

OOMAN'S WUK: GULLAH WOMANISM IN THE CREATIVE WORKS OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

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**ABSTRACT**

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Ooman's Wuk: Gullah Womanism in the Creative Works of African American Women

Dissertation directed by Associate Professor Adam F. Bradley

“Ooman's Wuk: Gullah Womanism in the Creative Works of African American Women” investigates Gullah history and culture as a usable past for modern African American female artists. This project explores the history of rice production and the vital but under-discussed role of women that led to the African retentions still at work on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. By exploring the often disavowed female roles, this dissertation argues that once acknowledged, the Gullah woman's role as ‘keepa a da kulca’ formulates a Gullah womanism or a form of cultural and community activism that is found in the daily lives of the female descendants of Africans living on the Sea Islands. I argue that the novels of Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall as well as Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* reveal the ways in which African American women utilize Gullah cultural practices, folklore, and language and through their creative productions reshape and extend women-centered discourses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am eternally grateful to the women who have become life-sustaining friends over the many years it took to get to this place. My sisters from other misters, Shawnette Lee and Andrea Schliessman, thank you for being "as close as ten toes in a sock" and for giving me a lifetime of wonderful memories. Saying "thank you" is not enough to Professor Jacquelyn Benton. It was your teaching that introducing me to Gullah. The trips we have taken and the conversations we have had over the last fifteen years inspire my work. Your presence in my life has shown me how to be a scholar, an educator, and a lady all at the same time. Completing this journey would not have been possible without my fellow grad student, Jessica Bornstein who toughed it out with me, juggled school, teaching, and family with me, and without our lunch dates, I don't think I would have survived. Thank you, ladies for being there for me – anytime, anywhere.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my children, Matthew, Gregory, and Lauren, I hope this shows you if you really want something, just go and get it - no matter how long it takes. To my husband, Mike, who for over twenty years has never been too far ahead or too far behind but always walked side-by-side with me on this journey. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. You are the great love of my life.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHO DAT GULLAH?

Prior to 2003, I had no knowledge of Gullah. I did not know the annual trips my uncle took to Hilton Head, South Carolina brought him to a Sea Island that once was home to many Gullah people; he went there to golf with his buddies. I never knew that slaves and their descendants held on to their African traditions just a few states away from my home in Pennsylvania. I became aware of Gullah when I was taking a course on Black Women Writers with Professor Jacquelyn Benton at Metropolitan State College of Denver. In her course we read Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. The foundational folktale in the novel is the story of Ibo Landing. Ibo Landing is the tale of a group of Ibos, who once they reached America and saw what enslavement would truly be, rebelled, and walked back to Africa. This story was told to the protagonist, Avey Johnson by her Great-Aunt Cuney every summer when Avey visited Tatem – a fictional island intended to represent one of the Sea Islands. Like Avey, who asks Aunt Cuney if the Ibos *really* walked on water back to Africa, I was unconvinced that there was any truth to the tale when I first read it. Perhaps the tale of Ibo Landing was just a “literary device” Marshall utilized to emphasize the “larger stakes” of her novel. The phrases “larger stakes” and “literary device” had become part of the growing academic vocabulary I was building through my English courses at Metro and I could rationalize the fictional nature of this tale through these terms. Before I read the tale of the Ibos, I assumed folklore was just a made up story intended to convey some moral; I thought of folklore as I once thought of fairy tales or Aesop's fables.

Like Avey, I silently questioned the authenticity of the folktale. In the novel, Aunt Cuney tells Avey when she questions the tale, “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you?” (40), which silences Avey because she did believe that narrative. I too was brought up to believe that Jesus walked on water through years of Presbyterian Sunday School. I believed all the stories about Jesus, so why couldn't I believe my African ancestors refused enslavement, left, and walked – on water - back to Africa? When I tossed the vocabulary aside and re-read the story as non-fiction, I saw a different type of strength in Aunt Cuney's

voice. Through the way Marshall constructed the tale, I could hear Aunt Cuney telling the story with pride and conviction. By the time I finished the novel, like Avey, I too completely believed the folktale of Ibo Landing.

After reading that single story, I was fascinated with Gullah, but I was angry as well. How could I not know about Gullah? How did I not know about a culture that kept African traditions alive? Where were the Gullah in my high school history books or in the African American history course I took at Rochester Institute of Technology in 1990? Why did I have to go back to school to learn this? What if I hadn't gone back - would I have ever have known about this vital piece of my African American history? My anger changed to action as Professor Benton told us about the history of the Gullah people. She told us stories of her trips to many different Sea Islands and of the Penn Center on St. Helena Island. She spoke of the Penn Center grounds as a space where the history of our ancestors can be felt in the air, the buildings, the trees, and I knew I needed to go there to see the land where these stories were set – to make the stories real. In 2005, I was able to go with Professor Benton along with a group of Metro students and Denver community members to the Penn Center and found out first-hand just how right she was about the land.



*Off the dock on St. Helena Island*

On our first day at the Penn Center, I walked down a path that led to a dock on the water, and sitting there alone, I felt something I can only describe as a connection that brought a sense of serenity I had never felt before. At age thirty-four, I felt like I had come home. While I do not know if my ancestors came from the Sea Islands or West Africa, sitting on that dock made me realize that I have a shared past with the Gullah; it's just something I feel.

My first trip to the Sea Islands was a journey I will never forget because once I tasted touched the land, tasted the foods, heard the language and met the people, I was, to use the Gullah language, “hook n’ line fa good onna de Gullah”. Not only did I feel emotionally transformed, but I knew also I had found culture in which to immerse myself, personally and academically. The Gullah believe that past is deeply

connected to the future. This project investigates the Gullah past because I know that my future will be guided by a continuing passion to learn and experience Gullah culture.

When I returned to college in 2002, I decided I was going to get a bachelor's degree, then masters and then a doctoral degree in literature with the intention of being a college professor. At the time it sounded so simple, but I did not have a clue as to what I was getting myself into. I did not know it would take the better part of fifteen years to complete this seemingly easy goal. And even though I still had little grasp on what getting these degrees really entailed, I knew Gullah was going to be a large part of my journey. Studying Gullah over the past fifteen years has created many opportunities and cherished memories. Since 2005, in my academic journey, I have designed my own Gullah course as a project for Professor Higashida's multicultural course that I hope to teach in the future, returned to the Penn Center for their two week intensive Gullah Studies Institute in July 2008, and was awarded an National Endowment for the Humanities Grant in 2010 to attend the summer program "African American History & Culture in the Georgia Lowcountry: Savannah & the Coastal Islands, 1750-1950". Gullah has also been a large part of my community activism: in 2007, I worked with Professor Benton and her non-profit organization, Johnson Legacy, Inc. to co-ordinate the first Gullah Studies Institute and in 2012, a much larger second Gullah Studies Institute that over three weeks brought artist Jonathan Green, sweetgrass basket weaver Henrietta Snype, storyteller Carolyn "Jabulile" White, and the McIntosh County Shouters to Denver.

As much as my academic research and opportunities inform this dissertation, so do my personal experiences and the many memories made on each trip to the Sea Islands makes me smile.



*With my friend, Wilson Moran and his mother, Mary Moran*

When I told Wilson Moran how I walked into an antique store near our hotel and left quickly when I saw Klan memorabilia, he said, "Oh, you went into Jimmy's place. Did you talk to him? You should talk to him. After dinner, I'll take you back there. You're gonna like Jimmy" (Moran).

I thought he was nuts. Wilson marched me right back to that store and told Jimmy “this little girl was scared a you! So I brought her back. Young lady,” - he always calls me that - “I’d like you to meet James Allen” (Moran). I knew that name immediately. Turns out the owner, Jimmy, was James Allen the author of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, a book I love that discusses lynching through its artifacts, such as photographs, cards, and stories. Mr. Allen gave me a copy of his book, signed it, and because of Wilson, extended quite the invitation: “Anytime you want to learn more about lynching, you have Wilson bring you on back” (Allen). I keep his business card on my wall because I do plan to take him up on his offer someday. Or the time he told me to “chew this” and laughed when, minutes later the root he gave me, called Life Everlasting, left my mouth numb for half an hour. Wilson sings Gullah spirituals with power and is quick with a story about his ancestors.

On my first trip to St. Helena, I walked on the beach with Professor Benton and my classmate and friend, LaShanta and I was amazed at how peaceful these two women looked. When I showed LaShanta the photograph I took of her on the beach a few weeks later, she said, “I think I found my home” (Smith). She did, moving to St. Helena a year later. She shared with me a poem that she wrote after our first trip to St. Helena; her words shape my views of Gullah and this project.

### ***Who Dat Gullah Be***

*Dat Gullah be sweet breeze transporting wisdom across the Atlantic.  
Hard cries of separation slice into the brick night air.  
Low hums, reaching, grasping, clenching onto survival.  
Dat Gullah be human gold.*

*Dat Geechee be sowin’ the seeds of yet to be born ancestors in this new place.  
Pounding, sifting. Bringing the Earth alive with a new rhythm.  
Now rain makes love to the land.  
Dat Geechee be womb.*

*Dat Gullah be the child of indigenous knowledge systems.  
Rebuilding the village, tying the rope, paving the road,  
preserving the old ways and setting the stage for the new.  
Dat Gullah be rebirth  
Dat Geechee be warriors in a battle made for them but not by them.  
Claiming Carolina, Georgia, and Florida with the prediction to testify.  
Sunset behind them, and with hope it continues to rise high in the sky  
Dat Geechee be mighty rock.*

*Dat Gullah be Africa in America wit tongue and all.  
Burial hymns, greetings, names and song still calling.  
Singing praises to crossroads that taught them well.  
Dat Gullah be resilient,*

*You ask who dat Gullah be?  
They be spirit bringers.  
Ring-shout invoking powers from Earth and Sky.  
They be natural healers.  
Root brewing away pesky threats to vitality.  
They be sweet like the making of grass baskets,  
Older than the eldest alive.  
They be tough like High John the Conqueror.  
Making death pass dem on by.*

*Dat Geechee be culture.  
Dat Gullah be connection.  
Dat Geechee be history.*

*They be the love that my ancestors sent here,  
for those days when I draw weary of this foreign  
land.*

*Dat Gullah be the bird flying me back home.*

Throughout my travels I have learned to listen and respect my elders in ways I knew but needed to relearn on the Sea Islands. In 2008, when I spent two weeks on St. Helena, Miss Ervena Faulkner drove me around the island on a Saturday afternoon, giving me what she called “a proper tour.”



*Praise House on St. Helena Island. The only praise house tourist can visit with tour guide “Rev” – Reverend Joseph Bryant.*



*Poet and dear friend, LaShanta Smith  
on the beach at Fripp Island*

We stopped at many places and she had stories for all of them, but when we pulled up to a dilapidated building in someone’s front yard, I wondered why we would stop here. She told me this was one of the four original praise houses on St. Helena, “although don’t nobody have the money to make it right, like that one out there on Coffin Point Road” (Faulkner).

I decided I was going to poke around, take some pictures, and started walking toward the building. I got a few steps away from her and was swiftly told, “Don’t you even think you goin’ in there. Not on my time you gonna get bit up by something. You better get back over here” (Faulkner). I do not think I had been told “no” like that since my grandmother passed away and my response was, of course, “yes, ma’am.”

The lesson learned that day - you are never too old to be told.



Gullah artist, Jonathan Green

Over the past fifteen years, I have experienced Gullah through reading texts and firsthand research, taking photographs, and writing down everything anyone said to me on my trips to the Sea Islands. Each of my experiences informs this project, but a conversation with artist Jonathan Green truly shaped my dissertation. In 2009, Jonathan and I drove an hour to attend church service in his home community of Gardens Corner when he said one thing that has stuck with me for years: “Rice. It’s great that you are here, but if you are going to study Gullah, you got to study rice” (Green). Taking Jonathan Green’s advice, “Ooman’s Wuk: Gullah Womanism in the Creative Works of African American Women” seeks to tell the tale of Gullah women through literature, culture, and rice.

## **DAT GULLAH BE: HISTORY**

The Gullah people are descendants of West Africans brought to the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida as early as 1670. The story of the Gullah is much like the story of all enslaved Africans; it is the story of forced labor. Their story, however, is also the narrative of West African ingenuity and cultural endurance. Over hundreds of years, the Gullah created a distinct culture on these islands, shaped largely by the “cash crop trinity” (Moran) of Sea Island cotton, indigo, and most importantly, “the crop that become the crown jewel in the crown colony of South Carolina” (Pollitzer 87)

- rice. Until slaves from West Africa were brought to the colonies, rice failed as a viable crop, although for many years planters professed it was their ability to direct slaves that created their agricultural and economic success.

A body of research by Peter Woods, David Doar, David Littlefield, and James Tuten successfully disputes these claims and demonstrates a clear connection between the success of rice in the Lowcountry and West Africa cultivation practices. Current scholarship reaffirms the link between West Africa and the Sea Islands through rice. Judith Carney states in *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* that, “the origin of Carolina rice cultivation is most likely African, the product of an indigenous knowledge system introduced by West African slaves familiar with the crop's cultivation. Among the colony's settlers, only slaves from the rice region of West Africa possessed a farming system that involved wetland cultivation” (Kindle Locations 1260-1263). Karen Bell’s research supports Carney’s finding, noting that the highest number of importation of slaves between 1755 and 1767 can be specifically traced to the rice growing areas of West Africa. She discovered that of the 3,318 slaves imported during these years into Savannah, 1,188 or 35 percent were from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gambia and the Windward Coast or what became known as “The Rice Coast” (“Rice, Resistance, and Forced Transatlantic Communities”).

Rice cultivation began on the Sea Islands during the colonial period, when Captain John Thurber brought seed to Dr. Henry Woodward from Madagascar in 1685, creating the first crops of “wet” rice on the South Carolina shores (Pollitzer). Both “wet” and “dry” rice, known as Carolina Gold and Carolina White Rice, respectively, became the foundation of the South Carolina economy. Just over 150 years later, the rice plantations on the Sea Islands were producing nearly 80,000 tons of rice per year (Pollitzer, Doar). According to historian William Politzer, over 120,000 Africans were imported into Charleston between 1716 and 1807. His collection of data from a variety of sources shows that the most active period for importation, with close to 70,000 Africans entering the southern United States occurred in what he calls “The Middle Period”, 1749-1787. This time period coincided with the demand for labor for rice and indigo cultivation (Politzer 124). The slaves who would become the Gullah people were brought to the

Sea Islands from West African areas such as Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast almost exclusively to cultivate rice. Recognizing the profitability of West African slaves, 61 percent of the slaves imported in the “Middle Period” came directly from Sierra Leon’s Bunce (Bance) Island (Pollitzer).

The cycle of rice production was labor intensive and essentially a year-round occupation on the Sea Islands. During the fall and early winter, slaves dug ditches, repaired levees, and began clearing the land for planting. Planting began in earnest in March and April as slaves dug small holes with hoes to drop in rice seeds then covering them with their feet. The fields were managed daily between April and July as slaves used levees and sluice gates to flood the fields, waded in knee-high water destroying insects, pulling weeds, and the difficult task of hoeing. By late August, the crop was ready for harvest. Slaves used hooks and hands to remove the rice from the stalks, tied and stacked the bundles for drying. Once dry, the slaves winnowed the rice by hand to remove the sheaths and processed the grains with a mortar and pestle. The crop was ready for market and shipment by early September.<sup>1</sup>

In West Africa, women were responsible for rice, from the cultivation of the rice seeds to the harvesting and processing of rice. This gendered delineation of rice production was transferred to the Sea Islands, where women were placed in charge of planting, winnowing, and cooking the rice on the plantation; however, by the mid-eighteenth century, rice became such a profitable endeavor the gendered division closed and both men and women performed tasks associated with rice on plantations. Slavery effectively dismantled the gendered West African division of labor in order to produce the enormous amount of sellable rice plantation owners required to keep pace with national and international demands.

Rice as a piece of the antebellum economy of the South is not discussed as frequently as typical cash crops associated with slavery such as cotton or tobacco, but, without rice the economies of South Carolina and Georgia would not have been so successful. Henry Laurens, one of the wealthiest rice

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<sup>1</sup> My overview of the process of rice production from David Doar’s *Rice and Rice Planting in the South Carolina Low Country* (1936); Peter Wood’s *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1974); Daniel Littlefield’s *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (1991); Judith Carney’s *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2002) James H. Tuten, *Lowcountry Time and Tide: The Fall of the South Carolina Rice Kingdom* (2010) and Daina R. Berry’s, *Swing the Sickle, For the Harvest is Ripe* (2010).

planters and slave dealers in the South Carolina Colony, worked closely with Richard Oswald to dispatch several ships per year in the 1700s to Bunce Island. His ships typically returned to Charlestown (Charleston) containing between 250-350 Africans for auction (Opala). At one point, just prior to the Revolutionary War, Laurens was so wealthy that he was able to send ships to Bunce Island to replenish slaves just on his plantations (Opala). Between the 1700s and the mid-1800s, the Heyward, Butler, Colcock-Jones, and Ball families rose to antebellum aristocracy on the backs of West Africans and their understanding of rice cultivation.<sup>2</sup> While I want to draw attention to rice as one of the prominent cash crops in the historical and economic narratives of slavery, my interest lies in the cultural narrative that rice produced in the formation of the Gullah culture.

The geography of coastal South Carolina and Georgia is quite similar to Sierra Leone and a perfect space for the West Africans knowledge of rice to take root and grow. The fertile soil and a series of tidal rivers that reach inland on the Sea Islands combined with the humid, semitropical weather provide the familiar and necessary growing conditions for rice. The West African ingenuity slaves brought with them from a similar environmental region proved lucrative for planters as slaves followed a similar system to produce rice (Pollitzer). Rice production altered the physical landscape of the Sea Islands. As plantations grew, slaves cut down and cleared trees; redirected waterways through levy construction and through what Roswell King, Jr. called a “renovating system,” slaves manipulated the fields by flooding them “with every full tide, so that the freight of silt carried by the river could be deposited” on other fields (Stewart 155). Because of the land manipulations due to rice cultivation, the Sea Islands have a very unique geographical landscape.

My project looks at the distinctive of the Sea Islands landscape as a space for cultural development that provides the setting for the literature and folklore of the Gullah people. In Thadious Davis’s 2011 text, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*, she argues African

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<sup>2</sup> This information comes, where cited, directly from William Politzer’s text, but other scholarship informs this section including Peter Wood’s *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1974); Daniel Littlefield’s *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (1991); Judith Carney’s *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (2002) James H. Tuten, *Lowcountry Time and Tide: The Fall of the South Carolina Rice Kingdom* (2010).

American writers are particularly interested in utilizing or revisiting the South as a means of reconnecting to what she terms the “Global South.” She proposes writers are engaging in a literary reverse migration to interrogate the South as “a spatial object and ideological landscape where matters of race are simultaneously opaque and transparent” (2). For Davis, the “Global South” reflects the ways “black writers from the Deep South use their spatial location to imagine, create, and define new and unproscribed subjectivities” (3). In many ways, Davis is borrowing from Henri Lefebvre’s definition of “global” as “the capacity to conceive of and deal with space on a wide scale, even on a *world scale*” (48; emphasis mine). If the South is now “global,” as Davis suggests, African diasporic influences must be a concern for black writers. Although Davis’s study is situated in the Deep South of Mississippi and Louisiana, her work has been useful in shaping my project by providing a vision that focuses on the connected space of the Global South that is shaped by Gullah African retentions.

Davis’s concept is situated in a different space but closely connected to Paula Ebron’s argument in her article “Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture”. She argues “the Sea Islands [offer] a powerful site of remembered African American community”, where authors “who utilize this space contrast the solidarity and spirituality of remembered Sea Island life with the dispersion and disaffection of African American urban life in the North” (94). Ebron views the productions set on the Sea Islands as a way to mediate the fracturing of urban, or perhaps a more appropriate term of Americanization, where African Americans attempt to create community outside of the South that ultimately lack a diasporic connectivity. As a term connected to the Sea Islands, a “Global South” becomes a diasporic place because of the African traditions and retentions still active in the lives of the Gullah people. Rather than needing to reinvent a global connection, writers and artists who draw from the Sea Islands find global influences embedded in the culture.

For black women writers, the trope of the ancestor has been a touchstone in their narratives. As Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses in the introduction to *Who’s Set You Flowin’?: The African American Migration Narrative*, it is “often necessary...to evoke the presence of an ancestor or certain aspects of their Southern folk culture in order to combat the harsh confrontations with the urban landscape” (5). In

this way, Griffin suggests that the ancestor is a pivotal component to the physical movement of characters in black women's fiction. Griffin states, "The ancestor is present in ritual, religion, music, food, and performance. His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations like the oral tradition. The ancestor might be a literal ancestor; he or she also has earthly representative, whom we might call elders" (5). Griffin's idea are clearly informed by Toni Morrison's "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" which I discuss in Chapter Two, "Ax'm Weh I Bin." While Griffin's study centers on migration narratives, her statement about evoking ancestors is a foundational belief in Gullah culture and for black women using Gullah in their narratives: an ancestor figure fulfills this role of comfort as well as guidance. Although many of the characters I address do journey away from the Sea Islands in different forms of migration, they return to embrace their heritage because of the guiding spirit or presence of an elder.

One of the primary Africanisms embedded into Gullah culture that is utilized in the work of black women is the reverence for and presence of the ancestors. The respect Gullah people have for those who have passed into the afterlife is demonstrated in Gullah burial traditions. At the gravesite, the youngest member of the community is passed over the grave site three times both to help the spirit transition into the spirit world, to ensure that the dead "will [not] hant (or haunt) de baby" and "worry him in his sleep" as well as to connect the past to the future (Holloway; Creel). The death of a Gullah community member is deeply respected and the commemoration practices ensure a peaceful transition, for both the living and the dead. In addition to passing the child, Gullahs bury the body facing east to guide them back to Africa and place objects on the gravesite, or "dress the grave", with items like cups, beads, or the favorite items of the deceased. Gullah burial practices like these ensure the spirit will not come back to claim those items allowing them to rest comfortably in the afterlife. Gullahs believe that all souls reside together and it is through ancestors that wisdom and comfort will come to you, if you call upon them.<sup>3</sup>

Elders and ancestors in Gullah culture are evoked through the oral tradition. For Gullahs, the act of storytelling was the primary way to educate as well as entertain and is a tradition that is still part of the

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<sup>3</sup> See in Holloway's *Africanisms in American Culture*, specifically the article by Margaret Washington, "Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death".

culture. Storytelling remains in the homes of Gullahs but for those outside of the community, Gullah storytelling can be engaged through storytellers like Carolyn “Jabulile” White or Anita Singleton-Prather known by her stage name of “Aunt Pearlie Sue”. Both women tell tales that harken back to slavery passed down through the generations and use pieces of the Gullah language within their tales. White learned her art of storytelling from her parents and grandparents on James Island. She states of storytelling: “Long as I live fuh ain goona die, I wanna carry ‘em on from generation to generation. Dis heha rich heritage, son, rich rich. We needa by proud a we ancestors. Taught us a lot. Brought us a long way. An as old as I am, I’ma standing on de shouldas eh dem old ancestors, you ain know so?” (<http://www.thegullahstoryteller.com/>).

As an alternative to the hegemonic, text-based narratives of history, the use of folklore and various elements of folk culture serve as a means of telling history allows the teller to become a folk historian where the traditional historical narratives are no longer based on an outside imposed chronology. For the folk historian, folktales are used to reaffirm the cultural narrative rather than the historical. One only needs to hear Carolyn “Jabulile” White tell the tale of “The Man Who Got Lost” or “Brother Where You From?” to understand the connections between the Gullah slave past, telling tales, and the Gullah language. To discuss both folklore and Gullah language, I employ Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory of “the speakerly text,” which he proposes in his seminal work, *The Signifying (g) Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. A “speakerly text” is defined as “a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of cultural speech that produces the ‘illusion of oral narration’” on the page (142). Gates theory allows me to address the importance of the oral tradition within Gullah culture, but also the ways in which the Gullah language has been used in texts and on the screen.

“Speakerliness” plays an important role in Gullah culture due to the fact that the language is primarily oral. Until the 1949 publication of *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* by Lorenzo Dow Turner, the Gullah language was thought by scholars and Lowcountry residents alike to be nothing more than a “baby talk,” a bastardization of Standard English, or simply the slave's inability to physically form the

English language in their mouths. In actuality, the Gullah language is an English-based creole blended with a variety of West African languages including Wolof, Mende, Yoruba, Krio, and Igbo. Turner's work disproves prior assumptions about the elementary nature of the Gullah language and people, but it also supports the fact that the Gullah language is primarily oral in nature and as such results in a lack of Gullah-authored literature and stories written purely in the Gullah language. "To have a story told only in Gullah...old school Gullah," stated Ron Daise "would not only be difficult to read but understand. The language is English and it is African, but what is important about Gullah is how you say it. In my own work, I use Gullah but it is modified so that folks can hear the language to understand it, not to be excluded from it" (Daise). In the works I engage in my project, only Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* attempts to use the language in the way Daise envisions it; the other productions employ more of a dialectic structure that alludes to the tradition of a black dialect on the page. I do not suggest the lack of Gullah or a reformation of the Gullah language in the novels by Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall harms their narratives in any way. Both attempt to create a "speakerly text" and if somehow either author had managed to use pure Gullah in their works, they would become almost unreadable. In Dash's film, however, the modified language is used to "sound" Gullah and her reformation of it allows the audience entry into the language. Just as the production of rice was gendered and women centered so too, I argue, is the act of narrative production.

The three primary works that inform my project, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, each serve as a counterpoint to race and gender oppressions by drawing from the distinct diasporic heritage of the Gullah. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, written in 1983, Avey (Avatara) Johnson is a widow and on a luxurious cruise begins to question her own identity. This questioning takes her on a journey between past and present; however, it is the dream of Aunt Cuney and the story of Ibo Landing that sets her on this journey. I chose Marshall's novel primarily because of the incorporation of the Ibo Landing story, which is reflective of the folklore drawn from Gullah culture during the rice growing days. The Willow Springs of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* represents the Sea Island geography and the culture, as well as the

traditions and beliefs that reside there. The novel, much like Marshall's text, contains parallel narratives of urban versus rural, north versus south, past versus present. Miranda "Mama" Day serves as the Gullah ancestor, while her niece, Cocoa, and her husband, George, represent the younger generation. Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* reflect similar issues as the texts of Naylor and Marshall, but where her film differs productively for my project is in its visual depictions of the Sea Islands. These texts and cinematic representations of the Sea Islands invite multiple moments of comparison that allow me to demonstrate the legacy of the rice economy. Although none of these texts directly retells the tale of rice production, I argue each piece is informed by that history. It is through these artistic productions where I shall connect the ways in which we can envision the Sea Islands as a place of restoration and Gullah womanism as a productive addition to women-centered discourse.

Although I draw from the large body of criticism on each of the works I engage, few have examined these works in light of the historical narrative of rice production while simultaneously linking the actions of the female Gullah characters to a form of women-centered activism. Using articles, essays, and books that detail the Gullah culture and history juxtaposed with my own ethnographic work, this project endeavors to contribute not only the growing field of Gullah Studies but the ever evolving body of critical analysis on black women's creative works. In my chapters, I focus upon Naylor, Marshall, and Dash but I also situate their works alongside what I suggest is a black female literary ancestry that informs their work. Drawing attention to black female writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Brooks in conversation with my primary works allows me to trace black women's literary history that has, since the publication of Jacob's slave narrative in 1861, altered and reformed traditional genre forms to reflect the intersections of race and gender. For the black woman, her narratives must reflect her oppression from both racial and gendered vantage points, yet for the black woman using Gullah culture this reflection is projected through Gullah womanism.

## DAT GULLAH BE: WOMAN

My project seeks create a framework that is drawn from the role of Gullah women as rice producers that resulted in the formation of the Gullah culture. To form my theoretical framework of Gullah womanism, I argue black women who produce projects that engage the Gullah and Sea Islands do so with the intention of creating a usable past. I define this term through Van Wyck Brook's essay "On Creating a Usable Past". His concept was not intended, I do not believe, to include African American writers, male or female, in 1918; however, his theoretical model that suggests the past is "an exhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals" (223) applies beyond the strictly white canonical writers he employs in his work. My dissertation conceives of the usable past as a means of connecting history to literature and the ways in which turning toward the past aids in interrogating the cultural nuances found in modern fictions. Both Alan Robinson's *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* and the essays of Hayden White inform my application of Brooks's concept to Gullah culture and black women's literature. Robinson argues that history has taken a turn toward utilizing narrative structures, where the history is positioned within literary modes. Yet however productive this mode of storytelling may be, it remains deeply rooted in the historical research and facts. Robinson claims fiction has reinvented history in complex and fruitful ways and fictions that attempt to re-present history do so from the position of "the evocation of an imaginary presence, the virtual reality of the present past" (28). His concept is valuable to my reading of Gullah in literature.

Similarly, Pierre Nora sees history as static but memory as active; in the search for history, memory allows for an inherent revision of history. Nora terms the intersections of memory and history as "sites of memory" that offer an alternative to the traditional historiography. Nora writes, "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name" where "history is a representation of the past" through "our hopelessly modern societies, propelled by change, to organize the past" (8). Because memory is fluid, Nora argues, history "is perpetually suspicious of memory" where the goal of history as it is recorded and mediated "is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place" (9). He concludes traditional historiography, with an emphasis on "empirical detail" is "ill suited" to express "the issues at stake" (24).

For the purposes of my project, the “issues at stake” are the intersections of race and gender and the representation of Gullah in our historical narrative. Nora closes his article with a statement that reflects the stakes of my project with a concise clarity: “memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary” (24). The authors and artists I engage are entrenched in transforming previously constructed historiographies and recreating the existing histories through literature.

The final piece that I investigate to construct my paradigm is a chronological examination of women-centered discourse in the United States. As activism and discourse traveled along our national timeline, I suggest these movements from feminism to black feminism to womanism demonstrate a necessity for black women to name and formulate ideologies that reflect their history of oppression as well as the ways in which they have defined themselves in opposition to patriarchy. This timeline helps explain my use of womanism over feminism in naming my paradigm. While the crux of black feminism informs my project, the name of womanism reflects more accurately the diasporic nature of the Gullah people and the ways in which African traditions, practices, and ideologies impact Gullah women and their daily lives.

My understanding of women centered discourse is primarily informed by Patricia Hill Collins work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. I borrow from her text the stereotypes she defines that govern black women’s lives. Collins suggests despite these controlling images, black women must in whatever form they are able, seek out “opportunities for self-definition and self-definition is the first step to empowerment: if a group is not defining itself, then it is being defined by and for the use of others” (101). In her text, Collins also uses the term “safe spaces” which she defines as “social spaces where Black women speak freely” (100) and “the extended family, churches, and African American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur” (101). Collins’s understanding of “safe spaces” speaks directly with the writing of bell hooks. hooks explains that despite its “fragility” and “tenuous” nature, the construction of the homeplace for black Americans has a “radical political dimension” (42). She identifies black women’s particular roles in creating and shaping the homeplace and underscores the role of homeplaces in

sustaining and articulating the humanity of black Americans. hooks elaborates on this point by stating, “despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of dominion, one’s homeplace was the one site where one can freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist” (42). I define “home” for the Gullah woman as the physical place on the Sea Islands, but also the family unit, familial lineage, and ancestral connections back to African traditions and cultural structures. In order to discuss Gullah womanism effectively, I must address the importance of family, home, and land to the Gullah people.

While the black feminist writings of hooks and Collins shape my understanding of home for the Gullah people, Clenora Hudson-Weems theory of Africana Womanism that she presents in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* grounds this aspect of my paradigm connected to space, place, and Gullah women. In her theory, she identifies eighteen distinct characteristics of Africana Womanism that reflect the diasporic nature of all women of African descent living throughout the world. Her theory of womanism is situated within an African context. Her work is applicable to my theory and I borrow some of her points that reflect the Africanisms still functioning with Gullah culture, particularly family and community centeredness. Gullah womanism is the term I develop that is drawn from the work and daily lives of Gullah women who embody the traditions of the African ancestors. This paradigm shapes the ways in which I discuss the works of black women writers utilizing the Gullah culture, history, and space to propose that the women-centered history of labor within the rice economy created Gullah womanism.

#### **DAT GULLAH BE: AFRICAN IN AMERICA WIT TONGUE AND ALL**

“Ooman’s Wuk” consists of four chapters that investigate the Sea Island landscape and Gullah culture through the artistic productions of black women. Chapter One, “Dayclean,” establishes the theoretical paradigm of Gullah womanism. As I have stated, Gullah womanism is based upon examining Gullah rice production, history, and culture as a usable past and women-centered activism. To discuss the usable past and the Gullah people, I mine the cultural, academic, and artistic productions produced by the Gullah community that form what Tracy Snipe calls the “Gullah Renaissance.” This movement is led by “binyas” and “cumyas” - those born and raised on the Sea Islands and those, like myself, who have

become engrossed in Gullah culture. The Gullah Renaissance is an active movement drawing attention to the history of Gullah as well as the preservation of the culture. I discuss “binya” many productions such as the documentary *The Language You Cry In* that brings the Gullah history to a wider audience, but so through Gullah narratives structures to express their history. *The Language Your Cry In* is the story of a single song recorded by Lorenzo Dow Turner in 1942 that is still sung by one woman in Harris Neck, Georgia - Mary Moran. This was her mother’s song handed down to her from her mother. Through academic research methods such as musicology, the song was traced to a village in West Africa where the song is still sung. The story is told, however, through the voice of Mary Moran to make this documentary a story of family memory rather than simply academic connections. It is vital to establish the usable past, first in order to discuss the specific area that grounds my project – the links between Gullah women and rice.

My discussion in this first chapter addresses female roles within the day-to-day production of rice, arguing that the tasks Gullah women performed were skilled labor due to their understanding of the rice process from West Africa. Traditional histories dismiss the agricultural knowledge of slaves as skilled labor, particularly in comparison to occupations such as carpentry or blacksmithing. These abilities are not only labeled skilled but are also predominantly male centered tasks. By reimagining the roles of women in the rice fields as skilled, the economic and gendered narrative of slavery is disrupted. Gullah women were producers in the fields as well as reproducers of slaves as part of the sexual economy of slavery. I argue that Gullah women were not immune from sexual abuse and were expected to reproduce the slave labor force; however, because of the task system put in place on rice plantations, Gullah women were afforded the opportunity to mother their children in ways enslaved women on the mainland were not. This ability helped to shape the Gullah family structures during and after slavery.

The last aspect of Gullah womanism I address in this chapter is a chronology of women-centered activism and discourse. Examining the timeline of discourse allows me to draw from black feminism and womanism to construct my paradigm that incorporates the ongoing oppressions in the lives of black women that are racial and gendered. Clenora Hudson-Weems’s theory of Africana Womanism shapes my

formation of Gullah womanism based upon the guiding factors of self-definition and self-naming; community and family centeredness; mothering and nurturing. To close the chapter, I read various traditions and customs in modern Gullah communities as examples of Gullah womanism.

Chapter Two, “Ax’m Weh I Bin,” applies the theoretical paradigm of Gullah womanism I establish in the first chapter to a reading Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*. Naylor’s 1988 novel, I suggest, is the starting example of Gullah womanism in fiction due to the importance of home and place, cultural memory, and ancestry stressed throughout the text. Through my reading of her prefatory materials, I discuss the Sea Island landscape as a space for Naylor to reimagine the narrative of slavery. The cartographic strategies she utilizes places the Gullah at the forefront by subverting traditional methods of mapping strategies to privilege Willow Springs as a women centered space. Within this space, Naylor expresses the power of female centered relationships. The continual presence of Sapphira Wade throughout the novel mirrors the Gullah belief that the ancestors reside with the living and Sapphira Wade is the foundational ancestor whose spirit guides the island residents. The ancestral relationship Miranda “Mama” Day and Ophelia “Cocoa” Day have with Sapphira Wade is exhibited throughout their lives but becomes life sustaining by the ending of the novel. Naylor’s text points to the necessity of ancestry to uncover a nuanced sense of self. For the female characters in *Mama Day*, this identity is grounded in Gullah culture, beliefs, and the ever-present spirit of Sapphira Wade.

The ancestor guides the lives of the women on the island, but rendering the experiences of Cocoa and her husband, George explores the importance of homeplaces and cultural memory, particularly for black Americans who find themselves removed from their cultural heritage. The relationship between Cocoa and George is tested on Willow Springs where George must submit to the ancestral beliefs of the island to save Cocoa from illness; he must sacrifice his Westernized beliefs and ultimately his life for her to live. Reflecting upon the passing of her husband George and their summer in Willow Springs, Cocoa proclaims: “And each time I go back over what happened, there’s some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a new light” (312). In one sense this speaks to Naylor drawing upon the multiplicity of voices and narrations surrounding events, experiences, and histories but this also reflects

the literary ancestry of black women writers. Naylor's text can be viewed as a continuation of Harriet Jacobs and Zora Neale Hurston with echoes of Gullah author Cornelia Walker Bailey. Naylor masterfully constructs the space of Willow Springs and the Gullah inspired characters in *Mama Day*, setting the tone for other black women to engage Gullah culture in their productions.

Chapter Three addresses Gullah folklore and its uses in creating Gullah womanism. I investigate in "We Tell It Fuh True" the discourse on folklore and the uses of it drawn from both the African American and Gullah communities. During the antebellum and reconstruction periods, predominantly white and male authors disseminated folklore but disavowed the tellers of those tales. It is only when folklore was collected by African Americans such as Zora Neale Hurston did folklore become a more nuanced representation of black communities. Folklore becomes a usable past when incorporated into the fiction of African Americans, specifically women writers. To discuss the uses of folklore in black women's fiction I turn to two folktales: the Flying African and the tale of Ibo Landing. Both pieces of folklore are a response to the inhuman conditions of slave labor and these tales share the theme of freedom from enslavement but do so through different methods. In the Flying African tale, a slave would leap into the air and fly back to Africa while in the Ibo Landing tale, a group of slaves walked on water back to Africa. The additional difference between these narratives lies in history. The Ibo Landing tale is a folk response to the incident at Dunbar Creek where Ibo slaves rebelled and drowned themselves in the water; the historical narrative is based upon the loss of property. The Gullah folklore, however, privileges the resistance and resilience of the Ibos that has become a reminder of the strength of their ancestors. In my discussion on "dayclean" in Chapter One, I suggest "dayclean" brings with the new day the opportunity to become revitalized; the story of Ibo Landing and the continued use of folklore in Gullah culture fulfills this concept.

My reading of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* alongside Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, argues both authors utilize folklore as the catalyst toward self-definition, however, Marshall's use of the Ibo landing tale reflects the women-centered nature of telling a folktale because the narrative resides with female ancestors. Moreover, I suggest in *Praisesong for the Widow* the use of the folktale of

Ibo Landing is the starting point for the main character Avery Johnson's journey to authentic Gullah womanism that mirrors the Gullah tradition of "seeking." The seeking ritual in the Gullah community allows a young person entry into the community only after they have undergone on a transformative journey guided by an ancestor. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey's seeking takes her on a diasporic journey, enacted by Aunt Cuney that results in her authentic place in the community. By novel's end, she becomes the ancestor, the "keepa uh da culca", who will continue to tell the tale of the Ibos.

In the novels of Marshall and Naylor, the Gullah language is not evident, but rather they make use of African American dialect to express Gullah voices. In my final chapter, "We Tell'um Fuh True," I investigate the uses of dialect literature by other authors, including Ambrose Gonzales, Edgar Allen Poe, and Joel Chandler Harris, who recreate both African American and Gullah dialects in in their stories. I argue, specifically in my examination of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus collections, these works participate in the commodification of dialect and the Gullah language. This led to a literary minstrelsy that disavowed the language and narratives of Gullah people. Toni Morrison has successfully argued that literary whiteness is a direct result of creating blackness in the literature. Her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark*, informs my reading of the texts that negative utilize and project blackness while Eric Lott's *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* illuminates my understanding of minstrelsy.

I counteract those presentations through my reading of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, where the Gullah language is present but reformed. I argue that her re-formation of the language is a productive depiction of Gullah culture. Dash recognized the pitfalls in attempting to recreate the Gullah language linguistically and instead employed Ron Daise and Vertamae Grosvenor to provide the actors with a tutorial in the Gullah language. Through their instruction to shift tenses and grammatical manipulations as well as the incorporation of common Gullah words, the language used in *Daughters of the Dust* sounds like Gullah to the viewers. Dash connects language to memory and African ancestry by using a small amount of African words and revising English words. I suggest the language in the film is designed to allow female voices to the story of the Gullah people. I draw attention to different scenes in the film, but,

it is in the scene where Eula recounts the Ibo Landing tale I argue is pivotal toward understanding Dash's Gullah language as women centered expression. The tale is told almost verbatim to the version found in Marshall's novel but with a Gullah auditory sound; Eula sounds how I would imagine Aunt Cuney would. Just as Ibo Landing leads to Avey's restoration, Eula's telling allows her husband, Eli to reconcile his fears and realize "the fury growing inside Eula's womb is, in fact, his unborn child" ("Making" 142); although he does not hear her, it becomes clear that the spirit of the Ibos through Eula's women-centered telling has restored him. The presentation of a reimagined Gullah language in *Daughters of the Dust* allows Gullah women to speak rather than to be spoken for.

