earning her the basket name "Singie."

most first time parents might agree, had learned a great deal about parenting by the time that I was born; hence her reference to her child as an “experiment.” The choice of my aunt to be my godparent highlights another important consideration in selecting godparents: stability. My aunt was someone whom both of my parents felt comfortable having as my guardian should anything happen to them. Her profession, alignment with my parents’ values, and interest were important factors. She also shared my aunt’s desire to be my only godparent. According to my mother, her sister’s experience differed:

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: When Monica [her sister] was born, Shirley and I were friends in school, but Shirley asked to be Monica’s godmother. And I said okay. Then Mrs. Margaret saw Monica and asked to be Monica’s godmother, then Sheebie asked to be Monica’s godmother, and all of this was when she was a baby. Then Calvin and Queenie [his wife] asked. Queenie loved Monica to death, but I told them Monica already had three godmothers.

Mr. Elijah Heyward Jr.: As I mentioned before, Shirley is a good example of the old-school godmother. (E. Heyward 2017)

Mrs. Vernelle Heyward: Sheebie and Mrs. Margaret were both like that. Sheebie would go to the store and buy five dresses at a time. Margaret the same. Monica had two christenings, one in Beaufort and one in Savannah. It was a competition. She bought her own gown even though Monica already had a gown from her first christening. Brooke has four godparents and we all christened her at the same time. (V. Heyward 2017)

Each individual brought their personality to the role, as my mother indicates. My sister’s godmothers struck a balance between traditional practices that mirrored adoption and the more contemporary practices that involved experiences beyond the Lowcountry such as summer travel. My sister’s godmother, Dr. Shirley Houston Aluko, is a physician based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her thoughts on godparenting are grounded in her Gullah identity and in her travels. My sister spent most summers with Aluko and her family and was invited into their fold as our godsister Brooke was invited into ours.

The responsibilities of godparents vary depending upon the family. The crux of my argument rests upon the important role of kinship ties in the Gullah context, which godparenting

exemplifies. The function of these relationships have shifted over time. An old-school Gullah model rests on the values privileged during the era when our islands were less connected. During my parents and grandparents' childhoods, proximity facilitated closer bonds and awareness of the child's needs. The responsibilities were based on supporting the child by supplementing parent's efforts. A forward-looking sense of the responsibilities of godparents informed Andrea and her husband's decisions about naming godparents:

For my own children, I think Michael and I were thinking about who would be most influential in a positive way to our kids, those who would help us make them well-rounded individuals. You also think, if something were to happen to us, who would we trust to instill a moral and value system? Who would ensure that they would continue to be successful in our absence? We didn't expect them to have the same relationship that I grew up with, given the proximity that we had, but the relationship is a little different. I think for a lot of people outside of our community, godparenting is just a title, a formality people don't really take to heart. We do as much as we do in our culture because it is just an extension of our family for us, not just a title. It's a real relationship. My husband has a godparent, some lady who lives in North Carolina, and I don't think he remembers her name. He saw her one time. (V. Heyward 2017)

The role of godparents has evolved for individuals like Dr. Aluko and me who remain engaged in a diasporic sense. Relatives in the northern United States often invited children to spend the summer "up north." This opportunity for exposure to another region of the country and for parents to have a break strengthened ties and affirmed the idea of community beyond our hometown. Other responsibilities included caring for the child in the event that one or both parents died; providing birthday, Christmas, and Easter gifts or outfits; and attending various milestone events.

My father noted how Dr. Aluko's approach was traditionally Gullah, "old school" as my mother would say. Dr. Aluko herself notes "One of the central factors of Gullah is the role of community and family. Godparenting is one way that community is sustained through providing children with support beyond the nuclear family" (Aluko 2017). Dr. Aluko's husband is from Nigeria, and her travels inform a wider view of family that connects our Gullah heritage to other parts of the diaspora. She draws parallels between the local custom of putting a "handle" on an

elder's name, which showed respect by prefacing the adults' first names with Mr. /Mrs. Uncle/Aunt.

Dr. Aluko stated,

I have been blessed with the opportunity to travel to many parts of the world. In West Africa, the concept of family is essential in the community. Practically everyone is an uncle or aunt (although not biological). The concept of a village caring for all is evident. It is not unusual that a godparent in the Gullah culture is instrumental in providing support beyond the nuclear family, as many customs were brought from West Africa.⁶⁴ (Aluko 2017)

Many suggest the fact that it does indeed take a village to raise a child; thus any financial or emotional contributions to those efforts facilitate the task. Mr. Bernard McIntyre explains how the community reflects the wisdom of this adage:

Godparents care for you and take care of the child. They attend events and provide support. There are the dance lessons at 3 or 4, twirling batons at 7 or 8, and then entering some beauty contest at 12 or 13. The whole family becomes involved and finds their way of participating. Whether that is travelling to participate—in my case for my daughter's beauty pageant—or providing financial support, calling to provide encouragement, the whole family emanates from the godparent family, and that's just something that helps supplant the fact that many are not always in a homogeneous community that we used to be in, that is the historically small black community compounds with the bus, school, church, etc. (McIntyre 2017)

The Gullah approach to godparenting reinforces the belief in the value of maintaining strong community and family using both Christian practices (including baptism) as well as others that transcend religion. But what about Gullah society makes such ties so essential to its survival? My Uncle Bernard describes the consistency of familial ties in the Gullah region with the values that he was raised with in mid-twentieth century rural North Carolina.⁶⁵ There is a consistent commitment

⁶⁴ Dr. Aluko suggests that “there are religious and legal aspects [to godparenting in Nigeria. Godparents may or may not be selected by parents. Godparents can name children and participate in naming ceremonies. God parents can be legally responsible for children if something happens to parents. In the Gullah context there is perhaps a combination of all the above and more. I wonder if there is an expanded role of community or village in many West African cultures. I'm told by my 87-year-old mother that godparents traditionally walk around the house holding the newborn while singing” (Aluko 2017).

⁶⁵ Mr. Bernard McIntyre offers the following insights regarding his own family: “Being here in the Gullah tradition reinforced the values that I grew up with. I come from a mother only family. Our model of family was family as the safety net. Coming from a family of twelve, you are each other's' safety nets. You are taught values such as keeping God first, the importance of church, and the importance of family supporting each other. Even when we worked, the money didn't come to us; the money went to our parents and was used for the entire household. You come back that there is a

to family, but to what end? After all, extended familial ties exist in other regions of America and around the world.

Each generation of Gullah people invests unconditionally in the community's youth to offer tools and lessons to supplant societal limitations. These tools and lessons have a direct lineage to family members who have lived and worked in the community for generations. It is a figurative wellspring. Gullah people, like few other groups of African Americans, interfaced with the practices that helped descendants of enslaved Africans survive the harshest of conditions during the period of African enslavement. Family networks were created as systems of survival. The traditions themselves are distinct to the area, and they also keep the community connected to diasporic practices in Africa and the greater African diaspora. The relevance of family networks continued for members of my community who had to depend on one another before bridges connected the Sea Islands, and during periods of heightened racial tensions. I would also venture to distinguish the all-encompassing nature of godparenting as a specific Gullah hallmark. The Gullah community has coalesced around an interdependence bred by necessity, and used godparenting as a way to offer a sacred realm of support and understanding. This safe haven countered the negative perceptions of outsiders and affirmed beauty, values, and made success tangible. Family is indeed central to these values, as well as a commitment to one another to achieve a notion of success based on the collective versus an individual attainment, which is also key.

Elders strengthen and ground the overall esteem of the individual. Godparents instill morals and offer support to parents. The individuals I interviewed interpreted the role community plays in Gullah life in various ways:

If my brothers did something they were not supposed to do at school, someone from Friendship [Baptist Church] would call my mom and let her know, and I remember my Uncle Oscar or my grandmother coming over for that extra support. If she didn't have those

notion that there is something bigger than you, a greater good. You grow to do better, to advance a common good, a greater good. Sometimes that greater good is having someone just being present" (McIntyre 2017).

tools, if she didn't have them, she wouldn't have that extra support system. My mom called on my grandmother a lot and other people who made a difference in the community to step in when need be. (Johnson 2017)

Collective discipline and support is a result of the proximity of community members. Johansson's story honors the communal approach to child rearing. When we were younger, our parents would talk about the fact that a community member had the right to discipline someone's child if they behaved inappropriately in public. The community grapevine was such that the parents of the child would know about the offense before the youth made it home, where they would be disciplined again. Things have loosened a bit over the generations, but I was well aware growing up that members of my community would apprise my parents of my actions away from home. I was also prepared for any community member to talk to remind me of our shared values. These values were reinforced at church, at family functions and dinner tables, and provided an unspoken code of conduct for our lives. Collective discipline personified community engagement as well as the community's interest in young people living up to their potential.

At times, this potential was realized away from home. Family reunions and gatherings are becoming more and more important to sustaining Gullah values as the Gullah community becomes more diasporic in nature. When proximity is not an option and when collective discipline cannot be relied upon, gatherings encourage familial ties that reinforce bonds, encourage, and inspire.

According to Uncle Bernard:

One of the things that the Dore family is known for—and I have attended for the past 35 years—is getting together every New Year's Eve. All family from across the nation, gathers at the Gullah homestead right here in Beaufort and shares how their year is going, etc. That Gullah love and family would always be there, so that wherever they are, they know where family is and it's kind of the same thing with the cousin retreat--to reinforce the notion of family and the village.⁶⁶ It's the entire village coming together and celebrating. And it is only

⁶⁶ McIntyre elaborated on the traditions of one Gullah Family, the Dore family, during his interview. The patriarch was a Disciples of Christ pastor who sent all of his children to college and established traditions that reflect the beauty and strength of familial ties. One such example is the annual New Year's Eve gathering started by Dore family matriarch Emily Dore. She requested that all the kids meet her at home on New Year's Eve, whether in Beaufort or in France. McIntyre stated the aim was to gather and give thanks to God for the old year and enlist His blessings for the New Year,

here in Beaufort would you find that kind of Gullah tradition. It is not uncommon at all and really not so much the exception, rather it is the rule down here in the Lowcountry in the heart of Gullah culture. (McIntyre 2017)

McIntyre suggests that gathering places and occasions such as holidays are central reflections of community life. The idea of home as a place to come back to is conveyed in McIntyre's remarks. Despite distance, there is strength in the ritual of return, of renewal, of re-engagement. Land is a key factor that many local activists fight to retain because of its importance to retaining cultural identity and legacy.

Gullah people challenge family norms with an embrace of family that transcends relational barriers. Interfamily adoption was a common practice, as evidenced by the strong ties godparenting [and the role of spiritual teaching and water mothering] creates and the interdependence among community members. My favorite examples of interdependence are my grandfather's driving around the island sharing seafood he caught in the river with various island residents, and my grandmother sending me out to deliver plates of food to other people after a family meal. The term "Family" personifies the spirit of phrases such as: "our doors are always open," and every meal was prepared with the expectation that the family's bounty should be shared with others.

Does one have to be born into a Gullah family to be Gullah? Many Gullah familial bonds are sustained among people unrelated by blood but who consider one another part of each other's lives. Author Lynn Markovich Bryant, who was shown hospitality by the Dore family, argues that the bonds of Gullah families can transcend barriers such as race and parentage. Bryant's mother, a white woman, married an African American man from St. Helena Island when she was in grade school.

"that moment of all of them coming together at the same time and place each year and year thereafter, the blessing of that experience of bringing people together at same time and place who are loved ones has much power, and it's gotten even larger" (McIntyre 2017). The occasion is open to the children of Hezekiah and Emily Dore, their children, relatives and friends: "There are aunts and uncles who have decided to attend one or two, so there has been a big overflow because of this Gullah tradition of a day of celebration, thanksgiving, looking forward into the New Year." McIntyre grew up in a large family and easily connected with his wife's family and the ethos of Gullah family in practice based upon his own experience.

Markovich Bryant documents her experience in a blended family on the Sea Islands, which was shaped by friendships with individuals such as Beverly Dore McIntyre. McIntyre was my mother's best friend, whom we referred to as Aunt Beverly. As Markovich Bryant recalls, "The Dore family is such a tremendously loving and caring family, for as closely knit as they are, they did not hesitate to take in and accept this little white girl into the inner circles of their family bond" (Bryant 2003, 91). Markovich-Bryant was wholly accepted by her new family and community. She also embraced the community's Gullah identity: "In college, I got a lot of hazing for having what they called a 'Geechie' or 'Gullah' accent. Fortunately, by this time in life, I had established a rather strong pride in my language and didn't allow criticisms to affect me as much" (Bryant 2003, 27).⁶⁷ Markovich Bryant conveys the same sense of belonging to the community to which Uncle Bernard alludes when talking about marrying into his wife's Sea Island family. In both instances, the individual's experience with Gullah as a culture was informed by the welcoming spirit of the community.

Uncle Bernard's description of the Dore family's annual gathering on the "Gullah Homestead" in Beaufort marks a trend that started generations ago. The expansion of the Gullah diaspora, which emerged with Gullah people leaving the region for job opportunities in urban centers, precipitated the necessity for family reunions of various forms. Many families, including my own, now have annual or biennial family gatherings.

Family and The Gullah Diaspora

The Great Migration fostered kinship ties among Gullah people, as many African Americans left the South for northern urban centers. Historian Isabel Wilkerson presents the quandary faced by African American families during the first half of the 20th century about whether to remain in the South or to move North to escape what she terms the "southern caste system" in search of

⁶⁷ Markovich Bryant experience of being chastised for her Gullah accent points to the notion of Gullah as a pejorative, and expands the diversity of individuals who claim Gullah identity.

increased economic opportunity and away from an environment defined by languishing post-Civil War era promises and where “a single gesture near the planter’s wife could leave [one] hanging from an oak tree” (Wilkerson 2011, 8). Wilkerson suggests that what became known as the Great Migration, when approximately six million African Americans from the southern United States migrated to the North and West, began in World War I and lasted into the 1970s, when the South started embracing the equality of the post-Civil-Rights era (Wilkerson 2011, 10). Wilkerson pinpoints the reasons why many of my relatives and others moved north to New York and New Jersey. When they arrived, they encountered a new way of life that challenged their experience on our island. As literary scholar Sandra Shannon argues, August Wilson’s plays use the blues to convey the feeling of the Southern African American’s initiation into the northern way of life. She cites Wilson’s appraisal of the migration: “We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North” (Shannon 1997, 659).⁶⁸

I have heard in jest that “Chicago is Mississippi, Ohio is Alabama, and a great part of New York and New Jersey is South Carolina.” Filmmaker and photographer Jon Goff, of Gullah ancestry, shares an anecdote from his father who recalls knowing what corner in Harlem to go to in order to connect with individuals from his region of the South. This reality became clear to me during high school. I had a one-night stay in Newark, New Jersey, and my mother and grandmother arranged for my cousins to pick me up. Cousin Yvette arrived in her sports utility vehicle, full of love and personality. I had only known her and others through our annual exchanges at family

⁶⁸ The era was documented by a host of artists, particularly writers like Wilson, who used the Great Migration as a meta-theme of his century series plays. Many of his contemporaries either documented or explored themes of migration through their art, highlighting the community building impulses of African Americans that inform the crux of this chapter’s discussion of the Gullah family. They reflected the importance of community as a value system, a mode of behavior, self-definition, and an affront to racial marginalization (Rodgers 1997, 196).

reunions in Beaufort, where I recall being mesmerized by their urban flare. They had style, nice cars, and a different way of doing things. But I was struck by the fact that New Jersey felt a great deal like home. Family members abounded as I was driven around to visit them. We passed them en route and met new members.

During my brief stay, they referred to “going down South,” a phrase that felt like a form of reverse migration. It was their shorthand way of talking about visiting our hometown. The network was intact; they knew who I was and embraced me with love. I felt the openness of Coosaw at every stop, where people have an open invitation to visit anyone’s home, be fed, and welcomed. I was also surprised to see Gemma’s great-grandmother, Geneva “Auntie Gee” Wilson. She had migrated to the area where she raised her kids but was also a staple of the Beaufort community, where she was a cornerstone of church and family life. Most of her kids remained in New Jersey, but Beaufort was her home. As a high school student, I did not understand she functioned as a valuable presence in the North as well as in South Carolina. It was as if through Star Trek “beaming,” she was transported from the South to the North, picking up where she left off.⁶⁹ I discovered that she maintained houses in both New Jersey and our hometown. I also saw Cousin Agnes, my maternal grandmother’s first cousin, who had ties in New Jersey, Beaufort, and Allendale, South Carolina. New Jersey felt like home because so many of the family members I knew in Beaufort either as residents (like Auntie Gee) or as visitors during the summer or holidays were there. They took me in, fed me, entertained me, and invited me into their homes with the welcoming spirit that defined island life on Coosaw.

⁶⁹ The original “Star Trek” television series included a form of travel that transported characters instantaneously to various locations in the galaxy, following the phrase “Beam me up Scottie,” a directive to a crew member to activate the travel technology.

I imagine the warm welcome to the area that I received mirrors what individuals from South Carolina experienced when they arrived generations ago. There is a spirit of home, of community, and continuity among Gullah people wherever we live. It is an affirmation of familial ties. I was Annie Ruth's grandson and therefore linked to her close cousins and their kin. I felt a similar spirit recently in New York when visiting my ninety-year-old Cousin Omi and Mr. Arthur "Toe Joe" Brown, who live in Jamaica Estates and Brooklyn respectively. Brown was the oldest son of Alberta "Roy" Brown.⁷⁰ He was taken out of the water by my grandfather and remains very close to him and my grandmother through consistent communication and regular visits when he returns to Coosaw Island. Brown's mother not only remembered every birth on the island but could also recall the weather and circumstances surrounding each birth; plus she kept a record of the islands' milestones and family histories and remained connected to many of the traditions, serving as a bridge between her progenitors and younger generations. I visited Mr. Brown and his wife at his townhouse in Brooklyn, New York. His wife prepared lunch as friends from the neighborhood filled their home with laughter and love. He was a man of Coosaw, with shared experiences and connections to home. He looked and felt like family, but in this moment, his narrative had also been shaped by the Great Migration. Unlike Cousin Omi, who left Savannah, Georgia to become a domestic in New York (later purchasing her own home where she continues to live), Brown's journey was less linear. It took him through the military and other interesting stops. What they shared in common was their tie to our island home and shared community of "migrants" who looked out for them when they first

⁷⁰ Brown left Beaufort at the age of sixteen. His first stop was Savannah, Georgia, where he was made fun of for being Geechee, a designation that most folks from Beaufort thought only applied to Georgia people because of the Ogeechee River. He has a sense of pride his Gullah dialect. He likened it to being as American as the Kennedys, who were known for their recognizable accents. He left for Vietnam on January 29, 1966, and travelled the world to eventually retire in Brooklyn upon the completion of his service. Our conversation was long and filled with the spirit of our island life.

arrived in New York. This community was comprised of individuals from back home who established a network of support for newcomers and continued practices that affirmed familial ties.

Like Brown, many Gullah millennials, and Generation Xers left the region for college and job opportunities, and many never return. The warmth of other suns was found in urban centers like Atlanta, New York, and the West Coast that provided cultural and economic opportunities that our tourist and agrarian-based region could not. What results are new approaches to family and culture. Many community members, like Andrea Dawson, are concerned about how younger generations will remain connected to their Gullah identity and family members in the region:

My fear is even when my mom passes or my aunts, what then? What is going to happen? Even some of my first cousins don't have a connection to St. Helena Island. They don't care if the land goes up for sheriff's sale, so I think, if I'm the only one and I have one or two other cousins who are linked to our culture and community, what happens when we go? You can't place value if you don't know the history, so it's important that my kids know who my grandparents were, how hard they worked to accumulate the things that they had. I don't know that my kids will know a lot of the traditions such as the basket weaving, fish-net-making, and things like that --the arts and stuff. I don't know if that will be passed on. But I do want them to know the history and where we came from because I want what we are as a family to be preserved. (Dawson 2017)

Dawson is concerned about the culture and what will be retained for future generations. Traditions such as seeking, that shaped community life, are hard to replicate beyond the region. Dawson and others are refashioning kinship ties by creating family networks in their current cities and remain engaged in the community life of our town through church and family events, and by attending festivals like the annual Penn Center's Heritage Days Celebration.

My aunt Mrs. Cheryl Brisbane—who is not my father's sister because she has different parents but was raised as his sister—is someone my sister and I consider to be our aunt. She grew up in New York and was raised by her grandparents, my paternal grandmother's first cousins, when her mother died. My aunt's narrative offers a first-hand account of how our community values transcended proximity. She also explored how she keeps Gullah traditions alive for her own family who live beyond the coast in Columbia, South Carolina. She stated:

When my mother died in 1981, several people contacted my family; they contacted Ethel. I was in the 9th grade at the time. When I got older, I would think about that. What I have learned is that my mother was very popular. They had a love for my mother and because of that love, they had a love for me without even knowing me. (Brisbane 2017)

Since my aunt Cheryl and my father's sister were close in age, my grandmother played a major role in her life. Mrs. Brisbane recalls life in New York as a reflection of how the Gullah diaspora functioned in order to retain Gullah practices, particularly through food. There are many indicators of Gullah culture. Oral traditions, music, and worship are a few that emerged during the course of my fieldwork. However, food was the cultural marker that was consistently mentioned. Food is more tangible than rituals. We eat dishes that were passed down through recipes and singular approaches to preparation. These dishes (such as red rice, shrimp and grits, bread pudding, okra and tomatoes soup, deviled crab) connect us to the past in the same manner that seeking does. They also provide an occasion to gather, creating a different kind of ritual that sustains kinship and offers the sustenance to live into the hopes of our ancestors. Food is particularly important to Gullah natives who lived away from home. They seek particular dishes when they visit the coast, and replicate the spirit of home around the world by preparing food that honors the best of Gullah identity. My aunt recalls:

In New York, my mother always cooked as if she was living on Sams Point. I grew up eating turtle soup, chitins, etc., not knowing the connections they had to my mother being a country girl. I probably realized the connection in high school. I have a love for food because I grew up with one of my aunts who loved cooking. (Brisbane 2017)

Aunt Cheryl continues our family's food legacy. For her, "Love is expressed through the culture, and found in the traditions with baskets, fishing, casting, crab, and the food" (Brisbane 2017). She has won several South Carolina State Fair baking titles and has passed down the tradition to her daughter who also competes.⁷¹ Food functions as a uniting mechanism for the Gullah diaspora.

⁷¹ My aunt shares the following reflection about the origination of her interest in food preparation: "I love food. I think because after I moved down South, I was in the kitchen because of my height. Ethel [her aunt] would always have me in the kitchen to help. I started cooking from being there and helping out. When I was teaching at St. Helena, dignitaries

Lessons from the kitchen connect generations. It will continue to unite as my aunt, Andrea and others fashion new approaches to community life as they live into the contemporary Gullah diaspora.

Our home was enlivened most evenings, but particularly on Sundays, around the dinner table. Our table on Beaufort's main island seated four, with a convenient fifth place setting for Brooke and other welcome guests like Uncle Butch, who always seemed to drive up when dinner was served. On Sams Point, at my paternal grandparents' house, the table seemed to have room for everyone. I have fond memories of the Sundays when Aunt Anna and Aunt Cheryl would be visiting from Columbia. Grandma Ethel would be in the kitchen, a formal and proper chef if there was ever one, who rivaled the sophistication of Martha Stewart. We sat around the oblong table, draped with a finely pressed linen table cloth accented with linen placemats and napkins, where my father and his siblings, the grandchildren, and cousins all gathered. The chairs came from all over the house. Though mismatched, they achieved the goal of togetherness as we embraced hands to bless the meal. Food and family were synonymous.

One example of this notion is Mrs. Ervena Faulkner. Her hands have joined with our own for prayer on many occasions. She has an open invitation to our family table. She is one of my maternal grandmother's good friends and our community's own Edna Lewis. Her weekly food column in our local paper documents the complexity of cuisine from our community. Mrs. Faulkner, a retired educator from Columbia, knew she had reached the status of family when Gullah people invited her to dinner:

came from Sierra Leone. One thing that struck me was that the food that we cook was very similar. One of their main staples was rice. We ate rice every day. Like us, they cooked with a lot of okra. I grew up on okra and shrimp, okra and tomatoes, and white rice. Food bridges the generations. Food, how we talk, connections to younger generations, are all important features of the culture. Gabby [her daughter] bakes with me because I want her to have a love for it and not think of it as a job or something she has to do. I have a love for it because my aunt had a love for it. It wasn't a chore for her, even though she did it for work. She still loved it" (Brisbane 2017).

The embracement—I thought nothing of it until I got an invitation to go to dinner at a student’s house. I asked the principal, and got his feedback, because I was taught not to eat at everyone’s house. That meal was something to die for. My mother was a good cook, so I always thought no one could cook as well as her. She made fried chicken, red rice, corn bread, but this fried chicken was so different with paprika, a spice used throughout the island. (Faulkner 2017)

Meals were an invitation to fellowship and also a gesture of love. The nourishment sustained our spirit as we enjoyed a moment of refuge within the walls of the family homestead. The same oasis existed in church, where food held a similar significance. Food bears an important connection to culture for my Aunt Cheryl, as it provided a gathering point for the village that raised us. Her culinary skills were refined under the tutelage of my grandmother. The following quote personifies the Gullah community dynamic in action. My aunt offers a glimpse into the spirit of our corner of the community, while bridging the discussion of kinship that food is so central to. Food is but one component of the wider Gullah experience. This experience is one defined by family and the saying “it takes a village to raise a child.” My aunt refers to these connections in the following remarks:

When I got to Lady’s Island [A community in Beaufort, South Carolina], I was a product of ‘it takes a village.’ I came to live with my grandfather. My cousins lived next door, who I called my aunt because they were so much older. I lived with them for a while because I was a woman, and my aunt wanted me to experience things like cooking, ironing, cleaning. I was back between both houses. The community at that time was such that I could walk to Uncle Freddie’s store, and they would know when I was going and coming. I could go and play with Linda and Terry, and Tisket was there and would make sure I made it home safely. (Brisbane 2017)

Food is a spiritual offering of love. Learning how to cook offered my aunt a similar portal of cultural transmission as seeking did for my parents. My aunt personifies the essence of this chapter. Her childhood reflected the oasis of love that we all knew and benefited from. The community collaborated to raise her after her mother’s death, and she picked up important lessons along the way that continue to sustain her. One such lesson relates to the power of food, which she is passing down to her daughter Gabby. For many of us, food is a source of healing that connects us to the past while helping us to prepare for the future.

Being surrounded by water offered a sea-to-table benefit that had been passed down from generation to generation. To be Gullah was to not only appreciate Gullah dishes like okra and tomato soup or shrimp and grits but to also know how to prepare them, or at least to know when they were not prepared well. My maternal grandmother passed food preparation traditions down to my mother and my mother to my sister. Each woman prepares dishes differently, reflecting evolving attitudes towards our shared heritage and the role of food in the Gullah community. Food and family go together, as my Aunt Cheryl suggested. Visits to families and friends across the Gullah diaspora shared common approaches to meal preparation and dishes that we are all raised with.

This chapter started around a dinner table and now ends with the notion of food as a mechanism of family togetherness. Family remains a key component of Gullah people's heritage. Ritual practices such as seeking sustain Gullah familial ties while offering a glimpse into how fictive kinship functions within a re-mixed approach to Christian liturgy. Godparenting, a subtle bridge for some from baptism, looks different for Gullah people who crafted familial bonds that became synonymous with adoption for some. The Gullah diaspora offers an important challenge to preservationists, with food emerging as a key connector. Distance has forced Gullah people to refashion community life, but food continues to reflect Gullah identity by sustaining the notion of memory. It was a Sunday when my aunt made her announcement about Gemma's birthday party. We were an hour or so removed from Sunday service. It was customary to eat Sunday dinner at my grandparent's home, located mere minutes from the church overlooking the river. My grandmother usually prepared the meal the day before, or early in the morning before service. We usually arrived first, my mother taking out casserole dishes from the oven while I set the table. Others followed suit as they filed in, filling glasses with ice, and arranging the food until corporate prayer provided the climactic moment. We ate as announcements like my aunt's guided discussions that were usually punctuated with laughter. Our family was growing and Gullah culture was evolving around us. We

all had a common knowledge of seeking and shared values around the role of elders and godparents, and in this moment, as we discussed Gemma's birthday, we were living out our commitment to continuing the community values that had shaped us.

CHAPTER FOUR: GULLAH ARTS AND IDENTITY

Introduction

December 3, 2015 was a night that literally broke the Internet.⁷² American families from all backgrounds escaped to the fictional world of Oz for three hours. Despair over verdicts, collective mourning, and discussions about the fragility of black life all paused. Audiences instead envisioned an alternate universe filled with hope, possibility, and a more-prevalent-than-ever yearning for “home.” The 1978 film version of the *The Wiz* captivated my sister and sparked her childhood dreams in the same way my father had been transported (and terrified) by the 1939 film version of the *Wizard of Oz*. The only difference is that my sister’s viewing experience mirrored her image as an African American, whereas my father’s mirrored the majority society in which he lived. Diana Ross and Lena Horne’s beauty mesmerized in *The Wiz*, and reminded African Americans of their beauty. The mantra “Believe in yourself” resonated despite societal limitations that told African Americans otherwise.

The updated 2015 live version of *The Wiz* was based on the Broadway version and telecast on NBC. More than ever, we needed to be charmed by the Scarecrow’s dexterity, spellbound by Shanice Williams’s take on Dorothy, and affirmed by Queen Latifah’s gender-neutral take on the title character. Even Mary J. Blige’s signature dance bridged the hip hop generation with Mabel King’s disco era Wicked Witch of the West (Tanzer 2016). The crowning moment of the night

⁷² *The Wrap* reported that NBC’s live telecast of *The Wiz Live* was the most tweeted live special program television event in the history of the Nielson rating system (Maglio 2015).

arrived with Uzo Aduba's descent from the constructed sky. Aduba sang a rousing version of "Believe in Yourself" as Dorothy exclaimed: "She's so beautiful!" Aduba's "crowning glory" celebrated the diversity of the black aesthetic, resonating with Solange Knowles's Grammy Award-winning empowerment anthem, "Don't Touch My Hair." In sum, it was a moment that reminded a community of the significance of home, hope, and the power of images that reflected our reality, despite the political, cultural, and societal unrest that persisted beyond the hours of the telecast. *The Wiz Live* debuted weeks before the Christmas holiday, a holiday that the Pinckneys and other families would be celebrating without loved ones. For a moment, I welcomed the break from the reality of a truth that generations before me had grappled with in their own way. Creative expression, particularly the visual arts, have always offered a safe harbor for celebrating the beauty of the African American community. In our household, awards shows, sports, and pageants held particular significance as outlets to take a break from the realities of the world.

"Beverly, there is a black girl in the top three!" I remember hearing my mother make this exclamation over the phone to her best friend, Mrs. Beverly McIntyre, who I knew as "Aunt Beverly." She happened to be our town's first African American Miss Beaufort. Like clockwork, if an African American made it beyond the top five of the Miss America pageant, my mom would call her best friend and others, convening a virtual community (before social media was an option) who watched in support. The sensation is likened to my grandmother's affinity for reading the obituary section of our hometown paper, *The Beaufort Gazette*, because—beyond mere intrigue—for her generation, it was the only section where African Americans would be featured. In both instances, the images were celebrated because of the dearth of African American representations in the media. They were reminders that we were beautiful, we were seen, and we mattered.

It is the same adulation Oprah Winfrey recalls as a child watching Sidney Poitier win his first Academy Award and Diana Ross and the Supremes' first Ed Sullivan performance. For Winfrey,

both instances affirmed her personhood, and offered hope for her future. She described the moment in her first interview with Ms. Ross on The Oprah Winfrey Show in the following passage: “I was mesmerized, taken back to a younger self seeing you for the first time and everything that moment held for me—the possibilities for a future, beyond poverty, to something beautiful. You represented that beauty, and more important hope for me, hope that my life could be better, that I could do better” (in Koojiman 2002, 1).

Oprah, my mother, and Aunt Beverly all underscore how visual representations empower communities who seldom see images reflecting their beauty in mainstream media. I doubt that Oprah was inspired to become a singer after seeing Ms. Ross, but in an era when her grandmother worked as a domestic and segregation colored the perception of African American achievement, the experience offered a new form of aspiration. My earliest memories of such affirmation were at my great-grandmother Mrs. Julia “Grandma Dear” Moultrie’s house. Visiting her home felt like the Super Bowl of familial experiences. Before I could play, every elder had to be greeted and acknowledged. There were always more cousins, aunts, and fictive kin than time to name and embrace. I felt a sense of belonging from hearing my great-grandmother call my name, and the anticipation of seeing my picture among the various other cousins’ pictures that lined her living room walls.

How is Art Resistance?

Julia Moultrie, “Grandma Dear,” as we called her, was Friendship Baptist Church’s Church Mother, a mother of eight, and the most memorable curator I encountered during my youth.⁷³ She was born and raised and cared for her family in Beaufort, on one of South Carolina’s many barrier

⁷³ “Church Mother” is a common position in many African American Christian churches, particularly in the South. Some congregations have a “Mother Board” comprised of female elders. My childhood church honored one woman as a Church Mother. The Church Mother enjoyed special seating and was looked to as a source of wisdom and decorum. My great-grandmother established our congregation’s first “Woman’s Day,” an annual event that still honors the contribution of women in a context where most of the leaders are men.

islands where the Gullah culture thrived. We crossed countless bridges and causeways on the way to Jenkins, an enclave in the Eddings Point area of Saint Helena Island where my grandmother's siblings and my great-grandmother lived. The dirt road leading to her house was lined with family on both sides. The first house on Mary Jenkins Circle to the left was Uncle Po' Slim; next to him was Auntie Willie Mae (Boo), my grandmother's youngest sister who was known for her vibrant personality. Across from them were Uncle Moot and his childrens' homes. Next we would pass Auntie Ell (known for her deviled crabs), Cousin Annette, Cousin Big Boy, Cousin Jimmy, Auntie Marylou (my grandmother's oldest sister), and Cousin Emmaline's (my grandmother's father's kin who Grandma Dear took care of) houses before finally reaching Grandma Dear's dwelling. The rule still remains that I should not drive down Mary Jenkins Circle without stopping to greet family members, particularly our family's elders, out of respect.

My great-grandmother's home was filled with family, the aroma of red rice, and the sounds of the pressure cooker intermingled with the local AM Gospel radio station WVGB reverberating Shirley Caesar and Rev. F.C. Barnes. The radio was her wellspring and connection to the community. Her home was our mecca, the place where everyone was welcome, and where cousins from various generations crossed paths as she held court in her kitchen, her living room, or the expansive yard. It was the site of the Moultrie family reunion where matching t-shirts created a figurative canvas of love for all to see. It was a space of collective parenting where no child was left unattended and every stomach was filled.

Her living room walls were lined with ample family photographs, including the trinity of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. Many of the photos were gifts, then arranged by seniority on her walls by age. My grandmother and her siblings occupied the most prominent positions, with the grand, great-grand, and great-great-grandchildren filling in openings and overflowing to line the tops of tables. Grandma

Dear decorated her walls to represent her identity, using images that she considered the most meaningful. Her images transcended categorization. They captured a foundational tenet of Gullah identity, the centrality of family.

My great grandmother and her contemporaries championed aesthetic choices that were thoughtful and honored their values through self-chosen representation. For example, her living room walls did not have sweet grass baskets on display. The quilts that she made to keep warm were not presented under perfect lighting, nor was she known to wear African-inspired clothing around the house. Did my great-grandmother's choice of representational artifacts directly align with what curators, anthropologists, and others deemed "Gullah items," or did the objects and their intimate display indicate a symbolic marking that was more personal in nature? Was she modeling a contemporary approach to cultural identity beyond the gaze of outsiders who projected their constraints upon her? In the end, what do our objects mean to us? What are their functions, and how do we craft an identity of our own to present to the world? For my great-grandmother, living her life as it came was enough. It is also important to note that at the time (she died in 1990), being called Gullah or Geechee had only recently been considered a compliment.⁷⁴

I looked for myself or some likeness of myself among the varied family portraits during every visit to my great-grandmother's house. My gaze can be likened to the gaze of African Americans who yearned for positive representations of their likenesses in the media. They responded with excitement to *The Wiz Live*, The Supremes on *Ed Sullivan*, Marvel's 2018 *Black Panther* film release, or any other images that mirrored their experience. There was a dearth of images that reflected what I knew Gullah to be growing up. Instead, we found pride in material culture that

⁷⁴ In a 1971 film, *Gullah Baskets*, a Gullah woman shared the following remark, "I'm no Gullah," after being prompted by interviewers to describe baskets (Matory 2008, 234). Cultural anthropologist J. Lorand Matory suggests that pejorative associations synonymous with poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness have long characterized Gullah and Geechee people, contributing to a reluctance in the period I described (during the 1980s and early 1990s) to fully embrace the label.

represented our cultural identity in practice. There remains pride in the handmade casting net that my grandfather used for sport and to feed his family; and in the quilts that line my bed during winter that connect me to my grandmother and great grandmother; additionally, the aroma of tea, representing various medicinal practices, is soothing to this day. However, a yearning for the feeling of home and seeing representations of our shared heritage still remains constant. Finding self in a basket, a box of tea, or an abstract painting differs from the instantaneous connection of seeing my photo at my great grandmother's house. But for my great grandmother's generation, such objects were the singular option.