In summary, "Ooman's Wuk," addresses the creative return to the Sea Islands and Gullah culture as a potential site of memory for black women artists. It is the rediscovering of "forgotten" moments, or the usable past, that allows black women writers to explore the Sea Islands and Gullah culture as a space of history that can be reformed through their creative power. The Gullah culture is rice, as Jonathan Green told me, but it is also a vast storehouse of history that has yet to be fully explored. My project seeks to connect rice to writing. In those moments where history and culture intersect with black women's artistic productions, I propose that we find a new vision of women-centered discourse: Gullah womanism.

## CHAPTER ONE: “DAYCLEAN”: THE USABLE PAST OF GULLAH WOMANISM

To construct the theoretical framework that will guide my analysis of Gullah culture in black women’s writing, I am reminded of my 2009 meeting with Cornelia Walker Bailey and my reading of her memoir, *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man*. In 2009, I along with a group from Metropolitan State College and members of the Denver community, traveled to Sapelo Island, Georgia to visit the last remaining Gullah community of Hog Hammock. Miss Bailey, as both visitors and residents call her, told us the history of Sapelo that was home to five Gullah communities during slavery and into the 1920s. Over the years, Gullah residents have been moved out of those communities and into the last remaining space, Hog Hammock; the other 97 percent of the island is owned by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.<sup>1</sup> When she spoke of the history of the island, it was really the history of her ancestors, dating back to the earliest days of slavery. She spoke of rice as a food staple, the labor in rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton fields. She recalled her direct descendant, Bilali Muhammad, who brought the Muslim religion with him when he reached Sapelo and how Islam is mixed with Christianity today in the community. She discussed what it was like for her family to pack their belongs, load them into an ox cart, and move away from their home in Raccoon Bluff to Hog Hammock (Bailey). Each memory she shared with us was so vivid that it was easy to position yourself on the island as it once was. The past of Sapelo Island, although now one community, was real and came alive with her words while sitting at her front yard picnic table.

Miss Bailey described to us the past and present hardships of Hog Hammock, but in her memoir she begins with the word “dayclean.” She writes, “My tale begins just before the rising of the sun, in that brief instant to time when the night clouds are being cleared away and the first rays of light are streaking across the sky. Dayclean, we call this, when the day is new and the world is made fresh again” (1). Dayclean could be reduced to a simple synonym like ‘sunrise’ or ‘dawn’, but that form of reduction to an English language equivalent would take away the power of this word. For the Gullah people, dayclean

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<sup>1</sup> The estimated amount of land owned by the state of Georgia comes from the SICARS and the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve websites.

means that there will always be another day with which to renew your spirit and soul if the previous day had been particularly tiresome or sad or difficult. Bailey connects this word to the history of enslavement on her ancestors: “Dayclean! You see, you can think of the Africans as being victims, and in a sense they were, but they were also great survivors...They were determined people...So, they would have taken a deep breath and said, ‘Maybe we can go on’ and found the strength to make a new beginning” (2).

Dayclean “came from Africa” (2) and that word is still used there, but just as the Gullah culture is a fusion of African traditions and principles with life in the United States, so is the concept of dayclean.

“Our word for dayclean is a little different from theirs,” she writes, “that’s all, because like almost everything my ancestors brought with them to this new shore, our version changed some over time” (3).

The Gullah concept of dayclean suggests to me that while a new day will come to restore you, the past days, no matter how distant, are not forgotten because those moments have become your heritage, your ancestry, and your usable past.

I borrow the term “usable past” from Van Wyck Brooks’s 1918 essay entitled “On Creating a Usable Past” where he addresses and critiques the narrowness of American Literature. While the goals of his essay are not wholly in line with my project, his guiding principles are very much applicable to African American culture. I understand his concept to mean that outside of the common historical or canonical narratives lie verifiable, but typically disavowed histories that once discovered, create a new vision of the past. The usable past is precisely what I engage by drawing attention to the under-told tale of the Gullah people. The theoretical model that drives my project fuses Van Wyck Brooks’s concept of the usable past with my recollections and research of Gullah culture drawn from antebellum rice production and the discourses of women-centered activism to form the basis with which to understand Gullah women. In “Dayclean: the Usable Past of Gullah Womanism,” I investigate each of these pieces and propose, when layered together, each concept aids in forming a paradigm of Gullah womanism which is a form of cultural and community activism that is found in the daily lives of the female descendants of Africans living on the Sea Islands and an effective lens to analyze the creative productions of black women who utilize the heritage of Gullah women in their work.

## ON CREATING A USABLE PAST: FROM CONCEPT TO PRACTICE

In November 1989, a delegation of men and women from South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida arrived in the West African country of Sierra Leone. Invited by the Sierra Leonean government, the people who stepped off that plane on a dark, fall evening were Gullah. Over the course of two weeks, the group met their distant African cousins who ate similar foods, performed similar religious rituals, and spoke a similar language. Emory Campbell, Gullah author, activist, and former director of the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, was one of the attendees. He stated in the documentary about the journey *Family Across the Sea* that African Americans still feel at times as people “without roots,” but, those who took this trip “now [have] a place to call home” (*Family Across the Sea*). He further called the experience of meeting his Sierra Leonean “brothers and sisters” one of healing: “a lot of wounds were healed in my soul with the chance to go back and see where my ancestors came from” (*Family Across the Sea*). Emory Campbell’s descriptions of how he felt upon his return from Sierra Leone suggest a restorative connection to one’s “usable past.”

The “usable past” is a term first used by Wyck Brooks’s in his 1918 essay, “On Creating a Usable Past.” The essay addressed the problems of stasis he saw in American Literature at that time, calling for a kind of literary anarchy that would reject “historical works [that] repeat the same point of view” (219). The conscientious writer and critic at the beginning of the 20th century, he argued, must “paddle his [or her] own course, even if it leads to shipwreck” (222). This new direction of a usable past meant moving toward new forms of literature that would allow for a reexamination of literary history, the addition of overlooked literary voices into the cannon, and questioning, reinventing, or even creating the past in such a way that would be serviceable to the modern writer. Brooks’s choice of the word “usable” amplifies this objective. Usable implies the active engagement of the user who now has the agency over how the past is represented as it corresponds to the desires of that user. No longer is the past only a single story told in the dominant historical discourse but an opportunity for multiple voices to emerge, reinterpreting the past. Brooks wrote:

The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value...it [the past] yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choice...But is this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? If we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own? (220-224)

Brooks's concept of the usable past is then a revisionary literary history in which writers construct imaginative narratives drawn from existing histories, but place an emphasis on the undervalued moments of history. His concept appears to be inclusive of all literary productions and producers, but the writers Brooks calls attention to in his essay were white males. The revolutionary idea was still rooted in dominant gender and racial groups. His call to question existing histories to discover alternative ones and to bring into being narratives about the past that subvert the dominant discourse was a groundbreaking idea, one that in the hands of others outside of his implied constructs of gender, race, and class becomes an impactful way to engage history.

Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas saw the important role a usable past could play in the understanding of the past and the present without the using Brooks's verbiage. Douglas stated: "Each new generation can and must look back on, face up to, and learn from the greatness, the weakness and failures of our past with the firm assurance the strength and courage to arise from such an honest and dutiful approach to our problems will continue to carry us on to new and higher levels of achievement" (Ater 98). Broadly, I interpret Douglas's statement to mean that the past must not be seen as static or fixed and as we move forward; it is necessary to create space within the master narrative for additional viewpoints – all vital components of the usable past. The construction of the usable past as a layer for my paradigm starts with history, the way it is documented, and the ways in which it can be recreated through aesthetic strategies. I use the art of Aaron Douglass and one of the surviving murals he created for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition, *Aspiration*, to interpret Brooks's concept.



Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration* 1936

*Aspiration*, is Douglas's visual representation of the progression of African American history from slavery to freedom utilizing his signature blend of African, American, and European art (Ater). At the bottom of the canvas, Douglas begins his visual narrative with slavery, represented by upward stretched hands and arms in deep purple and black tones. Even though these hands have manacles around their wrists to represent enslavement, the chains fade off the canvas, suggesting both slavery and freedom simultaneously.

The image then shifts from dark to lighter tones as the eye moves to the middle of the mural where three figures (two men and one woman) are placed side by side free of shackles and instead hold objects in their hands. Architectural tools, a beaker, and a book (from left to right), which represent freedom through the symbols of education and the possibilities associated with being able to learn. The image moves upward to the top of the canvas where, in the right-hand corner, two distinct images of industry – a factory and two skyscrapers - represent the possibility of opportunity in both the blue and white-collar sectors of industry for African Americans. These buildings are painted with bright, golden tones symbolic of hopefulness and the promise of success in the future. The foundation of the usable past is history - as it was documented and how it intermingles with the imaginative composite creations drawn from those realities. The usable past combines fact with creativity, allowing those who previously lacked agency the ability to reframe American history through various aesthetic and rhetorical strategies reflective of their culture.

American history has always intersected with the cultures of our nation. Hayden White wrote in his essay on contemporary historical theory that the “very records that make possible the writing of a history of ‘historical cultures’ are also the records that make possible the writing of a history of the so-called ‘non-historical’ cultures” (“Question of Narrative” 32). White creates two hierarchal labels to

engage history – “historical” and “nonhistorical” – and is an idea that I must address before I can effectively establish how I employ the usable past. On one hand, we can view “historical history” as the certification of an event while “nonhistorical history” is the subjectivity surrounding the event. For example, we can state the “historical” fact that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, but the “nonhistorical” features such as nationalistic, social, and emotional feelings surrounding this historical event cannot be stated in a single sentence. What is valuable to my critical paradigm is the way White defines the two terms: “a life lived in nature [historical], and one lived in culture [nonhistorical]” (“Question of Narrative” 31). In his definitions, both “nature” and “culture” are related to the human experience, but as White states, “there are two orders of humanity, one of which is more human, *because it is more historical*, than the other” (“Question of Narrative” 31). This statement reflects the order of significance enmeshed in historical discourse as well as the intricate relationship in our society of race, gender, and class where those who are deemed privileged (“historical”) hold more historical value than those that have been continually devalued (“nonhistorical”). If the same records of history contain the stories of both parties, then the usable past flips this hierarchy, allowing those who are the margins to move to the center of Historical discourse.

Douglas’s mural is overlaid with stars and I read his use of stars as a mirroring of White’s ideas of historical and nonhistorical labels. The entire mural is overlaid with the outline of stars, an aesthetic choice I believe that was intended to position African Americans as both inside and outside Texan history. Douglas’s murals were housed in the Hall of Negro Life, a smaller space set on the periphery of the Exposition. The physical placement of the Hall of Negro Life reflected the deep racial divide embedded in the history of Texas and the United States in the 1930s; by design, the role of African Americans in the 100 years of Texan history was never intended to be showcased (Ater).<sup>2</sup> In the Great Hall of the Exposition, it is clear that African Americans were shown through the eyes of “historical” peoples who saw African Americans only as laborers. In the background of a single image related to the

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<sup>2</sup> African Americans were not the only group to be disregarded in the Exposition. Rene Ater writes, “The grand narrative of Texas’s success excluded Native Americans, who had inhabited the land before white settlement [and] the Spanish and Mexicans who had lived there before and after 1836” (100).

Texas economy, two black men load cotton onto a waiting ship and in the parade celebrating the Exposition, the only float to include any representation of African Americans “showed them picking cotton” (Ater). Clearly, the narrative of white Texans regarding African Americans was a single story of slave labor. Douglas’s “nonhistorical” mural does not ignore the history of slavery, but it does reveal an additional narrative of the present drawn from that past. It is a narrative of possibility beyond physical work, and *Aspiration* is one example of the ways White’s “same records” can reveal a different story despite the attempts to diminish it. The practices of exclusion found in the Texas Exposition, and Douglas’s visual response to those attempts to marginalize African American history, provide an example of African Americans as “nonhistorical” peoples, but also the ways in which that label can be subverted.

The presentation of the Gullah past in various contemporary forms serves a similar purpose as *Aspiration*. Those re-engaging the history and culture of the Gullah people are no longer accepting the given histories nor the biases woven into previous documentations. Those participating in bringing Gullah into the national narrative are creating a Gullah Renaissance. Just as Douglas’s *Aspiration* reconstructed African American history eighty years ago at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the Gullah Renaissance challenges the labels of “historical” and “nonhistorical” by employing the concept of a usable past. The cultural events, academic and artistic productions that bring an increased awareness of Gullah history and culture as well as pride and advocacy for preservation of the Sea Islands, define the Gullah Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> For example, Gullah Heritage Days held each November at the historic Penn Center on St. Helena Island, SC is three-day event that offers programs and events to attendees celebrating the history and culture of the Sea Islands and is part symposium, part arts, crafts, and food festival, and part homecoming for island residents. The increase in Gullah heritage tours over the last ten years on Sapelo, Hilton Head, and St. Simons Islands offers tourists the opportunity to forgo the “touristy” places and learn more about the culture that resides behind the resorts.

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<sup>3</sup> I construct my definition of “Gullah Renaissance” from Tracy Snipe’s article “An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands” based on her discussion of the various factors she utilizes in her work as well as my own research and experiences on the Sea Islands.

The current Gullah Renaissance is not limited to a physical presence on one of the many Sea Islands. The publication of Gullah cookbooks and memoirs as well as photographic and art exhibits throughout the country introduce the heritage of the Sea Islands to a new and wider audience. One of the most popular ways Gullah culture entered the mainstream was the children's television show *Gullah, Gullah Island*. The idea for the show came during a dinner conversation between Gullah performer and historian Ron Daise, his wife Natalie, author Gloria Naylor, and a producer from Nickelodeon. In the early 1990s, the network was highly invested in creating more multicultural programming for its pre- and elementary school-aged viewers. Although the producer knew little of the Daise's or Gullah culture, he was intrigued by a show set on "some magical island" ("Ron and Natalie Daise: A Conversation") and by July of 1994, the first episode of *Gullah, Gullah Island* aired. While the show had typical attributes for its young audience such as colorful scenes, original songs, and a lovable puppet, it provided a national platform for the representation of the Sea Islands. Each episode highlighted some aspect of the Gullah people, whether it was a traditional Gullah food or locations from Daise home island of St. Helena or words from the Gullah language - the name of the puppet "Binyah" is the Gullah word for "native islander". Those of Gullah ancestry are taking Brooks's advice on the importance of a usable past: "... I do not mean at all that we cut our cloth to fit other people. I mean simply that we have every precedent for cutting it to fit ourselves" (224). Therefore, an additional core piece to constructing Gullah womanism based upon the concept of the usable past is the reclamation and recovery of Gullah heritage by the Gullah people themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The advocacy groups created by Gullah men and women each share the overall mission of heritage and historic preservation, culture tourism, and land protections. The mission statement on the website of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, states: "To preserve, protect, and promote our history, culture, language, and homeland and to institute and demand official recognition of the

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<sup>4</sup> Renaissance is defined as "rebirth; revival or renewed interest in something" ("Renaissance") and typically linked to 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries movements of art and literature in Europe. I suggest that that word is more closely linked for my purposes to the Harlem Renaissance a movement not only of art, literature and scholarship but also of racial pride. In this respect, the Gullah Renaissance has clear similarities to the Harlem Renaissance.

governance (minority) rights necessary to accomplish our mission to take care of our community through collective efforts which will provide a healthy environment, care for the well beings of each person, and economic empowerment” (“Gullah/Geechee Nation”). The Harris Neck Land Trust, organized by Gullah descendants, is fighting to “reclaim the 2,687 acres of Harris Neck - wrongfully and illegally taken by the federal government in 1942 - and return it to its rightful owners” (“Harris Neck Land Trust”). And on Sapelo Island, Cornelia Walker Bailey and SICARS (Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society) use educational programs and cultural events to bring awareness to Gullah heritage and “to preserve and revitalize the Hogg Hummock Community” (“SICARS”). Each of these groups put into action the ideal that a usable past allows, “the past experience of our people be placed at the service of the future” (Brooks 224) by placing an emphasis on the past, present, and the future of Gullah communities on the Sea Islands.

As part of the Gullah Renaissance, the documentaries created to express the history of Gullah people, such as *Family Across the Sea*, *The Language You Cry In*, and *Pricilla's Homecoming* construct a more inclusive narrated history. These productions provide viewers with “historical” information - there are many useful facts about the Gullah - but what is also present in these documentaries is an emphasis on telling a story. One of those documentaries, *The Language You Cry In*, takes the research of Lorenzo Dow Turner who discovered a Mende song in his collecting of Gullah language in the 1930s along with the modern work of anthropologist Joseph Opala, ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt and Sierra Leonean linguist Tazieff Koroma to discover the linkages between the Gullah people and their Sierra Leonean ancestors.

The film dramatically demonstrates the contribution of contemporary scholarship to restoring what narrator Vertamae Grosvenor calls “the “non-history” imposed on African Americans. She states, “This is a story of memory, how the memory of a family was pieced together through a song with legendary powers to connect those who sang it with their roots.” (Review *The Language You Cry In* 1998). It can not be overlooked that Grosvenor uses the same language as White when discussing the erasure of Gullah history and its reclaiming through documentary filmmaking. Opala, Schmidt, Koroma,

and Grosvenor detail the academic process of taking Turner's recording and traveling it through the Sea Islands, finding a single Gullah woman, Mary Moran, who knew the song and voice because it was her mother, Amelia Dawley, on the recording. Although it was part of her history, she states:

"I never knew what the song meant. My mother sang to me. She loved to sing. I thought it was something to dance by. I did not know it was a funeral song. If I had known, I never would have danced by that little song. She didn't know what it meant herself. Her grandmother learned it to her, and she taught it to us. It was a gift. She didn't know it, and I didn't know it then, but I know it now." (*The Language You Cry In*)

In the same way, her son Wilson Moran discusses the meaning of a song he learned from his mother:

"I heard that song my whole life. It was something my mother sang. But now I know that it was a song of connection. Part of our history was blank. There was no names, no records, nothing that would connect me to a place in Africa other than someone from my family was brought over here. But from where? We knew we had a connection to Africa, but we were a stranger. Now I feel like we are no longer strangers. There is a place where my people came from." (*The Language You Cry In*)

The linguistic and musicology discoveries about the Mende song are central to the scholarship of the Gullah people, as it reaffirms a connection between the West African coast and the Sea Islands as well as the African language and the Gullah language. When we consider, however, the ways Moran and her family shift the documentary away from a path of academic discovery and toward the importance of memory, family, and narration based upon scholarship, we see the ways historical discourse is expanded by Gullah traditions of storytelling. At one point in the documentary, Moran is shown singing the song to her granddaughter who was just an infant. Even though the baby cannot understand the words or the history behind it, the song will become part of her story, and she too will hold the song as part of her ancestral memory. The telling of tales – even through song – allows the Gullah community to hold their history while documentary scholarship allows that same history to others.

Just as Mary Moran served as a historian through song, a similar form of the Gullah usable past can be seen in the performances of the McIntosh County Shouters. The McIntosh County Shouters were founded in the late 1980s under the leadership of songster Lawrence McKiver in Bolden - or Briar Patch as the community members call it - Georgia, which is part of the Sea Islands. The group performs the “ring shout” which is perhaps one of the oldest surviving African American performance traditions. The term “shout” has been said to be a Gullah survival of the Afro-Arabic word “saut,” the name of a ritual dance around the Kaaba, a sacred site in Mecca. Developed during slavery when dancing was prohibited, the ring shout fused African origins of the call-and-response mode, a drumlike rhythm kept by hand clapping and the pounding of a wooden stick upon a wooden floor as well as the counterclockwise motion of the “dancers” singing secular and gospel songs. What makes the Ring Shout a part of the “nonhistorical” record is that it was performed during slavery after the traditional Christian church service was over or performed in small cabins called “praise houses”. This tradition was a vital part of the Gullah community, regularly performed but particularly important during the Christmas holidays.

Lawrence McIver’s daughter, Vertie McIver, recalls when she was growing up on the islands, the community would have shouts from house to house during the week and on New Year’s Eve or “Watch Night” for the Gullah people: “they would shout all night long, beginning at midnight and shouting until day break whey they would welcome the New Year singing “Farewell, Last Day Goin”” (Rosenbaum and Buis). As a child, Carletha Sullivan has similar memories, recalling her people filing into church on the eves of Christmas and New Years for an all-night shout, which she refers to as “hallelujah time.” “The stickman would grab the broom from the corner and start the rhythm, and everyone else would join in,” Sullivan recalls, “There was coffee and biscuits, and we would sleep for a while on the wooden benches—they were hard back then—and wake up and shout again” (“McIntosh County Shouters”).

Most of the songs sung by the McIntosh County Shouters today date back to slavery and “many of the melodies hint at African and Afro-Caribbean origins” (Rosenbaum and Buis 3). The texts of the songs range from secular (“Hold de Baby”) to biblical messages (“Pharaoh’s Host Got Lost”) to the hardships of slavery (“Move, Daniel”). The performers dress in traditional slavery clothing with hats and

head covers for the women. During the performance, Carletha Sullivan, cousin of founder Lawrence McIver, serves as the narrator setting the background for each song. Then “stick man” Brenton Jordan, the grandson of Sullivan, keeps the rhythm as the eldest member of the group, charismatic songster Freddie Palmer, begins to sing in a deep base voice his versions of “I Know I Been Changed” and the traditional “Pharaoh’s Host Got Lost.”

In a performance I saw on the Sea Islands in 2009, Palmer’s voice was infectious, and it was an experience to hear the music, see the shuffling of feet, and listen to the history of the Gullah people through narration and song. The McIntosh County Shouters are the modern historians and keepers of Gullah history as they combine singing and storytelling to explain the uniquely historic Gullah culture. Their stories and music provide viewers and listeners with a sense of who the Gullah are, where they originated, and what influences those origins have on today’s culture. Marlena Smalls, a member of another Gullah group, the Hallelujah Singers, believes the ways Gullahs are telling their own stories allows others to see truly the Gullah culture as well “understanding Gullah is the key to humanizing our race and showing that our ancestors came to this country with their own history, rituals, and customs” (Cross 214). Gullah storytellers and performers are the new historians bringing to those wanting to listen a new version of the past. Gullah history is not static; their forms of history reflect the African retentions, the influences of Christianity and slave culture in the United States, and their community-constructed Gullah culture.

The Gullah enters the mainstream from outside of the Gullah community as well. Those with no Gullah ancestry are called “cumyas” as the Gullah people say, respect and engage the usable past of Gullah heritage in a variety of ways. One of the most famous black women in the world, Beyoncé, used Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* as inspiration for her film *Lemonade*. The popularity of *Lemonade* enhanced interest in the already planned re-release of Dash’s film across the nation in late 2016. President Obama’s establishment of the Reconstruction Era National Monument that designates Gullah spaces on St. Helena Island and Beaufort, SC as vital components to our national history are continuing to create a national recognition of the Gullah usable past, and emerging academics, such as myself, are turning to the

Gullah and the Sea Islands to create new scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Brooks wrote that “the past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals” (223) and when moments are taken out of that storehouse what emerges is a Gullah narrative, one that is vital to extending our national construction of history. Brooks poses to his readers a rhetorical question in his essay, “If, then, we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own?” (224). The answer to his question is seen in the reclamation of history and the modern interpretations of Gullah culture or a Gullah Renaissance. The ways in which the Gullah have entered the popular or mainstream draw from their history, traditions, and culture; all pieces that trace back to the cultivation of the cash crop of rice on the Sea Islands.

#### **DA BUCKRA MAN OWN DE FIEL’: GULLAH CULTURE GROWN FROM RICE**

Rice cultivation began on the Sea Islands during the colonial period and scholars have concluded that, without the West African slaves, rice would not have succeeded in the South. Peter Woods’s work “...substantiates the position that African slave tutored planters in the requisite skills and technologies to create one of the New World’s most lucrative plantation economies” (“African Expertise” 2). Wood and Littlefield effectively eliminated the previously held idea that the planters were solely responsible for the success of rice on the coastal islands. The scholarship of Woods and Littlefield, as well as David Doar and James Tuten, is vital to inserting rice into the history of enslaved labor, making it as important to the understanding of the antebellum economic systems as cotton or tobacco. Their work effectively eliminated the assertion that the planters were solely responsible for the success of rice on the coastal islands, yet their writing lacks an emphasis on the roles of women. An investigation of the recent scholarship on rice, written by women, concludes that the success of rice production depended heavily on

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<sup>5</sup> In terms of emerging and established scholars creating Gullah works in addition to my dissertation, Dominique Hazzard’s 2011 honors thesis “The Gullah People, Justice, and the Land on Hilton Head Island: A Historical Perspective” and Katie White’s 2015 dissertation on Gullah women and foodways, titled “Food on the Move: Gendered Representation, Cultural Sustainability, and Culinary Practices of Gullah Women” represent a small example of new scholarship.

a female-centered African heritage and affords me the opportunity to interrogate those systems and heritage that form the basis for Gullah womanism.

The overall governing practices of slavery positioned bonded women, writ large, as producers and reproducers. Former slave Abbie Lindsay stated, “they [slaves] worked, in a manner of speaking, from can to can’t, from the time they could see until the time they couldn’t” (Lerner 15).<sup>6</sup> Simply put, all enslaved women worked and they worked as hard as men. Jacqueline Jones determined, “in the 1850s at least 90 percent of all female slave over sixteen years of age labored more than 261 days per year, eleven to thirteen hours each day” (19). Enslaved women worked long hours on plantations regardless of geographic location. Slave women “cut down trees to clear lands for cultivation. They hauled logs by leather straps attached to their shoulders. They plowed using mule and ox teams and hoed, sometimes with the heaviest implements available. They dug ditches, spread manure fertilizer, and piled coarse fodder with their bare hands” (White ch. 4) in addition to planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops. Gullah women spent the majority of their time as laborers in the rice fields but also as reproducers of slaves within the underlying sexual economy.

Judith Carney supports Wood and Littlefield’s conclusions, highlighting the connections between African rice farming practices and the rise of rice culture in the United States. Her investigation of the rice culture goes further than Wood or Littlefield to reveal the impact African women had on the development of rice as a major plantation crop in the southern states. Her central thesis argues that “women’s labor proved crucial to the rice-cropping system” and from “the earliest period of the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans had noted the crucial role of females in African rice cultivation” (Carney ch.4). Rice was “ooman’s wuk” and West African women were tasked with much of the labor and management of rice fields to ensure sustenance in many societies. For example, “The mangrove rice area [in Gambia] involved a gender division of labor by task, with women in charge of sowing the seeds, transplanting, weeding, and sometimes harvesting, and men in charge of field preparation and maintenance” (Carney

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<sup>6</sup> Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* chapter “Plantation Realities” details the work conducted on the plantation, in the fields, domestic work and artisan work as well as the daily lives of plantation slaves.

ch.2). In areas where “rice assumes a less central role in the regional food system, the crop is often farmed *solely* by women” (Carney ch.2; emphasis mine). Similarly, Carney found “a division of labor by sex among rice growers in Sierra Leone, with women involved in hoeing and harvesting the crop” (ch.2). Carney’s research situates the work of rice and the sustaining of crops for the family and village in West Africa with the success of crops in the antebellum Sea Islands with women. Looking back to the nature of West African, or even more specifically Sierra Leonian methods of rice cultivation, allows me to investigate the ancestral connections Gullah women retained.<sup>7</sup>

When West African women reached the Sea Islands, they brought with them what Carney calls “specialized forms of knowledge” that became the basis for rice as a successful cash crop. This begins with how the rice was planted. On the Carolina plantations, sowing in trenched ground, open trench planting, and tidal rice cultivation were the primary ways to begin the process of growing rice. The sowing of rice in trenches required women making a small opening in the ground that has the proper amount of moistness for the seed to be embedded into the soil. Women on the rice plantations of Carolina and Georgia did this with their feet, similar to the method used in West Africa. Elizabeth Pringle’s description of enslaved people’s preparation of rice for open trench planting in the 19th century corresponds with the contemporary rice planting system in Sierra Leone as well as with descriptions from Carney’s research: “Young men brought the clay water in piggies [sic] from the barrel and poured it over the rice, while young girls, with bare feet and skirts well tied up, danced and shuffled the rice about with their feet until the whole mass was thoroughly clayed” (Pringle 375). Over 150 years later, the 1991 documentary *Family Across the Sea* profiles the similarities in culture and rice production between South Carolina and Sierra Leone. In the film, women in Sierra Leone are seen performing the task of sowing rice in exactly the same manner as their foremothers; the methods of sowing rice changed little over

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Opala found in his research that over 60 percent of Africans who arrived on the Sea Islands were brought from the region of Sierra Leone. Wood, Politizer, and Carney leading me to argue that the rice cultivation practices that came to the Sea Islands were in large part from the Sierra Leone region support his determination.

centuries in Sierra Leone. Although rice is no longer a viable crop on the Sea Islands, the connections to traditional practices is still relevant in the memory of the Gullah community.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, women conducted the day-to-day maintenance of the rice fields during slavery and used the hoe as their primary agricultural tool (Carney). Women used both a long handled and short handled version depending upon the task performed, both in West Africa and on the Sea Islands. The long handled hoe enabled women to prepare the fields while the short handle was used for detailed work and weeding. Diana Berry refers to the plantations journals of the Elizafield Plantation where the required amount of sowing be done at "the rate of three bushels per acre for new lands and from two to two and one-half bushels per acre for other fields" (32). Women always did the task of sowing, as Duncan Heyward observed, "women always did this work, for the men used to say that it was "woman's wuk" (qtd. in Berry 32).

The use of the hoe has an African heritage, however, historian Lewis Gray suggests the use of hoes in the Carolina Lowcountry agricultural system is a "West Indian method" which he claims to be "fixed in local custom rather than technological necessity" (Carney ch.4). His observation tells two distinct stories. The first that the use of the hoe is cultural, thereby women who used this tool in their West African work lives brought the knowledge required to use this tool with them to perform their required duties rather than utilize another form of planter technology, continuing their cultural norms. The second draws upon the connection between the West Indies and West African slaves. Much of the historical research places a link between the Caribbean and Carolinas in the colonial days of slave trading, and it is no wonder that rice makes an appearance in the West Indies.<sup>9</sup> Carney notes in her article "From Hands to Tutors: African Expertise in the South Carolina Rice Economy" that rice growing was not

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<sup>8</sup> Currently, there are many plantations that are attempting to re-grow Carolina Gold rice, albeit in smaller amounts, as a method of educating the public on the importance of rice cultivation on the Sea Islands. Please see the website on Middleton Place (<https://www.middletonplace.org/>) as well as Plumfield Plantation on the Great Pee Dee River (<http://www.carolinaplantationrice.com/>)

<sup>9</sup> The connections between South Carolina, the Sea Islands, and Barbados are a large area of study. While I do not elaborate on this here, Hilary Beckles *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* and Warren Alleyne & Henry Fraser's *The Barbados-Carolina Connection* discuss the similarities found in both communities in more depth.

limited to West Africa and the southeastern coast but found on Caribbean plantations as well, although not to the scale found in South Carolina and Georgia. Rice played a minor role compared to crops such as coffee and sugar in the Caribbean but was found frequently in the provisional gardens maintained by slave women (Morrissey). This further emphasizes the staple nature of rice; women cultivated this cereal in order to feed their families with the ingenuity brought with them from Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The last skills needed in the of processing rice - using a mortar and pestle and winnowing rice - are the most important skills that West African women possessed that resulted in the economic success of rice on the Sea Islands. During the colonial period and well into the 1800s, enslaved women used the mortar and pestle to remove the hulls from harvested rice.<sup>11</sup> Mortar and pestle pounding required great skill and was often a two-woman job. Working in tandem, women lifted up and down a heavy wooden stick with a large circular bottom rhythmically to remove the hulls while still maintaining the integrity of the rice rather than producing broken or small damaged pieces of rice. In West Africa, for example, women pounded and winnowed enough rice for a family's meals on a daily basis. Yet, in the United States, the expectation of large scale production forced women and men to the fields, despite any gendered systems that may have been in place in Africa. On Lowcountry plantations throughout the 18th century, enslaved women pounded between 40-45 pounds of rice a day, cumulatively creating millions of pounds of rice for export. When the need for more rice required mass production, the gender designations from West African cultures were dismantled and men were assigned the unfamiliar task of pounding rice along with the women. This task may seem simple, but in order to complete the task successfully, extreme skill was required. What the merchants gained in quantity of rice, they lost in quality; African men were never able to gain the same skill level as African women in milling rice.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Carney further cites the appearance of rice as a food staple in Surinam, Mexico, and other southern states such as Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. These are all areas where enslaved West Africans and their descendants relocated after Emancipation. Rice remains central to the foodways in these areas as well as the Lowcountry.

<sup>11</sup> Hand pounding was the primary system used in the Lowcountry until Jonathan Lucas developed the water-driven mill in the late 18th century.

<sup>12</sup> Please see Diana Berry and David Littlefield for more discussion on the quotas of production on the Sea Islands and Judith Carney for more information on the daily uses of rice in West African villages.

After pounded the rice, women poured it onto a fanner basket for winnowing. Winnowing removed the indigestible hulls or chafe by tossing the rice up and down in the wide shallow basket. During this process the basket was gently tilted back and forth, tossing the rice upward and outward, allowing the husk to be blown away by the wind. In addition to actually winnowing the rice, Gullah women had the task of creating the winnowing baskets from light grasses and palmetto leaves. Anthropologist Dale Rosengarten has established that the weaving style of winnowing baskets and the process of winnowing passed down from South Carolina slaves to their Low Country-born African Americans descendants, are West African, not Native American, in origin (Rosengarten). Coiled grass baskets are a tradition in many parts of West Africa. Descendants of enslaved Africans who came to the Lowcountry made baskets for winnowing and other purposes in the 1700s. It is a tradition continuing among Gullah women on the Sea Islands today and is recognized as an art form, mainly by Gullah women.

In the plantation journals and advertisements for slaves, men and women were labeled either “prime”, “full”, “3/4” or “1/2” hands, delineating the amount of work they were able to produce. To be rated a “prime” field hand meant that the slave was assigned certain tasks based upon their capabilities and their amount of daily production was the benchmark by which other field slaves were categorized. Generally, a prime field hand produced two to three times more than the other slaves who were given lower standards and labeled as “full hand”, “half hand”, or “quarter hand” (“Plantations Practiced Modern Management”).



In this 1857 advertisement for slaves in Charleston, of the fifty-five prime negroes being sold the majority of those were women. This would indicate and support the research that women were the primary field hands on the rice plantations. Thus, those planters seeking slaves for the rice fields were typically purchasing women. Daina Berry states, “...planters purchased women more frequently than men for a variety of reasons: cost, their capacity to bear children and *their labor skills*” (17).

Judith Carney's use of the phrase "specialized forms of knowledge" to categorize the labor of Gullah women is positively yoked to their expertise as rice cultivators. They knew from their African foremothers how to grow rice successfully for their homes or villages. In most cases, men and women labored side by side with little gender distinction in the fields. Many of the required tasks to ensure a successful crop, and thereby wealth for the planter class, were performed by both sexes. It is no wonder that in Truth's speech as well as many of the collected narratives of former slaves, women prided themselves on working just as much and as hard as men.

Each of the pieces of "specialized knowledge" Gullah women brought to the success of rice cultivation makes them, as Diana Berry argues, created a skilled labor force. Citing examples from plantation journals and agricultural records, Berry suggests that skill at its most basic, requires the ability to do something well but on a more specific level to Gullah women, skill was required for the specific tasks associated with rice cultivation. Berry borrows from the classifications by Charles Joyner and Kenneth Stampf regarding what constitutes "skill". Stampf concluded that "skilled" was a "relative term" in regards to agricultural labor and Joyner stated specifically in relation to rice growing "that one could plausibly argue that virtually all the field hands on a rice plantation should be classified as skilled laborers, in view of the level of competence required in rice culture" (rpt. Berry 19; *Down by the Riverside* 59-60). Joyner's comments and research on rice culture offers a detailed discussion on the agricultural process and African retentions found within the process of rice growing. His discussion, while valuable to my understanding of the processes and skill required producing rice does not separate nor emphasize the roles women played within those frameworks. He falls back on similarities found in the previous scholarship and continues to disavow the importance of women in rice production.

Diana Berry productively suggests that the skills demonstrated by women in the field rivals those designated as trade skills. Trade skills, such as blacksmiths and carpenters, were typically occupations and labels reserved for male slaves, making them monetarily more valuable than women who worked in the fields. Berry rails against that idea by proposing that the agricultural skill set that Gullah women possessed arguing those abilities drawn from their African heritage made them as valuable if not more so

than men. In this way, Berry echoes Barbara Christian's idea that the proper naming of a thing brings it into existence. By naming Gullah women laboring in the rice fields as skilled, Berry is bringing their previously denied usable past into existence by shifting the narrative and placing a label of value onto the devalued history of women as rice producers. Essentially, it is time we recognized that women were purchased because of their skills.

One of the key elements of rice production and perhaps where the contributions of women are further overlooked is in the systems that govern production itself. Slaveholders in the Lowcountry utilized the task system rather than the gang labor system. Gang labor required slaves to work from sun up to sundown in rows in the fields. There was little designation of time, and the first gang set the pace of production. Although the gang labor slaves were divided based on their ability to complete certain work, little attention was paid to talent, by contrast, slaves within the task system were assigned tasks based on their ability. This is not to say that the task system was not utilized on other plantations. On the contrary, Berry's research suggests that in some variation, the task system was used in upcountry Georgia as well as Virginia plantations. Nor was the implementation of the task system meant to imply that the fieldwork required for rice production less intensive. This was just the opposite: the production of rice was just as difficult if not more so than cotton or tobacco. The task system was not just a profitable system for cash crop production but in the care and maintenance of slaves. Masters allowed slaves to perform tasks and then have the remainder of the day to work their own pieces of land. This practice benefitted the master's bottom line. Owners of Sea Island slaves did not have to provide their slaves with as many rations or necessities to ensure the survival of their slaves because of the time allowed via the task system. On a typical day, once the assigned task was completed by a slave, the remainder of the day was left to him or her allowing for personal work such as gardening, cooking, and other domestic tasks to maintain survival, without the intervention of slave masters; the plantation owners benefitted from the ability of slaves to be somewhat self-sustaining.

Yet the use of the task system as the primary mode of operation afforded slaves a small portion of freedom. On the Sea Islands, this led to the development of a cooperative slave community. Although

white masters enacted the task system, slaves made alternations to the masters' labor system from their own "basic African work orientation" and "their own sense of appropriateness" (*Down by the Riverside* 58). This may seem incongruent with the common notion that the master and the overseer strictly governed slave labor, and they certainly maintained their authority on Sea Island plantations. Because the environment of the Sea Islands was suitable for the spread of tropical diseases, white families could not live on their Sea Island plantations year round. This absence required that rice plantation owners relinquished some of the power and did so willingly if the production values remained plentiful. When planters were absent, they depended upon an overseer, and on some plantations the overseers were slaves. Thus the modes of African labor structures could be added to the master's structure without detection or resistance. The primary objective of the rice plantations was production; if the task system and African alterations did nothing but enhance that production, masters appeared to take little issue with these changes.<sup>13</sup> The implementation of the task system, while yoked to field production, helped to shape the Gullah slave communities, which I will address later in this chapter, but it also encouraged the reproduction of slaves to populate these isolated plantations. A reproducer is the second role a Gullah woman played and the creation of slaves was just as important as field production.

Alfred Conrad in *The Economics of Slavery and Other Studies in Econometric History* discusses the labels of "prime, full,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , and  $\frac{1}{2}$  hands" but with helpful information to understand the gender difference found within these terms, particularly the highest designation of "prime hand". Conrad writes, "The prime field wench was one-half to two-thirds as productive as a prime [male] field hand" (62). Conrad's point suggests that women could be designated as "prime" but their productivity levels were less than men because of one reason: pregnancy. Women, he proposed, who were late into their pregnancy could not accomplish the same amount of work as they would when not pregnant or in the early stages of pregnancy. Thus, their field work and economic worth was less due to "the time lost by the female during the pregnancy and postnatal periods" (Conrad 62). Despite the time away from the fields

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<sup>13</sup> I make these assumptions from Berry as well as Joyner's discussions on labor systems, but also based upon the narratives of Fannie Kemble, Weston's "Rules of Plantation Management" and J.H. Easterby's collection of the Allston family papers, *South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F.W. Allston*.

due to pregnancy – a time away that was by no means guaranteed to the slave woman – enslaved women on rice plantations comprised the majority of “prime” field hands. As such, this means that women bore the brunt of work in the rice fields. Economy and wealth drove the labeling of labor with categories of gender designated as planters saw fit. Conrad’s findings lead me to suggest that the word ‘woman’ and the connotations associated with it were reinserted into the economic language when the needs of the master shifted from production to reproduction.