My gaze was reminiscent of the gaze of African Americans from beyond the region who found West African identity in Gullah, and, even more so, of how we as Gullah people sought to find authenticity affirmed in the arts. Art facilitates expression and meaning-making, a connection to our lineage, and a reminder that we matter. We sought our place in southern culture, in American culture, and in the greater African diaspora. As writer Alan Moore suggests, "Art makes us feel less alone." We are all looking for some likeness of ourselves in the world, for validation, and some place, like Dorothy, where we feel at home. Grandma Dear raises two of the central question of this chapter: how do we best define Gullah art within and beyond the gaze of outsiders, and how have the arts functioned to promote creative approaches to resistance, in ways analogous to the already-discussed frameworks of family and spiritual practice.

The updated version of *the Wiz Live*, which aired on December 2, 2015, exemplifies how art during the era of #blacklivesmatter champions images of power and resistance. The production incorporated themes that celebrated the diversity of blackness and a multiplicity of identities. The *Wiz Live*'s lasting impression on the African American community is comparable to the manner that art has enlivened the discourse on Gullah identity. It would be a leap to make a direct parallel, but in many ways the visual definition of what it means to be Gullah in the 21st century is being shaped

in part by artists who are moving beyond the outsider gaze to honor and celebrate the nuances of Gullah cultural identity in the midst of tragedies like the Charleston shooting. These artists broaden the aesthetic options of my great-grandmother's living room. My great-grandmother's living room was our home, our place of gathering, and our oasis that shaped my perception of belonging to a larger extended family. She curated her home to represent everything that we were, and everything that we and the emerging generation of artists could be. This extended Gullah family is defined by the visual, and the tangible and intangible that is embodied in us all.

This chapter focuses on the tension between the tourist-driven outsider gaze and an emerging generation of Gullah people who are engaging contemporary narratives that redefine what it means to be Gullah in the 21st century. This chapter also considers the creative ways that Gullah identity is preserved and the multifaceted implications of our shifting cultural identity. The short-sighted reading of the Charleston shooting is one example of how a wider exposure to the diversity of the culture is limited by historic perceptions.

I grew up with few nuanced images of my Gullah identity within southern and American culture. What I experienced more often than not were caricatures—in film, tourist materials, and historic renderings in books—that promoted the culture and its progenitors as primitive and naïve. To be Gullah, America's lasting connection to Africanness, was a pejorative identity. The beautiful cadence of the Gullah tongue was synonymous with a lack of education, and the often misunderstood spiritual practices of the Sea Islands were viewed as unsophisticated attempts to make meaning of a world that Gullah people had been detached from. Before delving into what is at stake when cultural identity is marginalized as an object of the gaze, it is important to contextualize the role of representational imagery among the Gullah, and among African American communities more broadly. My previous discussion of my experience of looking at my great-grandmother's house frames an examination of the difference between being an object of the gaze

and being an active participant in the production of what is gazed upon. My great-grandmother crafted an identity that represented me, one that was nuanced and reflected our shared experience. Gullah people have been doing this work of crafting for some time, a role that has not always resonated with others who sought to project their interpretations of who we were to the world. To be fair, how could outsiders fully understand who we were, when the experience was ours to digest, protect, live into, and eventually share on our own terms?

The Gullah community is central to a larger narrative of blackness in America. The implications of reframing Gullah identity in a contemporary context abide with the greater perception of African Americans in the American milieu. African Americans have long used the arts to define their identity. I will now step back to discuss a lineage of image-making by and of African Americans, before proceeding to explore the implications of static representations of Gullah people within African American and American culture.

Oprah Winfrey alludes to the power of visual affirmation. As a child, she saw affirming reflections of herself in Sidney Poitier and Diana Ross. Winfrey's gaze upon Poitier and Ross is similar to my gaze at my great-grandmother's house. I recall surveying the *mélange* of pictures. Each view revealed a little more about our family history to me, and therein revealed a little more about myself. This esteem was based on the idea of seeing myself as part of a larger community. Television viewing audiences feel connected by a similar sensation. It is the sensation shared by my mother and aunt viewing an African American finalist advance on the Miss America pageant. There is no real familial connection or bond; nonetheless, a sense of belonging emerges from the hope of representation.

Perhaps the positive visual representations of African Americans in the sitcom *The Cosby Show* paved the way for the election of America's first African American president, as Carl Rove suggested in 2008: "*The Cosby Show*," which began on NBC in 1984 and depicted the Huxtables, an

upwardly mobile black family—a departure from the dysfunction and bickering that had characterized some previous shows about black families—had succeeded in changing racial attitudes enough to make an Obama candidacy possible” (in Arango 2008). The show was created as a corrective to prevailing depictions of African American life. It helped raise a generation while celebrating the intellectual and cultural complexities of African Americans with pride. For me, it was the most important pop cultural influence of my childhood, offering a safe haven in a world where I saw few positive reflections of myself and my community. The crack epidemic was at its height, the break-up of the African American family was nightly news, and violence cast a shadow on a segment of the nation that once boasted strong business and community life. Many of my peers and I benefitted from the weekly exchange with the television family that promoted family time, as well as from the subtle yet forceful exposure to African American history and culture.⁷⁵ The *Cosby Show*’s spin-off, *A Different World*, can be credited with increasing the awareness of and attendance at the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities. That show, coupled with my childhood memories of South Carolina State University, influenced my decision to attend Hampton University, an inspiration for the fictional Hillman College.⁷⁶

These shows were visual representations of a particular African American experience; filled with culture-affirming imagery and dialogue, they increased the esteem and consciousness of many

⁷⁵ I once considered using *The Cosby Show* as a metaphor for Gullah Life. The inter-generational relationships, foodways, and subtle nods to spirituality and folk practices all paralleled what I valued about my own community. I have since stepped back to see the universality of what the program presented about a diasporic black experience as something that resonates with many of our shared African influences. *The Cosby Show* employed such experts as psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint and art historian Dr. David Driskell to ensure that the sitcom promoted culturally accurate and responsible interactions and images of family life. The show is an important example of representational justice in the way that it influenced the perception of African American family life for the nation and world. Actress Alfre Woodard offers a fitting summary of the show’s legacy: “The black middle class has never been portrayed realistically and that’s where we all came from, even if we didn’t have that much. It was the same going to work, the same values. So we don’t recognize crack dealers and shoot ‘em ups. That is what is portrayed on the nightly news. That is what the Huxtables did, it introduced America and the world to where we all came from” (Winfrey 2013).

⁷⁶ Like Hampton University, Hillman was located roughly forty-five minutes from Richmond, Virginia, a detail that many Hampton Student and alumni raise as evidence that the fictive Hillman was based on their “Home by the Sea.”

African Americans. Artistic endeavors have historically played an important role in affirming the equality of African Americans; as art historian and curator Sarah Lewis suggests, “The endeavor to affirm the dignity of human life cannot be waged without pictures, without representational justice” (Lewis 2016, 11). The “representational justice” Lewis alludes to presented a case, especially during the first part of the 20th century, to a racially divided nation, that African American identity transcended stereotypes that criminalized and marginalized the African American community.

Frederick Douglass, the most photographed individual of the 19th century, championed this perspective in lectures that argued for the power of pictures to affect a new vision for the nation.⁷⁷ That this vision precipitated a positive shift is evidenced by the impact of the piece *Description of a Slave Ship* on views of enslavement in the 18th century, and how, many generations later, video footage of non-violent civil rights protesters meeting violent tactics shaped the perception of the Civil Rights movement (Lewis 2016, 13). *Description of a Slave Ship* also showcases the role of art by individuals outside the African American experience to influence the conversation. The visual image is a tool of both inward and outward expression. Lewis describes the centuries-long effort of crafting images that honor the full humanity of black life as a corrective endeavor buttressed by the indispensability of photography and cinema (Lewis 2016, 11). Theorist Bell Hooks also underscores the agency that the African American community found in using photography to shape community identity:

The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place. It was documentation that could be shared, passed around. And, ultimately, these images, the worlds they recorded, could be hidden, to be discovered at another time. (Hooks 1995, 48)

⁷⁷ Douglass gave a series of lectures in the late 19th century linking the innovation of photography to human progress. Art historian Ginger Hill argues that Douglass’ lectures about photography invited listeners to explore what it means to live an embodied existence. In Douglass’s words, “the whole soul of a man is a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama, in which all the great facts of the universe, the tracings of time and things of eternity are painted” (Hill 2012, 42). Douglass advocated for positive the representation of Blacks as a path to equality.

Photography was one among many other approach to achieving visual justice. For example, the canon of American art by African Americans was a tool that debunked racialized representations of African Americans by counter-curating the African American experience with humanizing images. Henry Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), for instance, was revolutionary for being a corrective to the perception that art by African Americans was naïve and primitive. The impressionist-inspired piece depicted a moment between a young man and an older figure who is understood to be his grandfather. The painting communicates the everydayness of family life and the centrality of intergenerational exchange; it might even be interpreted as educational discourse about the banjo being more than a tool of minstrelsy or white pleasure at the hands of enslaved Africans.⁷⁸

Art Historian and curator Richard Powell describes the Harlem Renaissance as a watershed moment in the campaign of African American identity-crafting. The Renaissance reflected an embrace of modernity as African Americans migrated to northern industrial centers for greater economic opportunity, thereby marking a shift in the contours of a previously southern and rural-defined African American experience. This shift coincided with an artistic, economic, and political transition into modernity as an all-encompassing era driven by aesthetics. The Renaissance was an exciting moment of artistic endeavor during which “black people were perceived as having finally liberated themselves from a past fraught with self-doubt and surrendered instead to an unprecedented optimism, marked by a novel pride in all things black and cultural confidence that stretched beyond the borders of Harlem to other black communities in the western world” (Powell 1997, 16). These representational possibilities emerged through art and a consciousness driven by

⁷⁸ The banjo was a central feature of minstrelsy. White minstrel performers, such as Ben Cotton, were heavily influenced by enslaved Africans, as he himself suggested when he recounted, “I used to visit with slaves in front of their cabins in order to hear them start the banjo twanging” (cited in Gura and Bollman 1999, 25). The exhibition “Two Centuries of Black American Art”—which featured *The Banjo Lesson* and other seminal works by Tanner's contemporaries and progenitors, particularly of the Harlem Renaissance era—reflected a desire by artists to have greater historical recognition and visibility in the mainstream art world (McGee 2006, 8).

Alain Locke's "New Negro Movement." Philosopher Alain Locke believed art to be a central component of the movement, arguing that "art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid" (Patton and Honey, 124). He anticipated the power of art to discover beauty and open our eyes to the unseen, a critical undertaking in a world where African Americans were rendered invisible politically, socially, and in the media. "The Negro is far more familiar a figure in American life than in European," Locke asserted, "but American art, barring caricature and genre, reflects him scarcely at all" (Locke 1925, 262).

Locke underscores the power of art to inform and empower. Images spark the imagination to see and imagine what otherwise may go unseen. The arts have always been a critical space for the expression of identity, a space to process and wrestle with the challenges of life, and a tool to communicate to ourselves and the world beauty and equality on our own terms. Scholar Cornel West reminds us of the work of artistic endeavors as an all-encompassing effort of claiming joy despite circumstances:

Pleasure, under commodified conditions, tends to be inward. You take it with you, and it's a high individuated unit. But joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries to get at those non-market values—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice—values that provide the possibility of bringing people together. (Sleeter and McLaren 1995, 120-121)

In the end, striving for joy can be an aim of art focusing on, as West suggests, "the possibility of bringing people together" (Sleeter and McLaren 1995, 121). I often wonder if the "doing" of quilting, bench making, or singing served as a therapeutic meditation on making the best of a world that offered more questions than answers, and at times more grief than joy. It is apparent that the arts unite people, despite the prevalence of grief and pain. Joy is an expression of the aesthetic underpinnings of community life, yet it is a state that is not arrived at without effort. West speaks to that effort as a journey rather than a destination. Creative practices help to shape this journey through expressions that inform the struggle for justice. The arts, in a very general sense, provide mechanisms to re-imagine how representations influence self-esteem and empower communities to

resist injustice through the work of counter-curating and image production.

It is this approach to representational justice that resonated with my every visit to my great-grandmother's house, because the experience did the work of meaning-making without projections or performative cues. It is the same meaning-making that arose in response to tragedies related to the #blacklivesmatter movement. Kendrick Lamar's refrain, "We gon' be alright," from his song simply titled "Alright," reverberates from dance floors and protests alike. It is a timely reminder that embraces the tenacity of spirit and will that has defined the African American experience in America. From the Jim Crow era's New Negro Movement, to the 1960s' era Black Arts Movement that echoed the pride and protest of Black Power, the arts have provided a prevailing counter-narrative of resistance to questions about the equality and value of Black life. The notion of being "alright" was assumed to be the birthright of the heirs of President Obama's historic election. What many deemed the beginning of a "post-racial" era in America instead ushered in an era of heightened racial tensions following the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, the Emmanuel Nine, and far too many others to honor through speaking their names.

The arts emerged as a space that not only promoted images of value and validation, memorialized, and offered healing, but also complicated narratives of criminalization that in many respects shape the narrative of the African American experience.⁷⁹ The activism apparent in these strides correlates to the counter-curatorial work of Gullah people. Gullah people embrace life as art to challenge narrow views of cultural identity on a macro level. Said challenges are an expression of resistance to societal constraints. Static representations of Gullah life promoting the nostalgia of the plantation South far outnumber contemporary interpretations promoting agency and the evolution of Gullah people in the 21st century. Such representations have fueled a thriving tourist industry as

⁷⁹ According to Michelle Alexander, after relative progress during the era of Reconstruction, Black Codes were established that limited the rights of African Americans. They also led to a spike in arrests (Alexander 2012, 28).

well as artistic expressions that, when curated too generally, minimize the complexity of the Gullah experience and its important link to the African Diaspora.

Over the years, Charleston, South Carolina, has been designated by several publications, most recently *Travel and Leisure*, as the “world’s best city” (Gifford 2016). Charleston’s nearly three-billion-dollar tourist industry is buttressed by images of Gullah sweetgrass basket makers and other cultural markers (Becker 2009, 90). Narratives of extinction versus evolution negate the presence of contemporary Gullah life across the Gullah diaspora (Glanton 2001). Additional Gullah images encompass various facets of a crafted commercialized cultural history and a regional experience unique to the coast. The allure of “Porgy and Bess,” a play that was featured at 2016 the *Spoleto Festival USA* with art direction by Gullah artist Jonathan Green, is another cultural maker that contributes to the city’s crafted character. Charleston’s cuisine, documented in such cookbooks as the Junior League of Charleston’s perennially popular *Charleston Receipts*, was heavily influenced by African American women who contributed their own flavor to what has now become a distinct Lowcountry cuisine noted for such dishes as shrimp and grits.⁸⁰ The artistic contributions of artists like Philip Simmons, whose masterful ironwork adorns Charleston, represents the artistry that draws tourists from near and far.

Then there are the copious plantations that tell the narrative of southern abundance, as hospitality and tourism experts Drs. B. Bynum Boley and Cassandra Johnson Gaither suggest:

Traditional heritage tourism within the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in areas such as Charleston, South Carolina, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia has been heavily criticized for bringing tourism development that favors a ‘whitewashed’, ‘slave-free’ interpretation of history with poor jobs that use the Gullah/Geechee as cheap labor within what Good and Thomas refer to as a ‘chambermaid-caddy economy’. Faulkenberry, Coggeshall, Backman, and Backman add that tourism in the Lowcountry has resulted in a ‘culture of servitude’ where the burden of accommodating

⁸⁰ The *Charleston Receipts* is an example of cultural commodification. First published in 1950 by the Junior League of Charleston, it contains Gullah verses, and 750 recipes including shrimp and grits. The ownership of the recipes’ intellectual property has been a major issue in the African American community (Huguenin, Vereen, and Stoney 1976).

tourists falls disproportionately on Gullah/Geechees. These criticisms of Lowcountry tourism mimic the larger literature on plantation tourism across the ‘Antebellum South,’ which has been criticized for its ‘historical elisions’ that trivialize the slavery of the past by deflecting heritage narratives away from slavery toward romanticizing the lives of wealthy planters. (Boley and Gaither 2015, 2)

Boley and Gaither underscore how the tourist industry in the coastal region where Gullah has a poignant presence minimizes the contributions of African Americans who bore the burden of servitude during the period of enslavement. They highlight the dichotomy of the allure of Gullah heritage existing within a context where the atrocities of slavery are whitewashed under the mythological guise of southern charm (Boley and Gaither 2015, 4).

This mythology persists as a pervasive challenge to understanding contemporary Gullah life. The surface implications of Gullah identity existing in suspension around the 1900s yields an outcome similar to comedian Jimmy Kimmel’s “Pedestrian Question” routine, in which unassuming pedestrians are asked simple questions about commonplace topics. The bit’s humor arises from the willing participants’ limited awareness of what might be considered important historical facts. Penn Center associate Carrie Ellis highlights a similar type of knowledge incompetence relating to Gullah people: “Many people come here and don’t even know that there is a culture here,” she notes (in Faulkenberry 2000, 93). A perpetual Kimmel street test of Gullah history and knowledge persists as limited understanding of the vitality and complexities of the Gullah people allows actors to assume awareness of Gullah people without purposeful investigation into the community, its people, and values. Furthermore, perceptions rooted in convenient racialized characterizations fracture any ability to view Gullah people beyond a previously established oeuvre.