**A T PRIVATE SALE.** a prime WENCH, 25 yrs old, warranted a complete washer, ironer and clear starcher.  
 A very likely Wench, warranted a complete washer, ironer, clear starcher, meat and pastry cook, of an unexceptionable character in all respects; with her son, a likely Mulatto Boy, 15 years old, a waiting-man about a house.  
 A very likely brown Girl, of mild and pleasant manners, 23 years old, a complete seamstress, with her son, about 1½ years old. Apply to:  
 T. N. GADSDEN, Broker,  
 Auctioneer, and Gen. Com. Agent,  
 N. W. cr. State and Chalmers sts.  
 S-11 3f

In contrast to the previous advertisement, this notification published in 1848 in the *Charleston Courier* promoting the “private sale” of a slave woman does not promote her abilities in the field but rather allude to her sexual reproduction value.

The “private sale” repeatedly labeled the slave woman for sale as a “wench”. In the coded language of slavery, “wench” had sexual connotations and the master specifically purchased female slaves labeled “wenches” for sexual use. Gregory Smithers’s research on slave breeding includes a discussion on the evolution of the word “wench” as it related to black women. While the word has its origins in Middle English as “...relatively benign, referring to a girl or young woman”, the term shifted in the fourteenth century to denote “a servant girl whose qualities included fickleness, unsteadiness, and loose morals” (105). Those who came to the colonies brought with them the negative connotations of this word, but within the racialized context of slavery, the term further shifted and in 1837 the first appearance of “wench” in connection to black women appeared as “nigger wench” (*Slave Breeding* 105-106). To use the word wench in the first six words and capitalized throughout the above advertisement, the seller suggests that sexuality is the foremost trait of enslaved women.

Slave women in the United States, as opposed to other regions such as Brazil and the Caribbean where sugar was the primary cash crop, were able to repopulate the slave workforce through natural

increase rather than dependence upon importation.<sup>14</sup> As such, white owners began exercising power over black reproduction very early in the creation of the colonies, which became a mechanism of physical, mental, and emotional control.<sup>15</sup> The passage of the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves in 1807 legislatively forced plantations owners to continue management of slave reproduction and devise pointed means of sustaining the enslaved labor force. This juxtaposition of production and reproduction gave birth to the sexual economy of slavery. Female slaves were primarily laborers, and masters dictated every aspect of women's lives to further economic profits, including reproduction. As former slave Henry Cheatam recalls, "Lots of times I'se seen him [the overseer] beat my mammy, and one day I seen him beat my auntie who was big with child, and dat man dug a round hole in de ground and put her stomach in it, and beat and beat her for half hour straight till de baby come out right here in de hole" (Yetman 55). The pull between production and reproduction, or the sexual economy of slavery, is demonstrated clearly in this graphic recollection. The hole dug to allow the pregnant slave to lay flat against the ground in order to be beaten provides a striking image of the tension between women as producers in the field and of slave bodies; the hole protects the natal property from violence ensuring future wealth, yet little concern is paid for the body housing the unborn child.

Adrienne Davis writes that the sexual economy of slavery was a secondary, albeit no less important, aspect to the political economy that governed the lives of enslaved women. Sexual economy encompasses the multilayered effects of political economy, race and gender oppression with the emphasis on reproduction or "reproducing the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced sexual labor to countless men of all races" (Davis 105). Davis's two-fold definition of the sexual economy of the antebellum south is both simple and complex; simple in that she straightforwardly links reproduction to

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<sup>14</sup> Barry Higman's *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica* (1976), Hilary Beckles text *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Women in Barbados* (1989), and Cheryll Ann Cody's paper "Age Specific Fertility Rates for Enslaved Populations: A Comparison of Low Country South Carolina and St. Ann's Parish Jamaica" (1992) detail the lack of fertility among slave women on sugar plantations, sighting the harsh labor conditions of sugar production and the climate as possible reasons for this decrease in slave repopulation.

<sup>15</sup> Paula Giddings details the history of Africans arriving in America and the first child born in 1624 as well as the first legal decision regarding a black woman *Re: Davis*, 1630 where the legal status of the child was shifted from father to mother, ensuring that child born of enslaved women remained enslaved (*When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* 35).

production, yet complex in that production and reproduction are a tangled web of racial subjugation and gender oppression that began with labor. Thelma Jennings, based on her research of female slave narratives, suggests “female bondage was more severe than male bondage because these women had to bear children and cope with sexual abuse in addition to doing the work assigned to them” (Yetman 46). In much the same vein as Davis and Jennings, Deborah White argues that, “female slave bondage was not better or worse, or more or less severe, than male bondage”; however, she similarly determines “from the very beginning of a woman’s enslavement she had to cope with sexual abuse” and as such their enslavement was “different” (ch.4). It is clear that sexual abuse went hand in glove with the desire for slave owners to attain more slave bodies through forced breeding practices, both on the mainland and on the Sea Islands.

Cheryll Ann Cody’s study of slavery and childbearing shows slave women in the United States were the most productive workers in the fields even while enduring frequent and often difficult pregnancies. Her research explores the connections between annual cycles of rice production in the Lowcountry and the rate of pregnancies demonstrates the seasonality of childbearing. Drawing upon records from the Ball family, including the Comingtee Plantation slave work calendar of 1849 and the birth records from 1735-1865, Cody effectively argues the planting calendar for rice production, the fall harvest time where labor was less intensive and the food more plentiful, as well as the seasonal pattern for disease in the Lowcountry greatly impacted the rate of procreation on Sea Island plantations. The late autumn months, November, December and January, had the highest rates of conception with 168 of the 513 children born on the Ball Plantations over this time (Cody). This coincides with the harvest and what was called the “lay-by flow” time where the work to prepare the fields for the next season occurred. Additionally, the food provided to the slaves was more plentiful after the harvest and masters encouraged slave marriages during this time.

Combined, these elements led to more children being conceived, but, this did not ensure healthy infants to replenish the slave workforce on any of the rice plantations and the Ball plantations, specifically. Although the rate of conception was higher during November, December and January,

children were born during the hardest time for enslaved women on the rice plantations: August, September and October. During this time slave women did the hoeing, thrashing, gleaning and gathering of the rice from the fields, arduous labor that required hours of standing in water up to the knee or higher and exposure to disease, particularly malaria. The production-related hazards led to the highest rate of infant mortality during the “gathering time” when many women were in the third trimester of their pregnancy. The Ball family archives show that infants born during the “gathering time” died more frequently than those born at other times of the year; Cody’s reading of the Ball birth records found “460 deaths per 1,000 live births” between 1800-1864 (72). Infant mortality was quite high on all plantations, but on the rice plantations where disease was more prevalent, nearly half of all infants died before their first birthday (Roberts 42). More often than not, the need to create wealth through the crop harvest outweighed the prospect of the birth of a healthy child; owners and overseers would reduce the workload for pregnant women, but not at the sacrifice of guaranteed wealth from the harvest. Jacqueline Jones sums up the quandary of female production and reproduction by stating “slave owners faced a real dilemma when it came to making use of the physical strength of women as field-workers and at the same time protecting their investment in women as child bearers” (18). Childbirth on the Sea Island plantations was in part to repopulate those spaces and add to the labor force. This is the economic narrative. Viewing field labor and reproduction on the Sea Islands through the lens of the historical narrative is useful, but when we examine these pieces through the Gullah lens, what is revealed are the building blocks for Gullah culture that is a blending of the retentions of multiple African cultures brought together under slavery.

Much of the history written about the Gullah from the 1800s to the mid- nineteenth century dismissed the value of their African heritage, not only in the success of rice, but in all aspects of Sea Island slave life. Melville Herskovits's *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) and *Man and His Works* (1952) were the first in-depth studies to reveal that the majority of African retentions are found on the "Gulla Islands", particularly in the areas of folklore and language (Politzer 10). Recognizing that Herskovits's data was, at least, sixty years old, Politzer revised Herskovits’s chart of Africanisms based on his extensive research of the culture. His findings were slightly different in some areas, such as social

organization and non-kinship institutions where he found, even more, Africanisms, yet his research supports Herskovits's findings that folklore and language are "very African" in origin. I draw attention to this research as an extension on my materials on rice cultivation and practices because the historical value of the Gullah culture lies in their African retentions. Ambrose Gonzales paid little attention to Africanism when collecting Gullah folklore, stating that the heritage or traditions brought from Africa equate to "the original scant baggage of the Negro slaves" (*The Black Border* vi). This shows that those previously writing about the Gullah downplayed these Africanisms and rejected what the Africans could bring with them to the United States. That was then. What we see now within the productions of the Gullah Renaissance is an emphasis on these African retentions, making rice the foundation that shapes the Gullah usable past. The Gullah Renaissance could also be viewed as activism, whether this directly connects to advocacy groups or indirectly through the children's show *Gullah, Gullah Island*. As I continue to outline the pieces that will form my praxis of Gullah womanism, activism is an essential component, and I turn to the forms of black women's activism in the forms of black feminism and womanism to connect black women with Gullah womanism.

### **FEMINISM OR BLACK FEMINISM: SIMILAR NAME, DIFFERENT PRAXIS**

"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies and eaten alive"  
~ Audre Lorde - *Sister Outsider*

On the second day of the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth offered one of the first public assertions of black womanhood constructed by black women - rather than for them by white men, black men, or white women. After two days of silence, Truth repeatedly asked those in attendance, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" Her extemporaneous speech laid claim to her womanhood, to her personhood, and to the dignity of all black women. When I read her speech, I wonder if her question was really "ar'n't I a woman...despite my race?" She alluded to this sentiment at the beginning of her speech when she began with the word "nobody": "Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place" (248). Being denied these simple courtesies

spoke profoundly about the conditions of her life as a *slave* woman: “I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns...I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well” (248). Womanhood for the slave woman was decidedly different than for her white counterparts. Unable to participate in the overarching structures of true womanhood - the nineteenth century concept that women were suited only for domesticity and living their lives by the principles of piety, purity, and submissiveness - enslaved women were forced to construct an alternative model of womanhood.

Truth’s speech, although it is has become a mainstay within feminist framework, is not a solely a feminist speech by the standards of white feminism. This is a belief that I share with scholar Phyllis Marynick Palmer who addressed the continual appropriation of Truth’s words for the feminist cause when she stated, “White feminists who may know almost nothing else of Black women’s history are moved by Truth’s famous query, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ They take her portrait of herself...as compelling proof of the falsity of the notion that women are frail, dependent, and parasitic” (167). The assumption that Truth’s words were meant to encompass all women, regardless of color, is a common albeit inaccurate misconception. Truth’s question to the audience was not wholly about her status as a woman, but her position as a *black enslaved woman*. White feminists who laud her speech as ‘feminist’ conveniently ignore the vital issues of race and class at work within her words and instead focus on the oppressive sexism in the nineteenth century. Truth’s speech, when heard through race and class lenses, is no longer a vital element of mainstream feminist rhetoric but is instead the foundation of black womanhood. Black womanhood, writ large, is built upon three tiers: first their race; secondly, their status as enslaved - or in a more modern sense - marginalized peoples, and lastly gender. I suggest a similar conclusion I proposed with the connections between rice and the usable past when marrying the usable past to the activism of black women. An analogous marginalization is revealed when examining the chronology of women-centered activism. As feminism became part of the national landscape, black women found themselves, continually denied full entry into the community of women fighting against collective forms of gender oppression in the United States. Creating their own organizations and their own names for themselves,

allowed black women to create a usable past of black womanhood through black feminism and womanism.

In the United States, feminism developed out of the abolitionist movement to bring into existence the principles of equality that this country is founded upon and expand the phrase, “all men are created equal” to include black and white, men and women. The passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment ending slavery signaled in the minds of the female abolitionists the next logical step – enfranchisement for all. Much to their dismay, this did not occur. The male leaders of the Republican Party shifted their focus to the black man, and the women’s right to vote became a casualty of the political decision makers. Republicans believed “the demand for women’s enfranchisement was a burden they could not carry if they were going to overcome the enormous opposition to black suffrage” (E. DuBois 59). Wendell Phillips reinforced this position in a speech discussing women’s rights: “I hope in time to be as bold as Stuart Mill and add to the last clause ‘sex’!! But this hour belongs to the negro. As Abraham Lincoln said, ‘One War at a Time’; so I say, ‘One Question at a Time’. This hour belongs to the negro” (rpt E. DuBois 60). Phillip’s statement made it clear that black males were more important to the political agenda of the Republican Party than white women. When the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment was passed in 1869 and ratified on February 3, 1870, declaring that no citizen “based on race, color, or previous servitude” could be denied the ability to vote, there was no mention of white women. The women who were once valuable assets to the Republican Party’s push for abolition and unified under their previous mantra of “without regard for sex, race, or color” were now dismissed. The women of the American Anti-Slavery Society in response formed the Women’s Suffrage Movement with the goal of unifying women to petition actively for the right to vote. Their efforts came to fruition in 1920 with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, but the seeds of racism within the mobilization of women had been planted.

The impacts of the racial divide initiated by the Republican Party were felt over the fifty years between the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> amendments. White women use this gap as evidence of the privileging of race over gender, despite the fact that the amendment made no mention of *black* women. The division was clearly seen in one of the largest events of the suffrage movement, the 1913 Women’s

Suffrage March or the Woman Suffrage Procession. Much like the 2017 Women's March on Washington, the National American Woman Suffrage Association intended the event to be a "march in spirit of protest against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded" and was scheduled the day before Woodrow Wilson was sworn into office (Sheridan 12). Women came to Washington, D.C. every year since 1869 to petition for the right to vote; the 1913 event was the most significant and most publicized event for the NAWSA with 5000 attendees (Sheridan 12). Black women were represented in the event but not without resistance.

In a 1974 interview with primary organizer Alice Paul, she discussed the challenges of having black women participate: "...then we had a foreign section, and a men's section, and a Negro women's section from the National Association of Colored Women, led by Mary Church Terrell... Well, Mrs. Terrell got together a wonderful group to march, and then, suddenly, our members from the South said they wouldn't march... that was the greatest hurdle we had" ("I Was Arrested, Of Course"). Black women were last in the procession, per Paul's recollection. White women first, white men second, then black women and men. Accomplished black women such as Ida B. Wells-Barrett and Mary Church Terrell led black women from across the country and all walks of life; many black female organizations were represented, including the newly formed Delta Sigma Theta sorority. Alice Paul's remembrance of the resistance by southern female delegates who would not participate if black women were present, demonstrated that as much as the beginnings of feminism were intended to be inclusive of all women, black women were not warmly welcomed.

Feminism continued beyond 1920 and was reenergized in the 1960s when white women raged a battle against sexism on multiple fronts including equal pay and reproductive rights. The objective outwardly was equality for all women, but again, the second wave of feminism left women of color on the fringes. Ellen Pence stated, "Our idea of including women of color was to send out notices... we never came to the business table as equals. Women of color joined us on our terms" (46). Duchess Harris expanded this sentiment when analyzing the creation of the National Organization of Women: "many upper-middle class, educated white women drew an analogy between sexism and racism, and the founders

of NOW declared that they wanted to form ‘an NAACP for women’” but ultimately, black women were of little concern to the organization (287). “Women’s Lib”, as the second wave of feminism is often named, was a movement of middle class, white, college-educated women with a flippant connection to racialized oppression. This idea is demonstrated clearly in the guiding text of the movement - Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*.

Published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* was the spark that reinvigorated the women’s movement. Friedan’s text opened the eyes of white women to the oppressive nature of home and family, or what she described as “the problem that has no name”. Women, who were encouraged to return to home after World War II, began asking, “is this all?” regarding their roles as wives and mothers. In a move backward to true womanhood, “the suburban housewife...was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world”; in having a nice home, a husband, and children, American women “had found true feminine fulfillment” (Friedan 18). Friedan argues that the image of the contented housewife was a myth perpetrated by corporations and advertisers, suggesting “the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*” and “somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being a housewife” (Friedan 243). White women were being consumed by the drudgery of housekeeping, Friedan argued, but were also objects to be consumed by their husbands and children. *The Feminine Mystique* was “a very specific cry of rage about the way intelligent, well-educated women were kept out of mainstream American professional life and regarded as little more than a set of reproductive organs in heels” (“The Feminine Mystique at 50”).

The book was a call to action for women in the same position as Friedan, but in no way represented all American wives, mothers, or women. bell hooks accurately critiques Friedan: “Friedan never wondered whether or not the plight of college educated white housewives was an adequate reference point by which to gauge the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of all women in American society” (2-3). Gail Collins who wrote the introduction to the W.W. Norton 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary

edition of *The Feminine Mystique* as well as several articles on Friedan's book reaffirms hooks's point. She acknowledges that although Friedan was writing during the Civil Rights movement, she has almost no mention of African American women, and working class women are only referenced as possible housekeepers or nannies for the married educated women entering the professional workforce ("The Feminine Mystique at 50"). Collins points out these exclusions, but she also excuses them: "In a strange way, all those deficits are the book's strength" because the book "is supremely, specifically personal" to Friedan's thoughts and life ("The Feminine Mystique at 50"). This may be the "strength" of the text because of Friedan's intended audience or because she chose to write from the comfortable position of her own life, but this supposed strength in my opinion is its weakness.

As white women organized to fight for the equality of all women, there remained an absence of many types of women and a consistent privileging of the individual or self. Friedan's choice to engage gender oppression from her own status as white, middle class, and educated as well as the words on signs demanding reproductive rights for all women with the phrase 'my body, my choice' reflect this duality. Because of this dichotomy, it is no wonder that 'women' is not the all-inclusive word in relation to feminism it is intended to be. The Women's Liberation movement continued the pattern of marginalizing black women, essentially reaffirming but reframing the labels of 'historical' and 'nonhistorical' Hayden White provides for us. No matter how well intended Friedan and others were in the inclusion of black women, ultimately the 1960s women's movement did not focus on the social and economic issues facing women of color or working class women. Only three black women – Pauli Murray, Aileen Hernandez and Shirley Chisholm – were involved in the founding of NOW (National Organization of Women). Murray was asked directly by Friedan to be part of the organization, yet Murray recognized that NOW did not translate into all women.<sup>16</sup> Overall, black women began "to sense that the struggle into which they

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<sup>16</sup> Duchess Harris combines two quotations from Murray in her article "From the Kennedy Commission to the Combahee Collective: Black Feminist Organizing, 1960-80" that express my point. Murray stated at a 1965 meeting of NOW that "If it becomes necessary to march on Washington to assure equal job opportunities for all, I hope I will not back down from that fight" but in that same year, Murray wrote in her article for the *George Washington University Law Review* titled "Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII" that violence African

poured their energies, [the Women's Movement], Black Liberation and the Civil Rights Movement, may not afford them rights they assumed would be theirs when the civil rights cause triumphed" (Murray, qtd in Lerner *Black Women in White America* 595). These realizations led to the creation of The National Black Feminist Organization in 1973 and the term "black feminism."<sup>17</sup>

The creation of black feminism stood in contrast to mainstream or white feminism, although the binding issue between the two versions remains the battle against sexism. The struggle against gender oppression is a subjugation black women in the United States have faced since slavery but experienced differently than their white counterparts. Black feminists realize that sexism is woven through race and class oppression and the three forms of oppression cannot be separated. The sexism that drives mainstream feminism is not simplistic 'male versus female' issue for the black feminist, and the racism and classism that permeates our society is a shared struggle for both women and men. The racism within the second wave of the feminist movement is, perhaps, as simple as white women not being able to comprehend the multiplicity of oppressions experienced by black women. White women, while confined to social constructs of true womanhood and suburban housewifery, did experience gender oppression. This oppression, however, was not the same experienced by black women and was essentially the difference between "historical" and "nonhistorical" in relation to women. White women in the United States did not have a history of systemic racial and physical abuse, they did not have their children taken from them at any moment, nor did they experience the extreme labor of work that is the history of enslaved women. White men oppressed white women, but white male oppression effected black men as much as black women. When black men did or do engage in misogyny, it is not with the same institutionalized power to oppress as white men. These are all aspects that white feminism failed to

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American men and women faced was far worse than that of white women. She wrote, we are in "different phases of the fundamental and invisible issue of human rights" (see Harris 287).

<sup>17</sup> Black women felt a similar exclusion with Black Power movement, active during the same time period. Michelle Wallace wrote of feeling tangential and ornamental within the Black Liberation movement. She stated, "I thought the Black movement would offer me much better [but] I discovered my newfound freedoms being stripped from me" ("Black Feminist Search for Sisterhood" 9). Instead of equality, Wallace found gender oppression where she was convinced to strive to "have babies and clean house" (9-10). For Wallace and many other black women, it appears the Black Power Movement was a rerun of antebellum patriarchy.

acknowledge, and it is that lack of understanding that made the first and second waves of feminism a failure for black women. Black feminists realize this racial disconnect and, although they actively work to end patriarchal practices, the fight is not wholly against black males. The shared racial oppression as well as shared history of enslavement between black men and women fostered a broader version of feminism for black women.

Black women sought to name themselves, away from the racial confinements of feminism and the sexist rhetoric of Black Liberation with the creation of The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973. NBFO was “committed to the struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression” (Hull, 13). In the minutes of the NBFO, they stated the mission of their organization as “explor[ing] the multiple ways in which black women in the United States have suffered from the combined forces of racism and sexism” and through combining aspects of feminism and the Black Power movement would reveal “all talents and creativity of Black women to emerge strong and beautiful” (Harris 289). The formation of NBFO leads to the Combahee River Collective a year later where those who identified as black feminists “observed that their vision for social changes was more radical than the NBFO” (Harris 295) because in their vision of black feminism, the specific needs of black lesbians needed to be focused upon. As the Combahee River Collective statement reads, black feminism is grounded in “the historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life and death struggle for survival and liberation” (13-14). What is most important in this piece of their statement is the phrase “historical reality”. As I stated before, one of the stumbling blocks of mainstream feminism was the inability for white women to understand the historical narrative of African American women because it was not their experience. Yet for black women, a more complex knowledge of that history is needed to understand the multiplicity of oppressions in their daily lives. Even though black women know these oppressions because they live them, black feminism proposes that they must engage the past and seek out their history to understand the present.

The call to recognize the “historical reality” by black feminists is essentially a call to construct a usable past for black women. Van Wyck Brooks’s written statement regarding the usable past - “But is

this the only possible past? If we need another past so badly, is it inconceivable that we might discover one, that we might even invent one? If we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own?" (220-224) - could have easily been one spoken by Gloria T. Hull, Barbara Smith, or Patricia Bell Scott at the 1974 Combahee River Collective meeting. In order to fully understand the legacy of enslavement for black women, it is imperative that stories of female oppression common within the narratives of slavery be sought out and brought out of the shadows of the accepted historical narrative, done through research or through imaginative creations. Black feminist look back the activism of Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Frances E. Harper, Ida B. Wells-Barrett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell to name a few. From the 1851 speech by Truth to the creation of NBFO to the current writings of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks created a heritage of black women's activism illustrating in their work the unique repercussions for black women living under a racist, sexist, and economically exploitive system constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The "nonhistorical" narrative of slavery creates a usable past and allows black women to combat the controlling images of black women created by the dominant power structures, which is another goal of black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins details these images, such as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the jezebel, in her 1993 text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. She effectively argues that portraying black women as stereotypes "helps to justify U.S. Black women's oppression" and "challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought" (*Black Feminist Thought* 69). The act of stereotyping any group is a "part of the generalized ideology of domination," but for black women "the authority to define societal values is a major instrument" of elite power groups and in exercising that power have effectively "manipulated ideas about Black womanhood" (69). Not only do these images project the power to define black women, but these images are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). Black feminists dismantle these images by constructing narratives that "represent and reconstruct history" (Carby *Reconstructing Womanhood* 22) and in doing so allow their reality and voices to be heard. Barbara

Christian argues “the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society’s *Other* (*Black Feminist Criticism* 160) and as such, maintaining this long history through the construction of controlling images becomes justification for the multiple forms of oppression experienced by black women in the past and present.

The controlling images of black women changed to conform to the needs of those in power and with the goal of keeping black women in positions of subordination. The most often used images of black women, as “mammy”, “matriarch”, and “welfare mother/welfare queen” are a chronological succession of created images based upon how the dominant power structures view black women in those historical moments. The mammy, created in slavery, represented “the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume *for them*” (73; emphasis mine). When the “mammy” image of black women as caregivers for white children and homes, often visually portrayed as large, dark colored making them essentially asexual, ended with slavery and thereby no longer served white male goals, her image was shifted into the “matriarch”. The “matriarch” was a “failed mammy,” in part because black women rejected the submissive structures of slavery and, no longer required to attend to the white children, began taking care of her families with strength and dignity. Instead of recognizing that strength, the “matriarch” image became of dominance and destruction, documented in what is commonly known as the Moynihan Report.

In the officially titled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, this government report essentially argued, per Collins, “that African-American women who failed to fulfill their traditional ‘womanly’ duties contributed to the social problems in Black civil society” (*Black Feminist Thought* 75). In this concise overview of Moynihan’s thesis, Collins points to what I would suggest is a dominant rhetoric, particularly echoes of the cult of true womanhood that the male dominant society put in place for white women; this connection back to “womanly duties” was never “traditional” for black women. Suggesting that black motherhood is the reason for “social problems” shifts the blame squarely onto black women rather than taking into account the destruction of black families by slavery, the “reversed roles” of black men and women at that time, or the legacies of racism, classism, and sexism. The Moynihan report created the image of the black mother as a matriarch with negative and destructive connotations without

investigating the detrimental effects of enslavement. The matriarch stereotype was and is a negatively constructed fiction, but one that is pervasive and deeply connected to the “welfare mother/welfare queen” images.

The “welfare mother/welfare queen” connected images suggest the black woman is still a bad mother, but instead of dominating her home, men, and children as a matriarch, she has become content to live off of the aid provided by the government. Collins writes, “creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty” (*Black Feminist Thought* 80). The “welfare mother” takes what is given to her while the “welfare queen” exploits the system for her own gain. Again these images are convoluted. Black women have been systematically positioned outside of economic success and often relegated to low paying employment. The creation of the “welfare mother” stereotype by the dominant society, like the matriarch, fails to recognize the economic position of black women, instead choosing to further blame them for their economic status and in the case of the “welfare queen” go so far as to vilify that status. Each of the stereotypes constructed to express black womanhood places them outside of the hegemonic narrative, becoming symbols of what was “deemed wrong with America” (*Black Feminist Thought* 80). Actively combatting the controlling images of black women is a battle against the sexism but is also directly related to the issues of racism and classism. Women of color are simultaneously and equally relentlessly affected by these three forms of victimization; black feminism was in part created to combat these forces and the images attached to them (Gordon).

Just as the first and second waves of mainstream feminism had little interest in the legacies of slavery or the stereotypes created to govern black women’s lives, they also had no concern regarding the ways in which black women drew from African traditions. Black feminism does recognize and utilize the ancestry of Africa in formulating their structures of feminism. Patricia Hill Collins proposes, through the construction of the stereotypes of black women, that the dominant culture wants us to believe that black women have no connection to African worldviews. Collins argues this claim is as just as fictitious as the stereotypes of black women and simply not true. She goes on to suggest that if black women relied more on the spaces they create while in the company of other black women, like those found women in many

African societies, black women would find more restorative spaces while combatting these controlling images.

Paule Marshall's essay "Poets in the Kitchen" explores the spaces women create based upon rejecting the dominant narrative for black women. In her essay, Marshall writes of hearing her mother and other Bajan women discuss their position within the events of the day, such as Roosevelt's policies or the rise of Hitler, in the small kitchens of their New York apartments. These national and international spaces of politics are places where their presence meant little in the larger scheme. Marshall believes, however, that their conversations were valuable to their self-definition. "There was no way for me to understand it at the time, but the talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional," Marshall states "Not only did it help them recover [from their work lives] but it restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth. Through language they were able to overcome the humiliations of the work day" ("Poets" 6). The community formed among women of African descent allowed those women to sustain themselves while surrounded by oppression and erasure from society. Marshall credits hearing these women talk as the catalyst for her fiction and how she defines herself as a writer. The women sitting "around the table long ago...taught me my first lessons in the narrative art," Marshall writes at the conclusion of her essay, "They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen" (12). What is seen in small moments of female community Marshall experienced in the kitchen is a usable past. The usable past does not have to be historical to be reclaimed and utilized; personal narratives also inform the usable past. Marshall's mother and her friends' conversations are just as impactful as discovering a long lost diary or historical documents, particularly for black women, the day-to-day narratives of their elders and ancestors inform the usable past.

Black feminism is activism allowing black women to break the silence, develop a voice, and to "talk back" concerning black women's representations in the dominant discourses; they created a usable past with which to reconstruct the dominant narrative of black womanhood (Collins; Carby; hooks). In the critical anthology *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. proposes Anna Julia

Cooper is the “prototypical black feminist whose 1892 book of essays *A Voice from the South*, is considered to be one of the founding texts of the black feminist movement” (1). Many consider Zora Neale Hurston’s 1936 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as one of the earliest black feminist novels and the starting line for modern black female authors. Barbara Smith, co-editor of *All the Women Are White, All Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*, began the formal examination of literature written by Black women from a Black feminist lens in her 1977 essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” Unsure of how to begin this process, she states what she believes is the Black Feminist approach to literature and what it must include: “A Black feminist approach to literature...embodies the realization that the politics of sex, as well as the politics of race and class, are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (154). Smith’s critical paradigm investigates the themes, styles, and concepts central to the lives of Black women within literature. Essentially, nothing in the literature of black women is accidental or coincidental; it is purposeful and meaningful while still staying connected to the theoretical paradigms that govern black feminism. My analysis of two of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems affords me the opportunity to discuss the ways in which black women writers addressed feminism and the needed shift toward black feminism through creative words that are both purposeful and meaningful, but also political.

In Brooks’s poem, “the mother,” we see a creative representation of one of the core issues at stake for the second wave of feminism - reproductive rights – but, her poem crosses the barriers of race and class erected within the second wave. The poem is about abortion, an act of choice that has no racial or class requirements – all women of all walks of life can be impacted by this difficult choice. Her poem expresses that connection among women as a group, making “the mother” a literary work that encompasses the collective nature of feminism and the fight for women’s rights. Brooks published “the mother” in her 1945 collection of poems *A Street in Brownsville*, almost thirty years before the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* made the choice to have an abortion legal. By writing a poem with this topic so many years before abortion became a debated and ruled upon the topic in the Supreme Court, Brooks was

tackling not only a political issue but engaging in the core foundations of feminism where the political becomes personal.

Brooks imagines the thoughts and feelings associated with having an abortion. By using “the” in the title, her work combined with the generic word for “mother” and she is beginning with linguistic clues that the topic she addresses inside of the poem is both collective and personal. “the mother” could be any mother and in this way, the title connects to the joint battle for reproductive rights among all women. The women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s believed all women should be able to choose to have or not to have an abortion and be able to make that choice safely and legally protected. Abortion, when Brooks published this poem, was illegal and dangerous, making the title about all women and the politically collective nature of this issue. Moreover, the title is in lowercase with no capital letters. Seeing the format of the title, to me, connects to both the ideas of true womanhood where being a mother was expected and therefore not unique as well as to the Friedan’s text where motherhood was simply a consuming role women were forced to play.

The repeated use of “you” throughout the poem also contains a duality of collective and individual. The first line, “abortions will not let you forget” contains “you” as though Brooks is speaking to one woman. Using the plural ‘s’ attached to the word abortion in this line suggests to me a duality. She is speaking to one woman who perhaps has had one or more than one abortion but also to the multitudes of women who have had abortions. The second line suggests that this mother or any mothers making choices about what to do with their bodies retain the memory of the unbirthed child: “you remember the children you got that you did not get” (2). Brooks is playing with form to demonstrate that women who choose not to have children also choose to have them, and that choice blends through her lack of a separation indicator such as a comma or a semi-colon between “got” and “that you did not get” (2). Further, this construct presents in one line how blended a woman’s life can be. We make one choice in at one point in our lives and then different choice during a different time period. Women who have abortions and then go on to decide to take a pregnancy to full term “remember” all of their “children” (2).

The memories of those children, “that you got that you did not get” are then described in detailed language from birth to adulthood in lines 3-10. Brooks does this to add emphasis to the word “remember” in line two and the ways in which having an abortion is an act that stays with the individual. Brooks gives us moments in what could have been the life of the unborn child. At first “damp small pulps with little or with no hair” to designate birth, then childhood with phrases such as, “buy a sweet” and “the sucking-thumb” and finally adulthood possibilities as “singers and workers” (6, 7, 4). In each line where life is described, the reader is also fully aware that this is imaginary because of the abortion. For example, in line four, the “singers and workers” are not alive because they “never handled the air.”

The poem then becomes fiercely personal as the mother addresses the aborted fetuses directly, telling them in line 23, “Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.” Brooks, in a single line, addresses the internal conflict a mother must live with after an abortion. The “deliberateness” is in the physical act of removing the fetus from the womb, but “not deliberate,” suggests this decision was not made with malice nor was it done without thought. The lines before and after line 23 bookend the guilt and sorrow felt after an abortion. Lines 11-22 use figurative language to echo the culpability of her actions. Direct words such as “killed”, “stole”, and “poisoned” are yoked to criminality, and the use of “sinned” suggests a moral deficit linked to having an abortion. Brooks uses more subtle words as well but with the same damning emotion felt after having the abortion. Words like “stilted” or “seized” or “contracted” do not have the same immediate weight of wrongdoing, but these are still negative. Before line 23, Brooks places the internalized guilt that is wholly personal onto the page; as readers, we are allowed entry into that space through her use of direct and indirect language of guiltiness.

After line 23, Brooks continues a tone of culpability but also ownership over the choice that was made by the woman. Brooks states this plainly, “Though why should I whine, / Whine that the crime was other than mine?” (24, 25). Using the word “crime” is two-fold with “crime” referring to the laws outside of the poem that makes having an abortion an illegal action and to the wrongdoing the mother inside of the poem feels for having aborted her child. She cannot “whine” about this, and it is telling that Brooks uses that word twice so closely in the poem’s structure. The woman who chooses to have an abortion

cannot make sorrowful outward sounds about her choice nor can she complain about it; she has to live with it, alone. The use of “whine,” rather than a word like “cry,” furthers my reading and suggests to me that Brooks is telling us that abortions must be internalized emotionally. If the child had been born but died, the mother could express herself outwardly and that emotion would be socially and publicly acceptable. The child that Brooks describes as “never made” (28) or “...that never giggled or planned or cried” (32) cannot be mourned anywhere but inside of the woman who had the abortion.

The final three lines of the poem return to directly speaking to the never-born children, but in these lines, Brooks moves away from figurative language or metaphors. These lines are clear – despite the abortions the mother loved her children. The repetition of the word “love” affirms that clarity. Love is used three times in these closing lines, beginning with the phrase in line 33, “I loved you all.” Brooks’s use of “love” and “all” in the same line suggest the unconditional love that is yoked to motherhood, and even though these children had their “births” (18) stolen from them, the love from the mother for those children remains. The unconditional nature of love is seen again in line 34, where the mother states, “I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you.” As simple and clear as this stanza is, the use of “all” has more than one meaning. On the one hand, “all” suggests that the mother of a child never born can still love every part of that child, but on the other, using the word “all” particularly in the last line, alone, expands the word. In this usage, “all” ends the poem horribly sad and mournful not just for the lost children, but also for the women who must live with having an abortion. Brooks does not choose a political side in her poem, it is not pro-life nor is it pro-choice, but what she does accomplish is creating a space for women who have had abortions to mourn and for those who have not to empathize with those women. “the mother” is a collective and individual poem, representing feminism as a whole, but her work is also black feminist and in much of her writing, she addresses the multiple oppressions of the black community and of black women. Poems such as “The Bean Eaters,” “We Real Cool,” “The *Chicago Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock,” and her novella *Maud Martha* reflect the lives of African Americans, both men and women. It is in the short poem “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” where black feminism for me is clearly and succinctly displayed.

“The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” is a connection to her larger poem “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” “A Bronzeville Mother” addressed the highly publicized murder case of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. Brooks’s 1960 response to the case through her poem had the political undertones of her previous work as an artist writing during the 1950s and through the Civil Rights Movement. The poem, however, does not position the “Bronzeville Mother” as a black mother, reflecting Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till. Rather, Brooks adopts the voice of a white woman, to examine the southern racial and patriarchal structures that were the catalysts for Till’s death. Brooks condemns in her poem the men who murdered Till and were acquitted of that murder. Brooks creates a southern, white, female voice, presumably Carolyn Bryant, the white woman who accused Till of wolf whistling at her thereby causing his death. Brooks placed the larger issue of responsibility for racial violence against young black men onto white women who allowed these structures to continue which is in opposition to the all-inclusive ideology of feminism.

In “A Bronzeville Mother,” Brooks shows the reader these gender and racial designations in the second stanza where the woman, Carolyn Bryant is described as a “milk-white maid,” Emmett Till as “the Dark Villain,” and her husband, Roy Bryant as “the Fine Prince.” These descriptors make the white woman someone to be rescued from the treacherous young black male. Throughout the poem, the story of the Emmett Till case is told from the perspective of the Bryant family. Molly McKibbin argues that “Brooks’s depiction of the woman must be considered not with a dichotomous understanding of guilt and innocence, but in a way that recognizes degrees of both” (669-670). McKibbin’s argument in her essay, “Southern Patriarchy and the Figure of the White Woman in Gwendolyn Brooks's 'A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon',” goes on to discuss the forms of southern patriarchy that allowed for Till’s death as well as the dual role women play within that structure. While I will not analyze “A Bronzeville Mother” here, I do suggest that as a precursor to “The Last Quatrain,” Brooks’s poem is in line with the critique of feminism that led to the construction of black feminism. “A Bronzeville Mother,” as McKibbin suggests, is not a clearly defined statement against

white women, nor is it in defense of them, but it does raise questions about the unity of women against patriarchal systems, regardless of race. In the last stanzas of the poem, presumably after the offense and murder of “the Dark Villian” and trial and acquittal of “the Fine Prince,” Brooks writes “She did not scream. / She stood there. / But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower, / And its perfume enclasped them – big,/Bigger than all magnolias” (144-148). Brooks, in the first two lines, presents a woman who does nothing while racial injustice surrounds her, but then in the next three lines, she fully recognizes the injustice is there and she hates her “Fine Prince” for committing that act. If, as I propose, these few lines encapsulate the disregard for racial oppression in the feminist movement then “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” is firmly grounded in the effects of racial as well as gendered oppression found in the praxis of black feminism.

“The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” begins with “after the murder, after the burial” in bold letters, signaling a time shift and a geographical move away from “A Bronzeville Mother.” After Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi, Mamie Till fought to have her son’s body removed from the state and brought back to Chicago. There she held an open casket viewing of the body so that everyone, from the people in the church to those who saw pictures from the funeral, could experience the sight of his mutilated body and understand the pain felt by a black mother when her black son is so violently taken from her. “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” is a short poem - only eight lines long - but Brooks packs the space with the wide-ranging grief of black motherhood. The first line begins with “Emmett’s mother” indicating to those familiar with the Emmett Till case Mamie Till. Rather than assume that fact, I read in Brooks’s structure, as the implication that “mother” is generic. I make that claim because so often Emmett Till’s name and case are used when cases of violence and death befall young black men such as the 2012 case of Trayvon Martin. The use of “Emmett’s mother,” in my mind, connects to the many mothers of murdered black boys who are acknowledged by name but their grieving mothers are not.

The poem uses colors to draw connections to racial violence. The use of “red” in line three, “she sits in a red room”, and again in line eight, “through a red prairie,” Brooks is alluding to the color of

blood and the bloodshed of Mamie Till's son because of racism in the South. She also uses that color, I suggest, to express the blood connection between mother and son. When line three is read in conjunction with line four – “drinking black coffee” – the “red room” and the “black coffee” connects mother and son, racially. The second use of red in the poem in the last line reminds the reader of the connotations of bloodshed, particularly when that line is read in conversation with “Chaos in windy grays / through a red prairie” (7, 8). Emmett Till's murder was widely publicized, but the culture of fear through intimidation, Jim Crow laws, black codes, and lynching was common in the Southern states. Therefore, “chaos” becomes a single small word to represent the multilayered senseless nature of violence in the South. Couple with the image of “windy grays,” Brooks is alluding to the feeling that racial violence could occur at any time. The despair, loss, and sorrow that is simply in the “windy grays” suggest these are found both below and above the Mason-Dixon Line as does the use of “red prairie”; racial violence is not limited to the southern states “And she is sorry” (6). Grieving black mothers have a common emotion of feeling somehow responsible when racial violence ends their child's life. Her sorrow is entwined with that gray guilt and the word “sorry” seems to evoke her powerlessness to protect her child from the threats of racial violence. Brooks's poem speaks directly to the issues at stake for black feminism. Brooks's poem further dismantles the controlling images of motherhood that Collins outlines and the destruction of those stereotypes that degrade black women and motherhood are a primary concern for black feminist. “the mother” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” are connected by motherhood, and by extension gender, but separated by race – precisely the difference between white and black feminism.

Black feminism is an effective construct to combat the triple oppressions of race, class, and gender, but the naming of this theoretical framework as “feminism” is problematic. In the visualization of the name alone, it appears to be a connection to or an offshoot of feminism. My discussion on the controlling images of black women suggests those simple phrases to describe black feminism are not wholly true, yet, the tethering to feminism cannot be denied in the naming. Black feminism is rooted in the experiences of women of African descent living in the United States and as such is limited to that geographical and historical narrative. This is not to say that forms of feminism do not exist outside of the

United States, yet there is many forms of feminism are found throughout the diaspora. The choice by women of color in the United States to self-define as a black feminist is theirs alone based upon how they view themselves. I did not use the word feminism in naming my theoretic structure for reading representations of Gullah women in the literary works of black women because it is not an effective descriptor for Gullah women. Too much of the previously discussed narrative of feminism, as well as the need to use qualifying labels to become part of feminism, stand in direct opposition to Gullah worldviews. There are at least seventeen prominent kinds of feminism, including Black, Latino, and Lesbian, that allow those outside of the foundation of the term feminism, i.e. white, to be identified and recognized as such.<sup>18</sup> The qualifying first word allows those women entry into feminism, but the need for a designator attached to that framework is precisely why feminism would not be a viable word for my paradigm. Essentially, I propose women of color are taking two steps forward and one step back by continuing to use the old word feminism as a part of new frameworks. When the word feminism was removed from labels of women-centered activism, a fresh and more inclusive word was developed to allow women of the diaspora to more accurately name and define themselves - womanism.

Womanism is a framework credited primarily to Alice Walker and her definition of womanism is the most well-known.<sup>19</sup> Womanism is for all women of color, applicable to their daily lives, and the average act of reading through a womanist lens sparks a renewed sense of self that can be incorporated into day-to-day life. Layli Phillips suggests that the use of day-to-day or employing the word “common” in reference to womanism is the difference between academic language and lived language. Phillips proposes that Walker is “defying the definition, labeling, and elaboration of women’s resistance activity in the exclusive and limited label of “feminist” (xx). To be a feminist or even a black feminist, therefore, leaves too many women out of that framework simply because they are not part of a small academic space

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<sup>18</sup> *The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History* highlights and defines these terms, yet in each of those entries, readers are directed back to feminism. Through those indicators, the editors and writers of this text see the different forms of feminism as such and the definition of feminism as the origins for those forms.

<sup>19</sup> Layli Phillips argues in her introduction to *The Womanist Reader* that Walker was also the first black female writer to incorporate the word ‘womanist’ into literature. In my own research, albeit brief, I have not found any earlier use of womanism/womanist in black women’s writing. Phillips suggests Alice Walker’s short story “Coming Apart” is where womanist is first used.

and Phillips's conclusions suggest that black feminism is just as limiting as mainstream feminism and is perhaps why the word has no resonance for the average black woman; womanism thus becomes a more inclusive word.

Alice Walker, through the use of creative language, defines womanism in more depth in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*:

1. From womanish. (Opp. Of "girlish". i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometime loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, yellow and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." (238-239).
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

Walker's four-prong definition has many pieces to unpack. Walker uses the phrase "black feminist" in the opening section of her definition, falling back upon that familiar term I suggest, to use a recognizable term prior to dismantling that construct with her own vision of black womanhood. Patricia Hill Collins

makes the connection between the two terms by stating, “Black feminism is the process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanistic vision of community...Alice Walker’s preference for the term ‘womanist’ address this notion of solidarity of humanity (*Black Feminist Thought* 39). Black feminism and womanism, per Collins, share a common goal of “solidarity” among all humans.<sup>20</sup> Womanism is linked to gender as well as the historically produced matrix of race and class that governs black womanhood. This is perhaps the reason these words are often considered synonyms for one another but womanism and feminism are not the same.<sup>21</sup>

Walker honors black folk traditions in the first section. This is a common idea between black feminism and womanism; however, the difference lies in the construction of Walker’s use of phrases common to the black community. Using the lexicon of the black community allows Walker to privilege the folk that came before her and whose wisdom she validates by borrowing from them. “You acting womanish” and “You trying to be grown” are commonly heard phrases in the black community. Using these phrases privileges the expressions found in the black community. Additionally, attaching those phrases specifically to the language of black women “mothers to female children,” speaks to motherhood, yet the use of “female children” suggests this is not limited by biology. “Female children” are the responsibility of all women, and using the word “mothers” dismantles the previous negative stereotypes of black motherhood and indicates the community aspect of womanism. The last words of this section are “Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*” further legitimizes those folk expressions. Previously the dominant culture dismissed folk expressions as simplistic. Walker complicates that idea of folk language with these words and the use of periods to add visual emphasis.

Walker continues to scaffold her theory with a simple word “also” yet tackles a more nuanced topic. Walker believes a womanist is “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.” This draws attention to the sexuality that in the early formation of black feminism was not addressed. As

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<sup>20</sup> Collins is one of the most insightful scholars regarding the condition of black women in the twentieth century by myself and a generation of black women respects her work. It is with a bit of hesitation that I challenge Collins, but it is difficult to see past the problematic nature of this statement given the historical narrative.

<sup>21</sup> *The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History*, defines womanism as a “poetic synonyms for Black feminist and Black feminism” and the last line of their entry reads, “see also Feminism, Black” (639; 641).

well, this section suggests the act of loving is not a mutually exclusively word linked to sexual acts with men or women; it is a deeper and more valuable connection between men and women. Attached to this disregard of the heteronormative implications of love is the acknowledgement of difference within the idea of unity. Walker writes that “every color flower” is represented in the metaphorical garden of humanity. It is those different flowers that make the garden a beautiful and the garden an inclusive space. Through this expressive language, Walker is expressing the humanity that encompasses us all while at the same time understanding the shared experiences of women make them a unique piece. A womanist simply loves and loves many things, per Walker’s third definition. What is most telling there is the italicized emphasis on “*loves* the folk,” again placing a clear emphasis on black history.

The final line of Walker’s theory “womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender” is the statement viewed as the truly defining aspect of womanism. Dorothy Grimes contends that this analogy “is apparently intended to capture the texture and intensity of ‘womanist’ as opposed to feminist” while conversely Maria Lauret believes “that the final component of Walker’s definition absorbs the white feminist into her project and radicalizes it to the point of no return” (168; 248). I would go further to suggest that “purple is to lavender” can be seen as similar but must also be viewed as different, all the while being appreciated and recognized for their differences. This phrase acknowledges the connection to lesbian women with the use of “lavender” while keeping with her previous ideology that love has no strict boundaries for womanists. This final line is a metaphorical representation of the inclusivity that feminism and black feminism lacked. Womanism is a more inclusive term to encompass all women of color and I propose the shift in naming of a female centered paradigm from feminism to womanism is more appropriate when discussing the collective experiences of women of African descent and Gullah women.

### **THE NEW PRAXIS OF GULLAH WOMANISM**

My theoretical frame adds a descriptor to womanism by placing Gullah before that word. This is not to say I do so to establish Gullah women as a subdivision of womanism in the same way that ‘black’ alters feminism. I choose to name my theory as Gullah Womanism without the need to differentiate in

order to be included. I do not need a designating word to precede womanism in order to utilize that term in my paradigm. I use the descriptor of Gullah before the word womanism, however, not to reform it, but to respect and recognize the Gullah heritage that informs my theory. I am combining the usable past of Gullah women's history as rice laborers and the construction of Gullah communities that resulted from the systems of rice production through the paradigm of Africana womanism outlined by Hudson-Weems to form the basis for Gullah womanism.

Clenora Hudson-Weems coined the term Africana Womanism in 1987 after years of research on the topic of naming Africana women. Her theory's origins began in the late 1980's while a doctoral candidate at the University of Iowa. Her doctoral dissertation combined this research with literature and her thesis entitled "The Tripartite Plight of Black Woman – Racism, Classism and Sexism in *Our Nig*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*" was completed in 1985. Her dissertation led to additional writings, debates, and attendance at conferences on the topic of Africana women on both the national and global scale in terms of their current shared societal existence. Hudson-Weems's original name for her theory was Black Womanism, but she changed the name to Africana Womanism to reflect the diasporic unity of all women of African descent. Clenora Hudson-Weems discusses extending Walker's paradigm to encompass Africana or women throughout the diaspora in her discussion of naming her theory:

Upon concluding that the term "Black Womanism" was not quite the terminology to include the total meaning desired for this concept, I decided that "Africana Womanism", a natural evolution in naming, was the ideal terminology for two basic reasons. The first part of the coinage, *Africana*, identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base – Africa. The second part of the term, *Womanism*, recalls Sojourner Truth's powerful impromptu speech "And Ain't I A Woman", one in which she battle with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood. (Hudson-Weems 22-23)

She came to this name to bring together our community as a whole to face the ongoing struggles of racism, economic oppression while still being aware of sexism. “In short, the reclamation of Africana women via identifying our own collective struggle and acting upon it is a key step toward human harmony and survival” (Hudson-Weems 31). Hudson-Weems proposes eighteen distinctive elements to Africana Womanism that give a more academic shape to Walker’s poetic definition of womanism. These eighteen characteristics work in concert with each other, and this diagram lists and visually expresses those elements.

	<p>The diagram in Hudson-Weems text is set against the background of a globe and an outline of the continent of Africa. This is a significant choice by Hudson-Weems as African people and their culture have been spread over the entire world. The two elements at the top “self-namer” and “self-definer” are positioned there indicating that these two aspects are the most important pieces and what ultimately will inform my ideology of Gullah Womanism. As well, ‘authentic’ is in the center of the diagram, again purposely placed to visually state that this trait is at the heart of the theory. Finally, ‘mothering’ and ‘nurturing’ are at the bottom, the base of drawing, holding up the diagram as these two traits hold up our community. This diagram is a visual, very poignant component to the eighteen elements of the theory of Africana Womanism.</p>
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Marquetta L. Goodwine, or Queen Quet as she is known among the Gullah community, wrote in her poem, “Rising In Spite of a Captive Environment”: “Rice is something to which we’re all akin/I guess we’re both seeds thrown in the wind/Rice falls together at just the right time/Just like Gullah’s polyrhythmic hand claps and syncopated rhymes.” (*Frum Wi Soul Tuh de Soil*). The opening to her poem places emphasis upon rice, not as a mechanism of wealth for planters, but as a vital part of the culture of the Gullah people. Josephine Beoku-Betts notes, “they [Gullah women] appear to be the custodians of food rituals and practices that perpetuate the group’s survival” (537). I understand Queen Quet’s poem and Beoku-Betts’s conclusions poem suggest that rice, which began as a cash boon for others, is the primary linking factor between Gullah labor and the formation of Gullah womanism.

Rice is the connection between the Gullah and their West African ancestors. Emory Campbell writes of rice that, “The key word [linked to those who all themselves Gullah and Geechee] is rice, a most enjoyable staple in the daily diet of every Gullah family. The fact that West Africans had been growing and preparing delicious rice dishes five thousand years before the slave trade began in not lost on our love of rice dishes” (x). The systems put in place to govern antebellum rice production, particularly the task system, allowed descendants of West Africa to infuse rice into the cultural identity of the Gullah community. During slavery, the task system afforded slaves time to secure food from the surrounding land and plots that were designated by the master or overseer. As a result, both men and women were responsible for gathering and preparing food for the community. Men hunted, fished, and made intricate casting nets for shrimping in the coastal inlets while women maintained plots of vegetables, fruits, and herbs. It was the task, typically, for women to prepare meals. In her ethnographic research, Beoku-Betts concludes that the foodways still present in Gullah communities are reflective of slavery.

Many of the methods used to cook rice as well as the recipes that incorporate rice are a vital part of Gullah heritage. The participants in her study, Gullah women ranging from thirty-five to seventy-five, all spoke of the ancestral food practices found in both West Africa and the Sea Islands and the foundational nature of rice in Gullah homes. “Rice was described as the central part of the main family meal by at least 90 percent of the women I interviewed,” Beoku-Betts writes, and a few of the comments

she adds to her essay reveal the importance of rice. Precious Edwards stated that, “Rice is security. If you have some rice, you’ll never starve. It is a bellyful. You should never find a cupboard without it” and Carla Bates states, “Many people feel if rice isn’t cooked, they haven’t eaten” (543). Rice is synonymous with Gullah culture and as storyteller Carolyn “Jabulile” White told me over dinner at the Heritage Days celebration, “We some rice eatin’ folk! When you say Gullah you really sayin’ rice” (White).

Even though the feminist movement did not adequately address the issues of women of color, Friedan’s famous phrase “the problem that has no name” resonates with Africana women to a certain degree in that naming is a key element in solving any problem. The shift from feminism to womanism, as Patricia Liggins-Hill discusses, “best describes the racially based perspective of many black women’s rights advocates” (1370). A name is powerful, serving as a foundation for our being. The ability to define a people is a power that the dominant culture holds tightly in order to keep those they marginalized in a position of subjection. When a marginalized group defines and names themselves, under the terms they decide upon, the result is always a rupture to the authoritative power structures. Self-naming, or to borrow from African cosmology, *nommo* is the ability to use the “generative and productive power of the spoken word” in order to create self (Asante 17). Critic Barbara Christian provides a succinct understanding of *nommo*: “it is through *nommo*, the correct naming of a thing, that it comes into existence” (*Black Feminist Criticism* 158-159). African Americans have been denied the ability of self-naming and self-definition since the days of slavery. In a key scene in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sixo is explaining to the schoolteacher that he did not steal the shoat (or young pig) even though he killed, butchered, and ate it. The schoolteacher says to him “And you telling me that’s not stealing?” His “clever” explanation – that he killed the animal to improve the rye crop and to “give you more work” – did not convince the schoolteacher. Instead, it resulted in a beating, primarily to show Sixo “that definitions belong to the definers – not the defined” (98). The concept of *nommo* allows the self-creation of identity, allows self-definition, and solidifies presences where one was previously unseen.

I borrow from the African concept of *nommo* to draw attention to the power with which self-naming holds but also what naming signals to those who hear that identifier and the starting point to my

own construction of naming my theory Gullah womanism. Hudson-Weems proposes “self-namer” is “a key step, which many of women of African descent have failed to address” (35) particularly because the white society has named us, for us, without understanding us. They have given us many names over the years, all without emphasis upon our womanhood and/or our culture. As well, the racial, class, and sexual inequalities discussed previously have prevented accurate naming of Africana women. Hudson-Weems believes the time has come for women of African descent to properly name themselves.

For Hudson-Weems, the Africana woman is “her own person, operating according to the forces in her life and thus her name must reflect the authenticity of her activity and her culture, not that of another” (56) and therefore must name herself, but the second element of Hudson-Weems’s theory of “self-definer” fits hand to glove with self-naming. Barbara Christian’s previous statement is in reference to Audre Lorde’s *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* and this additional proclamation of self-definition rings true with the Africana Womanist agenda: “this subtitle...is a crystallization of a persistent and major theme in Afro-American women’s literature [and her life...and is] our attempt to define and express our totality rather than being defined by others... for Afro-American women, this natural desire has been powerfully opposed, repressed, distorted by this society’s restrictions” (Christian 159). Historically, the Africana woman fought to define herself but found it nearly impossible to do so. An acceptance of Hudson-Weems’s theory enables the African woman to connect with her roots, defining herself not by the dominant culture’s standard, but from her reality and her cultural heritage.

For the purposes of continuity and clarity in my paradigm, I have chosen the more widely known term of Gullah, but women on the Sea Island self-identify based upon their connection to the two terms for descendants of slaves living on the islands: Gullah or Geechee. Gullah has become the mainstream name, but there is a difference between the two names that lies in geography. Those who reside in the South Carolina islands most often call themselves Gullah, while those on Georgia islands call themselves Geechee. Cornelia Walker Bailey calls herself a Geechee because of her ancestry on the Georgia island of Sapelo, but further expands that in the subtitle of her memoir: *a Saltwater Geechee Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia*. This is because Georgia island residents distinguish themselves by their

proximity to the coast as either “freshwater” or “saltwater” Geechees.<sup>22</sup> As the distinction between Gullah and Geechee, Freshwater Geechee and Saltwater Geechee demonstrates, the choice to name oneself based upon heritage is a distinct mode of self-identification. The Africana womanist “alone defines her reality” within her social, geographical, and cultural space (Hudson-Weems 58). Using the more common name of Gullah is one that is used by some Sea Island residents outside of the community, in part to draw a recognizable connection to the Sea Islands as a whole. Within the specific communities, however, the distinctions are commonly heard and heard with pride. The Gullah woman defines and names herself based upon her ancestral and cultural heritage.

An Africana womanist is rooted in cultural heritage, and she is family-centered in her thinking and actions to express those legacies. The family in Africana Womanism begins with the immediate family unit of mother, father, and children but also includes the extended family whether biologically related or not, as well as the surrounding community. For Africana womanism to be rooted in an expanded form of family, rather than a narrow definition, rejects the Americanized nuclear family while reflecting African worldviews. As discussed, the feminist movement was centered on either the individual female or the collective female’s place within society, without being a fully committed to a communal family structure. Africana Womanism rejects this because it is historically and culturally inaccurate. Hudson-Weems alludes to this rejection when quoting Rose Acholonu who suggests that the “individualism” in feminism and American social constructs “is a philosophy of life alien to Africans and therefore quite antithetical to our communal way of life” (qtd. in Hudson-Weems 58); essentially, black feminism borrows from but does not use African worldviews as their primary and grounding ideology.

I borrow the phrase “African worldviews” and how I implement it into my discussion from Winston Grady-Willis’s textbook *The Struggle Continues*, designed for students as an introductory to Africana Studies. Grady-Willis proposes four interconnected worldviews found in African societies.

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the different naming practices on the Sea Islands, please see Philip Morgan’s *American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* and *Sapelo Voices: Historical Anthropology and the Oral Traditions of Gullah-Geechee Communities of Sapelo Island, Georgia* – a published study by Norma Harris and Karen Smith where Cornelia Walker Bailey helped to provide information for their study.

African worldviews, per Grady-Willis, includes a respect and reverence for the elders and ancestors; a tradition of spirituality and religion that challenged the sense of patriarchy that informs other contemporary major religious traditions; depends upon the oral tradition to transmit knowledge from one generation to another through the creation of folklore, myth, epics, and songs; and lastly is founded upon the collective or communal where the group takes precedence of the individual member. Grady-Willis also discusses the community of African women within African societies, suggesting that women-centered spaces were places of nurturing, community growth as well as ways for African women to create identities. His discussion is intended to be an overall ideology found in African societies and therefore not found in all of them. His brief overview of African worldviews is useful in understanding how Hudson-Weems uses African ideologies in her theory construction and the ways those worldviews are found in the Gullah philosophies of community and family.

Hudson-Weems's paradigm extends to the family to include the collective communal family because an extended definition of family remained "one of the most important survival mechanisms" (Hudson-Weems 59) during slavery. As African women moved forward from post slavery into modern times, the family was still of foremost importance. Even though many women were forced to work menial low paying jobs outside the home for survival, the cohesiveness of the family was all-important to her. Yet this forced economic dilemma only served to create a rift between African men and women. Many men were unable to find jobs or support their families, thus creating the emasculation of African men and the horrible and inaccurate myth of the black matriarch created in the 1960s. With those two elements and numerous others, the African family suffered greatly with "the end result [being] the ultimate breakdown of the African family and spirit" (Hudson-Weems 60). Adopting the African Womanist characteristic of being family-centered would allow African women to rebuild the fragmented African family. By extension, for those African women who do not have immediate families, i.e. husbands and children, they must then adopt this characteristic and enact it within their neighborhoods and communities. Overall, "the movement of the African womanist is then from the workplace to the home place" (Hudson-Weems 61); although this movement is spiritual for most rather than physical, the ideal is

still the same: to reemphasize the importance of her Africana family, both in her immediate home and in her community.

Within the large structures of community, mothering and nurturing are interconnected words that connect directly with the ideas of community and extended family. These concepts in Hudson-Weems's paradigm are yoked together, and when we think of mother, the characteristic of nurturing is not far behind because both relate to children but also the community and humankind as a whole. In African culture, "the Africana woman comes from a legacy of fulfilling the role of Supreme Mother Nature – nurturer, provider and protector" (Hudson-Weems 72), a legacy of dedicated motherhood. "Black women have consistently indicated that they value the role of mother and consider it an important aspect of the sex role identity. Indeed there was evidence that Black women sometimes prioritized the mother role over wife and worker roles" (Hudson-Weems 73). For the Africana woman without children of her own, the need to remain mother figures in our communities consistently nurturing our youth and remaining dedicated to the survival of our Africana traditions for our communities is paramount.

The construction of Gullah communities and families is in part a result of the slavery task system but also clearly aligned with African familial traditions. Unlike the mainland slave families, Gullah families were often free from master intervention due to the isolation of the islands. As such, the slaves on the Sea Islands were less impacted by "the masters' notions of family" (Joyner 137) and less likely to experience the continual threat of family destruction. I do not mean to imply that Gullah families were not destroyed at the whim of the master. On the contrary, the largest sale of slaves in United States history took place in March of 1859 when Sea Island plantation owner Pierce Butler sold 436 of his 900 slaves over two days in Savannah, Georgia breaking apart long standing family units.<sup>23</sup> I do suggest that the slave family was more stable on the Sea Islands than the mainland. This suggestion derives also from rice labor. Masters recognized the value of male and female labor in the fields was connected to, for lack of a way to phrase this, keeping slaves happy. If the family was kept together, masters deduced that the

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<sup>23</sup> For a larger discussion on "weeping time," please see Kwesi DeGraft-Hanson's article, "Unearthing the Weeping Time: Savannah's Ten Broeck Race Course and 1859 Slave Sale."

dismantling of the family unit would impact their production. The lack of intervention in Gullah families was not to encourage family or to honor African traditions but to encourage production. William Politzer writes, “in selling slaves owners...were not as concerned about preserving the integrity of the *extended* family for which Africans felt just as strong an emotional bond” (53). This tactic was useful to the master, but like all of the other strategies masters employed aimed toward wealth; the Gullah subverted the master’s goals creating a sustaining community.

The Gullah family structures are not the same as the Americanized “nuclear family,” nor is it representative of the urbanized African American family. Gullah family structures are first and foremost extended units. The biological family is the base, but Gullah families “bear a remarkable resemblance to the extended family among African peoples, in Africa, the Caribbean, Central America and South America” (Demerson 58). Gullah communities also do not over-emphasize the heteronormative concept of marriage or of illegitimacy (Demerson; Politzer). Conjugal, or marital, relationships are valued and honored but a “consanguineal bonding” is also part of the Gullah community. This makes the extended family a flexible unit; all within the community are considered family. No member of the community is turned away from a meal, community members will help others as they can, and all aspects of the community space are shared among members.

On Wadmalaw, Edisto, and Johns Islands, there are echoes of the slave community housing structures where even today there are large extended family compounds where as many as eight households are arranged within close proximity to one another (Demerson). The construction of family compounds extends to the importance of land to the family. Unlike other groups, lands do not simply pass from one to another by deed or will but rather by unwritten or verbal contracts (Politzer). Gullah womanism is founded upon the strong bonds of multigenerational, multirelational, and extended kinship forms as well as keeping the cultural traditions created from the usable past of slavery and African retentions active in a modern society. This form of day-to-day activism can be seen in multiple forms from connecting to the land through environmental advocacy, the creation of activist groups, or participation in marches and demonstrations; in the most recent collective example of women-centered

political engagement, Gullah women were at the forefront of the Charleston and Savannah regional March on Washington demonstrations in January of 2017. Their activism is exhibited in smaller and more personal ways such as a pot of mulatto rice or peas and rice knowing that they are providing for their families an ancestral connection during an ordinary meal.

Creating a Gullah womanism praxis through the usable past of rice and women centered discourses allows me to engage black women's writing from what Hortense Spillers argues is the "a matrix of literary *discontinuities* that partially articulate various periods of consciousness in the history of Afro-American people" ("Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction" 251). With this statement, Spillers argues the community of modern black women writers "addresses the multiplicity of life issues that converge with black American women's historic and coeval experience" ("Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction" 250). In doing so, their work articulates moments of possibility that remain hidden; their creative endeavors "not only redefine tradition, but also disarm it" through their shared point of historical reference" ("Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction" 250, 275). Blending Spiller's conclusions about black women's writing with the explanation I provided of "dayclean" seems an appropriate way to conclude this chapter and transition into the remaining chapters that examine the literary and cinematic representations through my construction of Gullah womanism. The writers and filmmakers who utilize the Sea Islands and Gullah as a point of departure for their projects are incorporating a space, culture, and history that once recovered through artistic productions offer black women another mechanism to redefine aspects of race and gender.

**CHAPTER TWO:  
“AX’M WEH I BIN”: LITERARY LEGACIES AND GULLAH WOMANISM**

In the Gullah language, the words “ax’m weh I bin” translate to English as “ask me where I have been.” For the Gullah people, “bin” is not just a word for something that has happened previously, as the English equivalent “been” suggests. In the Cambridge English Dictionary, “been” is defined as the “past participle of ‘be’ or the past participle of ‘go’, when the action referred to is finished” (“been”). Much like my use of “dayclean” in chapter one, “bin” cannot be explained adequately for the Gullah through a direct English translation. “Bin” refers to the connectivity in Gullah culture between past, present, and future. In both African and Gullah worldviews, life is not linear nor does it end with death; the living, the dead, and even those not yet born are deeply connected. The lines are blurred. Margaret Washington describes the Gullah traditions of life and death as one of the representations of BaKongo beliefs retained by the Gullah people. The BaKongo people had one of the most “elaborate and complex system of afterlife beliefs,” particularly that “one’s spirit consciously exists after death” (167). In Gullah belief systems people die – they “bin” here – but they never stop being here; “bin” is a word of continuance rather than closure.

Toni Morrison proposes in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” that the presence of the ancestor enters into all African American literature. “There is always an elder there,” Morrison writes of black literature “And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). This presence is in varying forms and degrees depending upon the author’s goals for the work. Some African American writers perceive the ancestor as a crucial element, and the presence of an ancestor is heavily tied to every aspect, while other authors use the ancestor in the form of an absent presence or as an abstract image. The ancestor in African American literature is constantly changing, questioned, and redefined, but ever present. Morrison’s essay suggests that the ancestor is truly two-fold, meaning they can be characters or ideas. More importantly, “ancestor” also describes generations of African American writers who form a base of literary texts with which the modern writer draws ideas to

create their fictions. The lineage of ancestry Morrison proposes regarding literature is not so different than my Gullah inspired understanding of “bin”; black women writers examine their present with their eye firmly fixed on the past, creating a continuance of their foremothers. Building upon the theoretical paradigm I constructed in the previous chapter, “Ax’m Weh I Bin” uses Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* as the literary nexus with which to understand Gullah culture and womanism. I address Naylor’s imaginative creation of the physical space and narrative strategies she engages in constructing the Gullah community, the connections she draws in the novel to re-conceive the traditional narrative of slavery, and the formation of female characters as her example of Gullah womanhood juxtaposed with the literary ancestry of other black women writers whose works help to shape her text.

#### **MAPPING OUR WORLD: DESTABILIZING THE DOCUMENTS OF SLAVERY**

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* begins with three prefatory pieces that employ the modes of historical documents associated with slavery, but with each piece, Naylor subverts our understanding of those records. The map of Willow Springs, the family tree of the Day family, and the bill of sale for the “great, great grand Mother” (218) Sapphira Wade open the novel. The community narrator in the prologue tells the reader they must “listen, really listen” (10) but I propose the reader must first read, really read these opening documents to understand the tale of Sapphira Wade and the Day family. Naylor is challenging the reader to enter this story through materials that will perhaps test their understanding of slavery, and they must put aside any learned histories he or she may bring with them to the text. These documents are not as Hayden White terms “historical” history, meaning the reader will not get the standard hegemonic narrative of slavery through these introductory items. Rather, they are entering a re-vision of history both textually and visually.

The map of Willow Springs is the first piece the reader encounters, and this is where I suggest Naylor is connecting directly to the Sea Islands and the Gullah people. Jamaican poet Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* dramatizes what can be envisioned when one method of delineating space – a map – is subverted away from the normative knowledge of place and toward the

creative understanding of both place and cartography. He writes, “We speak to navigate ourselves/away from dark corners and we become/each one of us, cartographers” (4). Dionne Brand’s book of poetry *A Map to the Door of No Return* begins with African origins: “but to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora, there are no maps. This door is not mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is also perhaps a psychic destination” (1). She closes her book by stating, “A map, then, is only a life of conversations about a forgotten list of irretrievable selves” (224). A map is a tangible object, but one that is often rife with a sub-narrative of domination and power, but it can also become a method by which to subvert that domination if those cartographed become the cartographers. When connecting creative cartography to black women writers, we find a re-mapping of the world to reflect the contemporary revisiting, conceptualizing, recording and creating of spaces, graphically and metaphorically.



Map of Willow Springs from Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*

The hand drawn map of Willow Springs does not conform to normative cartography. It lacks what Denis Cosgrove states in his introduction to *Mapping* are consistent features of maps, such as scale, framing, selection, and coding.<sup>1</sup> The map has no scale to measure miles, and the ‘frame’ is a drawing of foliage, evoking the connections Gullah people have with nature.<sup>2</sup> The only link between Willow Springs and normative United States maps are the diminutive names of South Carolina and Georgia off to the side. Other than that designator, the reader has no national context for Willow Springs. In traditional mapping when the cartographer or surveyor attempts to replicate the environment on the page, the document that is produced is often informed by state sanctioned politics; however, when the use of mapping is creative rather than traditional, the results disrupt normative understandings of space. Willow Springs is only forty-nine square miles, miniscule in comparison to the mainland, but in Naylor’s reconstructive cartography, the island dominates the space becoming a visual composite history. I use the phrase “composite history” from Lene Brondum’s essay “The Persistence of Tradition”: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall” where she defines “composite history” as “a nonchronological representation of history in which historical “facts” are selected for representation according to whether they effectively reveal something about the “essence” of a culture or a historical period, rather than according to “objective,” historical demands for chronological accuracy. As such, composite history functions as a revision of the traditional Western definition of history” (155). Using cartography, Naylor draws for the reader the history of Willow Springs based upon the spaces that are important to the culture.

Naylor’s map places the heritage of the island at the forefront and the particular places marked on the map of Willow Springs are related to the community and/or to the descendants of Sapphira Wade. The only island mercantile, Stores at Bridge, and the naming of the woods by points on a compass suggest the communal places on the island, while the homes of significance to the community are named: Mama

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<sup>1</sup> The only other traditional cartographic element in Naylor’s map is a compass. Denis Cosgrove in his introduction to his collection on mapping, *Mappings*, recognizes these four elements as “*a priori*” for all maps (9).

<sup>2</sup> Trees, specifically oaks, are “important features of BaKongo beliefs; trees were planted directly on graves in order to guide the spirits on their journeys into the earth” (181).

Day's trailer, Abigail's house, Ruby's house, and Bernice and Ambush's house. What is noticeable in the naming strategy that Naylor employs is that all of the homes of importance are defined by female names – even in Bernice and Ambush's home, the home they share is labeled female first in the naming order. One of the other primary sites on the map is Chevy's Pass. The reader can see on the map how the pass is bordered to the north and south by the sketches of trees as well as a clearing to show the pathway toward the east that ends at the Atlantic Ocean. Chevy's Pass is also the location of the tombstone of Bascombe Wade as the communal narrator tells us "there's his tombstone right out by Chevy's Pass" (3). When Mama Day challenges George to walk from her trailer out to the Pass, the reader is given even more information about Bascombe Wade as Mama Day tells George her version of the tale:

Bascombe Wade used to have the whole island before he deeded it over to his slaves. Said he fell under the spell of a woman he owned - only in body, not in mind...But she got away from him and headed over here toward the east bluff on her way back to Africa. And she made that trip – some say in body, others in mind. But the point is that he lost her. He kept a vigil up here at Chevy's Pass – he's keeping it still. And when the wind is right in the trees, you can hear him calling and calling the name that nobody knows. (206)

The story of Bascombe Wade is intertwined with Sapphira, but on the map there is no mention of him because the island "belongs to us – clean and simple" (5). The erasure of Bascombe Wade from the landmarks on the map is congruent with their belief, and the marker of the man who owned the land so many years ago does not need to be demarcated on their island.

Susan Meisenholder's reading of the map is a clear statement as to why traditional mapping is not an effective structure for Willow Springs: "white world maps...are inadequate to express black experience" (406). I read Naylor's creative cartography in a similar way: as a visual statement critiquing the Western or mainland geographic and political systems of defining space. In the novel when Cocoa, the ancestor of Sapphira Wade, returns to Willow Springs with her husband George, he is frustrated prior to leaving for the island that he cannot find Willow Springs on any of his maps. Virginia C. Fowler suggests "the playful map in the front of the novel functions on one level certainly as a kind of joke" (94). Fowler

is alluding to George's annoyance that he has no point of reference. George states, "It's hard to know what to expect from a place when you can't find it on the map. Preparing for Willow Springs upset my normal agenda: a few minutes with an atlas always helped me to decide what clothes to pack" (174). She is poking fun at George and in some ways rightfully so; his westernized mind simply cannot envision a space without traditional notation. More importantly, however, is Cocoa's response to his inability to find Willow Springs through traditional cartography – "your maps were no good here" (177). The customary map that George depends upon that would regulate the space through a language he could understand is ineffective in regards to Willow Springs. If it were constructed in that way, it would not encompass the history or culture that resides there.

When Reema's boy, who is given no other name by the community, returns home from his mainland university with a westernized ethnographic education, it is with the goal to "put Willow Springs on the map" (7). The community rebuffs his use of mainland methods to gather information about the island. He talked to the community for his study, but he never really listened to them. When his findings were published, the people of Willow Springs never read the entire book – "none of us made it much through the introduction" (7) – because in the first few pages, they could assume his story was not going to be *their* story. Reema's boy deduced through his "extensive fieldwork"(7) that the island and one of the guiding terms in their lexicon, "18 & 23", was an inversion of the longitude and latitude markers of where the island sits on a traditional survey map, "81 & 32". He attempted to rationalize the space through cartographic language because he could no longer understand the depth of his own culture once re-educated on the mainland. In suggesting that the island use of "18 & 23" was simply a mistake, he is suggesting the people – his people – were "just so damned dumb that [they] turned the whole thing around" (8). As the community narrator speculates, if he truly wanted to understand his home island "he woulda asked" but "he didn't really want to know what 18 & 23 meant" (8) or any of the real stories of the island; instead, he reduced an entire culture to numbers on a map. George and Reema's boy are both representative of the misunderstanding of the island that accompany westernized ideology.

Naylor's Willow Springs is intended to represent a women governed space as well as the gentrification of real Sea Islands. The narrator discusses how any decisions regarding property would be made by Mama Day – “we knew to send 'em straight over there to her and Miss Abigail” (6). Amy Levin's research on the Sande community of Sierra Leone is a society where women are highly active in the leadership of the community. Levin suggests that since Willow Springs and Mama Day are connected to Gullah roots for Naylor, she is inadvertently drawing upon that model. “Miranda Day is called *mama*” Levin suggests “because like the women in the Sande society she is the ‘lady’ or leader of the women in Willow Springs” (32). The islands of St. Helena, Daufuskie, St. John's and Hilton Head are listed in the novel as taken over by land developers in the discussion by the narrator regarding the attempts to take over Willow Springs but in referencing actual islands, Naylor is blending fact and fiction to critique the ongoing practice of taking and destroying ancestral Gullah lands.

The community narrator concludes, “ain't nobody on them islands benefitted” (6) from land developers. Having the communal narrator make this statement, Naylor gives us a small piece of Gullah history. Sea Island residents have continually been denied free access to their ancestral lands once land developers started building large vacation homes and resorts. In a conversation I had with Emory Campbell, he discussed how he and his family have to get permission to enter the gated community where the graves of his relatives are located (Campbell). On St. Simons Island when you drive down one of the main arteries of the island, Federica Road, there is a place where two office buildings are separated by a graveyard. Because of development, per Naylor's novel, “the only dark faces you see now in them ‘vacation paradises’ is the ones cleaning toilets and cutting grass. On their own land, mind you, their own land” (6). Naylor textually addresses the gentrification of the Sea Islands based upon the time she spent there in the 1980s and 1990s. I learned of Naylor's residence while on St. Helena in 2008 from Ervena Faulkner.<sup>3</sup> She drove me to the house Naylor rented on the island. She said, “She was quiet, kept to

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<sup>3</sup> Ervena Faulkner is a St. Helena resident, retired educator, and columnist writes about Gullah history and foodways in her weekly column for *The Island Packet*, “Made With Love”. She is a dynamic woman with encyclopedic knowledge of the island. It was an honor to meet her.

herself mostly. But when she was out she listened to us. She learned about the traditions here but also what we have dealt with. And the struggles we have to keep the pieces of our land ours” (Faulkner).

Naylor’s use of real Sea Island economic and land issues engages in what Dorothy Perry Thompson calls the “rejection of kyriarchy” or the deconstruction of systems of domination by lord or master as opposed to patriarchy, domination by the father (92). The map is her visual statement that discards boundaries of enslavement both past and present, which Lindsey Tucker reads as “both white and male” (181). Rejecting offers that would make the islands dominated by a modern master as well as the erasure of Bascombe Wade from the map, Naylor attempts through her fiction to give ownership of at least one island back to the Gullah community. The time she spent there helped to shape the novel, and while living on St. Helena Island, she learned from St. Helena residents the Gullah history and culture.

More troubling than the gentrification of the islands, but associated with my discussion on Naylor’s map are these two maps of the Gullah Geechee Corridor: on the left from the National Park Service and on the right from the travel website “The Armchair Explorer.”



The Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor stretches along thirty miles of inlets, waterways, and portions of the mainland where these inlets were vital to the plantation system, including the production of rice. The

corridor includes 79 islands along the coast of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, beginning in Wilmington, North Carolina and ending in Jacksonville, Florida (NPS, <http://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/>). Through the efforts of Gullah activists and Congressman James E. Clyburn, Congress designated the space in 2006 as having historical and cultural significance. In the “Vicinity” planning map from the National Park Service on the left, we can see that all of the national cartography remains – highway signs and state lines – to show the government boundaries for the corridor with national parks, historic sites, and wildlife refuges taking center stage.<sup>4</sup>

What is most telling in the National Park Service map is there is no naming of specific islands, just general sites of interest and as a guide intending to reflect Gullah/Geechee heritage along the coastal areas it is disheartening. Their map suggests that Gullah/Geechee culture is recognized by monuments and preserves but not through sites of cultural significance. In other map, cities are labeled, including Savannah, Charleston, and Jacksonville as well as two islands, Hilton Head and Wilmington Island; both of those islands are now gentrified. The second map is not state sanctioned – it is intended to guide the average “explorer” to the Corridor, but again there are no sites of Gullah heritage. There is no mention of Mount Pleasant, SC where there is a rich tradition of sweetgrass basketry and the site of the annual Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Festival held every June. No designation of St. Simons Island where the captive Ibos rebelled and committed suicide in Dunbar Creek, which is the basis for one of the Gullah’s most important folktales. Even more disturbing, St. Helena Island where the historic Penn Center is located, a landmark recently designated as having national historic significance by President Barak Obama, is not labeled. The markers of cities any citizen would recognize should be juxtaposed with specific Gullah landmarks, but those Gullah spaces are absent on both maps. The Gullah committee who advocated for the Corridor intended it to preserve Gullah history and heritage, but without pinpointing the islands and significant landmarks, the cartographic goal of ‘heritage’ seems misdirected. If one wants to see a map of

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<sup>4</sup> Arnold Alanen states “a recent form of preservation activity that often includes vernacular landscapes within its overview is the heritage area, “a region with a coherent and unfired history that has made itself visible on the land, thus stamping them with a distinctive sense of place. Since heritage areas often are based upon a unifying feature such as a waterway, railroad, or road, many are identified as heritage corridors” (138-139).

a Sea Island intended to be a representation of the Gullah culture, one only needs to contrast these maps with Cornelia Walker Bailey's memoir.