The implications of such limitations influence outsider projections of meaning as well as insider perceptions of self. The notion that being Gullah was synonymous with being, as artist

Sheldon Scott suggests, “the pejorative’s pejorative,”⁸¹ was in large part due to the characterization of Gullah people as uneducated, docile, submissive, backwards, and barbaric, an idea explored by Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory:

Outside the academic community, the terms “Gullah” and more so “Geechee” have had pejorative associations, with implications of backwardness, poverty, and illiteracy. Thus, in 1971, when South Carolina Educational Television interviewers approached basket makers along Highway 17 for a film entitled “Gullah Baskets,” some weavers resented the term. “I’m no Gullah,” protested one woman, while another, who had crafted baskets for forty years, denied ever having heard them called “Gullah baskets.” Since the early 1990s, however “Gullah” and “Geechee” have gained acceptance among the people so described. (Matory 2008, 234)

Writer and artist Ronald Daise, artist Sheldon Scott, and Associate Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas also offer similar appraisals of Gullah natives’ perception of their cultural identity during the mid-20th century:

Daise: I grew up, as I said, a product of St. Helena Island, a product of the Penn School and its heritage. I remember coming to community sings at Penn Center, in the Frissell House—it was there—and also being a member of Brick Baptist Church, just across the highway from Penn Center, learning to sing spirituals and just basking in the heritage. As I was growing up, the words “Gullah” and “Geechee” were negative words. They were invectives. In fact, they were called fighting words. You didn’t want to be identified by either one of them. We were more . . . acceptable of “Sea Islanders”; that’s where we were from. (Daise 2013)

Scott: We were called Geechee DAN (Dumb ass nigga); it wasn’t until I went to college at Francis Marion that I ran into other black people from other parts of South Carolina that would refer to folks as Geechee DANS. Dealing with that exposed me to the notion that we represented something to people that was not easily embraced. Now people are interested in being connected to more identities. I hear folks say, “my family is from Columbia; we Geechee too.” “No you ain’t!” There is a warmer sentiment; it is not exclusively ours because at some point we all came through the Corridor, so we all should participate and own the identity in some way. (Scott 2017)

⁸¹Artist Sheldon Scott contends that, “There was a large anti-African sentiment. Anything that resembled diasporic people would be dispelled. We are now less weighted down by an exclusive African American identity. When someone called you a Geechee it was the pejoratives pejorative, It was one thing to be called a nigger. It was another to be called Geechee, I am looking at the sources such as the Great Migration. People who chose to stay were thought less of because they were not seeking the new frontier, which made things more stickier” (Scott 2017).

Thomas: What little remains of Geechee life is now celebrated by scholars of black folklore, but when I was a boy, “Geechee” was a derogatory term for Georgians who had profoundly Negroid features and spoke with a foreign sounding accent similar to the dialects heard on certain Caribbean Islands. (Thomas 2008, 2)

Matory’s findings, coupled with Scott, Daise, and Thomas’s remarks, foreground prevailing perceptions of Gullah artistic expression that artists and curators from the region are working to expand. Daise and Thomas’s views offer insight into a generation who not only wrestled with the maligning of African American identity in America, but also the exoticism of Gullah identity that was not celebrated as it is today by many Gullah youths. They also magnify the influence of societal perceptions of Gullah people. Such characterizations have also been synonymous with being African American and African.

Historian Melissa Cooper suggests that many of these views of Gullah people emerged during the post-World War I era, given the mass migration of southern African Americans to northern cities, and the emergence of modernism, which sparked fantasies among white and black Americans about their Africanness (Cooper 2017, 19). Framing Gullah people in a southern imagination defined by plantation homes supported by pre- and post-bellum African American labor stalls the progression of a narrative in which Gullah people are empowered to evolve to play a role in their own identity-making beyond such a confined frame. There is no more salient argument for the influence of such imagery than the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s “Doll tests.”

These tests explored the impact segregation had on African American children.⁸² The tests revealed

⁸² In Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*, Dr. Kenneth Clark offered the following thoughts about the Doll Test: “The Dolls Test was an attempt on the part of my wife and me to study the development of the sense of self-esteem in children. We worked with Negro children—I’ll call black children—to see the extent to which their color, their sense of their own race and status, influenced their judgment about themselves, self-esteem. We’ve now—this research, by the way, was done long before we had any notion that the NAACP or that the public officials would be concerned with our results. In fact, we did the study fourteen years before *Brown*, and the lawyers of the NAACP learned about it and came and asked us if we thought it was relevant to what they were planning to do in terms of the *Brown* decision cases. And we told them it was up to them to make that decision and we did not do it for litigation. We did it to communicate to our colleagues in psychology the influence of race and color and status on the self-esteem of children” (Hampton 1985).

that African American youth favored white dolls over black dolls. This evidence emerged after the children were prompted to consider which dolls were more intelligent, beautiful, and good or bad. The dolls became a projection of the society around them which, through legal restrictions and racially motivated propaganda, devalued their personhood (Hampton 1985).

Kiri Davis's 2006 Documentary, *A Girl Like Me*, updated Clark's test. The documentarian decided to revisit the seminal experiment because, in her words, "you can tell people these standards all you want, but until you figure out a way to really show people and how it's affecting black self-image and your self-esteem, that's when I think people really begin to get it and how it affects youth in general" (Davis 2006). In a very similar instance, Gullah people, as Matory indicates, reacted similarly to the notion of claiming their Gullah identity, because such a relationship would only highlight prevailing perceptions of who the world considered them to be (Matory 2008, 234).

This perception was based upon static representations best confined to museum exhibitions, rather than used as tools of meaning-making for a vibrant community. Living within a frame of identity that has traditionally been the object of the gaze is an unfair reality that defines many Gullah peoples' interactions with the tourist industry. According to Dr. Lisa Faulkenberry, who contributed to a study on tourism's impact on the South Carolina coast, locals resent being commodified as exotic others. Coastal resident Les Decker, for example, appreciated the need for tourists, but would like to see Gullah culture seen as part of the region, not 'like a circus or someplace.' Emily Broome, another coastal resident, feared 'Gullah Gawking': "I think it is rude to drive around our beautiful rural island and look for Gullah people. We're terrified of Gullah theme parks" (Faulkenberry2000, 93).

Cooper delves into these views in her case study of Sapelo Island, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia. This tourist destination was an early focus of research by anthropologists and social scientists seeking to discover and study Gullah people and their un-mined folklore. This

practice continues in the annual Cultural Day, where tourists visit the island hoping to catch a glimpse of what Cooper terms the “mystical magical blacks, who in their relative isolation, managed to exist suspended in time” (Cooper 2017, 2). They visit to engage a sanitized place reframed for nostalgia-seekers to experience the island without a glimpse into its connection to the dehumanizing horrors of chattel slavery.⁸³

Myths about the savage and primitive nature of community members emerged during the first half of the twentieth century as dominant narratives. Views of uncivilized Africans shaped the racial imaginary of white Americans and Gullah people alike. Customs and practices associated with pejorative views of their African homeland resulted in negative perceptions of blackness that pervaded the public consciousness. Novelist Julia Peterkin played an integral role in shaping the national imagination of Gullah people through her novels. Julia Peterkin, the first southern writer to win a Pulitzer Prize, was known as America’s premiere plantation novelist and was widely hailed as an expert on African Americans; she published her first book about plantation life in the 1920s (Robeson 1995, 762). Peterkin was lauded by African American contemporaries such as Sterling A. Brown, who celebrated her “literary mining of Gullah folk-lore,” and Countee Cullen, who found that Peterkin made “No attempt . . . to burlesque the Negro or to make anything of him except a human being” (Robeson 1995, 764).

These views were communicated during a period in which the representation of African

⁸³ The work of Mary Granger, the district supervisor of the Georgia Writers Project, and others perpetuated stereotypes that challenged the intellect and sophistication of Gullah people. In *Making Gullah: A History of Sapelo Islanders, Race, and the American Imagination* (2017), Melissa L. Cooper argues that Mary Granger’s work on the Gullah region was maligned by contemporaries such as sociologists Franklin E. Frazier and W. O. Brown, who suspected that she, like other “Africa survival hunters,” relied on simple, reductive, essentialist notions about racial distinctions to arrive at wild declarations (Cooper 2017, 131). Mary Granger served as the district supervisor for the Georgia Writers’ Project. Frazier was at odds with Melville Herskovits, who championed the cultural connections between African Americans and Africans. In one respect, it could be argued that Frazier was working to debunk simplistic connections that promoted myths about African American inferiority. Cooper also quotes Brown in the aforementioned work, who stated, “If Granger studies poor rural white folk, she might be less impressed by the uniquely African nature of the coastal Negroes” (Cooper 2017, 133).

Americans, particularly African Americans from the rural South, were limited and often times reduced to caricatures. Historian Melissa Cooper offers a divergent reading of Peterkin's work: "Suspicious of modernity and opposed to 'Book-learning' because it 'takes people's minds off more important things,' Peterkin's Gullah folk consumed themselves with work, pleasure, and daily survival" (Cooper 2017, 21). Cooper also highlights the presence of such Gullah rituals as seeking, ring shouts, and conjure. Peterkin's fictionalized folk practices are also underscored. According to Cooper, "Ultimately, Peterkin's Gullah folk are a blend of racial myth and published folklore material" (Cooper 2017, 22). Another leading figure who contributed to foundational views of Gullah people was Laura Towne. A Philadelphia native and missionary, Laura Towne was a founder of the Penn School in Frogmore, South Carolina. She described her perception of a ring shout as, "a savage, heathen-ish dance out" (Towne 1912, 22). Peterkin's and Towne influenced the perception and practices of Gullah people, and contributed to growing canon of Gullah studies.

Gullah people became objects of white fascination because their cultural practices—such as the ring shout and conjure—presumably reflected their "Africanness"; consequently, but they were objectified as living exemplars of the Port Royal Experiment's successful efforts to civilize formerly enslaved Africans into American citizens. The next section will explore how Gullah people have been portrayed in contemporary popular culture, as well as their aims to resist, to reframe their identity, and to embrace their own sense of agency.

Gullah in Contemporary Popular Culture

I looked beyond the family photographs that lined my great-grandmother's wall to forms of representation in popular culture; I sought examples that celebrated the complexity of our experience. Yet examples that embraced the quietude of nuance and that challenged me to consider the futurity of Gullah identity were not very common. This section will explore vignettes related to Gullah identity in popular culture. The calls for representational justice discussed in the previous

section emerged in response to societal norms that limited the view and opportunities for African Americans. Gullah artistic expression exists within this greater narrative of justice. I am interested in how we best define Gullah artistic expression within and beyond the gaze of outsiders and how the arts have functioned to promote creative approaches to resistance-aimed identity making.

This section is part survey of the Gullah image in the popular American imagination and part appraisal of artistic interventions by Gullah people. Both approaches are framed by the previous section's discussion of representation. The two-dimensional connection I felt with family photos extended to the moving images found in film and television and remains constant in paintings and conceptual art. Images of all forms have the power to shape our perception of ourselves and how we fit into the world around us. *Porgy and Bess*, the "Getaway" episodes of the NBC sitcom *A Different World*, writer, producer and director Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, and the Nickelodeon program *Gullah Gullah Island* are among the most recognizable portrayals of Gullah identity in popular culture.

Porgy and Bess, which is set in the Charleston, South Carolina area, was the result of the white outsider gaze and is a widely known cultural phenomenon that depicts the Gullah community in a narrow frame (Noonan 2012, 127). The "Getaway" episodes of *A Different World* have personal significance, as they were among the first times as a child that I saw a locale on television that mirrored my hometown. The episodes explore an outsider perception, but this time one that is African American (crafted by show's writers for African American characters). From the topography to the chosen dialect of the characters who inhabited the destination, there were many similarities that provide an interesting case study on tourism and how the intricacy of the diaspora is presented in the media. The film *Daughters of the Dust*, produced by a member of the Gullah diaspora, exposed

many people to Gullah culture in a manner that was far more direct than the previous examples.⁸⁴

The film is one that captivated locals who worked as extras on the film, as well as individuals who were exposed to Gullah culture by virtue of Dash's attempt to explore an important segment of the African American experience. The children's television show *Gullah Gullah Island* was created by Mr. Ronald Daise and his wife Mrs. Natalie Daise. "Mr. Ron," as he was called on the show, drew upon his experiences growing up on the Sea Islands to present an expression of Gullah identity that is now widely known by millennials who grew up watching the program. The show also fostered ownership on the part of my community because of our proximity to Mr. and Mrs. Daise and the material that the show explored.

Spanning from the white outsider gaze to the artistic expression of a Gullah native, these four examples embody a particular type of cultural depiction. I chose them for the ways that they influenced me as an emerging artist and scholar of Gullah descent, and for the fact that each comes from a unique observational place. This section ends with an exploration of visual art. Painters Sam Doyle and Jonathan Green are among the most notable Gullah artists who produced work in the twentieth century, as Gullah became more widely known and commercially viable. Artists Sheldon Scott and Charmaine Bee, in turn, are millennials. When their work is put in conversation with Doyle and Green, they challenge tradition through performance art and rituals that respond to contemporary traumas in very creative ways. From *Porgy and Bess* to Sheldon Scott, the overall aim is to survey various approaches to multi-platform and multi-dimensional Gullah image-making.

Long before Gullah became a mainstay of primetime, and before the African Diaspora became a point of interest after author Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977), one of the best known representations of Gullah people in popular culture was found in the opera *Porgy and Bess*. This

⁸⁴ *Daughters of the Dust* was recently re-released after the success of singer and performing artist Beyoncé Knowles's album *Lemonade*. The visual album had many intentional parallels to the pioneering film.

cultural phenomenon abides as one of the most prominent glimpses into Gullah life. The opera *Porgy and Bess* was based on the book *Porgy* by white Charleston native DuBose Heyward; the book was also adapted into a play in 1927. *Porgy and Bess* offers insight into the influence of the outsider gaze in cultural production. In preparation for the opera, composer George Gershwin committed to the task of authenticity. As Allen points out, Gershwin was:

Determined to acquaint himself with what he perceived to be genuine black folk music, and undertook an authenticating journey to Folly Island, off the coast of South Carolina in the summer of 1934. His “fieldwork” there consisted of attending Gullah church services, revival meetings, and funerals. (Allen 2004, 250)

The setting of the book, play, and eventually opera was a location right beyond Charleston called Catfish Row, a slum adjacent to the Holy City’s docks. The play, drawn from the book, was refashioned to include regional Gullah dialect, spiritual singing, and spontaneous prayer (Allen 2004, 246). The play reflected Heyward’s belief that African Americans were heirs to a primitive and emotionally potent folk culture that others would appreciate as a source of delight (Allen 2004, 247). The opera version followed, based on the novel, despite interest in a blackface version. Gershwin joined Heyward on visits to area churches to get the “feel” of African American emotion and to properly capture the “essence” of African American life (Noonan 2012, 178).

At the time, African Americans sought to redefine their identity through the pursuit of educational opportunities and migration to northern urban centers. It is no coincidence that New York figures prominently in the narrative of *Porgy and Bess*, for it represented progress for African Americans who lived in the rural South. The counter-narrative to New York would be Gullah culture, and the culture’s clearly defined Africanisms. Rural life, represented by the Gullah culture of fictitious Catfish Row, was a reminder of the traits that African American intellectuals such as Alain Locke endeavored to move beyond.⁸⁵ The tension this created might be reconciled by revisiting the

⁸⁵ This tension remains as new generations of Gullah natives seek to define their identity.

folk value of *Porgy and Bess*, as asserted by Grace Lumpkin: “Whereas the black folk of Heyward's play were perceived as primitives whose exotic otherness probably owed more to their African heritage than to their experiences as Americans, the characters of the opera were increasingly viewed as American folk struggling through an American drama” (Allen 2004).

Although Lumpkin widens the interpretation of *Porgy and Bess*, giving voice to how the opera makes an important contribution to the American fabric, her argument does not negate how the opera confirmed popular stereotypes. The fictitious “Catfish Row,” which permeates as a representation of Gullah life along the coast, is an example of how the opera and book narrowly portray African American life. Historian Ellen Noonan contends that *Porgy and Bess* helped to establish the genteel southern brand that created Charleston’s thriving tourist industry. She suggests that DuBois Heyward and others curated representations of African American life that favored rural life over the city’s thriving middle class:

The white Charlestonians spearheading the city’s various movements in preservation and the arts ignored the city’s black middle class in favor of their preferred rural and working class African American stock figures, or types, whose Gullah cultural practices and apparent docility in the face of white power appealed to their sense of history and social order. (Noonan 2012, 127)

This approach to curation gave little voice to the complexity of the African American experience in the city. *Porgy and Bess* is an example of an early representation of Gullah culture in the public imaginary that has had a lasting presence; however this presence should be explored as one that was intentionally crafted to showcase only one part of the African American community. The opera both limited its representation of the broader Gullah community, and constrained those whom it did present within a frame of deleterious stereotype. What is affirmed is a problematic portrayal that has been widely accepted into the American art canon. The ease with which the characters were “increasingly viewed as American folk” by the viewing public did little to promote the representational justice that art historian Sarah Lewis and others suggest that more complex images

promote.

Generations after *Porgy and Bess* gained prominence, I was a kid watching television with my family, and had my first encounter with what seemed like a performed representation of Gullah culture. Though I had heard the music of the opera by that point, I would not see it until years later. My family regularly watched *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* on Thursday nights. The shows, which were welcomed in many African American households as positive affirmations of African American culture, were not embraced by everyone. Some critics argued that the show, “was not Black enough because the family life being portrayed [was] not realistic and that the show minimize[d] Black issues because it is a comedy rather than a dramatic series” (Inniss and Feagin 1995, 696). Bill Cosby and others defended the show’s approach to portraying the humanity of African Americans in a manner that transcended race. *A Different World*, a situation comedy also created by Bill Cosby, was a spin-off of *The Cosby Show*. I was seven years old sitting on the floor in my family’s den when the one episode of *A Different World* that has personal value and likely had an impact on other cultural allusions to Gullah identity in pop culture debuted. It was the two-part “Getaway” episode of the NBC comedy. While *Porgy and Bess* was not widely seen, primetime television reached millions of Americans and had a definite impact on popular culture. Like the opera, these two episodes explore the complexity of how stereotypes are engaged.

During the first episode, African American college students from fictional Hillman College travel to “Devil’s Island,” an imaginary barrier island and popular vacation destination off the coast of South Carolina. The similarities to the Gullah region were very striking. Just like “Devil’s Island,” the valuable coastal real estate in South Carolina and Georgia inhabited by Gullah people (e.g., Hilton Head and Daufuskie Island) have become very popular tourist destinations. Furthermore, the natives on fictional Devil’s Island spoke in what could best be interpreted as a Jamaican patois, a connection that outsiders commonly make when hearing the Gullah language. Finally, like many of

the Sea Islands, this imaginary island was accessible only by ferry. The allusions to the Gullah coastal region were unavoidable.

The episode furthers a discourse around the implications of tourism through the inherent negotiation of spatiality between the island's inhabitants and tourists. Both groups inhabit the same space yet with different stakes. Local residents interface with the continuous rotation of visitors who contribute to the local economy and seek the trappings of paradise. In the "Getaway" episodes, the residents of Devil's Island functioned as guides to the island. This too was very familiar to me, as most of us become impromptu guides when we interface with tourists who are intrigued by our hometown and traditions. It is not uncommon to engage visitors, as the characters portrayed, who have little stake in the island's history or preservation. The *A Different World* characters were on vacation in a location known for its tropical appeal, like the Lowcountry, with a topography and culture not dissimilar to the Caribbean. They enjoyed the privilege of being cultural outsiders with no long-term investment in the region.

I recall my parents pointing out the similarities between "Devil's Island" and our hometown, noting as they did so the inauthentic dialect spoken by the episode's "natives." The episode did the important work of portraying African American leisure, especially from the vantage point of college students. Given the pervasiveness of the Green Book and how segregation limited access and travel, the episodes made an important statement about the economic advancement of the African American community. Furthermore, the agency in travelling to a destination where the show's protagonists interfaced with African Americans who offered a unique cultural identity speaks to the outsider/insider paradigm from a distinctly African American perspective. How does the "outsider gaze" function when it is projected by other African Americans? The episodes first offer public awareness, but additionally offer an opportunity to investigate the experience of tourism for local Gullah people.

The Caribbean wrestles with many of the same dynamics regarding tourism and identity as the Gullah coast. Much as sweet grass baskets and particular foodways have emerged as outsider-declared symbols of Gullah people, so too has the “man and donkey” image emerged as iconographic symbols of Jamaica. Art historian Krista Thompson argues that the “man and donkey” theme—a visual construction from Jamaica’s past, created for the tourism industry—has continued to shape dominant narratives about tourist destinations (Thompson 2006, 5). Thompson suggests that the unidentified man’s vocation is presented as being an object to be photographed (Thompson 2006, 3). In a similar fashion, in the episodes of *A Different World*, the location and locals were tools used to craft a setting in which both entities existed for the pleasure of the visiting group. The language and customs of the inhabitants of “Devil’s Island” are exotic, and the characters’ reaction to them reveals the classic tourist response. Likely not created to do the work of image disruption, the episodes surely fall into the common trope of the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Caribbean that is often framed by the tourism industry at large. To be sure, the show, known for its subtle didactic tools, did its part to expand the national consciousness around the African diaspora by exposing the viewing audience to a relatively unknown part of the country and African American experience. Nonetheless, the outsider’s gaze prevailed offering a misrepresentation, albeit well meaning, of Gullah people.

Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, released three years after the “Getaway” episodes, offered a very different image of the Gullah experience. Invoking a Southern Lowcountry Gothic aesthetic, Dash leveraged the natural landscape to craft a narrative buttressed by modernity.

According to journalist Melissa Anderson:

Dash teamed up with a trio of prominent African-American visual artists for the production design, including the great large-scale painter Kerry James Marshall; the arrangement in the frame of multiple generations of Peazant men and women, all clad in white, in postprandial languor, suggests Renoir canvases of bodies in repose. Though the mood and rhythms of *Daughters of the Dust* are largely serene, just beneath the quietude buzzes the anxiety of a family being fissured, of loved ones pulled apart by their allegiance to tradition or modernity.

(Anderson 2017)

The film presents a day in the life of a multi-generational African American family at the dawn of the 20th century. The family is Gullah, a nod to the director's paternal roots, and wrestles with modernity as the younger generation aspires to leave the barrier island that the family inhabits for the mainland. Nana Peazant, the matriarch of the family and keeper of tradition, desires to stay. Family members from the "mainland" visit with a photographer, sharing romantic accounts of the world beyond their isolated island with the Peazants, who remain on the island. Film scholar Jacqueline Stewart suggests that Julie Dash invites the viewer to intentionally consider modernity: "Dash offers a number of useful starting points for thinking about the relationship between early African American motion picture spectatorship and the processes of black migration and urbanization" (Stewart 2003, 650). The Peazants live on their island, a place reflective of the practical technology that enslaved Africans brought to America, yet engage modernity through the aspirations of relatives and tools such as a stereograph that offers a glimpse into the urban world. Jones states, "She [Dash] legitimizes technology as a means of effecting retention through the intersection of the characters of the Unborn Child and the photographer Mr. Snead" (Jones 1993, 22). Such a paradox presents Gullah people as individuals who are not isolated, but rather comprise a community with access and knowledge of a greater world that influences their worldview, if only indirectly:

Here, in the unlikely area of American film, the complexity and shaded histories of Black women's lives take center stage. There are no whores or maids in this film. No acquiescent slaves. No white people. Instead, *Daughters of the Dust* offers an historical moment in African American culture, plain and imperfect, blended with subtle charm, such careful technique that the preparation of food and a stroll along the beach become overwhelming in their beauty. (Jones 1993, 19)

Although set at the turn of the twentieth century, the film has a classically modern feel that is almost futuristic in its art direction. The wardrobes, ideas, and themes of the piece are timeless and do well to shape a perception of Gullah culture that transcends time and isolation. For many people outside of the region, *Daughters of the Dust* was their first exposure to the islands. The film also

introduced its audience to the Gullah language, traditions, and landscape.

The power of *Daughters of the Dust* is most evident in what is arguably the most important character of the film: the landscape. Award-winning painter Kerry James Marshall was the film's production designer. He referenced such works as Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" to create visual compositions that highlighted the vast beauty of the natural landscape. In the film, the landscape—defined by the ocean, waterways, and marshes—is breathtakingly beautiful. Land is an enduring connection for Gullah people to ancestors and the agrarian traditions that they passed down for future generations to survive and thrive. There is a spiritual bond fostered through ancestral land; land also functions as the physical manifestation of the rituals and practices around food and herbalism that are so important to Gullah identity. Framing art with landscapes and a forward-looking nostalgia, *Daughters of the Dust* honors the vitality of what Gullah represents, particularly through the presentation of the Lowcountry landscape.

Southern African American landowners who retained familial land through the 21st century can trace their family legacy from the period of enslavement, through the eras of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights Movement, and contemporary challenges around developments that increase property taxes. Maintaining land and retaining heritage is no small achievement. Representations of such traditions in films like *Daughters of the Dust* affirmed Gullah culture in powerful ways. Additionally, the film featured various family members and friends from the region. There was a sense of pride in ownership. Viewing the film felt like viewing a family photo album, particularly the moment when a person arrives at a page with her image. Landscapes have this effect for Gullah people, as they evoke home and community in a very particular way.

When I mention my Gullah roots to cultural outsiders, two things are mentioned (mostly depending on the age of the conversant), *Daughters of the Dust* or *Gullah Gullah Island*. The

Nickelodeon cable network children's program was an important milestone for the representation of Gullah people in the public eye. However, what was more salient was that the show starred two members of our community. They were accessible; we knew them. Ronald Daise was a local thespian, folklorist, writer, and musician who was one of my mother's best friends in high school. Given the size of our community, everyone could celebrate some connection to the Hampton University alumnus and his wife, Natalie, a "cum ya" from New York, who co-starred with him on the show.⁸⁶ Then there were the special moments on the program that mirrored our experiences. The show highlighted our values, our food, familiar stories, the interconnectedness of our community, and even footage of local landmarks and treasures like our town's high school marching band. The half-hour program was recognized as one of the ten best children's programs by TV Guide, and received a NAACP Image Award, Daytime Emmy nominations, and two Parents' Choice Awards.

Ronald, the father figure on the show, dispensed life lessons through music and storytelling while giving the world a very unique view of Gullah culture. *Gullah Gullah Island's* intervention was akin to the *Cosby Show's* impact in the 1980s. The show featured a father who was engaged in the lives of his children and their friends, youth surrounded by caring adults from all walks of life, and a Southern context characterized by diversity and the natural beauty of the Sea Islands. *The Chicago Tribune* described Ron and Natalie Daise as "perfect parents," with unmatched energy, children who never fight, and neighbors and friends who were invested in socially educating youth (Mangan 1994). Like the 80s' era Huxtables, the Daise family indeed had something to prove. The 1990s were a time when African American life remained fragile, and positive reflections of family life on television

⁸⁶ Hampton University has a longstanding connection to the Sea Islands of Beaufort, South Carolina. The president of Hampton Institute, Hollis Burke Frissell, was appointed the chair of the Penn School's board of Trustees in 1900. He oversaw the school's transition into a model of education mirroring Hampton and Tuskegee, establishing an exchange which allowed instructors from Hampton to teach at the Penn School and Hampton students and community members to attend Hampton.

provided an important counter-narrative to such trends as mass incarceration and the perceived ills of gangster rap. Through the show, viewers from various economic and racial backgrounds gained insight into a community not too different from their own, yet through the particular lens of Mr. Ron and Miss Natalie's family, they connected to the shared values of love, fun, and family. Upbeat and educational, the program targeted for preschoolers aired on the Nickelodeon cable network from 1994-1998. The show was part of a \$30-million-dollar initiative to expand Nickelodeon's preschool programming to encourage "flexible thinking," to inspire children to think on their own versus depending upon rote memorization (Mangan 1994).

One of the features that made the show distinct was that it foregrounded African identity by portraying Gullah in a manner that complicated the traditional frame, moving beyond the outsiders' gaze to embrace the agency of narrative. The Daises were both cultural consultants and featured actors on the program. The idea for the show emerged from their touring theatrical piece based on a book that Ronald Daise had written, as Ronald Daise explains:

Following the publication of my first book, my wife and I had scripted it into a cultural performance. We dramatized the oral histories about these traditions. We sang the songs that were listed. We showed slides of the historical photographs, which were a part of the Penn Center collection, in this performance piece. We had a three-year-old and were expecting our second-born. What we wanted of children's TV was to have a program in which our three-year-old daughter didn't afterward wish to have blonde hair and blue eyes. That was all [DS laughs] that we wanted. (Daise 2013)

It was during this season that the Daises met with a television producer who was working on an idea for a children's program. The producer, who the Daises met during the producer's first visit to the Sea Islands, presented an idea about a magical island and asked if they were interested:

They spent three days with my wife and me and our family, and they basically based the characters on our real life experience. That's why . . . I'm on the show as "Mr. Ron," and she was "Miss Natalie," our real names. Children from the Gullah Gullah Island community visited us. We taught them songs and engaged them in activities. It was just to be a show in which Gullah culture was a backdrop, but it was . . . it had cross-generational appeal, and it impacted the perception of Gullah heritage for a number of people. Particularly those were

in the target audience, who are now in their late twenties and early thirties; [they] grew up with a positive understanding of Gullah from hearing the tune “Let’s All Go To Gullah Gullah Island.” There was no negative [laughs]. And even if they wanted to find out more, their eyes were open to finding out more about it. (Daise 2013).

Daise’s book, *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage: Legacy of Freedmen on St. Helena Island* (1986) and his accompanying theatrical piece predated the documentaries *Family Across the Sea* (1991) and *The Language You Cry In* (1998). Both documentaries helped to cultivate emerging global interest in connections between Gullah culture and that of Sierra Leone. Penn Center, the cultural center that formerly housed the Penn School, was at the epicenter of this interest, and even collaborated in a set of trans-Atlantic cultural exchanges.⁸⁷ Such exchanges factored prominently in film as forms of documentation and entertainment with educational value.

Gullah Visual Artists

Television and film connected many of us to worlds and experiences that the digital age would soon make more accessible. We could not yet view Henry O. Tanner’s work with one click on the Internet, but we could appreciate the visual stimulation of moving images from the comfort of our homes and celebrate the achievements of the diaspora in film. Portraits like Tanner’s *The Banjo Lesson* function like the photographs at my great-grandmother’s house, in that they influence popular culture and do the work of expanding the representation of African Americans in the greater

⁸⁷ The Penn School became Penn Center, a conference center and community cornerstone with historic relevance to the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, as well as the Civil Rights Movement. As attorney and activist Vernon Jordan recalls in *Vernon Can Read!: A Memoir*, “In August, the month after the (NAACP) convention, I went to Frogmore, South Carolina, to attend a Southeastern Regional Office retreat ... at Penn Community Center” (Jordan 2001, 149). Martin Luther King Jr., Black Panthers, and other social justice groups found their way to Penn Center. Yet this awareness, enhanced by what many deem the spiritual setting of the campus accentuated by seclusion and natural beauty, undoubtedly hit a tipping point with the premiere of the 1991 Julie Dash feature film *Daughters of the Dust*, and has since gained increased interest with the release of Beyoncé Knowles’s album *Lemonade*. Knowles, a multi-Grammy Award winning artist, debuted her film *Lemonade* on April 23, 2016. She presented the album as a visual story that was crafted with various *Daughters of the Dust* allusions that help to buttress the piece’s narrative about blackness, southernness, and human dignity. This was most evident in the segment for the song “All Night,” which featured an all-female cast of African American women dressed in clothing reminiscent of a foregone era with a modern twist. The setting, described as “Low Country Gothic” by *Vogue Magazine*, was lined by a voluptuous landscape accented by majestic oaks that reminded many viewers of *Daughters of the Dust*. Julie Dash’s southern Lowcountry Gothic aesthetic communicates a timeless narrative of blackness that, with *Lemonade*’s success, proved relevant in the 21st century.

American art canon. At the same time that Dash and the Daises were offering their portrayals of Gullah life, so too were a set of visual artists. Contemporary Gullah artists offer important contributions to the discourse of representational justice. Like *The Banjo Lesson*, these artists affirm the African American experience and more specifically they celebrate Gullah identity. The four artists that I will discuss in the following section present a cross-spectrum of art by Gullah people. They are a mere sample from a larger canon, but they explore and expand creative expression from the Gullah perspective.

The genre of Gullah art is wide. It includes vernacular traditions that, when curated too narrowly, can be limited in their scope, and more experimental conceptual pieces that are pointedly provocative and thought provoking. Emerging Gullah artists have an interest in using art to resist norms by offering what can be deemed an insider perspective of what they know Gullah identity to be. Sam Doyle, Jonathan Green, Charmaine Bee, and Sheldon Scott are four Gullah artists who both affirm and challenge conventions through their work. Sam Doyle and Jonathan Green are well known Gullah painters who found commercial success during the late twentieth century. Bee and Scott, in turn, are younger, multimedia artists who challenge conventions while confronting approaches to legacy and image making. Each artist contributes their important perspective to the genre of Gullah art.

Visual representations fit within a broader visual/material aesthetic in the lowcountry. Artists like Sam Doyle and Jonathan Green undoubtedly “defined Gullah culture through art.” This is not to say, of course, that generations of others had already not been doing this, defining their identity through their baskets, quilts, boats, nets, songs, and oral traditions. Doyle and Green, though, added painting to this list, creating images that explicitly portrayed the *people* of the community. Doyle painted on objects found in the community, offering local portraits on local materials. Jonathan Green, in contrast, worked on canvas, abstracting the human figure to showcase everyday

life through tropes that celebrate the aesthetics of coastal living. Green, an Art Institute of Chicago graduate and Air Force veteran is the most recognized artist in my hometown. His annual calendar is prominently displayed in local homes, and he remains a fixture at community events.

Jonathan Green and the late Sam Doyle are two of the most notable and commercially viable Gullah artists.⁸⁸ The Gullah art canon has expanded to include multi-media artists like Charmaine Bee and Sheldon Scott. They depart from the two-dimensionality of paintings to embrace performance art, conceptual art, and such practices as herbalism. Gullah is not presented as a monolith through their artistic lens; rather they bring a complexity to a cultural identity that informs their practice but does not limit the categorization of their work. Painters and photographers traditionally have a representational path that departs from the vernacular. They offer images of the self and community that provide a particular type of accessibility. Both Bee and Scott are photographers, but they also resist the limitations of genres to activate photography to investigate family relationships, sexuality, trauma, and spirituality.

I begin this section by discussing Doyle, offering an historical survey of his life and career. Green, Bee, and Scott, who are still living and producing work, provide an opportunity for a different, less anecdotal and encyclopedic, type of engagement. Unlike with Jonathan Green, Charmaine Bee, and Sheldon Scott, I did not have the opportunity to meet Sam Doyle before his death in 1985. Doyle was a self-taught artist who created paintings and sculptures, mostly using found objects like roof tin and wood siding. He lived across the river from my grandparents on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, residing in an area we called “Wallace.” He is remembered through

⁸⁸ African Americanist Joseph Gordon frames what he terms the “Gullah Renaissance” by placing Jonathan Greene at the epicenter. He describes the renaissance as emerging from the renewed appreciation for classic Gullah studies such as those by Lorenzo Dow Turner, collaborations with colleges who promoted research on the Sea Islands, and local celebrations of the culture such as Heritage Days and the Gullah Festival, all of which have contributed to a renewed interest in Gullah people and their culture. Political Scientist Tracy Snipe observes that this Renaissance has a different tone from the broad public fascination with the Gullah that marked the beginning of the 20th century (Snipe 2004, 276).

accounts of the massive collection of art that lined his yard that portrayed local and national historical figures and events. The hand painted sign “Nationwide St. Helena Out Door Art Gallery” welcomed you to his yard (Spriggs 2000, 36). Hearing accounts about the gallery and his presence growing up, he struck me as a Noah-like figure, building a God-inspired mission that only he could foresee would have a profound impact on his community and the world. His works reflected the community as he engaged it and the world as he wanted us to know it.

Thomas Samuel Doyle was born on March 23, 1906, to Thomas Doyle and Sue Ladson on St. Helena Island. He grew up on a fifteen-acre farm, and attended the Penn School, founded in 1862 to educate formerly enslaved men and women of African descent, until the ninth grade. A teacher at this school first encouraged him to pursue art. Doyle likely didn’t know, when he was growing up on the former Wallace Plantation near Frogmore, that he was laying his own stones, just like the Israelites of the Old Testament, for future generations to follow. His stones would reclaim and define Gullah culture through art and the everydayness of the community life he depicted.

The Penn School, which championed industrial education and the utility of such tools to thrive in society, likely exposed Doyle to the technical dexterity that allowed him to fashion the canvases of wood and tin that he used to paint his masterpieces. Penn School also instilled an awareness in the greater world that affirmed the centrality of cultural pride. This pride becomes apparent in paintings like Doyle’s *St. Helena’s First Black Midwife* and *Jackie Robinson*, two pieces that celebrate African American achievement, and convey how Doyle personally curated the information he sought to document and share with the community. He ignored the notion that art is something that is limited in its accessibility, and engaged the practice as a meditation, making his art accessible to others through familiar images (we all knew the first black midwife) and its open-air presentation. Doyle came to prominence during a moment of widening cultural appreciation for his genre and diasporic cultural identities like Gullah.