From *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man*  
Cornelia Walker Bailey, 2000

Cornelia Walker Bailey's map of Sapelo Island reflects the story of her ancestry and the island that Bailey will reveal in the text. Her memoir is the tale of the island as it once was rather than how it is today. Like Naylor, Bailey's map designates the spaces that are relevant to her story, such as First African Baptist Church – a sacred space that in name to demonstrate the combination of African and Christian religions practiced on the island.

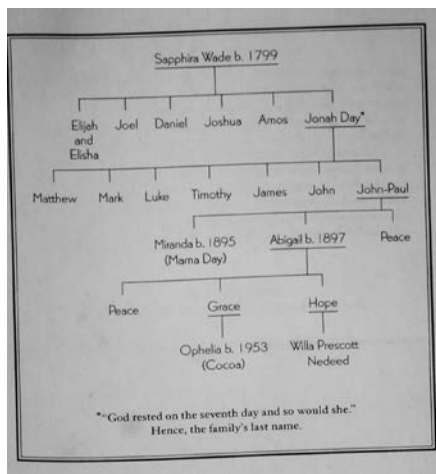
There are two churches with the same name on Bailey's map. The original First African Baptist Church was founded in 1866 by freed slaves living on the island and is located in what was Raccoon Bluff, one of the five original Gullah communities. The original church was destroyed by a hurricane in 1898 but rebuilt a few years later. The church was active until the displacement of the residents in the 1950s and 1960s. The 'new' First African Baptist Church is in Hog Hammock. Bailey's designation of both churches speaks to the history of the island where residents were moved off of their lands based upon white ownership and state sanctioned politics. However, much like Naylor, she privileges the Gullah spaces. When Bailey uses markers to designate places on the island today that are white owned, such as the state-funded Marine Institute, they are small in comparison to the Gullah spaces. As well, the "Big

House” on Bailey’s map is the representation of the plantation home of Thomas Spalding, the first owner of the property. This space changed hands over the years and is now called the Reynolds Mansion, which is a guesthouse and wedding venue.<sup>5</sup> The “Big House” has always been under white ownership but Bailey makes no mention of that fact on her map. Like Chevy’s Pass on Naylor’s map, a space that has slave ownership or white male connections is not designated because the map is created from the perspective of Geechee heritage and the way Bailey wants the reader to see the island, not as modern cartography or state mediated history would present it.

James Corner suggests that cartography is moving toward a more organic methodology of mapping space. He writes that there is an “unfolding agency of mapping” that is allowing designers and surveyors to reject “state-controlled schemes” to “see certain possibilities in the complexity and contradiction of what already exists by also to *actualize* that potential” (214). New visions of cartography that are not wholly dependent upon the spatial or statistical but interested in the ways maps could be used to reflect the “projected elements [of a place] and how those elements project back a variety of effects through its uses” (Corner 215). Traditional cartographers have met the ideology of constructing maps outside of the boundaries of previous practices and inserting an element of creativity into a supposedly linear practice with a level of resistance, but as Corner suggests the movement into a more creative cartography is “crucial for the effective contractual and constructions of new worlds” (217). For Naylor to fully construct a new world she needed to retain the notion that a map is the documented proof a place exists, but then reinvent the cartography to align with the space. Willow Springs is a fictional cousin to the Sea Islands and through Naylor’s map of the area the reader enters a Gullah inspired island and community without normative cartographic discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Spalding owned the land and house named Spalding Plantation Manor from 1802 to the end of the Civil War. It was purchased and rebuilt by Detroit automotive engineer Howard Coffin in 1912 and last owned, privately, by tobacco mogul Richard Reynolds in 1934. The property was purchased by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1975. My brief history of the Reynolds Mansion on Sapelo Island is taken from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources website (<http://gastateparks.org/lodges/reynolds/about/>), Bailey’s memoir, and my notes from tours of the island.



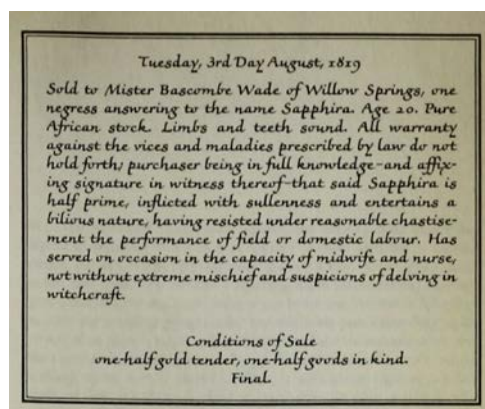
Family Tree Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

The family tree of the Day family, the second prefatory document of Naylor's novel, is both familiar and unique upon first sight; common because it looks like any construction of tiered genealogical lines but unique because it begins in 1799 and contains no gaps in information. Many African Americans who attempt to reconstruct their family lineage often find it difficult to construct a complete history – whether in the United States or back to Africa.

According to the Freedman's Bureau website, familial information before the Civil War is difficult to obtain.<sup>6</sup> One of the greatest accomplishments of the Freedman's Bureau was the creation of accurate records of former slaves. When someone came to the Freedman's Bureau, organizers asked their name, geographical background information, date of birth (if known), name of former masters, and any information they may know about their family members. There are over one million entries that date as far as 1870, making this the largest database of African American ancestry in this country ("Freedman's Bureau"). The system of slavery tore apart and divided families but the lack of information about familial ancestry is a mechanism that impacts familial heritage even today ("Freedman's Bureau"). Naylor's use of a complete family tree subtly challenges the notion that for "nonhistorical" people, their ancestry is a mystery. Valerie Traub argues that the utilization of the family tree in Naylor's novel serves "as an antidote to and exorcism of that initial sale of human flesh as property" (rpt in Fowler 94) and the names and dates become Naylor's evidence that African Americans existed as people. This document serves as a reference for the reader; all questions about hereditary can be answered through this familial graph, but as with so much of *Mama Day*, nothing is that simple or straightforward.

<sup>6</sup> The Freedman's Bureau was created in March of 1865 under the Freedman's Bureau bill signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln. The organization provided goods and services to newly freed slaves ("Freedman's Bureau").

The family tree is not just familial information, but as many critics have observed, is yoked to Christianity; I would further suggest it alludes to the combination of Christianity and African religions practiced in the Gullah community.<sup>7</sup> The connection to Christianity is readily available to the reader because the first generation of Sapphira Wade's children are named after the Old Testament, while the second generation reflect the names of the New Testament. Similarly, the Gullah people blend Christianity into their forms of religion. For example, the ring shout is an African modification of spirituality for the Gullah people, but the songs are sung during a ring shout borrow from the biblical stories, such as the MacIntosh County Shouters songs "Blow Gabriel" or "Move Daniel." As well, the asterisked note at the bottom of the family tree reads, "God rested on the seventh day and so would she." The first portion of the statement gives us the explanation for the change in surname from Wade to Day, and it is a clear allusion to Genesis and the creation story. What disrupts this easily interpreted connection is the phrase "and so would she". By adding Sapphira to the creation story allusion, Naylor presents Sapphira Wade as god or goddess-like and it is only through *her* ability to create does the family exist. If God is fixed to Christianity through the creation story, then by the same token Sapphira Wade is affixed to the creation narrative of the island. The reader is challenged to consider creation differently in terms of religion and gender.



The bill of sale for Sapphira Wade challenges the reader in similar ways as the family tree because it is in line with but diverts from the documentation practices of slavery. The bill of sale for a slave had several similar components, including the buyer's location, buyer and seller name; name of slave and age if known.

Bill of Sale Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

<sup>7</sup> For more discussion on the connection between the family tree and Christianity, please see Virginia C. Fowler's "Belief and Recovery of Peace: *Mama Day*" in *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary* and Lindsey Tucker's "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*".

Any descriptions of the slave, such as trade skill, field labor designation, or domestic abilities was also included in the bill of sale (Library of Virginia, “Shaping the Constitution”). The transferring of ownership of a slave was similar to the transfer of a deed for land. The slave bill of sale of was a binding contract, and as such, any defect had to be notated. The last item on a traditional bill of sale was the notation that the slave was to be a “slave for life” (Library of Virginia, “Shaping the Constitution”).

The sale of Sapphira to Bascombe Wade is written with comparable language found in slave purchase documents. The date is given on the top of the sale, and on the bottom “final” is reminiscent of the phrasing “slave for life” found in tradition bills of sale. Sapphira is described by her slave attributes. She is labeled “half-prime” in regards to her field labor, is capable of “domestic labour”, and has served “on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse.” Sapphira, based upon these descriptions, can serve in any of the occupations needed on a plantation. She has a value of “one-half gold tender, one-half goods in kind” meaning that she has both monetary and exchangeable value. Other documents simply use dollar amounts to equate to value. What makes Naylor’s version of the bill of sale subversive is in the use of language throughout the document that alludes to the particular characteristics of Sapphira. Although she is labeled “half prime” designating labor the words that follow - “inflicted with sullenness and entertains a bilious nature” - suggest that she is not a ‘good’ field worker. The combination of “sullen” and “bilious” suggest she is both prone to sickness – “bilious” the first denotation meaning affected by nausea or vomiting – but the second definition of that word connects to “sullenness” in that both words mean to be bad-tempered. Field labor depended upon complete surrender to direction; Sapphira, based upon the words to characterize her, suggest that she will not be valuable in the field. She is simply too strong willed, described as “having resisted under reasonable chastisement”. While there is no explanation as to what constitutes “reasonable chastisement,” “resisted” is the keyword to reflect her disobedience. The subversive prefatory documents combined all suggest that it is impossible to “possess, contain, or delineate the black subject” (Montgomery 46) through a piece of paper that the dominant power structures attempt to use. It is only when black writers look to the past but then reimagine and recreate that past can the whole story be told.

### **“LISTEN, REALLY LISTEN”: BLACK WOMEN REVISING NARRATIVE FORMS**

The ways in which Naylor uses the prefatory elements allows her to establish her narrative with a different structure, one that continues to be revealed in the novel with the first-person collective voice of the community, alternating narration by George and Cocoa as well as the strategy of using Mama Day's consciousness as a voice. Virginia C. Fowler cites an interview with Gloria Naylor where she discussed finding William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* while having a writer's block and his strategy in the novel of using shifting narration (Fowler 91). The connections can be drawn between Naylor and a Faulknerian narrative structure, but I propose Naylor's use of multiple narrative voices and aspects of Gullah culture forms a revision to the slave narrative genre. When asked about the topic of slavery in her work and black literature, Gayl Jones stated, "The writer [must] say something different or explore some new dimension of the Afro-American slave experience that hasn't already been done before" (Roswell 42). The stories of enslavement including Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Shirley Willams's *Dessa Rose*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, to name a few, delve into the historical narrative of slavery from various dimensions and vantage points. *Mama Day* is part of a heritage of re-imagining narratives of slavery. Before discussing Naylor's novel as "exploring a new dimension of the slave experience," I propose any newly formed presentation of enslavement would not be possible without Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs's narrative charted a new course for black women to write creatively about the experiences of slavery. Jacobs's narrative is part slave narrative and part sentimental fiction, but ultimately the combination of the two genres formed a new way for black women writers to tell their tale.

The slave narrative form offered Jacobs a plot structure to tell the events of her life as she moved from slave to free woman, however, as a literary mode was incomplete for black women. The slave narrative was a genre created by the social constructions and constraints of race that should have applied to both African American men and women but was not; the slave narrative genre was highly male-centric. Scholars such as James Olney, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William Andrews, and John Blassingame used male-authored narratives as their primary source of evidence. As such, their analyses demonstrate that the

narratives contained characteristics of masculinity male readers would relate to and the overarching theme of connecting manhood and freedom. Thus, the privileging of masculinity leaves little room for the difference of gender in the previous literary representations of slavery. Jacobs uses the conventions of the slave narrative style but infuses her work with literary strategies and language that makes her slave narrative female, rather than male, centered.

Blassingame wrote the materials left behind by slaves were the most used sources for his work because “there is no better way to investigate the slave’s personality than through his records” and goes on to state that the “diversity in the descriptions of slavery in the autobiographies is, perhaps, the greatest testimony to their validity” (“Critical Essay on Sources” 367, 374). His choice of words in this statement is quite telling. His text, *The Slave Community*, Blassingame does represent a variety of tales all linked to the work and lives of slaves in the antebellum south. The “diversity” he alludes to attempts to paint a picture of the humanistic side of slavery, one that can be gathered from both male and female narratives. While he lauds the narratives as not only relevant but also true, the word “diversity” has a dual meaning. What we see in his study and the work of other researchers is that “diversity” does not imply a mixture of male and female narratives in the scholarship of slave narratives.

The slave narrative genre is male oriented regarding both the number of narratives published and the critical work that analyzes them. In a 2014 article by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., he cites 204 known published narratives and provides a link to the research conducted by William Andrews to support this claim. Andrew’s bibliography of narratives reveals only a small percentage written by women.<sup>8</sup> The critical works by Gates, Andrews, and Olney are quite helpful in establishing foundational patterns of slave narratives, but at the same time, the prominence of traits of manhood make a genre that should have been representative of the collective experience of racial oppression one that was dominated by gender bias.

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<sup>8</sup> For a complete list, see Andrews’s bibliography on the “Documenting the South” website: (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/alphaautobio.html>)

If the slave narrative was not a successful form for previously enslaved women because of gender, then it is no wonder that Jacobs turned to a style that used gender as its point of entry. At the time Jacobs was writing, the sentimental novel was the most popular genre among women readers and writers. Sentimental fiction offered Jacobs a way to speak as a woman, but that method was ineffective as well. The foundational elements, like the slave narratives, were useful to Jacobs in portraying her plight as a female and a slave. But, again, the differences outweighed the similarities in the effectiveness of the sentimental genre. Cindy Weinstein astutely notes that the “difference between a sentimental narrative and a slave narrative is to recognize the differences between someone who is and who is not a slave” (“Behind the Scenes” 112) or in other words, the difference lies between *white and black* women. The distinction of race prevents the sentimental form from being wholly usable for black women, like Harriet Jacobs, and in her narrative, we see the ways she critiques sentimental themes.

I believe Jacob’s narrative is the most vital text to the legacy of black women’s writing because her story subverts the masculinity woven into the slave narratives and turns on its head the gendered aspects of the genre. Valerie Smith concludes in her reading of the slave narrative form “as long as the rhetoric of the genre identifies freedom and independence of thought with manhood, it lacks a category for describing the achievements of the tenacious black woman” (35). If men achieve power through this masculinized literary form and language, conversely, the narratives of formerly enslaved women must use a feminized method to achieve a sense of power in their narratives. Jacobs effectively uses aspects of the sentimental novel to convey a form of feminized power that also critiques the racial structures that prevented that same power. The foundational plot elements of sentimental fiction favor the black female plight of slavery in the nineteenth century. Nina Baym defines sentimental fiction as the story of “a female protagonist who was often downtrodden and wronged by family and society only to persevere through hardship...and by novel’s end she has developed a strong sense of her own worth” (19). Hazel Carby and Karen Sanchez-Eppler both argue that the uses of sentimental strategies in the slave narrative are intended to evoke sympathy but also to “challenge white middle-class norms” (Weinstein 117). The main character in sentimental novels experiences the hardships of bondage, but, as Cindy Weinstein

notes, the use of bondage in the white, female sentimental narrative is entirely different than the slave narrative although its usage is meant to be analogous to the slave experience. This point made by Weinstein suggests “bondage” is a useful strategy for white, women writers to place emphasis on the patriarchal structures and their detrimental effects on women. I read using this word as an idea within the sentimental novel belittles the physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, as well as the continual forced labor enslaved peoples endured.

Since neither slave narratives nor sentimental fiction was an effective structure for Jacobs, she combined the genres to reflect the intersections of race and gender that impacted slave women. These crossings are what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson terms the “simultaneity of discourse.” Henderson defines this in “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition”, as a concept “meant to signify a mode of reading which examines the way in which the perspective of race and gender, and their interrelationships, structure the discourse of black women writers” (349). When reading *Incidents* through the term that Henderson proposes, we must “account for the racial difference within gender identity *and* gender difference within racial identity” (349; emphasis mine). We must read with these differences in mind because black women must write pieces that keep these two identities in the forefront of their work. She must dispel the myths of black women in her writing. By revising the genres and creating a space for black women to interrogate race and gender simultaneously, Jacobs’s narrative sets the stage for modern black women to extend existing writing systems into new forms that reflect the ancestry of enslavement.

The creation of a communal narrator to relay the slave narrative of Sapphira Wade is Naylor’s contribution to the reinvention of the slave narrative genre. To begin, the narration in the prologue is a collective voice rather than singular. Jacobs’s narrative is a first person account, and although she has changed the names of those in her memoir, including her own, Jacobs’s voice is the only one used to discuss her life as a slave, which is a function of the slave narrative, where the tale had to be told from a singular voice in order become believable for the reader. James Olney determined that the narratives of “slavery *as it is*” (48) were highly formulaic and the patterns that emerged shaped how the slavery was

portrayed to the public. The slave narratives reinforce the “verifying and veracious” nature that Barbara Foley proposes are vital to African American literature.<sup>9</sup> The process of verification is achieved through visual and textual strategies.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is often taught in conjunction with Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* as a portrait of enslavement from the male and female points of view. When placed side by side, it is easy to compare the similarities and differences between the two narratives regarding Olney’s structural elements. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator as well as a title page that includes some variant of “written by himself” to open the slave narratives, and we see this in both Douglass and Jacobs. Both texts contained, broadly, the four phases of the former slave’s life (loss of innocence, the realization of bondage, desire for escape after a poignant event, and freedom) and woven into those moments are the former slave’s reflections/thoughts on slavery. In addition to these patterns in the narratives, two associated elements that Olney determined are an important point to my construction of the usable past and the role “nonhistorical” people play in framing historical discourse. These two elements also reveal the differences.

The first is the rhetorical strategy of beginning the slave’s tale with these three words, “I was born”. These three simple words ensure the narrator’s existence through “a simple existential claim, “I exist”” (Olney 52). Olney’s study of slave narratives shows, at least, twenty different narratives that begin with these words or a variation of them. While this should have been evidence enough of the reality of the narrator and the validity of the tale to follow, it was not. Olney argues that using the opening “I was born” was intended “to attest to the real existence of a narrator” and the narrative cannot begin “until the narrator’s real existence is firmly established” (52). Douglass’s story opens with “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland” (12). Douglass can recall the precise place of his birth, adding a physical location to the validity of his existence. Jacobs as well begins in a similar way. The first three words, “I was born”, are the same as Douglass and other

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<sup>9</sup> Barbara Foley argues that, “much writing in the entire domain of Afro-American prose fiction has a pronounced documentary quality” containing “some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world” (*Telling the Truth* 26).

narratives, but the remaining words of this sentence reveal a different strategy of language to assure the reader she is a person: “but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood passed away” (5). For Jacobs, it was important to acknowledge her existence as a slave but then put that position into a different context. Rather than detail a location, she uses a positive emotion, “happy,” to contrast to the word “slave.”<sup>10</sup> Even though they use different methods to establish themselves as human beings, “I was born,” are not the first three words of the text; before the former slave can construct his or her existence on the page, white-authored authenticating documents preface their words.

The use of corroborative devices, such as letters, testimonies, and prefatory statements, was intended to guarantee the historicity and reliability of the narrative and was an important part of any slave narrative, male or female-authored. William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to Frederick Douglass’s 1845 narrative, *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* states, “It is entirely his [Douglass’s] own production...it is, *in my judgment*, highly credible to his head and heart” (7; emphasis mine). In this statement, we see three distinct features to this piece of the validating documents. The first is the assurance that the narrative is real with the use of the word “credible”. Secondly the phrase, “head and heart”, alludes to the duality of rationality and emotion that the narratives were intended to evoke regarding the abolition of slavery. Lastly, and perhaps the most important aspect of Garrison’s statement, are the words “in my judgment.” Given the political objectives of the slave narrative, an assurance that the tale has been analyzed by what Hayden White would label a “historical” person establishes the validity of the narrative through the intervention of a white voice and white male judgment.

Editor Lydia Marie Child wrote the introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* using strategies, similar to Garrison’s, to assure the reader the narrative is an accurate account. The first line of Child’s introduction ensures the authenticity of the narrative because the author “is personally known to” Child and “her [Jacobs’s] conversation and manners inspire me with confidence” (*Incidents* 3). Child’s

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<sup>10</sup> For both the sentimental and slave narrative genres, the plot line includes issues of family ties and/or family loss as well as instability in naming that affects the protagonist’s identity. This is seen in the change of names within the slave narrative and in the lack of knowing ones family lineage or being unable to publicly recognize parentage. For the sentimental character and the former slave, the lack of knowing ones family lineage or uncertainty in never knowing their true surname impedes the character (Weinstein).

statement is meant to validate Jacobs's tale but uses a different type of language to do so. Although Garrison employs emotion in his piece, it is combined with reason. Child's validation comes from personal "conversation" and more importantly the "manners" of Jacobs. Nowhere in this first sentence is there a reference to logic or reason – the story is validated only by the way in which Jacobs relayed her story to Child. Garrison's preface leaves no doubt that Douglass's story is truthful. Child attempts to do the same, but the last sentence of the introductory paragraph destabilizes that goal: "I believe those who know her will not be disposed to doubt her veracity, *though some incidents in her story are more romantic than fiction*" (*Incidents* 3; emphasis mine). Child's statement must not have been intended to raise doubt about Jacobs's narrative, however, the choice of words to close her 'authenticating document' disrupt this veracity. Conversely, Garrison's preface uses language that is so concrete it assured the reader the truth is unmanipulated in any way: "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination" (Douglass 7). While the goals of the introductions were the same – to valid the stories of Douglass and Jacobs – the techniques of language that are used seem to connect to a gender disparity. Douglass's narrative, given Garrison's testimony, is not imaginary in any way. While Jacobs's narrative may have been construed differently simply because Child's statement contains the word "romance." These comparisons lead me to conclude that even in the introductory pieces that were supposed to set the tone for a true account of slavery and the structures that Olney believes established the standards for the slave narrative genre were continually impacted by gendered language.

The characteristic to begin a slave narrative with "I was born" in some form establishes the singular identity of the author, and the story is told from his or her memory alone. The incorporation of a communal narrative in *Mama Day* begins with the words "everybody knows" rather than the solitary "I." The tale of Willow Springs and Sapphira Wade is told by a communal voice in the prologue, but, that shared narrative is not a single linear story. In *Mama Day*, the narrator presents us with a two-word sentence of authenticity and fact – "Willow Springs" – but then the words the collective voice uses to describe Sapphira Wade are full of contradictions. They tell us she was "satin black, biscuit cream, red as

Georgia clay: depending upon which one of us takes a mind to her” (3). The differences in physical appearance suggest Sapphira Wade is perhaps a myth, but the reader will come to that conclusion only if he or she resides in the comfortable space of precisely defined terms. If the readers step away from those ideals, they would be able to see the power of a matricentric tale, particularly when they realize the differences in describing Sapphira comes from the power the community holds based upon how each member can “take a mind to her” (3). Although, as Olney argues, the “truthfulness” of the slave narrative genre was mediated by the characteristics that would make a slave narrative sellable and thereby a textual weapon in the fight against slavery, the narratives still depend upon the authenticity of the narrative. The inconclusive description of Sapphira’s appearance stands in opposition to the need for authenticity of the slave narratives and in a space where linearity is incongruent with the community; many visions of Sapphira Wade is necessary to tell this tale of enslavement.

Karla Holloway argues that black women writers in their productions of “(re) memberance” create “a restoration of fluidity, translucence and movement” while borrowing from “the traditions of memory” (ch.3). In reconstructing narratives of enslavement, modern black writers depend upon the collective memory of the ancestors found in slave narratives – both published and collected – as well as family stories and researched materials. Rooting their stories in reality does not mean they will be static as Holloway’s wording suggests. Maxine Montgomery reads *Mama Day* through a similar lens as Holloway, stating that the opening sentences of the prologue are Naylor destabilizing the idea of truth and reflecting the “fluidity of lore emanating from Sea Island culture” (38). Montgomery’s use of fluidity echoes Holloway in that both are alluding to forms of change enacted in modern writing, but her use of the word “lore” affixes the style of narration to the Gullah people. “Lore” means a body of knowledge, especially of a traditional, anecdotal, or popular nature; nowhere in this definition are the words truth or fact.

The prologue allows the reader to know there are supporting pieces of evidence to their narratives such as the deeds to the land and Bascombe Wade’s tombstone. However stabilizing these pieces of concrete evidence are intended to be, the narrator tells us the third piece of information that is duplicitous. The narrator states, “and seven sons (“ain’t Miss Abigail and Mama Day the granddaughters of that

seventh boy?)” (3) This last connection to Sapphira Wade is questioned by the community – they close what should be factual information with a question mark. The people of Willow Springs, like the Gullah people, believe that simple binaries do not exist as totalities. In various other places in the novel, the characters speak to the false nature of absolutes. Mama Day tells us that, “it ain’t about a right way or a wrong way – just two ways” (295). Naylor ends the novel with the idea that the “too many sides” to a story could be an invitation to go back to the beginning and reread Sapphira’s story with the malleability of her narrative in mind. To understand Sapphira Wade as we are told, “It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words” (3). Her narrative is not a chronological narrative in the style of the slave narrative, nor is it a static or fixed tale as a published memoir would be. Rather she lives in the space of motion and continual revision. Even though “nobody here breathes her name”, the tales they tell about Sapphira Wade “sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car” (10) are about the *idea* of her. She lives in their memory, but she is not static or fixed even though one constant remains when the community tells us “about the legend of Sapphira Wade” – “18 & 23.”

The term “18 & 23” is akin to the stories about Sapphira Wade in that nothing about that term is fixed or stable. At the beginning of the prologue, “18 & 23” is linked to the year 1823, but even that fixed date has multiple pieces of information. It was the year Sapphira Wade married Bascombe Wade and “bore him seven sons in just a thousand days”; the year she “persuaded him to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs”; and it is the year she murdered him, either by “smothering,” putting a “dagger through his kidney” or she “poisoned him” (3). A date is a solid, chronological reference point, but in Willow Springs, even something that is typically stable is not. Lindsey Tucker reads “18 & 23” as the signifier for Sapphira Wade that replaces her name “but circulates with the signifying practices of the island as a power-making word” (183). She goes on to argue that this is “conjure power” (183) alluding to the tradition of conjure on the Sea Islands and in the novel through Mama Day. She goes on to speculate that the date is a historical reference point noting that the Denmark Vessey rebellion occurred in 1822 and by choosing to change to 1823, Naylor is extending the rebellious nature of Vessey to Sapphira Wade.

Tucker admits this conjecture in her notes, but her idea that the date of 1823 “may mark for some Sea Islanders a new beginning” (187) is fitting for Willow Springs. The uncertainty of the year 1823 becomes “18 & 23” or just a way of saying things in Willow Springs. “18 & 23” can be used to reference the maturity of a young girl (“their 18 & 23’s coming down”), or the ways of trying to swindle someone (“offering Winky Browne only twelve dollars for his whole boatload of crawdaddies – ‘tried to 18 & 23 him’). The ability to shift meaning and be understood is the power Willow Springs residents have over their language, just as the Gullah people have over theirs.

In my first chapter and to begin this one, I borrow from the Gullah language, not to propose linear definitions but to use those words interpretively. The Gullah language, which I discuss in more depth in chapter four, has definitions for their words, but it is in the usage of those words where meaning is developed and redeveloped as needed for communication. In the Gullah language, as with the language of Willow Springs, meaning and usage supersede distinct definition. The usable past begins with readdressing the narratives that tell history in such a way that reflects their specific culture, and through those revisions existing histories take on new and richer meanings. Literature and artistic projects of African Americans expand conventional history’s scope through what Barbara Foley calls the documentary mode of African American literature. She argues, “much [of the] writing in the entire domain of Afro-American prose fiction has a pronounced documentary quality” containing “some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world” (*Telling the Truth* 26). Her assertions are useful not only in addressing the slave narrative genre Jacobs refashions but in the ways Naylor creates an alternative tale of slavery and its legacies in the black community.

In her article “History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature” (1980) and her full length text *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (1986), Barbara Foley presents the argument that the “documentary novel engages in dramatically different representation practices in different eras, but constitutes, nonetheless, a distinct species of fiction” (*Telling the Truth* 9). She claims that African American literature is inherently documentary in nature, meaning that the fictions of African American authors engage in varying degrees

events that are “grounded in the historical world” but do so with “techniques and materials of fiction to reveal a truth” about that historical world that perhaps has not yet been revealed (“History, Fiction, and the Ground Between” 390-391). Foley’s understanding of African American literature aids in my understanding of the connections between Jacobs’s refashioning of the slave narrative genre to suit her racial and gendered needs but is also revealed through the reconsideration of enslavement presented in Naylor’s multiple narrative strategies. Both women look to establish genres then repurpose them to reflect the racial, gender, and in the case of Naylor cultural needs of their individual projects. I propose this ideology is also true when examining black women’s writing that reflects the literary progression from feminism to Gullah womanism.

### **THE ANCESTRY OF GULLAH WOMANHOOD**

Alice Walker’s definition of womanism, specifically - “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength” (xi) - demonstrates the foundational nature of deep mental, emotional, and spiritual connections among women. Alice Walker states as the last piece to her definition of womanism that “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xi). Perhaps we can view Walker’s analogy, as a means to explain women-centered interactions where purple becomes lavender when black women create for themselves deeply engaging relationships with other women and an authentic sisterhood. In a society that marginalizes black women, womanist relationships are even more vital to their existence, and when those relationships are free of combativeness, those interactions become transformational. Authentic womanist bonds serve as a weapon against the racial and patriarchal systems that govern black women’s lives. The ancestry of Gullah womanism found in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* transforms Walker’s paradigm of womanism to include the spiritual connections found in Gullah belief systems and two key features from Clenora Hudson-Weems’s paradigm - family centered and male companionship – but is first and foremost the ways in

which women engage with one another to form intimate connections that result in women-centered relationships that are fulfilling and, at times, life sustaining.

The lifelong closeness Mama Day and Abigail share is biological, yet Naylor expresses their relationship through the African American tradition of call and response. Call and response is a form of "spontaneous verbal non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (Foster 113). In African cultures, call and response is a pervasive pattern of shared and democratic participation—in public gatherings in the discussion of civic affairs, in religious ceremonies as well as in vocal and instrumental musical expression. It is this tradition that Africans brought with them to the New World and which has been transmitted over the centuries in various forms of cultural expressions. To combine this tradition with the relationship of Mama Day and Abigail "elevates 'sisterhood' to the level of art" (Newson-Horst 365). To call to each other, they say "You there, Sister?" and the response is always "Uh, huh" (35). "There ain't no other way for Miranda to greet her, or for Abigail to respond – not after eighty years" writes Naylor, "It don't matter when and it don't matter where: Abigail bringing a fresh bunch of collards from across the main road, Miranda sliding into the pew beside her at church, them running into each other at the post office" (35). The intimacy the women share through this form of call and response began as young girls. The day their sister Peace was buried, Mama Day recalls "*climbing up on the bed, she shakes the younger child awake. "You there, Sister?" The answer is coated with phlegm on the edge of tears. "Uh, huh."* *Miranda's small fingers place themselves around the rhythm of Abigail's breathing. Nested under the quilt, they are four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat* (36). Mama Day and Abigail form their bond through shared grief. The personal form of call and response - "You there, Sister? Uh, huh." - began as reassurance for the young girls they were both present even though their sister was not. The physical closeness Naylor writes - "four arms and legs, two heads," - foreshadows their emotional and everlasting bond with the closing phrase, "one heartbeat."

Naylor is building upon a lineage of black women's writing that expresses the closeness between women that begins as young girls. In Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*, she creates a tale of the life long

relationship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright that begins even before childhood. Morrison writes, “it was in dreams that the two girls first met,” because both were “daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” in need of love and affection that both dreamed of a “presence, a someone” (*Sula* 51) that neither could yet see. “So when they met” Morrison writes “they felt the ease and comfort of old friends” and “in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (*Sula* 52). Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems conclude that women centered relationships are vital to the survival of women of African descent, and in the case of both *Mama Day* and *Sula* this begins in childhood.

The bond between Mama Day and Abigail continues throughout their lives but also through the shared experience of mothering and nurturing Cocoa. Clenora Hudson-Weems proposes as one of the elements in her paradigm of Africana womanism that the “Africana womanist is committed to the art of *mothering and nurturing*, her own children in particular and human kind in general” (72). In the model of Gullah womanism, this “distinct” characteristic in Hudson-Weems paradigm is woven into the ideas of female relationships in the Gullah community. After Cocoa’s mother dies from a broken heart, both Mama Day and Abigail raise her, extending their bond to the next generation of Day women through nurturing and mothering. Drawing instead from West African traditions rather than European or American constructs of motherhood, Naylor makes motherhood and nurturing attached to the relationships between women. Being a mother then takes on a singular meaning – in terms of Mama Day’s participation in raising Cocoa – but more significantly a collective one, reinforcing the Gullah worldview of community over the individual (Levin). The practice of integrating the elders with the children is still active in both African and Gullah societies. Amy Levin writes that, “Miranda [Mama] Day is *not* a biological mother. Instead as the ruling matriarch of the Day family and of the island community of Willow Springs, as healer, advisor, midwife and conjurer *par excellence*” (27, 32). Patricia Jones-Jackson’s study of Gullah communities, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* describes the Gullah reverence of the elders with children. Children on the Sea Islands “are highly prized” and rather than establish a new household, “a young couple joins a parent’s household” and “the elder members of the family usually take responsibility for the care and discipline of the children” (Jones-

Jackson 24). The presence of children is attributed to the longevity of elderly residents and “the belief that they *cannot die* until all the children for whom they are responsible are grown and able to care for themselves” (Jones-Jackson 24). The Gullah ideologies of mothering and nurturing Jones-Jackson discusses are peppered throughout *Mama Day*.

In the beginning of the novel, Naylor recalls Cocoa’s birth using both of the given names of Mama Day and Cocoa (Miranda and Ophelia, respectively): “That Ophelia came into the world kicking and screaming – kicked her right in the eye as she brought her up to her lips to suck the blood and mucous out of her nose. A little raw demon from the start. Miranda smiles. Under five pounds and being kept alive on nothing but sugar tits and will” (39). Mama Day and Abigail nurtured Cocoa from birth and since “we ain’t had much luck with girls in this family” (39), Mama Day takes extra care to raise and support Cocoa. During Cocoa’s life, the comparisons between her and Mama Day are readily provided; both women have the same spirit and temperament. It is in the ending of the novel where Naylor fulfills Jones-Jackson’s assertion that elders “*cannot die*” until children are “able to care for themselves” (24). As Cocoa deals the tangible pieces of grief, it is Mama Day who brings her out of mental and emotional state. When closing the house Cocoa and George shared, Mama Day’s presence helps her to realize the finality of George’s death: “Instinctively, I reached out to stop her from moving your slippers near the bed...He likes his things just so – until I *heard* the thought. In silence, I let her move them” (303). With unspoken words and the connections formed from birth, Cocoa realizes the act of Mama Day making her change a simple thing like where George kept his slippers allows Cocoa to begin the process of moving forward. The last step in this process – as Cocoa sees the brochure from the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys requesting George’s “annual contribution”, Cocoa “broke down and cried” (304). If Abigail had been there, “she would have held me,” Cocoa thinks, but “Mama Day only said that for a long time there would be something to bring tears a plenty; but she was saving her comfort for the day when I had stopped crying for myself and would have that one final cry – for you” (304). Mama Day knows Cocoa “gotta get past the grieving for what she lost, to go on to the grieving for what was lost, before the child of Grace lives up to her name” (308). Mama Day does not die until Cocoa achieves this years after George’s

death and her ability to commune with him at his gravesite. Cocoa states “Mama Day was right” (311) on the last page of the novel, and because she can grieve for what was lost, Mama Day’s nurturing is complete.

Mama Day and Cocoa share a deep, significant women-centered connection with each other as well as the ancestral spirit of Sapphira Wade. Communication with the dead is a fundamental belief in Gullah culture. Lindsey Tucker suggests that the Gullah practices of communing with the dead are related to the Africanism brought to the Sea Islands during slavery. “For African, and especially BaKongo groups, the afterlife was a reality: death was a journey to the spirit world, which, nonetheless, did not constitute a break with life on Earth” (Tucker 180). While worry about being haunted (“haint”) by the dead is a part of the Gullah belief system regarding death, the ability to commune with the dead is just as vital. We see this in the ways Mama Day can commune with ancestral voices, specifically Sapphira. These typically occur for her when in the woods surrounding the “Other Place” where the graves of her ancestors are located and their spirits are revealed to her because of her ability to listen. Naylor writes, “Miranda kinda blooms when the evening air hits her skin” and in the woods she can hear her daddy’s voice from the past: “*Little Mama, these woods been here before you and me, so why should they get out your way – learn to move around’em*” (78). She became, as the community believed, “a spirit in the woods” (79). Mama Day’s ability to commune with her ancestors is both her blessing and her curse. When Cocoa falls ill she knows she needs to reach not just the ancestors, but also *the* ancestor – Sapphira Wade.

Mama Day goes to the “Other Place” in search of a means to cure her Cocoa, and when she realizes her healing and conjure abilities are ineffective, she seeks a remedy she knows must be connected to Sapphira Wade. Once there she finds the ledger that would have contained the bill of sale that opens the novel with Sapphira’s name on it. The ledger, however, is so damaged it is unreadable; only bits and pieces of information are there. The date of *Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> Day August* is legible but the year is only partially readable “then a 1 and half of what must be an 8” (280). Only certain other words can be understood on sight such as “*Law, knowledge, witness, inflicted, nurse*” as well as the final words:

*“Conditions...tender...kind”* (280). The inability to read all of the information about the transaction that made Sapphira Bascombe Wade’s property connotes the inability to create property from human life but also that human life does not need to be verified or named for it to be valuable. No one knows Sapphira’s name but “all Willow Springs knows [was] that this woman was nobody’s slave”(280). The idea of her is what guides them, and Mama Day comes to realize this when she cannot read the name on the document, only an *S*. She tries to guess because she knows that in finding that name, she will save Cocoa, but then a “loss that she can’t describe sweeps over her – a missing key to an unknown door somewhere in that house. The door to help Baby Girl” (280). The “sweep” she feels is Sapphira’s spirit and she realizes she cannot demand answers from the ancestors; they must be “given” (280). Once she resigns herself to patience and faith rather than evidence or proper naming, she does find the answers: “and in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (280) who guides her through generations of pain to what will save Cocoa – George’s death will bring peace to the ancestors.

The connection between Sapphira and Cocoa is revealed in the novel, such as Mama Day connecting the golden color of Cocoa’s skin to Sapphira: “*the Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother...it’s only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold*” (48). Cocoa is also able to commune with Sapphira’s spirit at the “Other Place” and the rocking chair on the porch. Cocoa states, “You [George] wanted to sit in the rocking chair and play southern gentleman with me on your lap” (224). George’s desire to reenact an antebellum fantasy seems harmless, but as Cocoa knows the love story George thinks is associated with Sapphira and Bascombe Wade is a death-filled fallacy. Bascombe Wade could not exist in a connected relationship with Sapphira as master and slave, and the somewhat flippant allusion to this reveals how disconnected George is from the ancestral narratives of Cocoa’s family. The voices she hears in the wind, “*over and over: you’ll break his heart*” (224) foreshadows George’s death as well as her ability to hear the ancestors. Through the ancestral voice of Sapphira Wade, Cocoa is being warned about the sacrifices that are made because of love. When Sapphira’s warning comes to fruition and George dies, Cocoa is as grief stricken as were the other women in her family after their experiences with death. Virginia Fowler argues, “Both George’s love and his

death are what save Cocoa and bring her peace” (117). Fowler’s choice of wording positions the physical healing with the emotional healing Cocoa will eventually come to once the grieving process is over.

Unlike her great-grandmother who threw herself in the Sound after Peace died or her mother whose death was caused by the loss of her husband to another woman, Cocoa will navigate through her grief and a fulfilled life with another husband and children; she will have the peace the other women could not achieve because of the nurturing relationship she has with Mama Day and Abigail, but more importantly Cocoa is deeply connected with the ancestral spirit of Sapphira: “Cocoa *is* a modern-day Sapphira” and the “true inheritor of Sapphira Wade’s legacy,” (117) a legacy that created the Day family.