He began painting in 1944. His earliest works were completed in his twenties and featured various images (including animals) painted on found materials like sheet metal, driftwood, roots, and wood panels. Doyle married, and had three daughters. His children recall his fondness for music and his passion for playing the guitar. Back then, the sculptures, paintings, and drawings that he created were a mere hobby that he displayed outside of their home. He became a full-time artist after retiring in 1970. Retirement afforded Doyle the time to focus on producing art. He painted portraits of anyone who, as he would describe, “jumbled into his mind, or inspired him.” The leading collector of Doyle’s works, Gordon Bailey, offers the following insight into his process and painting style:

After his retirement, Doyle evangelically committed to "painting history." With bold strokes and vibrant colors, he blended ancestral Gullah lore and his devout Baptist faith into a rich multicultural impasto. Two series, Penn (school) and First (achievement or event), commingled with his folkloric works and clearly established Doyle's mission to honor Gullah culture and, more generally, African American advancement. Through the years, the museum-like display that overflowed the yard of his small, two-story house and adjacent workshop evolved into the St. Helena Out Door Art Gallery.

Doyle created art on all manner of surfaces but much preferred the smooth surface of metal, and his long fluid strokes reveal his affinity for the tactile nature of his craft. Often, he painted the background around his subject, contouring the figure as he worked. This overlaying of paint created a discernible aura that added considerably to its presence. He resolutely defended the works in his outdoor gallery from the harsh climatic extremes of the Lowcountry. Virtually all of the artist's older works show signs of rejuvenation, some were nearly rebirthed by their imaginative creator. (Bailey 2013, 264)

Doyle’s outdoor gallery challenged common conventions of how art is displayed by re-conceptualizing what connecting with the public could look like. He also falls into the broader tradition of African American yard displays, a tradition that’s been widely explored for its focus on history. The gallery was about celebrating his contemporaries and sharing his own knowledge of the period of enslavement and the fight for justice, all to educate younger generations while also embracing a form of anecdotal levity that was equally entertaining and provocative.

Doyle's was a noted figure in the American folk art tradition, as verified by his inclusion in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's exhibition "Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980." This definition does pose a challenge, however, as it limits the art of Doyle and his contemporaries to a genre that has long existed at the margins of the American art canon. Doyle's work also poses questions about the types of representation that best reflect Gullah life. Is it fair to limit Gullah representation to the refined images of contemporary figurative Gullah artists like Jonathan Green or Cassandra Gillens, or does Doyle invite a presentation that bridges generational practice and understanding in meaningful ways? I argue that a complexity of approaches best serves the future of Gullah culture.

This complexity is conveyed through subtlety. Curator Lynne Spriggs characterizes Doyle's portraits as having an economy of line and form, an assertion that Marquetta L. Goodwine, also known as Queen Quet, the Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation supports, "It is a complexity of simplicity we have here. There is a depth and multiplicity of meanings behind the simplest of expressions; you don't have to dress it up, it comes across sharp and clear. His [Doyle's] art conveyed the same flow as the culture itself" (in Spriggs 2000, 9). The simplicity of form that Spriggs references is used by Marquetta Goodwine to symbolize the insularity of Gullah culture. Doyle's aesthetic appears simplistic on the surface, but as Goodwine notes, there is a depth of understanding for Gullah people who engage his work. This depth also extends to Doyle, who should be respected for using art to share his worldview.

There is a quandary around the interpretation of Gullah art that persists over Doyle as an artist who was characterized for making work that was "simplistic and primitive." For many cultural outsiders, his art conveys a deeper meaning rooted in the complexity of Gullah identity. He showcased community people like the island's first African American doctor, first African American embalmer, and first African American midwife, who were all individuals that spoke to racial progress and the region's shared cultural history. He also honored important community icons like Dr.

Buzzard (a root doctor), haints (spirits), and other traditions that were documented for future generations to be exposed to. The reception of Doyle's work has been complex, given the ways that he portrayed community life; however, he made an essential contribution to the American art canon by contributing to understandings of Gullah people. Doyle's attention to history and technique are instructive tools worth celebrating, as they paved the way for a new generation of contemporary artists.

Painter Jonathan Greene expanded the perception of Gullah identity in a different manner than Sam Doyle. Both artists drew upon their experiences growing up in the Lowcountry. Whereas Doyle painted on tree roots and fashioned paintings as sculptures from found objects, Greene is primarily known for his works on canvas. Greene is one of the most commercially viable artists of the Gullah experience, who continues to produce work that can be found in galleries and homes alike. Greene's paintings are defined by bold, contrasting colors with intricate patterns that evoke the images of family, kinship and community on canvas (Gordon 2004, 279). His annual calendar, created to raise funds for the Beaufort Memorial Hospital, is a keepsake that not only adorns the walls of Gullah natives like my great-grandmother, but whose pages also become framed memorials to the legacy and experience of the Gullah community.

Jonathan Green was born in 1955, the same year as my father. Both men grew up during a period where they experienced the limitations of the segregated South as well as the promise of integration. He lived in New York City for a portion of his childhood, but was predominately raised by his grandmother in Gardens Corner, South Carolina, where he was exposed to the Gullah oral tradition and was shaped by spiritual practices such as seeking (Pendergraft 1988, 7). Novelist Bettye J. (Mbitha) Parker Smith notes that Jonathan Green "grew up walking hand in hand with the corporeal and the intangible cultural edifices of his surroundings, the realization and appreciation for their imitable value evolved over time" (Smith 1996, 14). He is undoubtedly a product of the

community that raised him, particularly to the degree that he offers a visual appreciation of the natural landscape and local traditions.

Green, who is thought to be the first individual of Gullah ancestry to attend professional art school, benefitted from many of the opportunities that Doyle and my grandparents' generation did not have access to (Pendergraft 1988, 7). Green's time away from home fostered a greater appreciation for his Gullah roots:

I wanted to go back to my roots. The older people were dying and I began to see people (the Gullahs) differently. I saw them as a people with a strong African link . . . probably the strongest link with Africa of any of the black American people. I had studied African art and I began to appreciate a certain uniqueness. (Greene 1988, 6)

Before his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, Green studied fabric construction at the East Grand Forks Technical Institute in Grand Forks, Minnesota, where he mastered the visual elements of color, pattern and texture (Pendergraft 1988, 7). This mastery is evident in his paintings, which consistently feature flowing textiles and clothing patterns with intricate detail. His work aligns with the work of other narrative painters like Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence, with whom Green studied in 1987 (Pendergraft 2000, 7). Green's narrative paintings are intentionally southern and Gullah. They have the compositional spirit of *Daughters of the Dust*, and the lyrical vibrancy of the youthful *Gullah Gullah Island* (a show that engaged its pre-school audience with bright colors). Green offered the following thoughts, at the height of his prominence, about his goals as an artist:

I can remember things as a child in the early '60s that are gone now such as hair wrapping, men weaving fishing nets, farming, and hunting. There is very little of these activities going on now. What fishing and hunting that goes on is mainly sport and not out of necessity as before. Food used to be preserved in various ways . . . drying, canning, smoking. Now only gardening seems to continue. (Greene 1988, 6)

Green set out to document the culture that he remembered as a youth, and its contemporary evolution. His pieces share the backdrop of nature, and in some instances the insularity of the Gullah home (see, for instance, *Red Tomatoes*, 1992) or places of worship (e.g., *The Passing of Eloise*,

1988). The connection that I and many of the members of my community feel to his work is palpable. He offers an acknowledgment of the past through practices that were familiar to my great-grandmother and grandparents (e.g., *The Plowman*, 1989); additionally, he crafts contemporary scenes like *Dale School Choir* (1995), that impose modern figures in traditional Lowcountry landscapes. In doing this, he reflects how Gullah people continue to evolve, while remaining true and near to the land and practices that connect the community.

Green's offers an oeuvre that is reminiscent of Gullah heritage while suggesting how the heritage is still evolving. Paintings like *Shucking Oysters* (1988) and *Fishing* (1988) celebrated traditions that honored the everydayness of life on the Sea Islands. The paintings also did so in a way that offered dignity to the subjects, who are given the agency of not being depicted in relation to whiteness. His works also suggest a form of leisure that exists beyond the influence of racial limitations.

Life within this "veil" of segregation is a theme that continues to emerge from Green's narrative paintings. A key function of the Gullah diaspora is the ability to participate in community, and to return and contribute to said community. The essence of Green's work is its connection to the people who raised him and continue to serve as muses for his work:

The people at my church see me as the person they knew as a baby and watched grow up . . . , someone who moved away, but who has continued to participate in the community, and give back to the community, over a lifetime . . . , who has remained close to his mother and the rest of his family. . . . That's who I am to them. A "famous artist" means very little to them compared to Jonathan Green, the child they knew, . . . the child who grew up with the veil. (Evans 2011)

The church that raised Green continues to inspire his artwork. He translates the familiarity of landscapes and practices such as seeking into powerful expressions of cultural identity. Of his painting *Seeking*, poets Kwame Dawes and Marjory Wentworth observe, "What ultimately became the painting *Seeking* was inspired by Jonathan's childhood in the Gullah community of Garden's

Corner South Carolina, where young people were sent into the woods alone for two weeks to ‘seek’ the word of God as a rite of passage into the church” (Dawes and Wentworth 2013, xi). Green achieves the aims of preserving Gullah culture through art, affirming the complexity of Gullah people through a contemporary lens that offers hope for the future, and engaging a southern black narrative that thrives beyond traditional tropes of black servitude.

This complexity might best be approached as a contribution to widening the depiction of Gullah people rather than presenting figures who challenge outsider notions of island life. Indeed, it could be argued that Green’s paintings affirm these traditional, outsider-crafted notions. White writer Pat Conroy suggests this confirmation when he shared the following about Green’s work:

I had fallen in love with the people of Daufuskie Island and I wrote my book *The Water is Wide* to give voice to that love. Jonathan Green’s art took me directly back to that time when I steered a boat out across the marshes of Beaufort County to teach everyday. Here were the oystermen I passed in the river, the baptisms in the small creeks, the yards full of children and chickens and dogs, the companionship of women, the wisdom of old men, the dignity of cattle and hogs—all of it coming out in a great tide of artistic labor. (Conroy 8)

Conroy gives voice to the white outsider gaze that has narrowly characterized the Gullah experience for generations. I do not take offense at Conroy’s connection to Green’s paintings, which remind him of a particular type of Gullah image. This image is germane to, but not wholly inclusive of, what I know and love about being Gullah. Green’s work does little to disrupt this image, perhaps making it more valuable as a form of documentation and exposure than as a portrayal of the dynamic fullness of Gullah life. The canon is wide enough for depictions that do more affirming than challenging. This affirmation is invaluable for the esteem of individuals like me who seek to find their image in the greater American art canon.

Green’s participation in a new initiative moves his work beyond this frame to look at the technological contributions of Africans who pioneered American rice cultivation. He shared the following in an interview about the Lowcountry Rice Project:

Rather than talking about enslaved Africans being slaves, we want to focus on their incredible contribution to the rice economy, which lasted well over 200 years. It literally built the Southeast. We want to look at all that it took to prepare the rice fields: Moving hundreds of cypress logs, 10 to 15 feet in diameter, creating the dykes, the infrastructure. . . . Who were these people who made this possible? (Evans 2011)

The Lowcountry Rice Project, like Green's paintings, does not aim to detach the African American narrative from its agrarian roots. Rather, it endeavors to expand the narrative in a manner that celebrates the innovation of Gullah people. This celebration is a consistent part of Green's contribution to the canon of Gullah art.

I remember the pride I had displaying a poster in my college dorm room of the annual Heritage Days Celebration that featured Green's painting *The Congregation* (1990). The painting depicts a church scene with a choir and congregation. The figures represent the complexity and diversity of African American complexions, who are adorned with vibrant clothing marking the creative practice of Sunday morning pageantry. The scene could easily have been from any African American church in the country, yet the subtle details of head wraps and fabric patterns were a nod to a place I call home. Jonathan Green paints what he knew to be Gullah culture, and in the process has created a lasting legacy that allows the world to see Gullah people for their beauty and glory.

Jonathan Green's approach to representational justice is rooted in looking back. He celebrates the tropes of the Gullah past, while also looking forward, albeit within a very familiar frame of reference. A number of contemporary Gullah artists offer a different approach. This approach often begins with the present or future. Arts activists like Charmaine Bee are working to reframe the narrative of Gullah identity in the 21st century; like many artists of Gullah descent, Bee is expanding the idea of Gullah/Geechee identity in this era. Bee and her contemporaries represent a new frontier of Gullah culture and represent what I previously have deemed the "Nouveau Gullah" generation. The isolation of Gullah people that has characterized—and been critiqued—in Doyle

and Green's work does not drive the images presented by this newer generation. They are challenging the prevailing stereotypical artistic portrayals of Gullah culture

Such portrayals, not surprisingly, are still found in the plantation aesthetic of the Gullah Dolls and paintings by white artist Samantha Claar. Her Savannah, Georgia based Fine Folk Gallery sells her dolls, and paintings like "Stick Pot" (2015), that depicts the image of an African American woman holding a large pot donning nineteenth century attire accented by a head wrap. John W. Jones is an African American painter who came to prominence by painting Confederate banknotes that portrayed "slaves picking cotton, corn and tobacco and loading barrels cheerfully" (Jones 2002). His work also includes pieces like "Gullah Shout," which illustrates Gullah people shouting in a field wearing plantation attire. Claar, as a cultural outsider, and Jones as a cultural insider, have different stakes in the discourse on Gullah representation. Jones was initially enraged by the depiction of slaves on Confederate currency, which invites a more subversive interpretation of his work. It is unclear if Claar has a similar motive. What Jones and Claar do have in common is an aesthetic that offers static representations of Gullah people. These kinds of works appeal to the sensibilities of tourists and to outsiders' view of Gullah life. The emerging generation of artists is not working directly in response to these tropes, but, like me, were raised with these images and seek to expand the discourse. They complicate the southern depiction of Black men and women in plantation attire, singing spirituals, and speaking in dialect to please tourists. They, like so many of us, have deep ties to the Gullah region and their families, live out their roots in ways that pay homage to their ancestral foundation, and expand media depictions of what historian Edith Dabbs referred to as "isolated life of a time forgotten island" (Dabbs 1970).

Charmaine Bee is a conceptual artist who roots her work in her Gullah identity. She approaches art through practices like herbalism as well as photography that all work toward greater awareness of our human agency. She is from Beaufort, South Carolina, and uses sound, installation,

video, and textiles to explore African Diasporic spirituality and personal histories. Some of her most recent work wrestles with race and identity in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. Her piece *Holding Space for a Reality We Are Told Not to See* is one example of such work. According to her, in this work she unpacks and examines the feeling of psychological trauma:

Holding Space for a Reality We Are Told Not to See is a dense, uncomfortable, quiet, loud, performance ritual considering the sublimity of racial terror. I began working on this piece after the death of Sandra Bland and after reading Okwui Enwezor's *The American Sublime and the Racial Self*. Through the use of sound, smoke (burning pots of rice and sugar), sculpture and performance, I examined the contradictory tension between the reality of racism and what we are societally told to see and accept as that reality. Through collaborative process I worked with two other black women and we had conversations about mourning, joy and how these deaths at the hands of police were affecting us. "What can the women and I conjure in the space" and "how is it possible to fill the space psychologically and with minimal objects" were questions that came up as we talked. We created a 45-minute performance movement in response to these conversations. At the end of the performance viewers were left with remnants of the smoke within their clothing, which created a loop of carrying the space and ritual with them after leaving. (Bee 2017)

Racial terror was the focus of my conversation with Bee in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. Like me, she felt paralyzed with grief and concerned about living during a period in America where violence, particularly seen through the death of African American men and women, was so pervasive and commonplace. In the same manner that I saw myself and my students in the eyes of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed Florida teen who was shot on his way home, Charmaine and the women she engaged for her piece *Holding Space for a Reality We Are Told Not to See* likely saw themselves in Sandra Bland's eyes. The use of sound and the ephemeral nature of performance symbolically conveys the fleeting nature of life lost and the permanence of the grief left behind. How does a community begin to explore processing death on such a continual basis? For Bee and her collaborators, art became a way to engage this idea in a way that was uncomfortable for her audience and herself. This trauma is one that encompasses the experience of Gullah people, who must constantly engage the relics of chattel slavery through the contemporary plantation enterprise spurred by tourism and economic injustice.

The art of tea making is an important part of Bee's art practice that works toward a different, more personal, kind of justice. She founded a tea company, Gullah Girl Tea, which sold loose leaf teas through a website. The teas were curated for each individual patron and reflected her attempt, as a performance artist, to live into her family practice of herbalism. My grandfather, and many other community elders, were herbalists. They knew which herb to use for a range of maladies. Bee describes her work with tea in the following quote:

[When I was] growing up, tea culture in my family was simply defined by drinking tea when we were sick. There was always this association of drinking tea when there was an illness. The next step of tea culture, for me, was upon learning about various teas as an enjoyable healing beverage. I learned about white teas, herbal teas and oolong teas. I previously learned about Life Everlasting and the herbs people drank to cure the flu at home, but I didn't really know about my Grandmother working with these leaves. I learned how tea can be engaged in a way where you experience enjoyment and healing at the same time. That's now how I approach making my blends. I want them to be aesthetically beautiful, to smell really good, and to have a healing component. (Ash 2015)

Tea culture is a significant part of Bee's Gullah identity, and represents a refashioning of a tradition for a new generation. Additionally, through tea rituals, she aligns herself with a family tradition that sustains an important part of Gullah cultural identity and also offers a model for economic empowerment that is tourist industry-adjacent, as it operates beyond the region and is sold primarily online, at festivals, and at fairs in New York and Los Angeles. The transmission of legacy from her grandmother to her is synonymous with the depiction of the intergenerational moment in Henry O. Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson*. Intergenerational influence is a key factor of Gullah life, and the arts offer an opportunity for such lessons to be honed and preserved for future generations.

Charmaine also crafted a photography project based on her family's property in Beaufort. Using a tripod, she went to her family's property and took various shots with herself in the frame. The series is reminiscent of Carrie Mae Weems's *Sea Island Series*. The landscape is wooded and uninterrupted. Bee stands on heirs' property, which her family has owned for generations. She engages the landscape. In some shots, she encounters the landscape on her hands and feet, forming

a plank; in other shots, she stands upright as if to fully embrace the sky or spiritual real that surrounds her. These photos engage memory and ritual to honor her positionality as a forebear of her ancestral lineage, and as a custodian of its future. Her artist's statement offers additional insight:

Dreams and memory were a crucial element of growing up Gullah particularly memory of Mende language passed on through Gullah people of the Carolinas and memories of symbolism within dreams. It was important to understand how dream worlds impact the waking world. I was 9 years old when Aunt Aida passed away; Aunt Aida was actually my cousin and lived up the street from my grandmother. She collected dolls and I would go and sit with her every day. When I went into her home after she passed I sensed energy so strong that I felt as if I were suffocating in her stories, and existence. I think of that heavy energy in her space as the layers of her experience in that house. Those layers drive my work. (Bee 2017)

Bee's work offers an important framework for Gullah futurity. She explores narratives of memory, family identity, and practice that champion an approach to art that is materially rich and provocative. She engages the trauma of police brutality while exploring a spiritually based approach to meaning making and healing, a similar practice that our progenitors fashioned generations before us. She offers the following insight into her practice:

My practice is collaborative and emphasizes ritual that simultaneously explores and creates discomfort, remnants of an experience and healing. I use materials such as smoke, dust, and temperature adjustment in order to impact spaces in a way that makes the viewer aware of their body and its position within space and time. I am drawn to materials such as rice, sugar and indigo—materials charged by histories of building economy via subjugation of black and non-white people. (Bee 2017)

The art of living and doing can be seen as a spiritual practice. Through ritual, Bee invites the viewer to interface with the innermost feelings of the subjugated. Owning this discomfort through awareness prompted by smoke and dust forces the body to acknowledge the toll of trauma. She challenges comfortable two-dimensional depictions of Gullah life by forcing sensory engagement with the painful truths of chattel slavery. Bee's aim is not to stay in a place of trauma, but rather to allow the discomfort to begin an exploration of how experience can lead to healing.

Bee's preservation of Gullah practice beyond the Lowcountry is representative of the ways that many of her contemporaries in the Gullah diaspora preserve and re-envision Gullah traditions

synonymous with home. The difference is that as an artist, Bee takes the quotidian and presents it for audiences to consume and engage. This presentation is one that generously invites others to consider the approach she offers; it also aligns with the hospitality—like offering a cup of tea—that has shaped many Gullah experiences. Bee and many of her artistic contemporaries make works that are a far cry from images that support a crafted plantation South inhabited by natives who live simply, hold onto tradition, and barely interact with the greater world. They raise awareness about the economic and political issues impacting the culture while celebrating the culture's contemporary existence. They also help to further contextualize the community impacted by a still unimaginable tragedy.

One of her contemporaries who is also asking questions related to tragedy is photographer and performance artist Sheldon Scott. The former therapist is trained in responding to crisis, and leverages his training to unpack personal and societal traumas. Like Bee, he embraces the discomfort of compositions that he photographs himself. In the past he has used cotton balls to represent African slave labor, sugar to represent queerness, and an ax to explore notions of labor and black masculinity. Scott offers the following context for his work: “Broadly, being Geechee, the pejoratives' pejorative, forced upon me an already compounded journey of racial, sexual and economic identity. However, it was my findings on a truer history of Gullah/Geechee peoples that informed my desire, and ultimately my works' desire, to break tropes, upend pedagogy and posit more honest narratives into the broader consciousness and present them canonically” (Scott 2017). He transitioned into storytelling and performance art to have conversations about the intersection of racism and sexual identity:

I have had a unique relationship with legacy. Being gay, I never thought I would have children of my own, so it forced me to think about what I leave in a different kind of way; I would never allow myself to be invisible again. Combating invisibility creates the legacy of the things I want to leave. When you talk about the Gullah Geechee Islands being under siege, it connects to this idea of legacy. At one point we were protected by heirs' property

laws. The law has since changed. Our area is the Martha's Vineyard of the South. We live on these beautiful islands that are incredibly attractive to people. (Scott 2017)

The impact of a changing Gullah landscape inspires Scott's real-time exploration with evolving notions of identity. The visibility of his Gullah/Geechee roots coincides with the visibility of his various identities, which all seem to work toward a greater sense of awareness in his audience. For instance, Sheldon's recent piece, *Precious in Da Wadah, A Portrait of the Geechee*, presented as a part of the *National Portrait Gallery's IDENTIFY series*, challenges the concept of European technology as the basis of American agriculture (much as Jonathan Green does in his rice project); by highlighting the ingenuity of rice cultivation by the Gullah/Geechee people, Scott honors his Gullah roots. Scott grounds his artistic practice in his experience growing up in the region:

Pawley's Island is on the very northern tip of the Gullah Geechee region, which is comprised of coastal barrier islands in South Carolina, Georgia, and North Carolina. What is interesting is seeing folks claim the area. Being born and raised in the region, I didn't have much of an understanding of what the world outside our area was like. I did not understand Geechee to be anything different than who I was. I soon noticed that our experience was contextualized through someone else's narrative. Griot culture is at the core of our identity, as evidenced through sharing stories. It wasn't until 2005 that I realized that telling stories meant something else to others; for me it was entertainment, for others it was academic. There was the practice of root—for instance, my great uncle is a root doctor, the process of healing, etc. Growing up where your ancestors were enslaved has a special meaning. I grew up in Brookgreen Garden, the largest outdoor garden. None of that was contextualized for me until I found myself outside of that space. (Scott 2017)

Despite not having much contextualization of his Gullah identity growing up, Scott now offers cultural background through art using the everydayness of Gullah life to challenge conventions and raise awareness. His work engages not only trauma, but also narratives of identities, including his performance piece that involved his submersion in sugar to explore the societal challenges related to sexuality. Sheldon Scott opens wounds, exposes pain, and challenges his own truth in ways that are uncomfortable and jarring. The basis for much of this truth is his upbringing in a tourist enclave of the Gullah coast where his queerness and cultural background were not widely accepted.

Bee and Scott's frameworks for healing represent a tradition grounded with an attention to

spiritual practice and familial ties that continue to sustain them as artists and as people making sense of the world around them. They contribute to representations that expand Gullah identity beyond the images of Doyle and Green, exploring provocative ideas that aim not to isolate, but to connect Gullah existence to broader dialogues. Bee and Scott's art practices are presented beyond the coastal region that they reference in their lives and work. Both artists are part of a new diasporic movement that is decidedly Gullah in identity and practice, but that also engages more global linkages and conversations. (This becomes evident, for instance, in Bee's work in South America to investigate the connections between Gullah spirituality and other African diasporic spiritual practices.) Scott and Bee respect and honor Green as a pioneer, but are far from being his disciples. Their chosen media and subject matter is a far cry from Green's work.

This isn't true, however, for all contemporary practicing Gullah artists. Artists like Cassandra Gillens, Amiri Farris, and Saundra Renee Smith are a little older than Bee and Scott, and create work that is noticeably influenced by Green. They embrace a similar exploration of history and place, and Gillens and Smith share Green's cubist inspired style. Green is a champion for younger artists, and is actively engaged in supporting the next generation of Gullah artists like Charleston based artist Fletcher Williams III, whom he suggests is the future of Gullah art. Williams, a North Charleston resident and Cooper Union graduate, offers a bridge from the work of Green to the artistic practice of Bee and Scott. He is a multi-media artist who draws upon many of the historic tropes as Green, however he also explores topics such as the death of Walter Scott.

Bee and Scott embrace the fullness of what the Gullah experience has been presented to be through art. They embody the comfort of tradition and the hope of futurity. They share these traits with Williams and other emerging artists, however their practice and performance expand the genre of art by Gullah descendants in powerful ways. They depart from the common tropes of landscapes and history to explore trauma, sexuality, and violence. My focus on Bee and Scott expands the genre

to embrace the enduring question of the Gullah future. They each approach this question by offering solutions rooted in inclusivity, economic empowerment, and approaches to self-care.

My great-grandmother died in 1990, a year before Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* reminded the world of my great-grandmother's beauty and before the international strides of Penn Center fostered bonds with my great-grandmother's spiritual relatives in Sierra Leone. She did not live to see *Gullah Gullah Island* on Nickelodeon, or to encounter an emerging generation of artists, scholars, and folklorists who are re-envisioning the portrait of Gullah people in the 21st century by complicating the culture's aesthetic beyond stereotypical representations. I opened with a description of my great-grandmother's photographs and my memories of her walls of family pictures. When I imagine her living room today, I see MLK, JFK, and possibly a black Jesus, alongside President Obama and her girl Michelle. I see the familiar Jonathan Greene calendar that adorns many Lowcountry walls as a symbol of the Gullah aesthetic lineage and solidarity. I see family portraits flanked by expanded notions of Gullah portraiture that remind her and visitors to her home of the agency in creating our own narratives.

CONCLUSION

*When the warfare is all over in glory,
Give us a home somewhere in your kingdom
Where we can praise thee in a better world.
Tis your servant's prayer, Amen.*

The End of an Era

“Are you driving? If you are, please pull over;” my mother suggested over the phone. I hesitated, but followed her recommendation as my heart dropped in anticipation of the words that would follow her pointed yet impassioned request. The inflection in her voice had become far too familiar. Her inflection had the same tone that I heard from her after 9/11, after Rev. Pinkney’s death, and after the passing of loved ones over the years. It was a guarded tone that protected her emotions, while allowing her to be present to my own. We speak every day, so I was well aware of the various tones that would indicate the nature of the conversation that would follow. Inflection is a key feature of the Gullah dialect, which has been sustained through the oral tradition of storytelling—it can instantaneously shift the meaning of a word or phrase. There was the inflection for conversations related to holiday planning; the inflection that suggested an elder in the community had asked about me (which was code for “give them a call”); or the inflection that marked moments of pure joy (like my mother’s account of meeting President Obama for the first time). At that moment, the inflection she used marked something different than the focus of planning, the concern of elders seeking to hear from me, or the joy of meeting a hero. In that moment, I knew by her inflection to be prepared to hear something serious and all too familiar. She was preparing me to cross a threshold of grief and maybe even trauma.

“Your grandfather said he will see you on the other side,” she solemnly shared.

My world stopped at the utterance of those eleven words. In my mind, I had prepared myself for the moment, yet I had not prepared myself for the range of emotions that would accompany the news of my grandfather's death. He was more than a grandfather in the traditional sense; he was like a father figure, as it was with many Gullah families, where the extended family takes on integral roles in the lives of children. As my mother's words sunk in, my heart sank into depths where mere reasoning proved ineffective. I felt like I had lost my childhood best friend, my spiritual father, my artistic and scholarly muse, my greatest champion and living role model. At the same time, my community had lost a living library. I felt like that which was lost was indeed gone forever.

My maternal grandfather, Deacon Benjamin Smalls Sr., was born on April 17, 1938, on Coosaw Island in Beaufort, South Carolina. He died on February 2, 2018. He was a deacon at Friendship Baptist Church, the only church remaining on the island, and was employed for most of his life as a carpenter. His last official post was at a company specializing in the preservation of antebellum homes located in our town's historic district. It was not lost on me that he worked on many homes where he would have likely been enslaved in previous generations. He took pride in his work, and I took pride in the respect his colleagues had for his expertise and profound grace and class. In addition to doing carpentry, he spent a great deal of time in the river, a site of leisure where many island residents captured fish, shrimp, crab, sharks, and scallops that would become shrimp and grits, fried whiting, or the ingredients that would enliven many a lowcountry boil. Both of my grandfathers passed this passion down to me. Years ago he told me, "I raised my family from the river," a statement affirming his dependence on the waterways for travel, sustenance, and economic gain. He, like many of his contemporaries sold seafood, and supplied his family and community with the bounty from strategically placed crab traps and boating excursions. These excursions included

travel along the waterways to “Jenkins” or Eddings Point, where he courted his future wife, my grandmother, Mrs. Annie Ruth Smalls, whom he married and had six children with.

He sent five out of his six children to college, despite only having a third-grade education himself. Education was very important to him. He saw it as a tool that would allow his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to take advantage of many of the opportunities that he did not have access to. It is because of this belief that he worked vigorously to support us in our pursuits, expending any resource toward our tangled aims that he could only imagine for himself. His formal education was cut short when the death of his own father prompted a need for him to contribute to his childhood household. In its stead, his education came from the church, where the liturgy provided a framework for engaging the world around him, and from the wisdom of his community elders that he passed on to us. He leaves behind a legacy of family, faith, and artistry—the three pillars that ground my dissertation. My graduate studies facilitated many uninterrupted hours of conversation with him about life, his experiences, and his deep pride in my research, my accomplishments, and the man whom I was becoming. It was during these uninterrupted hours that I gained inspiration for this project and the focus and endurance to see it through to completion.

“Daddy Ben,” as we called him, was a father figure to our family and also to many of the youth on our island. He took pride in listening, offering wisdom, and providing for others. He often sent me on missions around the island to drop off seafood to various families, a practice that affirms the interconnectedness of community. His faith persisted beyond the confines of the four walls of the church. He lived by a moral code that guided his actions, and sought solace in the serenity of the outdoors, where he sang, prayed, and talked to God. He passed down a strict standard of engagement with the spirit world that was pragmatic and unwavering.

We learned the power of herbalism through the sacred teas that he prepared, and the art of stillness through his guidance in attending to nature. We learned the importance of hospitality too.

As one of his oldest friends, Mr. Green (from Red Top, South Carolina), recalled at Daddy Ben's funeral, "Ben and Annie treated their friends like family and made sure that you felt like their home was your own." We learned how to sing many of the spirituals that elders had taught him, as portals of understanding that quelled the anxieties of the world. We learned about the importance of commitment and generosity through his annual "Deacon's Contest" campaign that raised thousands of dollars for the church. Finally, we learned how to communicate through the practice of prayer, a gift that he was known for. He was often invited to offer prayer during worship at our family church and during Penn Center's annual Old School Prayer service held during the annual Heritage Days Celebration. He shared this gift with me for my exhibition on Gullah arts, a first for a man less interested in artistry's presentation than the inherent communion with God found through its production. He blessed me with the following words:

Father in Heaven, this hour, our Lord, we come thanking you, Jesus, for this day, Lord. We thank you, Father, you've been so good to us all. You've been better to us than we've been to ourselves, Lord. We come this hour to say, "thank you Jesus for one more day." Lord, a lovely day that we have never seen before. Father Lord, this hour, Jesus, we thank you, Lord, because you were so good to us, you brought us from many unseen days unto this present hour. Father, at this hour, we can say, "thank you, Lord." Lord, we just thank you for everything you're doing for us. Father, His goodness and your mercy should come upon us, strengthen us where we are weak and build us up where we are torn down, prop us up on every leaning side, and Father, when the warfare is all over in glory, give us a home somewhere in Your kingdom where we can praise Thee in a better world. 'Tis your servant's prayer, Amen.

With every word of this extemporaneous prayer, he tapped into a theology-infused theoretical framework of his own identity. The gratitude. The humility and dependence, yet aspirational nature of glory. I could write an entire dissertation on his prayers and theology, but will succinctly say that the yearning for home in a "better world" was a theme that offered him the will to engage each new day with joy as a choice, and with a challenge to the circumstances that told him joy should not be an option. He fashioned this joy through worship and artistic expression. His artistry, which included but wasn't limited to prayer, bridged former generations with our own. He was an

unmatched craftsman who made walking sticks, benches, and desks out of found and treated wood. Every object was a labor of love carved with the sweat equity of the joy he found in the practice and in the immeasurable gift of giving.

The gift that my grandfathers and countless others gave me was a framework for the “doing” of life. They taught us through their sacrifice about perseverance and the centrality of having pride in our shared identity. Though they never used the words “Gullah” or “Geechee,” they lived lives that reflected a deep understanding and appreciation for the rituals (such as seeking) and sacred meanings that sustained our community. Their only hope was that we, as the future, would honor their lessons and live lives that serviced where we came from.

Daddy Ben bookends my project in a profound manner. As I wrestled with the depth of grief prompted by their recent passing, it occurred to me that I was feeling the very emotions that I encountered when I penned the opening words of this dissertation. After the Charleston shooting, I found myself wrestling with a range of thoughts that initially rendered me emotionally paralyzed by the trauma of the moment, and later by the irreplaceable loss of life. I questioned how to best proceed with research that would force me to encounter many of the painful memories that I preferred to push aside. To my surprise, the research and writing process proved a therapeutic space to explore and process many of the lingering questions that I had hoped to avoid. I discovered a point of intersection by reckoning with what the loss of Daddy Ben indicated about the future of Gullah culture, a culture that they each so eloquently and unknowingly shaped for me and countless others. Solace came through the gift of productivity, and the hope that through the work I would find greater meaning in the aftermath of their deaths and the tragedy in Charleston.

Mourning Gullah and the Weight of Black Death

Daddy Ben was ever present in the aftermath of the shooting at Mother Emanuel when I sought the wisdom of his generation, a generation who had more consistent experiences with

racialized violence. As video and photographic documentation of police brutality and assaults became more prolific, they prayed for our generation. With so much uncertainty about how to respond, their answers rested in what they knew about the centrality of faith. In many ways, I heard their voices as I explored the role of Gullah spiritual practice as a mechanism that they and many others used to make meaning of the world around us. They used prayer and forgiveness as tools of comfort when tragedy hit; they also used them to subvert power in order to form barriers of protection and radical resistance that paved a way for the future. Daddy's Ben's prayer, for instance, held many coded messages that our community understood, messages communicated not only through words, but also through the inflection of his voice. The solemn prayer of a Baptist deacon was thus also a rallying cry to those who understood the depth of the moment. Gullah spirituality, through this act and the hope of futurity, was a mechanism of agency. The Gullah language, spiritual practices, and uniquely crafted traditions resisted the norms of society that purported to know my grandfather; in so doing, they invited us to reframe the Charleston shooting through a spiritual frame that should not be taken only at face value.

Daddy Ben affirms the centrality of family to Gullah people, as discussed in Chapter Three. They were not only baptized in the Gullah tradition that privileged the ritual of seeking, but they also served as Water Mother and Water Father to those who came behind them. The rite of passage sustained Gullah familial ties for their generations and offered the framework for fictive kinship that continues to shape communal bonds through godparenting and networks in the greater Gullah diaspora.

Finally, my exploration of art production and representation called me to consider how my aunt and grandfather's generations wrestled with their own Gullah identity. What were the aesthetic influences that shaped their attitudes toward their standards of value and beauty, and what role did they each play in the production of a complex Gullah narrative? Gullah crafts, and the work of

contemporary artists who shift and expand Gullah identity to embrace artistic expression as pathways to greater meaning respond to these questions through their work. I was interested in exploring the origins of the Gullah image in popular culture as well as contemporary responses to these crafted images. My goal was to develop a survey that could offer a framework for future historical and cultural analysis.