The emphasis on family-centered history in Gullah womanism is clearly evoked by Naylor throughout the novel. As I have suggested, the family tree allows the reader to see the generational lineage, but the quilt Mama Day and Abigail make for Cocoa as a wedding gift demonstrates that family connectivity is paramount to the Day women. The “seven square” (147) foot quilt was created from pieces of cloth that represent the continuity of generations. The shifting of colors from gold to “reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt” represents the “overlapping circles” (137) of connectivity. Each bit of cloth comes from an ancestor, “a bit from her daddy’s Sunday shirt”...Abigail’s lace slip, the collar from Hope’s graduation dress, the palm of Grace’s baptismal gloves” (137) and each small piece connects to those listed on the family tree. Virginia Fowler reads the creation of the quilt “to create from fragments a whole and patterned history of the Day family” (99). When George and Cocoa receive the quilt, George sees it as a work of art, and he “wanted to clear a wall in the living room and hang it up” (147) but Cocoa understands “it had been made to be used...they had sewed for *my* grandchildren to be conceived under this quilt” (147). With her comment – not children but “grandchildren” – Cocoa understands what George cannot: this artwork was family history, and it was to be passed on to future generations to tell a visual story of their ancestors.

As Mama Day is sewing the quilt, she finds in their box of cloth “a piece of faded homespun, no larger than the palm of her hand” that was “real old” (137) - she has found a piece of Sapphira Wade. The material is older than everything else, but as Mama Day places it onto the quilt, she feels “a chill move

through the center of her chest” (138) as the “old walnut clock” (137) ticks. She is uncomfortable as she works with the chill and the ticking of the clock because she knows “it’s only telling her what she knew about the homespun all along. The woman who wore it broke a man’s heart” (138). Realizing it is too late to take the piece out of the quilt and ruin the carefully constructed pattern, Mama Day keeps this piece in the quilt because when it is “done right you can’t tell where one ring ends and the other begins” (138). This comment is aimed at the technical aspects of quilting. When you make a mistake while quilting, in order to fix the problem you have to carefully cut the seams, remove the backing, and re-stitch so that the new sewing blends seamlessly; each step in this process can be tedious and time consuming (“Purple Daisies Quilting”) which is part of Mama Day’s dilemma. She also realizes, however, that to take this piece out would deny Cocoa a piece of her past, and with this piece in it tells the whole story of the family.<sup>11</sup>

Family-centeredness extends beyond Mama Day’s immediate family toward the community, nurturing those around her. Bernice Duvall, one of the island residents, desperately wants to have a child but cannot; it is only through the use and belief in Mama Day’s conjure does she finally have a child. The use of conjure in *Mama Day* creates what Amy Levin calls “surreal elements” that “may be read as signs of African presences, while the mother figures may be viewed as expressions of a conception of female authority derived from West African women’s traditions” (28). Lindsey Tucker argues that the use of conjure in African American literature “addresses the undervaluation of African medicinal practices and belief systems,” and specifically in *Mama Day*, she proposes the conjure figure Naylor creates through Mama Day reclaims the conjure *woman* to “de-mystify conjuration” (Tucker 174, 179). Tucker’s argument is useful but requires extending. If we read Mama Day’s conjuring abilities as ‘de-mystified’ through Naylor’s view, then we must see conjure as a means of family centered nurturing and therefore Gullah womanism.

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Fowler cites Houston and Charlotte Baker’s study in her reading of *Mama Day*. Houston and Charlotte Baker argue that quilts represent the artistic method of recreating the “wholeness” that is fractured within the African diaspora.

When Bernice becomes ill from the fertility drugs she is taking, her husband, Ambush calls the 'mainland' doctor, Dr. Smithfield. The exchange between Mama Day and Dr. Smithfield reveals the differences between mainland and island medicine. Dr. Smithfield states before examining Bernice "I have a feeling I'm going to find myself a sweet little case of ovarian cysts in there" while Mama Day uses a different language - "some kinda boil up on her female parts" (85) - to describe the same conclusion. With excellent diagnostic skill, Mama Day performs internal and external exams with ease and treats illnesses with herbal medicine and common sense. "Although it hurt [Smithfield's] pride at times, he'd admit inside it was usually no different than what he had to say himself—just plainer words and a slower cure than them concentrated drugs" (84). For example, to calm Bernice before the doctor arrives, Mama Day gives her "a smidge of choke-cherry bark" and Dr. Smithfield replies "I'm not familiar with that one" (84). Dr. Smithfield is not as well versed in island remedies as Mama Day. To help Bernice create a child, Mama Day tells her "if you willing to work with me...if it turns out we gotta go to the other place together in the end, what happens there we gotta keep a secret" (85). The "secret" is a combination of herbal medicine, planting seeds at the other place, and "nature helping out" (87). This creates interesting questions about what "alternative medicine" is as well as questions about what kind of medicine is validated in Western society and what is dismissed. Mama Day's form of conjure is drawn from West African traditions and the Gullah reverence for family ties.

The following section of the novel tells the family history of the direct line of descendants of Mama Day. Her father, John-Paul, was the seventh son of the seventh son (Jonah Day) of Sapphira Wade. Their specific story is revealed here and it is one of pain and grief, inherited perhaps from Sapphira.

*The five year old moves quiet-like away from the darkened room where the bundle of soft flannel lays amidst flowers and the smell of melted candle wax. Moonlight floods in through the window, making bars across the tiny casket that is carved with rosebuds and the trailing of circles of water lilies. The wavery shadows of the horsehair divan and the marble fireplace against the hardwood floors are a betrayal: Peace was not supposed to die in their home. Her mama's wail and the angry thud of her daddy's hobnail boots*

*spiral above her head, louder and louder. The sound will fill the house while one then the other grows mad, mad. There was Miranda, Abigail, and now there was no Peace.*

*Creeping into the bedroom, she sees the three year old curled up tight with her thumb in her mouth. The counterpane rises steadily with each breath, but ain't to be trusted. She will see Peace breathing too, at the bottom of the open well, long after her daddy carves the box and they wrap her in white flannel. Long after her mama will spend her days rocking and twisting thread, twisting thread, while her daddy spends his nights digging, digging into the blocks of wood. But there will be no Peace.” (36)*

Mama Day and Abigail's sister, Peace, died when she fell down the family well, which is a story that is revealed without specific details detailed later in the novel, but is introduced through the juxtaposition of the “tiny casket carved with rosebuds and water lilies” with the moonlight “making bars” across it, the reader sees the traditional symbol of death, the casket, but the inclusion of “bars” reemphasizes the lasting nature of grief from death that will imprison the family. Peace “was not supposed to die in the family home,” as Mama Day states as a five year old, but the family home or the “Other Place” as it is called throughout the novel, was the home Bascombe Wade owned and where he took Sapphira after he purchased her. Regardless of which version of his death the reader believes from the prologue, he died there and Sapphira disappeared from that space, I propose making the house haunted with grief. It is not surprising to me that Peace died there as well; there is an ancestry of death and pain in that house. As this portion tells the reader, in veiled ways, grief and pain will continue in that place. The “Other Place” is the family home on forty-nine hundred acres and on that land is the familial burial grounds; the land “got” Mama Day’s uncles and her father, as well as “got Peace, Grace, Hope, and Peace again” (117). Inside of the home, “long after” Peace’s death “her mama will spend her days rocking...while her daddy spends his nights digging” (36) the grief remains until it finally kills her mother, Grace, who died from grief – “Mother flew off that bluff [into the Sound] screaming Peace” (117). As Mama Day states, “there will be no Peace” her statement has dual meaning. Mama Day “*begins to learn even at this age: there is more to be known behind what the eyes can see*” (36) recognizing that nothing is singular or fixed. Her words link

to Peace's passing, but with her death the peace of the family has been replaced with circles of lasting grief.

The intersections of female and family are displayed in Naylor's paragraph, but the other aspect seen here is the inclusion of men through the references to Mama Day's father. Amy Levin suggests that because Willow Spring is inhabited and guided by women, the "male inhabitants are shadowy and passive, at best powerless and at worst ridiculous" (34). Ambush Duvall, despite being a loving husband and father, is "dominated by his mother, Pearl. And Junior Lee is a ridiculous figure, ruled by his wife, Ruby" (Levin 34). I would not suggest John-Paul, based upon how he is described through Mama Day's memory, within either of Levin's designations but rather describe him as creative and artistic but also broken by the grief he shares with his wife. In regards to men within Hudson-Weems paradigm, the relationships formed between women and men have the same goals of survival and are just as valuable as women-centered and family connections. When the bonds between women and men are broken, the female interactions that surround those relationships are either fractured or enhanced. In Morrison's *Sula*, the friendship Sula and Nel built as young girls was broken when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude. This is an offense that Nel cannot forgive, but for Sula the infidelity is reduced to her comment, "He just filled up some space" (144). Conversely, in *Mama Day*, Naylor proposes the marriage between Cocoa and George enhances the women-centered bonds between the women on the island.

The relationship George and Cocoa form are somewhat mediated by Mama Day and the color yellow. When Cocoa travels to Willow Springs and tells her about the interview with George, she encourages Cocoa to write him a letter that Mama Day sprinkles with a yellow powder. Although she does not get the job, the charm Mama Day placed on the letter starts their relationship and is solidified when George sends Cocoa eleven long stemmed yellow roses with a note that the twelfth rose is waiting for her if he would join her for dinner. Nagueyalti Warren reads the links between the yellow powder and the yellow roses as "indicating magnanimity, intuition and intellect [that] perfectly predicts Cocoa's and George's relationship" (20). George is the intellect that Warren draws attention to, not simply because of his intelligence but because he approaches everything from a pragmatic standpoint. His life is neat and

orderly until “a woman who has the power to turn [his] existence upside-down by simply running a hand up the back of her neck” (33). His grounding in intellect came from his upbringing in the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys where he was constantly reminded to “keep it in the now” and that “only the present has potential” (23). He has no past to access and no ancestry to return to as Cocoa does and when he journeys to Willow Springs for the first and last time, his scientifically trained mind cannot grasp the Africanism and traditions at work on the island.

As Mama Day is preparing for their first visit to the island, she thinks about what Cocoa told her about George – he has a congenital heart defect that limits some of his activities – and the emphasis on his heart is significant. Mama Day observes he is a “good hearted boy with a bad heart” (170). The heart is typically linked with love but “in African philosophy the heart is the true seat of intelligence and the brain is merely instrumental. George’s heart defect...is made to represent faulty thinking” about love (Warren 20). Throughout their relationship, George has tried to rationalize it rather than giving over the uncertainty inherent in loving someone completely. Given the nature of George and Cocoa’s worldviews – mainland versus island – their marriage is a joining of opposites.

On the island, when Cocoa becomes deathly ill from Ruby’s spell, George must put aside any disbelief in the traditions that govern the island and the people. Hudson-Weems writes that the “Africana womanist invites her male counterpart into her struggle” and together they work to find a solution (61). In this sense, George is trying to save his love, Cocoa, but this also means he must depend upon and “listen, really listen” to the directions of Mama Day, which reflect her Gullah belief in conjure. She realizes that “these are the hands that could do it, but would he trust her enough to follow?” (295); he is capable of saving Cocoa and himself if he can give himself over to a belief system rooted in African traditions. Her instructions to George appear simple – “you gotta take this book and cane [into the chicken coop] with you, search good in the back of [the hen’s] nest, and come straight back here with whatever you find” (295). Dorothy Perry Thompson notes that, “chickens are ever-present in ritual drama of the diaspora” (97). Thompson supports her analysis of Naylor’s use Hurston’s experience with New Orleans Hoo Doo citing the folkloric research in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*. In Hurston’s experience with Luke

Turner, a descendant of the high priestess of New Orleans Hoo Doo Marie Leveau, Hurston learned of the process to sacrifice chickens in order to protect the community (*Mules and Men* 202-205; Thompson 97). Hurston writes after the chickens were ceremonially killed that “we drove out one of the main highways for a mile and threw one of the chickens away. Then another mile and another chicken until the nine dead chickens had been disposed of. The spirits of the dead chickens had been instructed never to let the trouble-maker pass inward to New Orleans again after he passed them going out” (*Mules and Men* 204).

The ritual Hurston recalls was intended to ward off harm to the community, but in Naylor’s version, Mama Day’s instructions are not explained to George. He is angered by these instructions, but completes Mama Day’s mission with reservations that this simple act would save his wife. As he fights with the chickens, who leave him bloody and bruised, he realizes, was it possible that Mama Day “wanted nothing by my hands?” (300). George’s revelation and connection with African beliefs are short-lived; he states just as quickly, “there was nothing that old woman could do with a pair of empty hands” (301). When he returns to Cocoa, empty handed with nothing to save her, George dies next to Cocoa. He felt his “heart burst” and then there was “total peace” (302). George makes the ultimate sacrifice that allows Cocoa to break the legacy of dominance connected to slavery and, as Fowler argues, “reverses the history of the island” (118). Fowler’s conclusion is disclosed when Cocoa visits George’s grave. Cocoa, now living in Charleston, returns to the island often and stays close to her Gullah roots. Cocoa states at the end of the novel “but when I see you again, our versions [of their time on the island and his death] will be different still...And it’s the one truth about you that I hold on to. Because what really happened to us, George? You see, that’s what I mean – there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311). In this revelation, Cocoa comes to understand the circularity in her Gullah roots while simultaneously restoring peace to her ancestors; George’s sacrifice enables Cocoa to transform back into a fully realized Gullah woman.

Naylor closes *Mama Day* by blurring the lines of time. She evokes the future through the phrase “some things are yet to be” and the past by referencing “1899” (312). She tells us of the death of Abigail by including the familiar “You there, Sister?” but this time the question is answered with “the rustling of

the trees". Naylor foreshadows Mama Day's death in 1999: "when she's tied up the twentieth century, she'll take a peek into the other side" (312). The reader comes to understand perhaps the most important aspect to the ending pages: that Sapphira's spirit now described with more specific language than the prologue - "a slender body, but the hair is streaked with gray...there are fine lines marking off the character of her face - the firm mouth, high cheekbones, and clear brown eyes" - is resting and "given the meaning of peace" (312). Scholar Patricia Liggins Hill suggests that black feminism, womanism, and African Womanism all revolve around the lives of black women. It is in the work of modern black women writers such as Morrison, Walker, and Naylor "who have given new life to the novel form with their distinctive use of the African American folk idiom, use of mythology, and their emphasis on black female lives" (*Call and Response* 1380) to heal the wounds of the past and the legacies still at work within our modern society from slavery. Her conclusions that modern writers are indebted to the forms of the past means that they are also beholden to their foremothers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Harriet Jacobs and the literary ancestry of their writing. As a part of that legacy, *Mama Day* productively uses of her literary ancestry and the culture of the Gullah people to revise the theoretical and creative paradigms of black women writers through the literary model of Gullah womanism.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “WE TELL IT FUH TRUE”: GULLAH FOLKLORE & BLACK WOMEN’S FICTION

In 1927 Zora Neale Hurston boarded a train from Harlem to the South, first to her home state of Florida and then to Louisiana, to gather African American folklore. She amassed many notebooks of material during her trip, but she returned to Harlem with little direction on how to make something out of the tales she collected. During this first trip, Hurston fashioned herself as an academic using the skills and methodologies learned at Barnard College. Reflecting on her initial trip to Eatonville in 1927, Hurston wrote, “The glamour of Bernard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls...I went about asking in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?’ The men and women, who had whole treasures of material just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads. No, they had never heard of anything like that around here” (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 127-128). The proper speech Hurston used was “impersonal and awkward” for her, and the first trip resulted in little usable materials for her anticipated book (Plant). With the encouragement of her mentor, the pioneering anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston returned to Eatonville, but on this journey she would become part of the community. She left any of the formal airs of her college life in New York and returned as “just Lucy Hurston’s daughter, Zora” without any anticipated “admiration over ... a diploma and a Chevrolet” (*Mules and Men* 2).

This new approach spawned *Mules and Men* (1935) which Arnold Rampersad described as the product of a “matured consciousness, and organized according to effective journalistic and literary strategies” (*Mules and Men* xvi) representing a different view of African American folklore than what was found in previous folklore collections. Franz Boas writes in the introduction that Negro folklore has a “strong attraction upon the imagination of the American public” but “the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro has been given very inadequately” (*Mules and Men* xiii) in the texts prior to Hurston’s work. Hurston’s book provided for readers, according to Boas, “an unusual contribution to our knowledge of the true inner life of the Negro” (*Mules and Men* xiii). Zora Neale Hurston inserted herself into the community as both a scholar *and* a former resident and, as a consequence, was able to produce what Alan

Lomax called "the most engaging, genuine, and skillfully written book in the field of folklore" (*Mules and Men* xvi).

*Mules and Men* accomplishes one of the primary goals of folklore: to be a mechanism for a group of people to express their view of the world. Hurston's collection contains over eighty folktales, songs, and stories of hoodoo, yet it is not fashioned with the traditional structures of academic folklore texts of the time. Collections of folklore in the late 1800s and early 1900s were presented in two ways. The first method was to present the folktales as faithfully as the collectors were able to do. This means that the text was an arrangement of a collector's data with names, dates, and places; this approach was intended to be relatively straightforward. This approach, however, was not without some intervention by the collector in the form of introductory or concluding materials to aid in the reading of the folktales or reflective of the racial, cultural, and linguistic barriers that separated white and black. The second approach is what I would term "the Harris method" or the presentation of folktales and traditions through the intervention of the collector, a narrator or a created character to retell collected materials. I call this the "Harris method" because Joel Chandler Harris's creation of the character of Uncle Remus was by far the most popular way African American folklore entered the public realm. Uncle Remus was intended to be reminiscent of the slave storyteller and reflect the way tales were told on the plantations in the antebellum south. Harris's collections of folklore were extremely popular among readers, in large part because of the Uncle Remus character.

As Alice Walker wrote in her essay, "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus", "when you think of folklore in America, you have to think of Uncle Remus and you have to think of Joel Chandler Harris" (25). Her comment, while accurate based upon the popularity of his texts, was not intended to be a positive statement, and Walker was quite critical of Harris's representation of African American folklore. Harris's collection of tales represented the "classic

folk tales that came from Africa, and that, even now in Africa, are still being told” (Walker 26), yet the creation of Uncle Remus belittles the historical and cultural value of African American folklore.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, *Mules and Men* is a blend of expertise in folkloric fieldwork and a carefully crafted prose that demonstrates the vital nature of African American folklore and those who tell the tales. Each tale is surrounded by Hurston's unique ability to recreate the sound of speech on the page and presents the informants as people rather than subjects. Trudier Harris writes, "She [Hurston] creates characters in the way that short fiction writers or novelists do, and she manipulates characters and situations in ways to get readers to identify thoroughly with the text and its presentations" (*Power of the Porch* ix). Each of the tales in the first section of *Mules and Men* comes from the residents of Eatonville and the surrounding towns. The stories represent a wide variety of folklore including the refashioning of biblical stories, animal tales, and stories of folk heroes. Hurston's collection allows entry into the ways African Americans created tales from their everyday lives, the methods by which folktales are told, and how one gifted interpreter can capture those tales for posterity. She also addresses key issues within the black community without explicitly stating them and makes the community of Eatonville and by extension the African American community accessible to her readers.

In chapter two, for example, Hurston is on day two of her trip to Eatonville. During this session of telling “big lies” at the community-gathering place, “the store porch” (*Mules and Men* 3, 19), Hurston captures many tales, including "Why Negroes are Black":

Long before they got thru makin' de Atlantic Ocean and haulin' de rocks for de mountains, God was maki' up de people. Bu He didn't finish 'em all at one time. Ah'm compelled to say dat some folks is walkin' 'round dis town right now ain't finished yet and never will be. Well, He give out eyes one day. All de nations come up and got they eyes. Then He give out teeth and so on. Then He set a day to give out color. So seven

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<sup>1</sup> This is the opinion of Walker as well as other writers, folklorists, and critics. However, Robert Cochan's 2004 essay, "Black Father: The Subversive Achievement of Joel Chandler Harris" disputes this claim. I will discuss both sides of this argument and the role of Harris as a folklorist in more depth later in this chapter.

o'clock dat mornin' everybody was due to git they color except de niggers. So God give everybody they color and they' went on off. Then He set there for three hours and one half and no niggers. It was gettin' hot and God wanted to git His work done and go set' in de cool. So He sent de angels. Rayfield and Gab'ull to go get 'em so He could tend some mo' business. They hunted all over Heben till dey found de colored folks. All stretched out sleep on de grass under de tree of life. So Rayfield woke 'em up and tole 'em God wanted 'em. They all jumped up and run on up to de th'one and they was so skeered they might miss sumpin' they begin to push and shove one 'nother, bumpin' against all de angels and turnin' over foot-stools. They even had de th' one all pushed one-sided.

So God hollered "Git back! Git back!" And they misunderstood Him and thought He said, "Git black," and they been black ever since. (29-30)

In "Why Negroes Are Black" the biblical tale of Ham, which was used to rationalize the inferiority of Africans and African Americans by white slave owners, becomes a comedic circumstance of chance through the "lie" of Gold, a woman in Eatonville, "called Gold, for no evident reason" (*Mules and Men* 20). Being black was not a punishment in Gold's tale, but the result of a misunderstanding of God's words. The tale is not framed by scientifically constructed identification information, such as name, date, or place of interview. Instead, the lead-in to the tale is a heated discussion on who is "blacker", Gold or the previous teller, Gene, and concludes with Gold's assertion that women tell the better lies: "Don't you know you can't tight de best of no woman in de talkin' game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got" (*Mules and Men* 30). In this one example, Hurston allows her readers into the conversation of the folk and their language while bringing to the surface issues of colorism and gender roles in the community. She accomplishes these goals while at the same time giving readers an alternative narrative to a familiar story with the Eatonville folk and Hurston as their guide.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* represents what I would call "mainland" African American folklore, yet this is not the only representation of African American folklore. On the Sea Islands, the

Gullah people tell tales that I would describe as Sea Island folklore. Their tales, like most African American folktales, share many commonalities including themes, characters born from African folklore, and the use of folktales as teaching tools for children. Yet Gullah tales represent distinct African retentions because the Gullah people have maintained much of their African heritage in comparison to mainland African Americans.<sup>2</sup> As the Gullah people are descendants of various ethnic groups from the Sierra Leone and Angola regions, it would follow that many of the tales have connections to those areas.

For example, the Gullah people tell animal and trickster tales that are similar to mainland tales, but as William Politzer notes, the tales of the spider Anansi from the Temne and Limba ethnic groups of Sierra Leone are found in the Sea Islands as Aunt Nancy tales.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Lorenzo Dow Turner's research on the Gullah language revealed at least five specific folktales that contain the Mende language, drawing a direct connection to the Sierra Leone region where many Gullah people have traced their ancestral lineage. Patricia Nichols's research supports Melville Herskovits's research, and she writes of Gullah folklore that the "underlying themes and linguistic patterns have endured the Middle Passage as well as the passage of time can be heard today in the stories of children in African American communities along the South Carolina coast" (233). Modern Gullah storytellers draw from this intertwined past of African retention and white society in their versions of antebellum tales.

The collections of Gullah folklore in many ways were created to preserve their tales, and collectors leaned toward transcribing and presenting the tales as they were relayed to them. *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast* (1888) written by Charles Colcock Jones, contains sixty-one Gullah tales. On the three plantations his family owned, Montevideo, Arcadia, and Maybank, Gullahs cultivated rice and told folktales drawn from their African heritage. Jones recognized the importance of what he saw as the "vanishing folklore" of the Gullah people in the 1880s and began collecting their tales. Susan

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the research of African retentions among the Gullah people, please see William Politzer's discussion of William Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits research in chapter nine in *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*.

<sup>3</sup> Aunt Nancy tales are also very prevalent in the Caribbean. This connection speaks to the connections between the Caribbean and the Sea Islands discussed by various scholars who suggest that while the majority of Gullah peoples were brought to the Sea Islands from West Africa directly, the trade between Barbados and South Carolina allowed for many of the same traditions to be exhibited in both spaces.

Millar Williams writes in the 2000 edition of *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast*, “the versions [of folktales] Jones transcribed in the 1880s are now regarded as a kind of window through which we can peer backward to the oral traditions of an even earlier time” (xi). Despite Williams’s conclusion, the four closing tales of the text reveal Jones’ voice rather than solely representing the Gullah oral tradition. The tales “Dentistry at the Old Plantation Home”, “The Negro and the Alligator”, “Sperits” and “Daddy Jupiter’s Vision” are written with a bit of Gullah language but are dominated by Standard English. The form of these tales is also different than the previous tales. In these three tales, Jones forgoes presenting in a folkloric way and constructs these tales in a standard essay format. By using these two elements Jones infused himself, his style of writing, and his opinions of the Gullah people into the text.

These four pieces “tell us a good deal about how Jones saw himself, as a superior, well-educated, tolerant man uniquely positioned to record Gullah tales” (Williams xxxiii). For example in “The Negro and the Alligator”, Jones describes the alligator as “an important *dramatis persona*” to Gullah folklore, yet he belittles the Gullah people as “lazy” (162, 168). It is almost as though Jones could not resist placing himself within the collection, and, as Williams suggests, “modern readers will undoubtedly wish that Jones has left well enough alone when he finished transcribing the stories” (xxxiii). What strikes me in regards to the inclusion of his own voice is that it comes at the end of the text and it is the last interaction with Gullah folklore the reader encounters. This placement disregards the importance of Gullah people and the value of their tales. It is Jones who has the last word. Modern readers may be rightfully critical of Jones’s intervention, but the collection remains one of the strongest assemblages of Gullah folklore.<sup>4</sup> Jones and Harris were both contemporaries in the field of folklore and succeeded in preserving Sea Island and mainland folklore. Both men, however, demonstrate their belief in southern paternalism and a nostalgic reverence for the Old South in their collections of folklore. These two aspects, despite the positive aspect of preservation, ultimately harm their collections for modern-day readers.

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<sup>4</sup> This conclusion comes from a conversation with Gullah scholar, Joe Opala, who introduced me to this text in 2008. He believes Jones work, even more so than Ambrose Gonzales, reflects the strongest collection of Gullah tales in their language.

Though many collections of African American and Gullah tales exist, it is Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* that helps to form what I propose is the usable past of folklore. We must consider folklore as the history of a people *and* as a representation of their culture. By examining a piece of folklore in this way, we can see how both factors interact in the construction of a tale, borrow from events experienced by everyday people, and define how the tales chronicle their past. The shift toward viewing history through folklore allows nonhistorical people to become historians based upon their communities and cultures while bearing the influence of the larger historical narrative. White authors commodified African American folklore, however, I argue that once African Americans regained control over their narratives, their folktales and storytelling creates a usable past.

"We Tell It Fuh True" examines two prominent folktales - the Flying African and Ibo Landing - that represent the folklore within the African American and Gullah communities, respectively. I investigate these stories to uncover the ways in which African American writers draw creative inspiration from them toward a multilayered form of activism, by which I mean a dedicated engagement with the past to combat oppressive forces in their lives. The forces are societal, racial, and historical but also personal and it is in the individual journey the character takes through the past where the greatest impact of the uses of these folktales occurs. In my reading of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, I address how folklore and storytelling becomes the catalyst for a journey toward self-definition and healing from the ever present trauma of slavery; in Marshall's novel, however, I suggest this journey leads to an additional revelation - the restoration of an authentic Gullah womanism.

## **FOLK & FOLKLORE AS HISTORY & CULTURE**

The definitions of folklore have evolved greatly since the first official delineation of the term. Folklore was once thought of as "the generic term under which are included traditional institutions, beliefs, art, customs, stories, songs, sayings and the like current among backward peoples or retained by the less cultured classes of more advanced people" (Thoms rpt in Dorson xi). This definition, written in 1846, is antiquated and problematic due to its labeling of people as "backward" and implies little value

lies in their traditions. Jan Brunvand constructed a more inclusive definition in 1978, writing, "folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people....so as to reveal the common life of the human mind apart from what is contained in the formal records" (1-2). Brunvand's understanding of folklore reiterates Van Wyck Brooks's idea that the past can be found, and perhaps should be found, outside of the dominant discourse and through alternate voices. In 1989, Henry Glassie added to Brunvand by acknowledging folklore is both past and present: "Folklore is traditional. Its center holds. Changes are slow and steady. Folklore is variable. The tradition remains wholly within the control of its practitioners. It is theirs to remember, change, or forget. Answering the needs of the collective for continuity and of the individual for active participation, folklore is that which is at once traditional and variable" ("What is folklore?"). The American Folklore Society's current definition is perhaps the most useful for my project, academically. The AFS definition not only recognizes tradition, but includes two key words "knowledge" and "culture" that express the duality of the usable past of folklore: "Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example. The word 'folklore' names an enormous and deeply significant dimension of culture" ("What is folklore?"). This idea of what folklore is, past and present, help to shape my understanding of it and helps to guide the ways I will engage with the term in a broad sense in this chapter.

In the African American community, folklore mirrors these larger ideas but also represents what Africans could carry across the Atlantic – their memories, tales and proverbs. Once on the mainland, African traditions were often dismantled and, as Richard Dorson discusses, plantation life was rich in folklore and storytelling was one of the few expressions not taken by white plantation owners (330). The combination of plantation life and traveled memories and the blending of African and European in the United States resulted in African American folklore. The folktales of African American slaves served many of the same functions as folklore in Africa, particularly binding together a group of individuals, and in the case of slaves, individuals from different tribes and countries, placed into similar situations thus, a duality occurred. On one hand, an African American folklore was born, but, on the other, a diasporic canon of collective oral literature formed within slave communities, reaching as far as the West Indies

and Central America (Walters 4). Oral literature, or folklore, enabled bonded men and women to connect to their African roots, express themselves creatively, and subvert their forced servitude. Hurston's literary styled definition of folklore speaks directly to this idea. Hurston writes that folklore "is a great big, old serving platter, and all the local places are like eating plates. Whatever is on the plate must come out of the platter, but each plate has a flavor of its own because the people take the universal stuff and season it to suit themselves on the plate" (*Every Tongue Got to Confess* xxvi). In this description of folklore, Hurston addresses the autonomy of the teller as well as the connections between history and culture that characterize the folk. It is the most helpful way to view folklore for my project.

The "people" Hurston describes who draw from the platters to make their plates are the "folk". The folk have long been thought of as people from a rural region, or as A.H. Krappe notes, the folk were considered those in "agarian" spaces. In the 1976 article "American Folklore and American Studies", Richard Bauman, Roger D. Abrahams, and Susan Kalcik describe the folk as those who have "the qualities of isolation, homogeneity, and unsophistication" (373). The idea of who the folk are have taken on many faces in the study of folklore, but I would suggest that the description provided by Bauman, Abrahams, and Kalcik of the "folk" and White's description of "nonhistorical peoples" are quite similar. As White discusses, there are two categories of human history with two labels, "historical" and "nonhistorical" where "one of which is more human, *because it is more historical*, than the other" ("Question of Narrative" 31). To categorize one group as "more historical" or as exhibiting "unsophistication" positions the folk as those who have been and continue to be marginalized. If we think of this as a reason why using the narratives of the folk as the basis for revising history, these words take on a positive, rather than negative, connotation. The folk, their traditions, and their narratives become valuable touchstones by which to examine alternative forms of history when we view the folk as respected historians.

Alan Dundes's essay, "Who are the Folk?" traces many of ways we have defined who the folk are. In his analysis of the word, Dundes's begins with an aspect of marginalization and binary nature of describing the folk that echoes Hayden White's terminology of historical and nonhistorical peoples.

Dundes writes the “term *folk* lay in the fact that was inevitably defined as a *dependent* rather than an *independent* entity” (2). In this statement, the dualistic nature of the word folk is evident in his use of italics to emphasize the difference but more importantly, in the words he chooses to use to characterize the folk: *dependent* versus *independent*. The folk, in this statement, are created from the superior people rather than being valued for their own sense of identity. Dundes states, “*folk* was defined in contrast with or in opposition to some other population group” (2). This further emphasizes the marginalization of the folk to the fringes, or to connect to White’s ideas, the folk are nonhistorical because of their difference from the normative culture. The folk have been defined as “peasants”, “lower-class”, “non-progressive classes in a progressive people”, and “illiterate” (Dundes 3 and 4). These labels that still exist when using the word folk in some spaces position this supposed group in a negative light and in opposition to those who would occupy the corollary spaces such as upper class, progressive, or literate. Thus, the folk and their folklore only exist “where a civilized or elite group existed” (4). This reasoning makes the folk a derivative of the elite class and one that is devalued; this is a previously held notion that Dundes vehemently opposes.

Dundes argues in the remainder of his essay that the folk and folklore exists not because of this division; the folk can be found in all areas of cultural and societal groups. Folk, therefore, transforms away from the negative implications and toward a more inclusive idea. Individuals who engage with different groups at different times become “folk” based upon that space and place, not because of binary oppositions such as “savage or primitive” or “civilized or elite” (4).<sup>5</sup> The folk, therefore, is not a description by which to devalue a group or their methods of storytelling, but rather a way to comprehensively engage the wide spread and varied aspects of our collective culture. Dundes concludes his essay with the following statement: “Who are the folk? Among other, *we* are!” (19). It is in this last sentence where *we* is a distinct word and thus emphasizes an erasure of the reductive idea of the folk. If we think of the folk as “*we*” or all and their narratives as the basis for revising history, these words take

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<sup>5</sup> Please see Dundes discussion on various social and cultural groups, particularly those that are somewhat temporary. He discusses how a summer camp participant becomes one of the “summer camp folk”. This example then proposes that we move in and out of a supposed “folk” status with ease.

on a positive, rather than negative, connotation. Taking Dundes's approach to understanding the folk allows their narratives become valuable touchstones to examine alternative forms of history when we view the folk as respected historians.

Folklore as the basis for historical research is a relatively new concept. Folklorist Richard Dorson outlined his understanding of the intersections of folklore and history in many of his writings, but in his 1978 essay, "American Folklore vs. Folklore in America" he set forth what he saw as the intersections and importance of history.<sup>6</sup> Dorson defined "American folklore" as folklore as a product of the American historical process where the "great dramatic movements of American history" are deeply affected by folk traditions that helped to create new folklore and reshape existing folkloric themes (100). Folklore as "American folklore" means we cannot separate historical events from the folklore a group produces. This model asserts that folklore is not relegated to "backward peoples" (Thoms) or that the groups positioned outside of the "official historical records" (Brunvand) add no value to those records. Rather, all peoples in America, regardless of status, are affected by the nation's history and vice versa in deeply rooted ways. As inclusive as this concept appears to be, it comes with a downside. Stephen Stern and Simon Bronner warn us in "American Folklore vs. Folklore in America: A Fixed Fight?" that if we think of folklore as only "American folklore", we run the risk of "pushing the 'uniqueness argument' [of America] to the extreme" and overemphasizing the influences of Americanism upon the folk and their traditions (77).<sup>7</sup> In terms of African American folklore, this idea is particularly troublesome because it leaves little room for connections to African Diasporic history.

The contrasting concept of "folklore in America", as Dorson defines it, is "the traditions and material culture found and collected in the forty eight contiguous states" (97). Thinking of folklore as only "folklore in America", we confine a tale or tradition to the community or region where it was collected and, even with analysis done "comparatively or psychologically or structurally or in other ways"

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<sup>6</sup> For a larger discussion on Dorson's ideas of history and folklore, please see "A Theory of American Folklore" (1959) and "Oral Literature, Oral History, and the Folklorist" (1976).

<sup>7</sup> Stern and Bonner's comments come from Dorson's research on boosterism in the 1930s where the folk traditions associated with boosterism are a direct result of the American character of capitalism. For a full discussion, please see Stern and Bonner's article as well as Dorson's essay "Boosterism in American Folklore" (1978).

(Dorson 97), the folklore is static. This is not to suggest the word ‘static’ should be seen in a wholly negative way; the idea that a piece of folklore has a specific place, person, and a time period can be quite useful. The reader of a folktale recorded in the South in the 1930s where the informant is a former slave has attached to that tale an inherent historicity, and the reader can envision that space or moment from the words of the teller. This method of engaging folklore, however, does not take into account the context of the folktale or folk tradition, nor does it engage the cultural elements of the people. The concepts of “American Folklore” and “folklore in America” have positives and negatives when viewed separately. Contemporary folklorists have recognized this and tend to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. I propose the usable past of folklore must be a clear combination of both “American folklore” *and* “folklore in America” where folklore is seen as a narrative of a people influenced by history, both nationally and diasporically, but also drawn from their cultural traditions.

Engaging folklore as a form of history, and those who tell folktales as historians, enables us to see the ways in which nonhistorical peoples present history from a specific cultural vantage point, which is quite different from the work of traditional historians. Although both share a mutual grounding in history as a story of the past, traditional or academic historical works typically approach history as factual and linear. A chronological mode of history has its value in helping us to understand how historical moments and events build upon each other in a logical sequence. This structure of historical discourse, however, creates narrowness and exclusion. Henry Glassie argues that history “becomes a chronology so streamlined that the nature of human history becomes an admirable artwork of relevance to almost no one” (191). I would disagree with Glassie’s conclusions that linearity has little relevance, but I do propose that when we loosen our grip on tightly formed structures of history and allow folk historians to reveal alternative narratives through their folktales, we open history up to broader and more inclusive interpretations.

As the study of folklore continues to change and move toward using folklore as a basis for elucidating history, folk historians and their stories they record are more relevant in shaping our ever-evolving understanding of the past. Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-*

*American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* was one of the first texts to utilize the African American folk traditions for the basis of historical study. In the preface to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (published in 2007), Levine describes how African Americans were outside of the normative historical narrative because “if you came from a people without writing or a people whose written records were not preserved, you were out of luck so far as modern history was concerned” (xiii). Levine’s readings in the 1960s of civil rights leaders from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as well as African American literature by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin in the 1960s set him on a path toward combining history and folk traditions. Levine realized that his readings were infused with the folk traditions, songs, and stories of African Americans that could be traced back to slavery and that many of those pieces traced back to Africa. Additionally, he saw in the literary texts how those folk traditions were applicable to the present, which led him to conclude that the past of folk traditions “has its place in the work of historians” (xiii). These realizations inspired Levine to “depart from the traditional historical practice of viewing the folk as inarticulate intellectual ciphers” (xxv). Instead, he saw the folk “as actors in their own right who not only responded to their situation but often affected in crucial ways” and folklore as a way to “explore and reconstruct the mind of the black folk” (xxv). His text drew heavily upon WPA slave narratives, collections of folklore, and folklore publications as the basis for a historical study of African Americans from slavery to freedom; he tells the history of African Americans from their own voices.

Included in Levine’s work is a strong discussion on the Gullah community as an additional layer to his study on African American history. He draws upon Gullah language, folk traditions like the ring shout, and Gullah folklore. He highlights the tale of “Gullah Jack”, Denmark Vesey’s chief lieutenant Jack Pritchard, who aided slaves during the rebellion. Levine adds the Gullah to his historical narrative, but the section on Gullah Jack also links to folklore. Levine retells how fellow slaves described him: “he gave me some dry food, consisting of parched corn and ground nuts, and said eat that and nothing else on the morning it [the rebellion] breaks out, and when you join us as we pass put into your mouth this crab-claw and you can’t then be wounded” (76) Another slave stated, “Jack said he could not be killed, nor

could a white man take him” (76). Gullah Jack was a conjurer, and the slaves who spoke about him did so in a way that reminiscent of the ways others have spoken about a conjurer and folklore.

African American and Gullah storytellers, as folk historians and as nonhistorical peoples, construct tales that reveal how marginalized people build their everyday lives upon bravery and wit amid pain and oppression. As such, folk history through folklore is not guided solely by chronological or historical facts. The details of a folktale are as representative of the folk history of a group as verifiable facts are to professional historians. In this way, folk historians are more in line with Brondum’s concept of “composite histories” where historical details may be used to “reveal something about the ‘essence’ of a culture” but chronological facts are not required to provide that “essence” (154). Brondum’s concept helped me to define the usable past in chapter one, but the key point she makes about the essence of history rather than a definition of it speaks directly to folk historians. The facts of folk history are fluid and change as the teller needs it to change; thus, in a folktale, the details often allude to historical facts. For example, in many of the tales Hurston published in *Mules and Men* that dealt with slavery, there are no dates. Rather, we know the time of a tale when the character of “Old Massa” enters and can easily translate that phrase to the timeline of slavery before Emancipation, without including a single date. When reading tales such as “Why the Sister in Black Works the Hardest” or “De Reason Niggers is Working So Hard”, the “Old Massa” is replaced by the generic “de white man” suggesting that the timeline has changed. Subtle changes to the diction of a tale can reveal historical connections.

Hidden within the stories told by folk historians are kernels of history, which, if heard particularly by someone outside of a community, result in a new and exciting piece to the existing historical narrative. Historian Jacqueline Tobin discovered this first hand. While walking through the marketplace in Charleston, Tobin saw a stand with handmade quilts that reminded her of her grandmother’s quilting box. The woman who was selling the quilts asked Tobin, “Did you know that quilts were used by slaves to communicate on the Underground Railroad?” (Tobin). At the time, Tobin did not engage the woman to find out more. The interaction, however, intrigued Tobin and three years later she returned to the market and found the woman, Ozella McDaniel Williams, again. This time Tobin was ready to listen, and

Williams was ready to tell: “After seating herself on the folding chair she leaned down toward me, one hand resting on her knee, her index finger point to my notepad. She pushed her straw hat farther back on her head and with the other hand she directed me, ‘Write this down’” (Tobin).