Looking back at the journey that has brought me to this moment of conclusion, it is apparent that much of this project has been about processing death: processing the death of the nine church and community members who died on June 15, 2015, at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina; processing the death of countless individuals who died since the beginning of this journey at the hands of gun violence and police brutality; processing the long predicted slow death of my own community's cultural identity. Daddy Ben represents this grief in a very tangible way. The impact of the "tone of voice" I heard from my mother as she delivered the news of my grandfather's passing was the same tone I felt when I read of Gullah's impending extinction in *USA Today* during my freshman year of college, and the omission of Gullah in discussions regarding the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. In both instances Gullah was not dead to me, despite what the media reported (or in the case of the Charleston shooting neglected to report). My community and family are indeed evolving, but are not dead. The purported death of Gullah, became a path of inquiry that allowed me to constructively process much of what was happening in my community, the life of my family, and the greater world.

This path of scholarly inquiry started with that *USA Today* article that my father sent to me in the early 2000s. Since that front page headline that listed Gullah as the only trace of humanity among a host of "natural landmarks," several other pieces have been published that sound a similar alarm (e.g., *Slate Magazine's* "A Unique African-American Culture, Hundreds of Years Old, That Could Go Extinct" [Teicher 2014]). The *Slate* headline sparked a cycle of mourning that has

persisted as I considered what it means to potentially lose a culture that has meant the world to me and everyone whom I loved. I realized that I was grieving something based on outsiders' perceptions of erasure and not my own. I began to process what the shifts in our cultural identity really meant to me. I have learned that part of embracing loss is acknowledging how death and trauma have long defined the African-American experience in America.

"Black Death," is an important consideration that foregrounds my own thinking about the metanarrative of death that has influenced so much of this project and the opportunities for future inquiry. When Paul Gilroy cites Orlando Patterson's theory of social death, he underscores the value of seeing the consciousness of the enslaved as involving an extended act of mourning (Gilroy 1993, 63).⁸⁹ Enslaved Africans were separated from family members, were forced into a system of servitude that cut all tangible ties to their cultural identity, and had to engage the trauma of violence and familial separation as a way of life. The institution of slavery has had a lasting impact on the African American community, leaving the legacy of death in the middle passage, of senseless deaths and racial violence during the period of enslavement, and of deaths related to the institution's dehumanizing ideologies, which led to such atrocities as lynchings and race riots after emancipation (Wells-Barnett 2014, 34). Gilroy suggests that the quotidian nature of trauma-induced grief in African American communities, the sheer constancy of mourning, gave rise to a particular kind of emotional dexterity.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Author Toni Morrison dedicates her book *Beloved* to "sixty million and more," a figure that she confirms is "the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery, those who died as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (Clemons 1987, 75).

⁹⁰ Playwright Diane Exavier engages the ideas of death and mourning in many of her plays, and shared the following in response to the idea of Gullah death: "I think there is a difference between grief and mourning. I think grief looks inward and is highly subjective—it's a really personal thing. Grief is that silence, the tears, the small and strange things that get us to cope. And there's nothing wrong with that AT ALL. I think mourning looks outward and in that way is objective; mourning is usually about the labor tied to loss—the affairs one must get in order, the calls, the arrangements. . . . To be black in America often feels like we are constantly mourning, having skipped the grief. We're always at work (Exavier 2018).

Death can also be a tool of agency, as my discussion of Ibo Landing suggests, and as Gilroy argues when citing Frederick Douglass's physical struggle with his slave master Covey. Gilroy identifies this as a pivotal moment in Douglass's consciousness, when he honorably embraced death as an outcome: "Douglass's preference for death fits readily with archival material on the practice of slave suicide and needs also to be seen alongside the representations of death as agency that can be found in early African-American fiction" (Gilroy 1993, 63). For individuals who were bound physically, the liberation of the spirit through death became a form of agency. This also emerges as a central theme in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who had escaped from a Kentucky plantation only to be captured in Ohio, kills her daughter to prevent her from living a life of enslavement (Hine 2013, xi). Both Douglass and Garner exhibit a fearlessness that challenges the power of death. The inherent agency in reclaiming and reinterpreting notions of physical or social death aligns with the "Flying Africans" theme explored in chapter two of my dissertation, in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, as well as in the work of Gullah writer Cornelia Bailey, of Sapelo Island.⁹¹ Cornelia Bailey explores this hallmark of the Gullah oral tradition in her memoir *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man* (2000). Bailey cites her uncle Shed Hall's assertion that, "before he [the overseer] could get to them, they rise up in the air and fly away. They fly right back to Africa" (Bailey 2000, 319). Bailey sustained this narrative and affirmed her belief in flight: "You may not know this but the Africans who came to the Sea Islands believed in flying. They actually *believed* in it. . . . We had song after song about flying, songs like 'I'll Fly Away' and the one we sang at church that had the verse, 'When I get to heaven, gonna put on my wings, gonna fly all over God's Heaven'" (Bailey 2000, 319).⁹²

⁹¹ Religious Studies scholar Timothy Powell's essay "Summoning the Ancestors: The Flying Africans' Story and Its Enduring Legacy" explores the crossed perceptions of suicide vs. flight (Powell 2010, 271).

⁹² Macon "Milkman" Dead is the protagonist in the novel *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison. He is a thirty-one year old African American male who is described as a drifter who is spiritually dead. He sets out to find his financial inheritance,

Morrison and Bailey challenge us to reconsider the narrative of death in the Gullah context. The state of mourning mentioned by Gilroy is in response to the systematic injustice and violence that has been a consistent part of the African American experience. Yet in spite of this constant mourning, death—at least when viewed through the lens of Gullah identity presented by Bailey—becomes a form of agency where “flight” is an option. Flight broaches an Afro-futurist notion of transcendence and agency that ancestors believed in, and that continues to inform the spiritual context of the community. At its core, it also suggests the Christian belief that death is not an end in itself, but a beginning to the afterlife or as Gullah people affirm the reunion with loved ones. For my community, this reunion is immediate and persists through the engagement that LaRhonda Manigault Bryant explores in *Talking to the Dead* (2014). “Flight” in this context is a subtle transition into the venerated space of a collective of elders who offer counsel, presence, and eternal engagement. Death loses its power through such a frame, and becomes a new beginning. The basis of this ideal offers a psychological framework for coping with the trauma of violence, in that whatever harm or brutality that was experienced on earth was merely a short-term trial that would someday lead to eternal glory. Such a mentality offers a sense of calm, a calm informed by ancestral ritual and the awareness that Bailey honors. This is also the calm that Religious Studies scholar Timothy Powell suggests rests not in historical validation, but rather in the power of the narrative that a community summoned to ensure that future and present generations are empowered (Powell

which leads to a spiritual journey that uncovers a different kind of inheritance, rooted in his familial legacy and ancestral pride. The novel follows Milkman’s reclamation of his ancestral story, and binds his familial past and future. *Song of Solomon* ends with Milkman “leaping.” Toni Morrison’s use of the “Flying African” motif can be grounded in Gullah history. Morrison engages the realm of ancestral power to honor what Religious Studies scholar Timothy Powell categorizes as the curative powers of the Flying Africans’ story when imbued with the spirit of the ancestors (Powell 2010, 273). The very premise of *Song of Solomon* is death, inherent in the last name “Dead,” Milkman’s soulless existence, and the systematic and psychic burdens of the African American experience during the Jim Crow era explored throughout the novel. Life and liberation emerge when Milkman embraces the power and agency of his ancestral lineage: “In the novel’s closing pages, Morrison revisits the theme of suicide/flight, although she inverts the dynamic such that when Milkman leaps into a gulch it does not constitute an act of suicide, but the fulfillment of a prophetic promise—‘now he knew what [his ancestors] knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it’” (Powell 2010, 273). Morrison’s narrative extends from the account of Flying Africans in the Sea Islands, which has been widely used in the African American literary canon.

2010, 276). To leap or fly is to surrender, knowing that in the end you will indeed, as Bailey suggests, “Fly Away.”

Fashioning Hope

The basis of my research project is the empowerment that Powell suggests derives from the retelling and living into the spiritual understandings of ancestors. The journey of mourning has brought me to a greater understanding of our collective agency to re-imagine a Gullah future that builds upon undesirable circumstances in order to claim empowerment and fashion hope. Hope takes work, and does not appear by happenstance or simplistically; rather, it is a decisive choice that has to be made each day. The centrality of this choice emerged in two interesting ways for me. The first came at my grandfather’s funeral. My uncle, who bears a striking resemblance to my grandfather, offered a solo. The song, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” was one of my grandfather’s favorites. As he sang, with every verse it became clear that he was not only singing away his own grief, but he was also making a decisive decision to fashion hope:

I want Jesus to walk with me;

I want Jesus to walk with me;

all along my pilgrim journey,

Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.

This hope was a decision that reflected the ways that my grandfather engaged the song near the river, in the yard, in front of the congregation, and at the kitchen table. The phrase: “I want Jesus to walk with me was” was a desire, a partitioning that reflected Daddy Ben’s faith as well as his view of Jesus. Jesus was not a distant or dead historical figure, he was a friend, brother and spirit who “walked with” my grandfather. My grandfather felt his presence in the fields as a child, in the river as he worked to provide for his family, and in the most uncertain times. This inherent desire becomes a hope for companionship and protection “all along” the “pilgrim journey” of life. Daddy Ben sang

his burdens away, flying to a stratosphere that allowed him to spiritually commune with his ancestors who sang the same song in different generations. As my uncle sang, the pace quickened, a piano joined in, worshippers stood to their feet, and a community joined to embrace hope as a response to deep loss and despair.

A second song was offered during the funeral by my grandparents' god-daughter, Mrs. Edna Singleton. She is of my parents' generation and has the poise and vocal ability of a Grammy Award-winning artist. She approached the front of the church singing "I Will Trust in the Lord," a song that my grandfather had taught her, and after sharing brief reflections, grounded in how she remains the most cared for goddaughter on the island, offered a moving rendition of "Peace in the Valley," another song she prepared. Miss Edna, as we call her, has been ministering to the community through music since the tragic death of her son Titus Singleton, also my grandparents' godson, who was a victim of racial violence. Titus was found in a car that was burned and abandoned—and that was later traced to a white couple who lived in their neighborhood. The community rallied around Miss Edna and her family—who are our family—as grief and the aftermath of the violent act presented more questions about humanity than answers.

I remember seeing her months after the tragedy on Mother's Day. She arrived at church wearing a beautiful spring-colored suit, smiling, and offered a song. Her presence was rooted in her deep faith, reflecting the same understanding that I saw in the prayer circle and the forgiveness I saw in the aftermath of the Charleston shooting. There was a choice to fashion hope, to engage in an ancestral conjuring of communal understanding about the impermanence of death, and a consideration of how "doing" the work of life toward greater justice can offer comfort. This "doing" is what I hope that each chapter of this dissertation has highlighted, as each represents my creative processing of how Gullah's cultural identity fashions hope through intentional spiritual, community building, and artistic representation. In essence, we were all taught about the power of

flight as a coping mechanism, ancestral connection, sacred space of intentional joy to quell the pain, and approach to meaning making on our own terms. We use this belief to transcend each day as an act of fashioning hope.

Fashioning Hope

This research project is grounded in documenting the ways that Gullah people fashion hope. This process has taken shape in tangible two ways: 1) oral histories from Gullah people about migration, their seeking process and godparenting; and 2) a survey of Gullah arts in the twenty-first century. Both subsets of my project have the mutual aim of documenting Gullah culture for future generations, as well as providing additional data for future research interested in the Gullah community.

The arts survey will evolve into a travelling exhibition with an accompanying catalogue framed by scholarly essays focused on the ways that Gullah identity is expressed through the arts. My exhibition is a visual compliment to my research. The project presents a contemporary view of Gullah people through my own photography, the multi-platform pieces of millennial artists, and artworks that rework traditional Gullah/Geechee tropes. The Gullah aesthetic is central to the vitality of the culture in the twenty-first century. Gullah/Geechee artists promote inward esteem among natives, and foster an outward portrait for the world of a community sustained by creativity and resilience. The framing of this exhibit is critical to expanding the very ideals of Gullah/Geechee life that the artists aim to affirm.

Another important pillar of my dissertation project is the notion of Gullah futurity through a lens of Black radical traditions. Thus far, my research has complicated the contemporary narrative of Gullah/Geechee people by using the watershed moment of the Charleston shooting to investigate how the contextualized pillars of Gullah cultural identity offer readings of the tragedy that renew

Gullah/Geechee agency, despite the claims of docility that accompanied the forgiveness and prayer as immediate acts by members of Mother Emmanuel AME's congregation.

The question of a Gullah/Geechee future is an important area of inquiry. How is Gullah/Geechee culture sustained in the Gullah/Geechee corridor and in the larger diaspora, despite the detrimental impact of environmental and economic shifts? The next step for my project includes a greater exploration of Black Liberation and approaches to Futurity found particularly in Afrofuturist thought. Afrofuturism exists at the intersection of imagination, technology, liberation, and the future. It is a mechanism to imagine possible futures through a black cultural lens (Womack 2013, 9). Viewing Gullah culture through this lens becomes the antithesis of Afro Pessimism, Fred Moten's expression of exhaustion, which offers a theoretical reason not to believe (Moten 2013, 737). Instead, Afrofuturism embraces the possibility of aesthetically-driven, speculative artistic expression that—through literary, visual, musical, and intellectual endeavors—intersects with race, space, time and technology to do the work of post-soul cultural production (Heath 2016, 172). The technological advances of coastal rice plantations, coupled with the spiritual, artistic, and quotidian practices of Gullah/Geechee people, speak to the imaginative agency of cultural identity.

A Final Word: Inspirations and my Journey as an Americanist at UNC

I close by considering the beginning of my journey as an Americanist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* inspired my first dissertation idea. The piece described the efforts of the settlers of the Plymouth colony be a model society built upon the ideals of the Reformation. Led by Winthrop, they worked collaboratively to bring forth a vision that they believed was planted by God, to cultivate themselves as examples who would someday live in a city on a hill. Despite their best efforts, this vision was tainted by various factors that corrupted the idyllic vision of what life would be like in the new world. Miller used his scholarship on the Puritans and their era to subliminally expound upon contemporary ideas and

quandaries. I was fascinated by the idea of embarking on an “errand” that does not come to fruition as intended. I considered the power of revisiting Miller’s narrative, and wondered how investigating his approach might offer insight into the ideals that grounded American exceptionalism.

As this conclusion has recounted, this vision shifted after a series of events. Among the experiences that inspired my new course of scholarship was viewing the play *Hamilton*, and visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*. As provocative and entertaining as *Hamilton* was, I was most compelled by the power of storytelling in a creative manner. The hard work and dedication of Lin Manuel Miranda’s creative team set a standard I hoped to apply to my own work. It also became a standard for how my work might be conveyed in a way that connects to a myriad of audiences. The singular theme of *Hamilton* is summed up in one of the final songs, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story.” I had always perceived founding father Alexander Hamilton as one of the least relevant historical figures in American history, yet with the success of the play, he found greater popularity and relevance.

Miranda was inspired enough by *Hamilton*’s story and his era of history to propel his narrative into a contemporary frame, a true example of agency given to those who frame historical and cultural narratives. I considered the opportunity I had to reframe the narrative of Gullah people in America. I grew up often feeling like I was caught in a museum exhibit, living in a region sustained by the tourist industry and the conception of a culture defined in large part by its relationship to the period of slavery. The opportunity to speak from the vantage point of someone who was intimately shaped by, and who fully embraced, Gullah identity became increasingly important, particularly given the dominant voices of non-natives who have published work on the Gullah experience. I was interested in contributing to the discourse from my unique scholarly perspective.

The exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* inspired me to consider the impact of the outsider gaze on Gullah people, and how a similar framework could be used for my research. The exhibit *was* a visual masterpiece showcasing the influence of Asian culture on design in America and abroad. The opening text addressed the often racialized influence of the Western gaze on Asia, and the ways that Asian designers and cultural arbiters worked to offer more realistic representations of their culture. The show was captivating and thought-provoking. The Western gaze cast upon Asian culture reminded me of the gaze cast upon Gullah people, which in turn challenged me to consider the implications of that gaze on my own perception of my Gullah identity.

My journey became one of significance to me and my many collaborators and consultants. It wasn't quite the errand that Miller so eloquently depicted, but it carried similar spiritual weight. The project honors my forebears, men and women who were often misunderstood for the ways that they made sense of the world around them. Their rightful place in the American narrative has not been fully celebrated (like Hamilton's), particularly within dominant portrayals of Southern culture and identity. Gullah people are Southern, American, and proudly integral to what many consider the foundation of African American culture.

Some of the most striking moments of this entire project happened when I was interviewing my parents. It was during our conversation that I realized that they were a bridge between my generation and my grandparents' generation. Their generation was the first to enjoy the experiences of going away to college, moving from barrier islands to the mainland, and, in many respects, embracing what assimilation looked like professionally and otherwise. They remained engaged, involved, and present to their parents and the values they fought to pass on to me and my sister's generation; at the same time, they in many ways acknowledged that things would never be as they were. It is a tension my community wrestles with, as many American communities do. My parents and grandparents hope for "things never being the same," as a reflection of advancement. For them,

this advancement would be grounded in the both/and of progress and the continuation of Gullah traditions and values.

The Charleston Shooting hit me like a ton of bricks. The grief of the moment was hard to shake, so the project became a way to process my feelings while also exploring the under-appreciated role of cultural identity in the moment. The greater narrative of the Black Lives Matter movement and our country's ongoing conversation around violence became a meta narrative. The movement underscored a disparity of value when it came to black life. It also underscored the consistent criminalization of blackness dating back to the black codes that followed the era of Reconstruction. The organizing related to the Black Lives Matter movement, on the grassroots and national levels, reflected the angst of a spectrum of Americans. Artistic endeavors were central to this moment in sometimes unexpected ways. The message of self-care (#blackboyjoy #blackgirlmagic), breaking down tropes of toxic masculinities and celebrating the overall beauty of difference, has emerged as inward-focused campaigns that reaffirm the personhood of the oppressed. There is an important cultural moment afoot, that I am engaged in, that refreshes dated perceptions of Gullah people by reframing Gullah identity through an activist lens. What happens when Gullah becomes radicalized, a tool for agency and empowerment? What happens when art becomes a place to grieve and craft mirror images, and when family becomes a fortress of protection? During my final visit with my grandfather we prayed, we sang, and we sat in silence. In many ways, we explored the aforementioned questions in silence. He was a living testament to agency and the power of representational justice. Looking back on our visit, the words of his prayer take new meaning, "*When the warfare is all over in glory, Give us a home somewhere in your kingdom. Where we can praise thee in a better world.*" He recently embraced that world, and as LaRhonda Manigault Bryant and my mother suggest, he became a conversation partner in a journey that in many ways is just the

beginning of that which we imagined together as we continue to fashion a hope for a better world-
Amen.

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