Tobin gathered from William’s three-hour narrative much of what she would need to articulate the connections between quilts and freedom. Williams explained to her that the patterns and shapes on the quilts were actually codes for enslaved men and women to escape slavery via the Underground Railroad. Quilting is folk tradition among African Americans, and the knowledge of how to construct a freedom quilt was handed down orally, generation to generation, since slavery. Until Williams revealed her story to Tobin, no scholar had examined quilts as historical narratives.<sup>8</sup> Williams’s storytelling allowed Tobin and her partner, Raymond Dobard, to decipher the codes embedded in the textile language of the quilts. Together they established a verifiable link between the Underground Railroad, freedom, and the African American patchwork quilting tradition. By listening to a stranger who turned out to be a folk historian, Tobin experienced the ways the historical pieces of our national narrative, such as the Underground Railroad contain many layers waiting to be discovered. Tobin titled her text, *Hidden in Plain View*, a title that reminds us that history is not a single story but one that is dependent upon many forms of telling, and listening, to construct a more nuanced picture of the past.

The folk, as historians, transform the past through performance. As such, oral history requires that the teller tells a good story. Without the skills to engage the audience, a piece of folklore is not effective and the creativity required to make the audience listen to a story is dependent upon the teller. In Patricia Jones-Jackson’s research on Gullah storytelling, she notes, “Though everyone is potentially capable of telling a tale, I soon learned that not everyone can tell a good tale” (“The Audience in Gullah and Igbo” 199). Performance requires interaction with the audience where the rhetorical strategies used to persuade and engage the listener are also entertaining. Storytellers depend upon their personal style to bring a story to life, yet that style comes from cultural elements. Roger Abrahams writes, “...the more stylized the

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<sup>8</sup> Although Tobin’s text was the first to decode patterns in quilts from an academic perspective, Deborah Hopkinson’s two children’s books, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (1995) and *Under the Quilt of Night* (2005) both include the codes found on quilts.

performance, the more asymmetrical and ritualized the performer-audience relationship becomes” (“Folklore and Literature as Performance” 76). Alan Lomax expressed this connection. His book *Folk Song Style and Culture* discusses the connection between the way a song is sung and the cultural elements within that performance. He writes that song style “portrays some level of human adaptation, some social style. Each performance is symbolic reenactment of crucial behavior patterns upon which the continuity of a culture hangs” (rpt in “Folklore and Literature as Performance” 78). Performance is then a product of one’s culture and as such culture cannot be easily separated from folk traditions or folklore. Franz Boas was one of the earliest champions of the relevance of culture within the study of folklore as history. Boas believed that “folktales are ‘reflectors of culture’, for all incidents important to the daily life of a people eventually turn up in their tales, either incidentally or as the basis of a plot” (rpt in McNeil 32). Boas’s work contains many connections between culture and folklore as well as the act of performance as a representation of culture. Given that Boas was her mentor, it is no wonder that culture in the form of performance emerges in Hurston’s folkloric work.

Gullah culture is evident in their folktales because of their language and their distinctive methods of storytelling. As Franklin O. Smith reminds us, these links to the past position “the Gullah on the outside of the consciousness of the black intelligentsia” (129). In this way, if African American folklore represent “nonhistorical” peoples in White’s paradigm, the Gullah are even farther away and “stand as an ignored example” of the larger African American community (130). In this marginalized space within the larger marginalized group, Gullahs are a significant “cultural bridge to the past” (Smith 129). This is evident in the methods of storytelling. Patricia Jones-Jackson notes the ways Gullah tell a tale is to “tell a lie” (“Audience in Gullah” 200). The word “lie” has various connotations on the Sea Islands. On one hand, it means not telling the truth, but it also means “any kind of fictional tale told primarily for entertainment” (“Audience in Gullah” 200). When telling a tale, Gullah storytellers engage the audience. Most audiences react to onomatopoeic words, repetitions, and chants acting as a chorus (Jones-Jackson). In many ways, this is a common practice among both African American tellers and Gullahs. The Gullah

storyteller interacts with the group, but, the practice of Gullah storytellers to seemingly tell the tale to one individual is a key difference between the two groups. Jones-Jackson explains:

A given speaker may single out a person that he knows, or one that he may not know well and seemingly speak directly to this person, ignoring all others. He has eye contact with this person alone and may even turn his back to the other members of the audience who may be sitting next to him. This practice was fairly common in some West African communities. (204)

This practice seems contrary to the idea of performing for the audience, but reflects the retention of West African storytelling among the Gullah people.

#### **“IT WAS HERE THAT THEY BROUGHT ‘EM”: FLYING AFRICAN AND IBO LANDING FOLKTALES**

The Flying African tale is a multilayered story of the harsh nature of life on the plantation, the importance of freedom and memory, and the ways in which stories of escape reveal a connection to the trickster tales of the slave’s African heritage. The Flying African is “a canonical tale which resonates throughout the expressive traditions of that part of the African Diaspora which has known slavery in the New World” (Walters 4). Though there are many variations to the Flying African tale in African American and Caribbean folklore, the central plot line is the same. Broadly, the form of the Flying African tale begins with slaves working in the fields where at least one African-born slave can still recall the words to enable flight and/or still can fly. One slave is being more harshly treated than the others, to the point of near collapse. The African-born slave speaks the words required for flight, and those who are most severely worked take to the air and return with him to their homeland. After the slaves take flight, the remaining slaves who are not able to escape are left behind to continue toiling in the field.

In the late 1930s, researchers went to the coastal sea islands of Georgia to record stories and memories of former slaves or their descendants. This area was chosen because of the distinctive Gullah culture, which represented an alternative to mainland African American culture, and collectors

concentrated “on African survivals rather than on black acculturation” (Joyner xiii).<sup>9</sup> Often traveling by boat to many of these locations, as much of the Sea Islands were not accessible by automobile until the 1950s, collectors sought out the eldest person in an area and recorded their memories, stories, customs, traditions, foodways, crafts and folklore, particularly those with strong connections to Africa. In addition to recording Africanisms, researchers were able to obtain twenty-one versions of the Flying African legend, and *Drums and Shadows* remains one of our largest collections from former slaves and their descendants who could recall the legend themselves or could tell the tale as a close relative told it to them. In the recollections of the Flying African tale, a few key elements are found in the collection, specifically how the tale was passed on within the family, the words used to conjure flight, and the method of flight.

Most of the stories collected about the Flying African were tales handed down by a close family member, such as a mother, father, grandparent or great-grandparent. Twenty-seven different tales describe or refer to Flying Africans. This is a significant number that clearly fulfills Brunvand’s “validating formula” as well as the importance of familial storytelling and history. Martha Page, an eighty-year-old woman at the time of her interview, remembered clearly her African grandfather, who knew those with the ability to fly:

“I sho wuz sked ub im wne he use tuh talk bout dem time he people in Africa could do...some ub em could make yuh disapeah, he say, an some could fly all roun duh elements an make yuh do anyting dy wats yuh tuh do. Wen I growd up, I dicobuh dat plenty un duh tings gran tell me is sho nuff true.” (29)

Martha Page discovered in her adulthood that many of the things her grandfather told her were true, and although she does not claim first hand knowledge of human flight, the relationship of family trust and belief is clearly exhibited. Other accounts of elderly storytellers sharing the Flying African legend with children are just as important as tales told by a family member. We must remember that elders were the

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<sup>9</sup> Among the Gullah people, it is community tradition/knowledge that those from the South Carolina Sea Islands are called Gullah, while those on the Georgia islands are called Geechee. Geechee derives from the Ogeechee River, near Savannah. These terms are somewhat interchangeable for those of us outside of these communities, but this is often not so for those in their respective regions. For purposes of continuity in this paper, I will use the term Gullah to discuss both South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islanders.

most revered members of a community, as they were in African villages or tribes, and their stories were taken as truths. Carrie Hamilton recalls her mother telling her the story of Flying Africans while Dorothy Johnson of Springfield, recalls “duh ole folks use tuh tell bout duh people wut could take wing and fly right back tuh Africa” (44). Henry Bates remembers ‘dey ol’ folk tell bout Africans” and as a child “...heah lots uh stories bout people flyin” (34). In these examples, the stories come from what can be considered ‘reliable’ sources, not necessarily from the standpoint of accuracy about beings taking flight, but the believability in the original storyteller.

In Carrie Hamilton’s version of the tale, as well as Mose Brown’s version, the slaves who were flying back to Africa departed with “goodie bye, goodie bye” (29 and 18) but these were not the words that enabled flight. Magic words, phrases in African languages, are a significant piece of the legend, as these words display the power of indigenous tongue and memory. Prince Sneed recounts the following flight enabling words in his version of the legend, as the slaves were resting in the shade: “Duh dribuh say ‘Wut dis?’ and dey say *kum buba yali kum buba tambe*, *Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe* quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away” (79; emphasis mine). These words are very similar to the words of an African song that William Delegal, who at over one hundred years old, could remember from slavery. He associated the song with the legend, which includes the words *kum*, *baba* and *tambe*. Of the remaining stories, it seems curious that these words, or at least some version thereof, are not found; rather sounds are made to express the words that initiate flight. Perhaps the storyteller simply could not recall or were never told the words, but this may also reflect the storyteller’s desire to keep “hidden in plain view” a portion of their story. Wallace Quarterman’s account includes “quack, quack, quack” and “gabble, gabble, gabble” (150) as denotations of the conjure words that enabled flight. These expressions, that represent perhaps lost words, reflect a belief in magic and escape. Quarterman’s tale replaces bird noises for African language, and the slaves turn into buzzards to fly away. The substitutions, however, display the sounds of two different animals, a duck and a turkey, which is quite interesting; ducks certainly take to the air, but the overarching myth is that turkeys do not. One could read this subtle use of a supposed grounded animal as an addition by the storyteller as symbolic of those Africans who could fly and those slaves left behind.

The last characteristic within the collected tales from the Sea Island that is vital to understanding the importance of the folklore are the methods by which Africans took flight. The most common method of flight found in these tales is the transformation into a bird, or, to “take wing” (150). Quarterman and Johnson, discussed previously, recall this method, as does Pricilla McCullough, “bawn tree yeahs fo freedom in Sumthu, Sout Calina” (153):

“Duh slabes wuz out in duh fiel wukin. All ub a sudden dey git tuhgedduh an staht tuh mob roun in a ring. Roun dey go fastuhnfastuh. Den one by one dey riz up an take wing an fly lak a bud. Duh obuhseeuh heah duh noise an he come out an he see duh slabes riz up in duh eah an fly back tuh Africa.” (153-154)

The phrase “take wing” represents flight, but none of the tales state specifically the growth of wings. Again, the use of language is crucial to the story and the storytellers. These words represent flight and the animals that are connected with those words, but extreme detail is not needed. Turning again to Brunvand, we have an event that is connected by narrative structure, and the use of “take wing” allows the story to be both generic and specific. In other words, “take wing” creates a communal element to specific family stories.

*Drums and Shadows* as well as the other versions of the tale provides a useful foundation for understanding the Flying African folklore, but a discussion of a few of the other versions found in other areas of the diaspora is needed to fully explain the usable past nature of the tale. What is interesting to note about the versions found in the Caribbean is that they contain a possible reason why Africans no longer had the ability to fly: the ingestion of salt. In her collection of folklore from Haiti, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, Hurston recorded stories about the “duppies” that led into a discussion on one of the reasons why Africans could no longer simply take flight once they reached North America:

Another says that salt is not given because salt is heavy. It holds duppies to the ground. He cannot fly and depart if he has salt. Once Africans could all fly because they never ate salt. Many of them were brought to Jamaica to be slaves, but they never were slaves. They flew

back to Africa. Those who ate salt had to stay in Jamaica and be slaves, because they were too heavy to fly. (755-765)

Monica Schuler's *Alas, Alas, Kongo* provides several examples of flying and, much like Hurston's collected material, her research supports the belief that salt prevented enslaved Africans from flight. In her interviews with residents of the St. Thomas parish in Jamaica in 1971, three of the stories connect flight and salt. The first by Charles McKen who states:

They couldn't go back...because they bring down the things that they call mackerel, herring – a salt – we call mungwa – and after they eat it, they couldn't go back....[But] some fly. They fly a'wing – like a dove-and they fly from Jamaica back to Africa...they never eat no salt [in Africa] just in our country" (93; rpt in Walters 12).

The second version by George Walker that is quite similar but gendered: "Only men fly back to Africa. One flew from Bowden Wharf soon after the ship arrive. They never took salt" (93; rpt in Walters 12). Only one story recounted by a woman, Elizabeth Spence, tells a similar story: "My grandmother had a grand aunt seventeen years old, and one day she in the kitchen, and she blew on her hand –toot, toot- and she disappear. She didn't eat salt and she went back to Africa" (93; rpt in Walters 12). Referring to salt as a deterrent to flight further suggests the impacts of enslavement and oppression.

Lorne McDaniels argues that including salt as one of the main reasons Africans could no longer fly can be thought of as a metaphor for the Middle Passage. The sea becomes a physical barrier to the return home, McDaniels argues, and the salted sea reflects the harrowing trip to the New World (McDaniels). Her point is a strong one, but I would also suggest that the connection between salt and the sea demonstrates the creative power storytellers engaged in their presentation of the narratives and including a warning about salt speaks to the teaching nature of folklore. The warning against ingesting salt also connects back to the Middle Passage. The food on the ships, as well as on many plantations, was preserved in salt. The "weekly allowance of salted codfish, mackerel, herring or pork constituted the new and foreign food culture of the enslaved that was dictated by the Beneficent Clauses of the Code Noir and British slave laws" (McDaniels 31). Slaves were forced to ingest salted foods to survive, again

showing the oppressive power held by the slave owners. Wendy Walters draws a productive conclusion to McDaniels research: salt “was associated with their exile” (12). By including salt as a tangible reason why Africans can no longer fly, the folklore creatively suggests the ways in which their power was taken away from the Africans once enslaved, while the possibility of flying for some slaves suggests the hope and power in memory; the stories that contain salt become a two-fold narrative. Ultimately, what is at stake with the folklore of flight is the significance of remembering African retentions that were brought to the Americas and the power of resistance.

The Flying African tale takes many shapes throughout the diaspora, but the definitive origins of the story are largely unknown as is the case form much of folklore. The materials found in *Drums and Shadows* provide a glimpse into the diasporic Flying African legend on Sea Island soil, but *Drums and Shadows* also contains recollections of the Gullah communal folklore of Ibo Landing. Ibo Landing tales still travel throughout the Sea Islands and it is said, somewhat jokingly, that every town has an Ibo Landing.<sup>10</sup> This tale differs from the Flying African story in that it has its roots in an actual event. Discussing the history of Ibo Landing as “historical” peoples retell it juxtaposed with the folklore of the “nonhistorical” Gullah people, it becomes clear how the history of the Gullah people became a usable past through folklore.

The historical narrative of Ibo Landing begins in May 1803 when *The Schooner York* brought seventy-five captive Ibos to the Georgia Sea Islands to labor on the Couper and Spalding plantations. By the time the ship reached Dunbar Creek, the Ibos slaves rebelled, took control of the ship, and drowned their captors (Clucevich). Based upon the account of the event by Roswell King, one of the overseers on the Pierce Butler plantation near the site, we know that as soon as the ship landed on St. Simons Island, the Ibo took to the swamp, committing suicide by walking into Dunbar Creek (“Ibo Landing”). King’s account, as well as others found in the research of Terri Snyder and Jacqueline Berlin, reflects the Whitean nature of the event made by “historical” peoples. In Snyder’s research, she cites a written

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<sup>10</sup> This idea comes from a lecture I attended on Gullah culture by Ronald Daise at the 2008 Gullah Summer Institute.

account of the event that names the captain of the ship as “Patterson” (surname only) and Roswell King as one of the men who “recovered the bodies of the drowned Igbo” (61). She also discusses a letter written by a Savannah slave dealer William Mein to Pierce Butler. Mein reports “the enslaved cargo, who had ‘suffered much by mismanagement,’ ‘rose’ from their confinement in the small vessel, and revolted against the crew...the Igbos ‘took to the marsh’ and drowned themselves” (Snyder 39). Jacqueline Berlin’s research reveals ten to twelve Ibos drowned in the creek and that bounty hunters were hired to “salvage” slaves still alive; they were paid \$10 per slave they retrieved from the water (<http://www.ssiheritagecoalition.org/articles-about-ssaahc.html>). The research by Snyder and Berlin suggest that the suicide of the Ibos, as documented by white males, is an economically driven account of history. The plantation owners, who paid \$100 per slave on the ship, must have seen the event as the loss of property and valuable labor resources (Berlin). Words such as “salvaged” and the price paid to those who could recover slaves demonstrates the value of the slaves as objects, not human beings. From what I can gather from the research of Snyder and Berlin, the documented accounts are testimonies of those in positions of power who were financially invested in the cargo of the ship; clearly, those retelling this event saw the Ibos who died as objects of profit.

It is in Sieber’s research where a link to the Africans as subjects was found. In his book, *Holy Ground*, Sieber determined that an Ibo chief guided the enslaved men to their death in the water. As they walked into the water, Sieber writes, “they sang in their native tongue ‘Orimiri Omanbala bu anyi bia. Orimiri omanbala ka anyi go ejina’, which translates to ‘The Water Spirit brought us, the Water Spirit will take us home’” (Sieber 43). Sieber’s research provides an African link to the tale through the language used and the tone of resistance connected to the event. The suicide of the Ibos, who refused to be enslaved, is not a tale of money lost but one of freedom gained through the sacrifice of oneself. Snyder writes in her conclusions on the Ibo Landing tale as “an act that most scholars have understood as a determined, collective suicide” (39).

Given the support from multiple sources, the event of Ibos rebelling and drowning in a mass suicide appears to be true. Michael Gomez documents the Ibo ethnic group and discusses their resistance to

slavery throughout the Americas in “I Seen Folks Disappeah: The Igbo and West Central Africa”<sup>11</sup>. He focuses on the legend of Ibo Landing, citing Shad Hall’s tale in *Drums and Shadows*, concluding that:

The Igbo were experiencing suffering unusual even for a slave...their condition was such that they were unproductive, and rather than accept punishment, they chose to fly back to Africa. Interestingly, they first had to go to the river...when pushed to their limits, the Igbo were more likely than others to take it beyond the limit. ....flying via suicide was a sure way, perhaps the only way, to get back to Africa, at which point one could be reincarnated and live in the land of family and relations, far away from the experience call America...the Igbo may have indeed chosen the option of resistance by way of self-destruction more than did member of other ethnicities...but of course, suicide was only one form of rebellion. (119-120)

It is, on one hand, irrelevant whether or not physical flight or walking upon water took place; on the other, it is extremely relevant that a form of freedom was attained. The cultural currency of the Ibo Landing tale, as well as the Flying African, lies within the themes of self-determination and resistance. The publishing of the Ibo Landing tale in *Drums and Shadows* enables those outside of the families of Sea Island slave descendants the opportunity to form their own attachments to the legend.

The narrative of Ibo Landing that centers on economics and property is the White-styled historical one; the folklore of Ibo Landing is the nonhistorical version that privileges determination and the resolve to be free no matter the cost. In his discussion of Ibo Landing in 2002, Pat Morris, Executive Director of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society stated, “It’s an oral tale that’s been told down – not written. But it did happen. It’s one of those things that we’re always learning more about to tell the complete story. History isn’t static” (<http://www.ssiheritagecoalition.org/articles-about-ssaahc.html>).

Erskine Clarke suggests of folklore used on the Sea Island plantations that, “the stories explored in depth

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<sup>11</sup> This chapter is found in his text, *Exchanging Our Countries Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. (1998).

the character of human life in the low country and provided wisdom for living in a harsh and often arbitrary world” (232).

The tale of Ibo Landing is still told on the Sea Islands but the collection *Drums and Shadows* offers the most detailed collected account of the folklore. Paul Singleton of Tin City, in his recollection of the Flying African, includes slaves who were drowned in the river:

“Lots uh time he tell me annudduh story bout a slabe shipbout tuh be caught by revenoo boat. Duh slabe ship slip tru back ribbuh intuh creek. Deah wuz bout fifty slabs on bode. Duh slabe runnuhs tie rocks oun duh slabs’ necks and tro um ovuhbode tun drown. De say yuh kin heah um moanin an groanin in duh creek ef yuh goes neah deah tuh-day.” (17)

Their memory, according to Singleton, still haunts the place where they died and as such Ibo Landing is a place still recognized today. Shad Hall, of Sapelo Island, also recalls the Flying African legend and, too, associates the tale with the river: “Duh obuhseeuh he shot ought he ketch um wen dey git tun duh ribbuh. But fo he could git tuh um, dey riz up in duh eah an fly way” (169). The difference in Hall’s recollection is that the slaves did not drown but flew to Africa. Hall’s tale appears to combine the river with flight and what links Singleton and Hall is the common thread of water. The above stories that link Flying Africans and Ibo Landing do so without a direct reference to the Ibos; only one informant, Floyd White of St. Simons Island, addressed the river, Ibos and names Ibo Landing in his tale:

“Heahd bout duh Ibo’s Landing? Das duh place weah dey bring dun Ibo’s obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so day all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbuh tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah Dey gits drown.” (185)

Combined, these tales clearly show that the legend of the Flying African has distinct modifications on the Sea Islands. Both the Flying African and Ibo Landing tales have similarities in the themes of flight, freedom, and a return to one’s roots and both demonstrate a narrative of resistance; however, the Ibo Landing tale must be discussed within the context of Gullah culture and viewed as a distinctly Gullah tale.

## THE USABLE PAST FROM FOLKLORE TO FICTION

Roger Abrahams suggests that a piece of folklore that loses its function within the community will eventually disappear, while stories that still have community relevance will remain in modified form. He writes, “for any piece of oral literature to transcend the bounds of language and culture, a strong impulse must exist...and an ability for that bit of lore to adapt itself...to the values of the new group” (10). We see this in the differences between the collected folktales, original published version of the Flying African tale, and the modern revisions by African Americans or with the cultural connections to African Americans placed at the forefront. In North America, the Flying African tale has been reproduced in many collections of folklore. The tale was told by Caesar Grant of John’s Island, SC in the early 1900s, and John Bennett published Grant’s account of the tale in 1943 in his book, *Doctor to the Dead: Grotesque Legends and Folk Tales of Old Charleston*, under the title “All God’s Chillen Had Wings.”<sup>12</sup> This exact tale was reprinted under the same name in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’s collection of folklore, *Book of Negro Folklore* in 1958. Almost ten years later, the Flying African tale was published under a different title when writer Julius Lester collaborated with illustrator Tom Feelings to create a collection of stories titled, *Black Folktales*. He included the tale, under the name “The People Could Fly,” which is similar in storyline and themes with only subtle variations. The most recent examples include Virginia Hamilton’s version under the same name, “The People Could Fly” in 1985, and Veronica Byrd’s version published on the website “The Moonlit Road” in 1997 which retakes the name of the original tale.

The published versions of the Flying African tale are drawn from the collected folklore and demonstrate clear similarities regardless of the date of publication. In the first paragraph of each tale, there are direct connections to Africa and slavery and the plot line is the same. Additionally, most versions close with the story continuing to be told or the possibility of flight returning to African

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<sup>12</sup> In my research thus far, this is the first published version of the Flying African tale I have been able to find.

Americans.<sup>13</sup> When the stories are compared, changes to certain elements of the story suggest that the narrative has been refashioned to reflect the changing times and as the story is rewritten, the Flying African tale unapologetically connects readers to African resistance and heritage.

As the versions were published in different decades, the narrative takes on a different shape, particularly in terms of the language. Later versions take on a “speakerly” nature, sounding more and more as though the story is being told by a teller rather than by an editor. The term “speakerly text” was created by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to express the way writers attempt to create text that sounds like the vernacular speech of African Americans on the page.<sup>14</sup> By using a speakerly strategy, the later versions give the narrative back to the teller by allowing the vernacular voice to take a primary position within the text. In Virginia Hamilton’s version, there is a distinct difference between the presentation of the language of the overseer and the slaves as well as the assumed narrator. The overseer uses standard English throughout the narrative, while the voices of the slaves and the narrator are represented with the dropping of the consonant at the end of words like “hollering,” “taking,” “out crying,” and “flying” (1,3) to sound more like the speech of the slaves. As well, Hamilton’s version has slight indications of the way an African American storyteller would speak to their young audience, using short sentences or phrases put together without punctuation or prepositions, such as “but Toby just laughed say he threw back is head”(2). Hamilton constructs the narrative to seem as though the reader were a young person who “sat close before the fire in the free land” (4) to hear the tale.

The most recent version, published on the Moonlit Road website, takes the speakerliness to a greater level by putting the narrative in first rather than third person. The tale begins with lines from the song “All God’s Chillun Had Wings” and in the opening sentences Byrd writes, “I bet you always thought those songs were about dying and goin’ to heaven didn’t you. Well, I’m here to tell you different” (“All God’s Chillun”). In this opening, the text reads as though the narrator is speaking using his or her

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<sup>13</sup> In Julius Lester’s version, there is no mention of the story being handed down to other generations, however, he does close with the possibility that flight may come back to African Americans: “Maybe one morning someone will awake with a strange word on his tongue and, uttering it, we will all stretch our arms and take to the air” (152).

<sup>14</sup> For a larger discussion on “speakerly text”, please see *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Criticism* (1988).

own voice and style. Byrd's version draws connections back to the Gullah tale and their storytelling technique of telling a tale to one person in the second sentence. As we know from the material in *Drums and Shadows*, the Flying African tale was part of Gullah folktales. Told by a resident of John's Island, the original tale, "All God's Chillen Had Wings," includes direct links to the Sea Islands: "there remained, here and there, in the sea islands and out of the way places in the low country" (Bennett 62). In later tales, this connection is lost. Julius Lester only mentions "a plantation in South Carolina" and Hamilton's version has no geographic location. It is in this most recent version that the tale circles back to the Sea Islands and Byrd accomplishes this through subtle clues. Gullah storytellers tell the tale to all by addressing a single person in the group. Byrd, who studies Gullah folklore, would know such a small, but distinct aspect of Gullah culture and uses that knowledge subtly in one sentence of her version.

The Flying African tale is a part of the usable past for both African American and Gullah peoples because it has been adapted and changed over time. This is a vital characteristic found in the differences of the published versions from the early to late 1900s. In the original version, collected in the early 1900s, readers are given a reason for the inability of slaves to fly at the beginning of the story: slaves lost their ability to fly because of "...their many transgressions" and their "wings were taken away" (Bennett 139). The earliest version essentially blames the Africans for not being able to fly anymore because of the rules they have broken, but gives no further explanation of what they may have done. Former slave Caesar Grant told Bennett the tale and while other sections of the text show Grant's voice, this opening section has to be attributed to Bennett. The word "transgressions" seems like a word used by someone well versed in Standard English rather than a former slave. This small piece of the original version is curiously similar to the ways Charles Colock Jones and Ambrose Gonzales inserted their voices into the tales they collected. By contrast, Julius Lester's version published in 1966 and Virginia Hamilton's 1985 publication of "The People Could Fly," reclaims the power of the Africans, and there is no mention of this power being lost because of their "transgressions." By the second paragraph of Lester's tale, the slaves resist slavery through running away or walking back to Africa (148) and in Hamilton's version those who could fly are described as "blackbirds" with "black shiny wings flappin' against the blue up there" (1).

With the inclusion of resistance and the word choice to make the African appear and become beautiful birds, Lester and Hamilton subvert the previous ideas of the Africans as being punished by taking away their ability to fly.

One of the key characteristics of the usable past is the functionality of it to aid in the present. If a folktale can be adapted to the changing nature of a group, it becomes relevant to the community, evolving to meet the changing needs of that population. Susan L. Blake's conclusions also help to support my connections between folklore and the usable past in modern versions. She determined that while "African American folk narrative comes out of slavery, it is not an artifact of the slave period but a living tradition" (250). Connecting to the past and the present in this statement reminds us to acknowledge folklore for its origins but to understand it through its current functions. Folktales have become "increasingly politically pointed" (25) to reflect the needs of the African American communities of today. The historical nature of folklore and the ways writers borrow and creatively reframe that history is at the heart of folklore's function as a usable past in literature. Trudier Harris notes in her study of folklore and literature that, "African American folklore is arguably the basis for most African American literature" (2) and Sw. Anand Prahlad further argues that "the entire way of thinking, speaking, and writing about literature is folklore, and it is connected to a particular social mythology and class aesthetic, arising out of capitalistic Western ethos" (1) or slavery.

Theorists Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and Melvin Dixon all recognize the importance of folklore to the creation of an African American literature. Baker, in particular, believes that the value in yoking folklore to literary study of works written by African Americans means we must examine the concept of the "folk" or a term that "refers to all black people in America" influenced by "dialect, economics, and race" and the 'lore' in folklore suggests that a "conglomerate of contacts has become a singular body of folk expression which reflect a singular folk experience" (*Long Black Song* 18-20). In a less formal mode, Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her essay, "Folklore and Music", that "folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living" where we can find the fruits of "undreamed geniuses" (875-890). Even though Baker and Hurston say this differently, both further Prahlad's claim that the collective

experiences within the economic and social structures developed during slavery helped to create folklore, and by extension, the themes and techniques found in African American literature making folklore a vital piece of the usable past for writers, particularly for black women.

### **“THEY WAS STEPPIN’”: A JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS IN MORRISON AND MARSHALL**

Folklore can be fixed to one place or time when attached to a photograph, a voice or when recorded in print form yet when folklore is enmeshed in novels and there is more space for exploration and transformation. In a novel, a folktale can become a useful literary device to engage the oral traditions of African Americans. Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall draw from folklore in their novels, as Alan Dundes would say, to “create texture, text, and context” (*Interpreting Folklore*) and in doing so express the ways an active engagement with history via orality become a freeing of self with a simultaneous grounding in one's roots. Both Morrison and Marshall revise the oral tradition with their uses of the Flying African and Ibo Landing folklore, respectively. They “see their writing as communitive of the community’s links to its past” (Walters 15) expressing the value of knowing the folkloric history of the ancestors. Morrison suggests in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” two characteristics “[or distinctive element of African American writing], one of which was oral quality, and the participation of the reader and the chorus. The only thing that I would add...is the presence of an ancestor...there is always an elder there” (343) Marshall also understands the value of oral traditions and ancestry. In her essay “Shaping the World of My Art,” she takes Morrison’s idea and connects it specifically to the female oral tradition of storytelling: Women transmit “the wisdom of the race” (103), yet questions of identity remain. Marshall’s writing uncovers “a concern for the past – both the personal and historical past” (106) and the ways the past plays a large role in the formation of identity for African Americans. A shared intention of creating novels that intersect the past with the formation of self are found in *Song of Solomon* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. Both novels engage folklore as a usable past toward self-discovery and it is folklore that serves as the catalyst for the quest their characters take. The outcomes of those journeys, however, result in different conclusions that demonstrate a difference in gender and cultural legacies.

The folklore of the Flying African serves as the foundation for *Song of Solomon*, and Morrison utilizes the Flying African tale in similar ways as her literary predecessors: her novel reveals the ways one must discover the past through community and ancestral memory in order to define an authentic self. Morrison writes that the past is an “advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor” who possesses “racial memory” (“City Limits” 39,43). At the start of *Song of Solomon*, Macon “Milkman” Dead III, wants to be “a complete person, or have some notion of it” (221) although he is enmeshed in the Americanized, material driven, and violent world of his father Macon Dead II. Prior to understanding The Flying African folktale as a communal and personal narrative, Milkman struggles with self-definition. He does everything he can to be the opposite of his father, going so far as to strike his father at the age of twenty-two to avoid seeming like him: “He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well” (180). Milkman engages in a tumultuous sexual relationship with Hagar, Pilate’s granddaughter, where his sexual use of Hagar is only as he needs her, not as she needs him; the moments of sexual encounter demonstrates Milkman’s inability to give love. The last connection in his life that contributes to his troubled identity is his relationship with Guitar. Guitar is his friend in the beginning of the novel, but enemy in the closing chapters. Guitar, as his name represents, is associated with music – perhaps providing an additional “song” element to the title - but also Guitar’s affiliation with the political group, Seven Days, suggests he is Milkman’s activist alter ego. Each of these connections contributes to Milkman’s unstable and unhealthy identity.

The journey Milkman takes is at first yoked to his current identity and is initiated by greed rather than self-definition. His father is convinced that the underneath of the green tarpaulin that he and his sister, Pilate see in a cave after his father’s death contains a treasure of gold. Milkman sets out to find this from the directive of his father: “Macon, get it and you can have half of it; go wherever you want. Get it. For us both. Please get it, son. Get the gold” (172). Macon Jr. is using the promise of shared wealth and the possibility of going “wherever” Milkman wants in order to persuade him to seek out the mythical gold. His father’s request to seek the gold further implies that once he finds the treasure, Milkman can be

truly independent, no longer having any attachment to his family. Macon Jr. is completely detached from his family and is encouraging Milkman to do the same. What Milkman discovers on this quest is not “gold” in the sense of material wealth; he learns the names and family history of his ancestors, which becomes more valuable than any material possession toward understanding his authentic place in an inauthentic world.

Milkman’s journey takes him away from the oppressive atmosphere of his father’s house and toward the South in a form of reverse migration. The Great Migration was the moving of upwards of six million African Americans out of the South and toward predominantly northern cities from 1910 into the early 1970s (Wilkerson). This flight out of the South was necessary to flee the oppression put in place by the southern legal systems that kept slavery alive through codes, minor infractions that lead to long term incarceration, and forced labor.<sup>15</sup> The movement away from history and ancestry caused by migration created a “loss of cultural knowledge” as families lost touch with the elders who held the ancestral narratives (Middleton 33). Morrison’s novel is perhaps one form of intervention toward repairing that loss. He begins his journey with a modern form of transportation but still within the frame of “flight” taking an airplane to Pittsburgh and Milkman is deeply connected to methods of flight throughout the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Morrison connects the death of Robert Smith, who leaps from the roof of the hospital to the birth of Milkman (9) and as he and Guitar see a white peacock flying he “felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly” (178). When he is in the airplane, he relishes the solitude of flying: “The airplane ride exhilarated him... In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (220).

Each time Milkman encounters an ancestor, he is propelled forward in his journey by the tale he or she tells. When Milkman arrives in Danville, Pennsylvania, he meets Reverend Cooper, an old friend

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<sup>15</sup> For more discussion on the codes, laws, and ways the South put systems in place that continued the forced labor of African Americans, please see the documentary “Slavery by Another Name” and accompanying text, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas A. Blackmon.

of his father, and this is Macon's first encounter with community when Reverend Cooper tells him "I know your people!" (229). Milkman feels "awkward" when he hears this term. It is one he heard before yet "the tremor in the word" (229) had little resonance with him. In this place, his awkwardness is a response is brought on by the unfamiliarity with connotations of African American vernacular and with the community. As he talks with Reverend Cooper, he feels "in the parsonage, sitting in a cane-bottomed chair near an upright piano and drinking homemade whiskey poured from a mayonnaise jar, it was real" (231). This is the first time Milkman feels the connection to his heritage, and it is through simplicity, such as "homemade whiskey" and "a mayonnaise jar" as a cup, that combats the perceived formality of his home filled with the elegance his mother brought when she married Macon Dead, Jr. As well, Milkman finds in Reverend Cooper a different type of man than who he perceived his father to be. Cooper was a generous man who allowed Milkman to spend four days as his guest and a guiding paternal force. Morrison writes, "the purpose of long visits from every old man in the town who remembered his father or grandfather, and some who'd only heard" (234) was Cooper's attempt to initiate Milkman into a community of men.

Through this male centered community, Milkman begins to see his father in a different light and began to miss him. His father's words, spoken as a memory Milkman previously never understood, came back to him: "'I worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him.' Milkman thought then that his father was boasting of his manliness as a child. Now he knew he had been saying something else. That he loved his father, trusted him and found him a worthy of working 'right alongside him'" (234). This revelation was brought on by the community remembering his father and grandfather as "extraordinary men" (234) and begins the transformation for Milkman. Although he is not completely forgiving of the actions of his father, he has come to see him with an admiration he could not envision while standing next to him. This is a large first step for Milkman toward his own identity because he now has a respect for his father and grandfather, learning that "here is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it" (235). Cooper is the beginning of Milkman's understanding of the communal nature of the African American community and to creating his identity.

Morrison's novel, particularly the second half, has garnered comparisons to Homer's *Odyssey* and like Odysseus, Milkman is guided on his journey by Circe. Circe, in the *Odyssey*, helps Odysseus find his way home. In Morrison's novel, Circe serves a similar function; home, however, is not only a physical place but also insight that constructs his emerging ancestral knowledge. Circe is a similar figure to Pilate with echoes of African heritage:

Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead—as a matter of fact, she had to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (241)

Morrison frames the description of her in language that channels the African cosmology that connects to the trickster figure of Esu Elegba. Circe is alive and dead, old and young. Morrison's image of her is unsettling because she is not easily defined as is Esu Elegba who is often seen at the crossroad and never seen as the same twice. The duality of Circe's appearance alludes to this and Milkman's shifting view of others and himself. As a guide toward home, Circe tells Milkman additional pieces of practical information such as Macon Dead's real name was Jake, his wife's name was Sing, and that they arrived in Pennsylvania from Virginia.

After revealing needed details, Circe provides Milkman with the directions to the cave where Macon Jr. and Pilate were hiding and where the bones of his grandfather were supposedly buried. Circe gives Milkman valuable advice for the remainder of his journey: "You don't listen to people. Your ear is in your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (247). Despite his interactions with Reverend Cooper and Circe, Milkman still believes this is the fabled place of the gold treasure and in order to truly transform, Milkman must learn to listen before he can truly understand anything. Armed with practical information and advice, Milkman heads to the cave and once there, he is challenged to listen in this place. Dorothy Lee suggests that the journey to the cave is similar to "archetypal trials" (68). It is a dangerous

and difficult trip where he is “hindered primarily by ineptness and city clothes” and “like Dante, and most questers, he seems to have to take the long way around to reach his destination” (Lee 68). There is no gold in the cave. Like George in *Mama Day* he emerges from the cave empty handed, but unlike George he does emerge with “a new empathy and understanding” for “all the tired black men he has met and to the murderer of his grandfather” (Lee 68) as well as his ancestry. This propels him forward and with Circe’s information he heads to the last place – Shalimar, Virginia.

Reaching Shalimar, which is spelled Solomon, is the final place and where all is revealed about his great-grandfather first through song then through folklore told as history by Susan Byrd. Singing the blues and telling a story have long been integrally linked elements in African American culture. Joyce Wegs suggests that Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* constitutes a literary blend of the two elements, and is in fact a blues song thinly disguised as a novel. Morrison's use of Pilate's "O, Sugarman" blues song is the most obvious indication of her intention to sing the blues in writing. Gay Wilentz writes, “Morrison reminds us that the men who flew off would not be remembered had the women not remained behind to tell the tale” with the statement at the beginning of the novel, “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names”. A dominant and compelling image in *Song of Solomon* is that of the men who “fly away, and leave their women to sing the blues” (Wegs 212). The song Milkman hears in Shalimar is a re-introduction of the song “O Sugarman.” Pilate has carried with her and sings it the day before Milkman is born as Robert Smith leaps to his death. In this version there are only two lines: “*O Sugarman done fly / O Sugarman done gone...*” (9). In the first usage, the lyrics are brief with only two clues, “fly” and “gone” about his ancestry and so early in the novel, foreshadows the tale Milkman will discover about his great-grandfather who took flight alone.

The song is repeated in chapter three when Milkman hears Pilate, Reba, and Hagar sing “O Sugarman” together. This version contains more lyrics and portions to a history that is only remembered through song:

*O Sugarman don't leave me here*

*Cotton balls to choke me*

*O Sugarman don't leave me here*

*Buckra's arms to yoke me....*

*Sugarman done fly away*

*Sugarman done gone*

*Sugarman cut across the sky*

*Sugarman gone home. (49)*

In this version, more information is given but rather than be a personal narrative, it is a broader narrative of slavery. While the lyrics “cut across the sky” and “done fly away” are yoked to the Flying African tale, while others refer to the larger narrative of enslavement. The use of “cotton balls to choke me” alludes to the cotton fields of slavery, and Morrison’s use of the Gullah word “buckra” for white man adds another layer to the overall slave story. The reader and Milkman will come to learn that “Sugarman” is Solomon, but at this point in the novel, it seems appropriate to give the disappearing slave a generic name to continue to move Milkman forward.

Milkman hears this song for the last time while on his journey which triggers his memories of childhood when he was excluded from playing with groups of children, and his memory of this is linked to his early memories of flight: “Milkman watched the children. He’d never played like that as a child. As soon as he got up off his knees at the window sill, grieving because he could not fly, and went off to school, his velvet suit separated him from the other children... he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything” (276). As he hears the children in what is reconstruction of his past and by following Circe’s advice to listen, the children’s song reveals additional connections to Solomon through what he has yet to uncover:

*Jay the only son of Solomon*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Whirl about and touch the sun*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee... (264)*

In Marilyn Sanders Mobley's essay "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" she writes: "Pilate's song and the children's song become one at the same time that they comment on one another and engage in a dialogue with one another to connect young and old...past and present, present and future" (61). As a piece of African American culture, Morrison uses song in conjunction with folklore and the variations of the song become a secondary form of storytelling in the novel that aids in Milkman's journey. In this last version, where personal names are revealed, the similarity to the words Prince Sneed remembers in his version of the tale – *kum buba yali kum buba tambe*" (*Drums and Shadows* 79) suggest again another link to Gullah. In the song, Milkman finds the information Susan Byrd revealed to him, but he must continue to employ the skills of listening he has gathered over the course of his journey to interpret the narrative of his ancestors.

Morrison envisions her work and this novel to have "the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well" ("Rootedness" 341). She is also critiquing the dwindling practice of telling tales in this same section by suggesting that the ancestors of Solomon "must all be dead a long time now" (321). Folklore is a prominent element in most of Morrison's work because "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological stories that we heard years ago" ("Rootedness" 340). Throughout *Song of Solomon*, the mix of text and telling is evident but particularly shown in Susan Byrd's telling of the Flying African folktale to Milkman:

"Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar—I never knew which was right. He had a slew of children, all over the place. You may have noticed that everybody around here claims kin to him. Must be over forty families spread in these hills calling themselves Solomon something or other. I guess he must have been hot stuff." She laughed. "But anyway, hot stuff or not, he disappeared and left everybody. Wife,

everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go. The wife saw him and the children saw him. They were all working in the fields. They used to try to grow cotton here. Can you imagine? In these hills? But cotton was king then. Everybody grew it until the land went bad. It was cotton even when I was a girl. Well, back to this Jake boy. He was supposed to be one of Solomon's original twenty-one—all boys and all of them with the same mother. Jake was the baby. The baby and the wife were right next to him when he flew off." (322)

The recounting of the folktale provides Milkman with the last piece of information about his ancestry, but like so many who are uncertain that folklore, Milkman asks, "When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?" (323). In this brief moment, Milkman has returned to his previous self in an attempt to rationalize the tale through language that is easier to comprehend – his "flight" is a creative synonym for "escape". Her response mirrors the collected narratives of the Flying African tale: "No, I mean flew. Oh, it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (322-323). Although she calls the tale "foolishness", perhaps to appease Milkman's response, she is also adamant that something that is perhaps unbelievable should be believed. Her assertion Solomon "wasn't running away" rejects the primary and commonly known history of escaping slavery, placing freedom in a different context, shifts the narrative to one that is yoked to African beliefs. It is through folklore we are able to encounter these connections.

After Milkman has all of the information about his family ancestry, he is complete. While with Sweet, a prostitute with whom Milkman has a brief affair in Shalimar, he comes to the realization about Solomon that is freeing:

"He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!" He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding,

leaping, diving. "The son of a bitch could fly! You hear me, Sweet? That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!"

"Who you talkin 'bout?" Sweet was lying on her side, her cheek cupped in her hand.

"Solomon, that's who." (328)

By the end of the novel, Milkman has embraced his ancestry that is malecentric. His rejection of modernity, "he didn't need no airplane" and the autonomy found in flying "his own self" are now traits that Milkman embraces that become the last piece in the puzzle to reconstruct his identity and manhood. Flight as a motif or symbolism, argues Peter Bruck, "would seem to imply that the black male can only become a complete person by returning to his racial heritage" and that "the idea of moving is associated with male activities" (302). Morrison herself stated in an interview with Robert Stepto that "most of the major male characters in black literature are in motion...that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life...It's part of that whole business of breaking ground, doing the other thing. They would leave, go someplace else. There was always that possibility" ("Intimate Things in Place" 485-487). This suggests that flying and flight is predominantly gendered male, not just in Morrison but in the work of Ralph Ellison.

In two of his short stories, "Mister Toussan" and "That I Had the Wings," Ralph Ellison uses the metaphor of flight to express the desire for the reclaiming of manhood. As Susan Blake overviews in her article, "Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison", "in the black American folklore, it means freedom. In the folk context the aspiration to fly recalls Harriet Tubman's dream of flying over a great wall, the numerous references in the spirituals to flying to freedom in Jesus and the humorous folktale of the Colored Man, who went to heaven and flew around with such abandon that he had to be grounded but who boasted that he was "a flying black bastard" while he had his wings" (124). Ellison productively looks back through these examples of folklore to express the modern experiences of African Americans and the use of flight as a vehicle for freedom and manhood in "Flying Home." In this short story, Todd, a black World War II pilot in training crashes his plane on a nearby farm where an old black man,

Jefferson, attends him. In taking care of Todd, Jefferson represents the three folk contexts Blake details in her examination of Ellison's work, specifically the tale of the Colored Man who flew around heaven. Jefferson tells him he died and flew around heaven before returning to Earth, closing his story by stating in the same way the folktale closes, "but you got to admit just this: While I was up here I was the flyin'est son-of-a-bitch what ever hit heaven!" (160). At first, Todd sees Jefferson as "an ignorant black man" stating, "with all I've learned, I'm dependent upon this 'peasant's' sense of time and space" (151). This line is quite telling in wording and tone. On one hand, Todd recognizes the dependence upon Jefferson - a dependence upon the elder to help him with his "sense of time and space"; but tonally, Todd is too blind to see the power in the "peasant" as he calls him. In his isolation away from the black community in the Army, he has forgotten the power in his own folk. However, by truly listening to Jefferson and his folk wisdom, he realizes that Jefferson "prepares him for a new way of seeing, a way of transcending the internal slavery he has imposed upon himself as well as the actual restrictions that white society places on him" (Wilentz 24). Further, Ellison's combination of folktale and the modern symbol of flight, the airplane, work together to function as transcendence to oppression transforms the Flying African tale into a metaphor of flight for black men. Flight, as Morrison uses the word in her interview, is connected not only to leaving but also to being somewhere other than your current place. For Milkman, this seems wholly necessary for his self-definition that is male centered.

Morrison leaves the reader with a literal cliffhanger at the end of *Song of Solomon* as we stand at the edge of Solomon's Leap with Milkman and Guitar. We do not know what will become of Milkman or Guitar only that "if you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it" (337). With this closing, Morrison is proposing that Milkman's freedom comes with cultural knowledge, yet, with a clear allusion to Solomon's flight, we do not know if this knowledge will be passed on or even returned to Milkman's family to aid in healing. In discovering his great-grandfather's ability to take flight, Milkman has found a male model of heroism with which he can identify. Solomon took flight alone: "Back to Africa. Tell Guitar he went back to Africa...Everybody! He left everybody down on the ground and he sailed on off like a black eagle. 'O-o-o-o-o Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky,

Solomon gone home!’” (328-329). This realization is combined with the confrontation with Guitar, which is an additional moment of masculine duality. As Susan Blake proposes, this moment for Guitar is conflicting to “his sense of the political community of black people” because despite his dedication to the black community, “he is out to kill his brother” (80). For Milkman, who previously had little personal connection with black empowerment, exhibits a true brotherhood; “He leaped” (336), willing to give his life to his “brother” if he needs it and willing to hand it to Guitar, if it will possibly save him in some way. By the end, Milkman is willing to “surrender” his life to another black man. The ancestral knowledge he now possesses allows him to sacrifice himself, if need be. Milkman finds a similar freedom as his great-grandfather Solomon did when he leaped into the air.

To argue that Milkman’s journey, flight, and willingness to sacrifice his life for his brother is masculine is supported by Susan Blake’s reading of those left behind when Solomon flew away – the women – creates a conflict placing freedom beside continued enslavement and grief. As Susan Byrd tells Milkman when Solomon flew away:

It like to killed the woman, the wife. I guess you could say ‘wife.’ Anyway she’s supposed to have screamed out loud for days. And there’s a ravine near here they call Ryna’s Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. (323)

While I do not know if Morrison has read *Drums and Shadows*, the story of the Solomon’s wife Ryna who was left behind is a direct correlation to the tale of Rosa Grant who recalls the story of the flying from her grandmother, Ryna and her great-grandmother Theresa was the person who flew away:

Huh mothuh [Ryna’s], Theresa, wuz caught too an dey wuz bought tuh dis country. Attuh dey bin yuh a wile, duh mothuh git to weah she caahn stan it an she wannuh go back tuh Africa. One day muh gran Ryna wuz standin wid uh in duh fiel. Theresa tun roun – [like] so” here Rosa made two quick swings with her skirt. “She stretch uh arms out – so – an rise right up an fly right back tuh Africa. (145)

Rosa Grant's great-grandmother flew back to Africa with her daughter as a witness, who passed the story onto Rosa. This account displays a direct linkage to Morrison's novel. Rosa performs the role of griot, the African storyteller who was also holders of familial histories, and thus, she is heir to her family lore.

While there are no indications of the sustained grief Rosa Grant's grandmother, Ryna may have experienced, the fictional Ryna is left alone with her children to bear witness to the tale. As Wendy Walters suggests the women become the unsung heroines of the novel because they remain behind to tell the tale and incorporate it into the community, evident by the children's song, while Solomon is the hero, particularly in the eyes of his great-grandson. *Song of Solomon* is thus a gendered connection to the Flying African tale. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, this narrative becomes both gendered female and a reflection of Gullah culture. The "authentic details presented in a complex and nuanced way" allows the reader to be engulfed in the culture and history of the African Diaspora (Marshall Lecture). This was the way Paule Marshall described her writing in a lecture at Metropolitan State College of Denver in 2003, and *Praisesong for the Widow* uses features from the historical narrative of the Middle Passage, Gullah rituals, and folklore to bring her protagonist, Avatara "Avey" Johnson back to her Gullah roots and toward an authentic Gullah womanism.

In *Praisesong*, Marshall tells the story of Avey Johnson, a widowed black woman in her late fifties, who on her yearly recreational cruise, begins to realize that her life has been inauthentic, merely reflective of the attainment of the American dream rather than a true diasporic identity. For Avey, the journey begins with memories of her life as she is aboard the Bianca Pride that set her to packing her things and leaving the ship. As she is packing, she remembers the floor of her first apartment with her husband, Jay at the beginning of her marriage, and being barefoot she thinks, "when was the last time she had gone barefoot around the house? Halsey Street? Had it been that long ago? Back when the young woman whose headstrong ways and high feelings Avey Johnson had long put behind her" (11). In remembering who she once was as she leaves, she is beginning to realize that the life she now has lost something, but she is unsure of what that is as she rushes to leave the ship, knowing only that she must go to find it. The dismissal of her personal life is also linked to her denial of cultural heritage revealed in the

conversation Avey has with her daughter prior to leaving for the trip. Marion is disappointed and angered that her mother would spend so much money to go on a “meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks” but not go with her to “that tour to Brazil, and on the one, the year before that, to Ghana...”(13,14). Marion represents a modern diasporic woman who desires to “learn something!” about her African heritage, while Avey is too rooted in American ideas of leisure. As Avey comes to this realization, she dreams of her Great Aunt Cuney, Tatem Island, and the story of Ibo Landing. These three elements begin Avey’s journey to authenticity by reclaiming Gullah folklore and cultural memory. Unlike Milkman, Avey’s journey is not seeking knowledge of her culture or ancestry she does not know, but it is “seeking” in terms of the Gullah process of initiating one into the community.

The Gullah ritual of “seeking” is defined by Emory Campbell as “a traditional Gullah ritual to become a member of the church: to meditate for a period of time during which nightly dreams are recalled and told to a spiritual leader for interpretation, a sacred place in the forest is visited three times daily – fo day, midday and evening in determining eligibility for Baptism and subsequently church membership...the tradition is linked directly to West African practices”( *Gullah Cultural Legacies*” 32-33). According to Margaret Creel this is a “socioreligious” ritual adopted and adapted by the Gullah people where the spiritual leaders combined Christianity with African religions ( *A Peculiar People* 285). The aspect of “socio” in Creel’s research on the Gullah practice of seeking reflects the importance of community to the Gullah people. The practice of seeking comes from West Africa, but the name is drawn from the interventions of Christianity. On the Sea Islands of the nineteenth century, the Methodist religion was largely practices and the form of religion used to shift African ideas of religion to Christianity. During services, Methodist minsters would ask white and black congregants “who is seeking Jesus?” ( *A Peculiar Institution* 285). Africans, who were being initiated into Christianity but unable to read or participate in the services as Methodists required, took what they could from this new religion. “Yet true to their adaptive genius,” Creel writes “Gullah embraced the term and devised a unique interpretation of “seeking Jesus” that had little to do with the Methodists’ idea, but which Baptists accepted as proof of “Christian” conversion” ( *A Peculiar Institution* 286). Much like the importance of African ingenuity in

the success of the rice cash crop and the dismissal of the Gullah language, the dominant power structure could not understand the ways in which Gullahs retained their African heritage and adapted to the New World with a firm eye on Africa.

In the Gullah community, “seeking” is a rite of initiation and a three-step process. The initiate is first urged by the community to become part of the group and “expected, as far as possible, to shun all ‘social or worldly pleasures’; second, the seeker is required to commune with the ancestors and with an elder in the community where both act as spirit guides through the seeking process; third, the seeker must “travel” and “go into de wilderness” where “visions” usually appear to the seeker (*A Peculiar Institution* 286; “Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death”). The Gullah practice of “seeking” is also an act of maturation with the intention of the seeker becoming a vital part of the community and eventually a guide for other seekers; the steps in Avey’s journey correlate almost identically to the “seekers” journey and with the same outcomes as the traditional Gullah seeker – to become a guide for others, which I suggest is the creation of an authentic Gullah womanism.

Margaret Creel states in “Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death”, “Seekin’ began with a personal decision not devoid of community pressure, followed by the choosing of a lifelong ‘spiritual parent’, usually a female elder point out in a dream” (164-165). Mirroring Creel’s statement, Avey begins her journey with “the dream three nights ago” when she is “confronted” in her dreams by her great-aunt Cuney, a woman who never entered her dreams before, “yet she had been in her sleep, standing waiting for her on the road that led over to the Landing” (31,32). “As a rule”, Avey rarely dreamed because her dreams were nightmares of racial violence: “electric cattle prods and lunging dogs. The high pressure hoses...the bomb that exploded in the Sunday School quiet of Birmingham in ‘63” (31) and because of that those images “Avey Johnson had ceased dreaming after that” (31). Her previous dreams link to the Civil Rights Movement, but more importantly these images reflect her inability to be active in the larger African American community. As she became more and more distant from her Gullah past, racial issues only came to her in abstract forms and when these issues were too difficult for Avey to engage, she

simply stopped thinking about them. When Aunt Cuney comes to her in her dreams, she is not as easily dismissed.

In the dream, Avey is resistant to Aunt Cuney's request to join her at the Landing in part because in her dreams she is not dressed to traverse the "scrub, rock and rough grass" or the "mud flat which had once been a rice field" (40). Aunt Cuney will not allow Avey to be dismissive of her, at first "exhibiting a patience," but as Avey continues to resist, she becomes more demanding "her body straining forward as the to bridge the distance between them, she was pleading with her now to join her... '*Come/O will you come...Come / Won't you come...*'" (42) and finally, when the gesturing and pleading will not persuade Avey, she feel "a manacle had closed around her wrist, and she found herself being dragged forward in the direction of the Landing" (43). The resistance of Avey and the insistence of Aunt Cuney reflect the pressure associated with seeking; however, I suggest this pressure is intended to positively impact the seeker. By taking Avey forcibly to the Landing, Aunt Cuney has seen enough of Avey's disregard for her heritage and the internalizing of "social and worldly pleasures". On the *Bianca Pride*, one of the additional catalysts for her change is a parfait. Served in an elaborate dining room that Avey compares to the "Versailles with its Louis XIV décor and wealth of silver and crystal" (46), the "*peach Parfait a la Versailles*"...had been done to perfection...with layers of sliced peach sherbet up the length of the tall fluted glass. A large dollop of cream shaped like a spiraling dome covered with chocolate sprinkles provided the finishing touch" (49). The decadence of this desert and the references to Versailles give Avey pause, "as if stricken with a sudden paralysis" and an "odd" feeling in "her entire midsection" (50). Never bothered before, the odd feeling becomes Avey unconscious rejection of "worldly pleasures" that one must give up in order to begin the seeking process. Coupled with the dream and Aunt Cuney's ancestral presence to guide her, she gets off the ship to begin seeking, both in terms of the Gullah tradition but also in the sense of reestablishing her identity as a Gullah woman.

The act of leaving the *Bianca Pride* in an attempt to travel home takes on a different meaning for Avey because she cannot simply get on a plane back to New York. She must wait until the next day and in the hotel room, waiting, she remembers how she and Jay her husband once had a sense of shared

heritage that was the foundation for their marriage. Early in their marriage, Avey took Jay to Tatem, telling him the story of the Landing, which he believed, and Jay listening to jazz and blues and quoting Hughes and McKay. Marshall's use of music, literature, and folklore as their relationship begins established a greater tension once the reader realizes this became lost and their marriage became driven by wealth, position, and attaining a home in White Plains. The memories Avey encounters in the room, memories she had pushed aside long ago, culminate in a final memory of her husband. Avey remembers that by the time Jerome Johnson, who ceased to be Jay once they began climbing the Americanized corporate ladder, died "she could scarcely remember when he had been another other than Jerome Johnson" (132). He was someone else at the time of his death and she recalls looking at him in the casket - there was "that other face with the tight joyless look" (133). In this room, she remembers crying for the love she lost and the people they once were as "the first note of a colossal cry could be heard forming in her throat" (133). Creel writes that part of the seekers journey is to "refrain from social interaction" (287) and in this room, alone, years after Jay's death the grief has shifted and she begins to realize that the memories of Jay and the question of "couldn't they have done differently? Hadn't there perhaps been another way?" (139) are yet another push toward her journey to authenticity.

Travel for Avey after these realizations is not on a plane but a boat that takes her to Carriacou. Travel is an important aspect to the seeking process: "The more important indication of spiritual transformation was the vision or *travel* as interpreted by the spiritual parent" where the "word *travel* is not only about physical movement but "all those exercises, spiritual, visionary and imaginative" (Creel 165) experiences that combine toward full entrance into the community. The boat ride to Carriacou demonstrates each of these characteristics detailed by Creel. The boat ride to Carriacou is a mesh of memories of other boat rides:

Boat rides up the Hudson! Sometimes, standing with her family amid the growing crowd on the pier, waiting for the *Robert Fulton* to heave sight, she would have the same strange sensation as when she stood beside her great-aunt outside the church in Tatem, watching the elderly folk inside perform the Ring Shout...And the threads went out not only to

people she recognized but to those she didn't know as well, such as the roofers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father. (190)

Couple with the discussion Avey has with Marion before her cruise, Busia argues in this memory "the triple link of communal history is thus complete, from Ghana to the Hudson River of her childhood, to Carriacou, through Tatem – because Tatem also is associated with the feeling of unity" (206). Unlike Milkman whose journey takes him through the north and south, Avey's journey is diasporic connecting each ancestral space of slavery, particularly the Middle Passage.

What is telling about the Ibo Landing tale when juxtaposed with the echoes of the boat ride to Carriacou as a version of the Middle Passage is that the end of the journey is not enslavement but freedom – a much different ending than that of the 12 million Africans who reached North American shores. Marshall makes a clear connection to the Middle Passage voyage at the end section three, appropriately titled, *Lave Tete* meaning "to wash or cleanse the head." In the closing paragraph, Marshall writes:

It was nearing dusk and the Emanuel C was almost to port when the pall over Avey Johnson's mind lifted momentarily and she become dimly conscious. She was alone in the deck house. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering – the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space – made hers of no consequence. (209)

In reliving the journey of her ancestors in a visceral way, Avey comes to understand the historical narrative she had refused to accept and take into herself by rejecting the dreams of current African American suffering. The boat trip to Carriacou reflects the Middle Passage and as Avey is experiencing a complete rebirth, the imagery of a rough small boat trip to the experiences of enslavement aboard the large slave ships is an appropriate analogy for Marshall to engage.

Avey's rebirth is seen in the response to Lebert Joseph and his family when he invites Avey to attend the Big Drum: "Of course I'm going! That's what I took the trip for!" (229). Prior to the journey to Carriacou, Avey most likely would have responded as she did to Marion with "either 'we'll see' or that infuriating silence" (14) but now she is a willing and enthusiastic participant. Arena Busia writes, Avey's "journey is a carefully worked out reincorporation of song, dance, and ritual, specifically as it relates to the recognition to continuing African traditions" (203-204). The Big Drum is a celebration of community through music and song. Avey is emotionally and physically renewed on the island and moves with a similar stride to the dance floor as Aunt Cuney used to do, "striking to the fields toward the Landing"(241); only a few days ago, she was a women who needed the aid of taxi driver "to rescue her from the crowd on the wharf" (242) – now she is vibrant and independent. Avey "too moved – a single declarative step forward. At the same moment, what seemed an arm made up of many arms reached out from the circle to draw her in, and she found herself walking amid the elderly folk on the periphery, in their counterclockwise direction" (247). This description of the dance on Carriacou is a variation of the Gullah tradition of the Ring Shout.

The Ring Shout is reflective of the merging of African and Christian religious practices and, per the Santa Barbara Ring Shout Project website, is defined as, "a dance-like form of Christian worship [and] involves moving in a counterclockwise circle, singing, clapping, stomping and beating on the floor rhythmically with a stick or brooms" ([www.ringshout.org/](http://www.ringshout.org/)). During the Big Drum, the "music turn brisk" (242) which is similar to the way the Gullah songs in the Ring Shout seem to start slowly or with less pounding of the stick that makes the sound lower; as the song continues and particularly near the ending, the stick rhythm is increased and in this way the Gullah ring shout also "turns brisk" as the song reaches its climax and decreases toward the end. Avey's memories of a Ring Shout reemerge as she is dreaming of Aunt Cuney. She states, "...the Spirit flowed powerfully through her [as she danced in the ring] which had caused her to forget to cross her feet. She had even tried brazening it out "Hadn't David danced before the Lord?" (33) The spirit Avey reflects upon is one of African and Christian. As Aunt Cuney defiantly proposes, a true Gullah must believe, without question, in both culturally derived religious

practices. “The mystical nature of the Gullahs’ conversion and its importance in community accountability has African antecedents. Sterling Stuckey argues that ‘movement in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors’ was an integral part of life in central areas of Africa” (Creel 165). Just as Gullah modified the question of “who will seek Jesus?” the incorporation of the Ring Shout as part of the religious experience reflects their deft ability to merge African practices with Christianity.

Avey’s rebirth results in a continued blending of memories with “her mind swinging like a pendulum back in time – as it had been doing ever since she awakened – it was the ruined field of sea-island cotton she and her great-aunt used to cross on the way to the Landing” (227). Marshall borrows from the Ibo Landing tale as a revision of the Flying African while infusing Gullah cultural and historical elements. Although the Ibo Landing tale is told only once at the beginning of the novel, it is the foundational element toward diasporic connection, resistance to domination by the white, male society, and a story that has served as a tale of resilience for the Gullah people. The journey to Ibo Landing, twice a week during Avey’s visits to Tatem as a young girl, was ritualistic; it involved the proper dress, walking down a specific path, stopping in the same place to begin the story and Aunt Cuney’s use of the same words every time to begin the tale: “It was here that they brought’em. They taken’em out of the boats right here where we’s standing” (37). Avey was told the story, repeatedly, for the specific purpose of keeping the Gullah tale as part of the family lore. Marshall stated that the use of the legend of Ibo Landing came directly from encountering the text *Drums and Shadows* (Marshall Lecture). Although the Ibo Landing story is only told once at the beginning of the novel, it is constantly referenced throughout and usually as Avey remembers something else, demonstrating the centrality of the tale to Marshall’s work:

They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping! And they didn’t bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here- boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they’d of got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on’em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened ’round they necks like a dog collar. Nuff iron

to sink an army and chains looking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they taken off down the river on foot. Stepping. And when they got to where the ship was they didn't so much as give it a look. Just walked on past it. Didn't want nothing to do with that ol' ship. They feets was gonna take'em wherever they was going that day. And they was singing by then, so my gran' said. When they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't givin'em no trouble they got so tickled they started to sing. (38-39)

The Ibo Landing tale is similar to the tale of Floyd White and draws upon the stories of Shad Hall and Paul Singleton. The clear difference between Marshall's creation and the *Drums and Shadows* tales is that the Ibo do not drown, nor do they fly back to Africa, they 'step'; Marshall's text is an obvious modification of both legends. The march back to Africa supports Gomez' assertion of the defiance of the Ibos, as does not looking at the ship and singing in celebration of their new found freedom. Marshall effectively merges the legend of the Flying African and Ibo Landing creating a tale that combines believability in slave resistance, the heroic actions taken to attain freedom and most importantly Gullah folklore. After this specific telling of the tale, Avey, in her youthful inquisitiveness, responds to this story by stating, "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?" (39); the dialogue Marshall creates as a response juxtaposes this story with Christian beliefs. Aunt Cuney replies, "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?" "No, ma'am." "I din' think so." (40). Walters claims that Marshall, "...implicitly posits the story of Ibo Landing as a spiritually empowering legend for African descended people, which in some ways can serve as a companion discourse to the canonical stories of Christianity" (21). Elizabeth McNeil suggests that Marshall's "ritualistic shedding of individual and material values, which are associated in the novel with white America, echoes the Ibos' self-preserving (and self-sacrificing) act" (191). Avey's understanding of the tale as a means of continuing culture is a self-sacrificing act, as we see at the conclusion of the novel. Avey does not leap into the air to fly away, rather she stays grounded in Tatem.

Walters quotes Marshall, who sees the female oral storytellers, as “transmitting the wisdom of the race” (15) and this is perhaps why two of the most important characters in the novel are women: Avey (Avatara) Johnson and Aunt Cuney. “Avey, short for Avatara” (251), means avatar, which Marshall states, represents a recurring soul and a “god of embodiment of a principle” (Marshall Lecture). In the novel, Avey is named after her Aunt Cuney’s grandmother, thus, fulfilling the concept of recurring souls. The existence that Avey is to be the embodiment of is Gullah heritage. By impressing upon and entrusting a young girl with the history of their tribe, Avey, in a similar manner to Rose Grant, is to become a griot. As a child, however, Avey is unaware of this “duty”. It is Aunt Cuney, who comes to her in a dream, reminding her of this tale that begins the transformation that Avey must take to reclaim her Gullah cultural memory. This story, thus, becomes the antidote to the contemporary amnesia Avey experienced throughout much of her adult life and remembering Aunt Cuney and Ibo Landing allows, not only for the diasporic reclamation that Walters argues, but the acknowledgement of her Gullah heritage. As Avey discovers and rediscovers her diasporic past, she is ready for the next step in her life, loving the way Lebert “used the word ‘next’” (230); now the journey is completed she is ready to enter the next phase of her life, which will become one of connection between past, present, and future.

The final lines of the novel solidify this as well as the ways in which the legend of Ibo Landing, her family folklore, has constructed a bridge that Avey will now walk (Couser 111). Avey, fully internalizing her Gullah heritage, decides to spend half of the year in Tatem and vows to continue the familial history by taking her grandchildren to Ibo Landing and tell them the tale, begins, “It was here that they brought them”, ...as had been ordained by Aunt Cuney... “They took them out of the boats right here where we’re standing...” (256). “From their African heritage Gullah possessed a proclivity for rising about the near-tragic situation for the sake of community” (Creel “Gullah” 160). Unlike the uncertainty of the ending of *Song of Solomon*, the ending of *Praisesong for the Widow* is a continuation. Embracing her heritage and retelling the story as Aunt Cuney once told it allows Avey to take her place as the elder and keeper of the family and community lore. In doing so, Avey is now a fully realized Gullah woman.

Recently, the trope of the Flying African is found in Jamaican-American author Michelle Cliff's first novel, *Abeng*. In her story, the main character, a young Clare Savage, engages with the history of the Maroons on the island and the ways in which that history has been hidden from her in the colonized education she receives. She learns throughout the novel the history of her people and her family. As part of her education into Jamaican history, a retelling of the Flying African legend helps to further Clare's understanding of the past. Cliff's version of the tale is very similar to the Caribbean versions: "The old women and men believed, before they had to eat salt during the sweated labor in the cane fields, African could fly. They were the only people on this earth to whom God had given this power. Those who refused to be slaves and did not eat salt flew back to Africa" (63). It is through this tale, as well as other revelations in the novel, does Cliff construct Clare's path to engaging with the past in productive ways. Similarly, Earl Lovelace uses the Flying African myth and the connection to salt as a barrier to flight in his 2004 novel, *Salt*. The ability to fly is at the heart of the text as the novel begins with the ancestor, Guineau John, flying home to Africa. His descendants are unable to fly because their arms have become too heavy because they have eaten salt. The use of this tale becomes a vital part of the theme of the novel, which centers on the ability to become free despite the oppression of colonialism on the island of Trinidad. Both authors use the tale as a means to engage the past of slavery and the present issues of racial subjugation, ancestral memory, and the ways these two intersections lead to restoration of one's self.

The use of folklore by modern writers allows folktales to be utilized in new ways but also allows the practice of storytelling to remain a vital aspect of the African American past and culture. Wendy Walters writes, "It is vital to see that this "use" of the past, this incorporation of cultural memory into literature is essentially forward looking, and in this way it is a crucial part of culture building" (23). Abena Busia echoes Walters in that we must "recognize the cultural signs of a past left littered along our roads of doubtful progress" (197) and with the allusion to "roads" Busia is also suggesting that along our paths, if we choose to see them, the past and culture are interwoven. The conclusions of Walters and Busia are evident in the novels of Morrison and Marshall. Their characters develop "diasporic literacy" which enables them to understand the multilayered meanings found in folk stories with any given

community of the African diaspora.<sup>16</sup> Their ability to read and understand the ancestral stories placed in their paths allow Milkman and Avey to create a diasporic self-identity, but, the ways they move toward those attainments are gendered. Milkman assumes a masculinity identity that is full because of his discovery of his ancestral past. For Avey, who now is employing *nommo* by returning to the full name of Avatara, she not only remembers her past, but also will continue those legacies leading her to re-creation as an authentic Gullah womanism.

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<sup>16</sup> Busia uses this term in her article “What is your Nation? Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*”. For a detailed discussion, please see her note 3 as well as Hortense Spiller’s *Comparative American Identities* pages 40-60 and Veve Clark’s 1991 conference paper “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness”.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### “WE TALK’UM FUH WE”: THE VOICE OF GULLAH WOMEN IN *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST*

The production of rice established the Lowcountry plantation economy and as such the need for communication between planters and slaves was vital. In the early days of the colonies, the close physical proximity of Africans and Europeans logically made the foundation of verbal exchange British English.<sup>1</sup> This embryonic language, as historian Peter Wood suggests, was a “pidgin” or a term applied to any speech evolved from several languages and used by speakers for whom it is not the primary tongue. He writes in *Black Majority*, “during the slave-trade in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there developed a kind of pidginized English on both sides of the Central Atlantic—in West Africa on the east, in the Caribbean area and what is now the south-eastern part of the United States” (Wood ch. 6). The pidgin quickly became a “creole” or a stable nativized language, used by both the planters and slaves. As is common in the rapid development of a creole language out of a pidgin, the changes were primarily in the re-expansion of the language in both structure and vocabulary (Wood).

As Daniel Littlefield and Peter Wood have demonstrated in their studies of colonial slavery in South Carolina, the plurality of slaves brought to the colony came from the Upper Guinea region, the rice growing area of Western Africa. Littlefield’s research showed that more than 40 percent of the slaves came from this area, bringing with them their experience and knowledge of rice cultivation (Littlefield 1981). As many scholars have noted, the overall vocabulary of what would become the Gullah language comes from the target language of British English (Turner 1943; Hancock 1976; Opala 1990; Nichols 2009). Despite those links, the importation of Africans from the Rice Coast to the Sea Islands is evident in the Gullah language. Many of the words, syntax, and structures of the language are drawn from the various African languages the slaves brought with them, including Via, Yoruba, Wolof, Krio, Temne, and Mende. As more Africans were imported into the Lowcountry, as well as the isolation on the large rice plantations, this creole language became more “Gullah” through additional African vocabulary, syntax

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<sup>1</sup> English settlers constituted about one-third of the immigrants from Europe although this group came to be the primary slaveholders as the plantation system emerged. It stands to reason then that British English would be the primary language; other languages such as Spanish, German, and French as well as some of the Native American languages along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts can be found in the Gullah language (Nichols).

and intonation of African languages as well as the social characteristics of slave quarters.

In the antebellum south, the Gullah language was thought of as “baby talk” used by slaves who simply could not understand or use English. Believing the slaves lacked the ability to grasp British English solidified their position as ignorant underlings already in place by the paternalistic system of slavery. John Bennett wrote, “The Africans, plastic by nature, quickly lost their own language and acquired imperfectly the dialects of British peasantry” (12) and Professor John Krapp’s article on language concludes with “generalizations are always dangerous...but it is safe to say that not a single detail of Negro pronunciation or Negro syntax can be proved to have any other than an English origin” (qtd. in Gonzales 6). These conclusions demonstrate not only the dismissal of African influences but also the racially biased undercurrent of academia. Mason Crum’s 1940 study, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands*, continued these preconceptions of the language. Crum suggests, “It is usually thought that the Gullah Negro’s confusion of gender [in grammar] is due to his ignorance and primitiveness” (qtd. in Gonzales 11). The word choices of ‘ignorance’ and ‘primitiveness’ within scholarly research further reveal the continued prejudices at work in academia. While the creation of the Gullah language established a form of verbal exchange for the economic system to progress, this language became synonymous with the paternalistic and racist ideologies of the white society that carried over into intellectual endeavors regarding the Gullah people.

It was only in the extensive linguistic work of Lorenzo Dow Turner did the academic world see a different and more complex understanding of the intricacies of the language. Turner, unlike other scholars, did not view Gullah as a bastardization of English but rather believed and later proved that the language contained retained Africanisms. Turner studied many African languages and cited the specific linguistic attributes to the Gullah language that reflect African morphology, syntax, sounds, and intonations. Additionally, his text *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* contains over 3,000 words, phrases, and names collected from fieldwork on the Sea Islands and from African languages. By identifying the Africanisms within the language, Turner’s text established a foundation that challenged previous assumptions about black speech on the Sea Islands and opposed the Eurocentric perspective of the Gullah

people and their language. Lorenzo Dow Turner's linguistic inquiry and results are valuable to modern scholars of Gullah studies, and *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* remains a foundational text in understanding the language.

As Michael Montgomery notes Turner's text dismantled the previous notions of the language in part because Turner had the desire and means to interrogate the African languages associated with Gullah. He argues that prior to the 1930s not enough information was available about African languages in the United States ("Africanisms in the American South"). Montgomery's claims are most likely accurate, but as Gavin Jones productively speculates, the issue at hand was not only accessibility to African languages but also little interest by scholars prior to the Civil War. Moreover, Jones proposes, "The great fear, was that African Americans might have had a fundamental influence on the language and culture of the South" (103). The acknowledgement that the Gullah language had deep roots in African languages would have dismantled the southern ideology regarding enslaved Africans. Viewed as property rather than human beings, enslaved Africans developed an intricate system of communication; the Gullah language uses both African and English components and was simply not fathomable in the nineteenth century. Moreover, acknowledging Gullah as a language rather than a misuse of English or as a form of dialect would call into question the language used by the planter class. The Gullah language in their everyday lives impacted those at the highest levels of wealth because of rice, indigo, and Sea Island cotton, and therefore African influences existed in both the Big House and the slave quarters. John Bennett notes that, children of the elite planter class "were apt to speak an almost unmodified Gullah, taught from brown playmates and country-bred nurses" (Bennett 1:339; G. Jones 104). "To admit an African presence in Gullah," concludes Jones "therefore was to admit an African thread in the cultural fabric of the white South" (104). For white southerners on the Sea Islands, the dominant ideology of slaves as inferior would not allow them to think of their forms of speech as influential.

Those who have little or no knowledge of the Gullah language find it difficult to understand when they do encounter it spoken by a native speaker. In the 1950s, Emory Campbell experienced this in his high school in Bluffton, SC just miles away from his home island of Hilton Head. Teachers on the

“mainland” – whether white or black – had difficulty understanding children from the islands. “We would have to speak slowly and try to interpret our language for them,” Campbell stated “even though we were just about 10 miles away from Bluffton, it may as well have been a different country in terms of our language and theirs. I had to learn to speak ‘mainland’ at school and could speak ‘Gullah’ at home” (Campbell). When Campbell attended Tufts University in Boston years later, the reactions to his language and “accent” were similar. Campbell said, “People thought I was from the islands and when they said ‘islands’ they meant Jamaica. At first, I said ‘yes I was from the islands’. But then I would get questions about living in Jamaica. I had never even been to Jamaica then. I had to explain the difference between the Sea Islands and the Caribbean and that just got frustrating, so I stopped saying yes” (Campbell). Gullah is a recognized language, but uses of it outside of the Sea Islands seem to be infrequent. From my own experiences, I believe Gullahs prefer to keep their language within their communities. Choosing what to allow “cumyas” to experience allows the Gullah people to have control over their language rather than have it controlled and exploited by others; it allows Gullahs to “talk fuh we.”

This chapter examines the uses the Gullah language in creative works based upon the time period, genre or medium and authorial objectives and outcomes. The examples I engage from Edgar Allen Poe, Ambrose Gonzales, William Gilmore Simms, and Joel Chandler Harris published before Lorenzo Dow Turner’s *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* participate in the popularity of African American vernacular in dialect literature as well as variations of the Gullah language. While these publications offer entry into the Gullah language, particularly via Gonzales, Simms, and Harris, their works participate in what I suggest is a literary minstrelsy where language becomes a racist form of culture commodification. I counteract those minimizing textual representations with a modern cinematic demonstration of the Gullah language found in Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*. Dash utilizes the Gullah language in her film, yet she forgoes linguistic precision choosing to construct the essence rather than the accuracy of the language. This artistic move results in an innovative representation that honors the language and becomes a productive depiction of the culture. Dash’s revision of the Gullah language creates a matrifocal

representation of the Gullah culture and, as such, I conclude Dash's film offers a productive layer to my construction of my Gullah womanism through a linguistic representation.

### **DIALECT LITERATURE: CREATING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY SUBJECT**

The uses of dialect shaped the American literary landscape in the post-Civil War era. The creation of a form of literature that moved away from European influences seemed necessary for American writers as America was reuniting and reforming. Gavin Jones suggests that as a means of distancing themselves from their European ancestors, white authors were "searching for a more radical" presentation of American life and found that unique characteristic "through [the] depictions of sound [that] led to widespread orthographic innovation" (4). The form dialect took in postbelleum literature was dependent upon the goals and regionality of the writer. Stories of dialect published at the turn of the century range from the colloquialism found in the short stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman to show the quaintness of New England, to the "gritty realities" of the Lower East Side of New York City in Abraham Cahan's use of Yiddish-English in *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (Jones). The use of regionality, or the rise of the local color movement, coincided with the use of dialect in literature to generally enhance the veneer of verisimilitude and realism of different regions of the restructured nation. The local color movement, or a minor literary movement as Lisa Minnick calls it, had one clear value in that authors emphasized a mimetic use of language, concentrating on the particular idiosyncrasies of a region (Minnick). Professor James Nagle furthers Minnick's conclusions when he proposes, "The short narratives of humorous traditions and local colorism evolved into the realistic short story...the uses of colloquial language lead to the creation of a literary art form" (qtd. in Minnick 8). The impact of dialect allowed authors to move away from what I would call the "proper" English and toward an accessible representation of local patterns of speech; the use of dialect helped to inform the narrative and thematic structures. Ultimately, the shift toward using dialect established an American literature reflecting the various regional, social, and ethnic influences shaping the nation as it repaired itself from the chaos and destruction of the war (Minnick).

While many different forms of dialect entered the American literary landscape, the vast majority of writing utilized the dialect of African Americans and although these forms of racial dialect “were much stranger to the eye” (Jones 5) than other forms of regional dialect, they were also more popular among readers. The replicated speech of now freed men and women created what Jones describes as the “cult of the vernacular” (7). White readers of “dialect sketches” in such “highbrow” publications as *The Century* and *Harper’s Magazine* made the everyday language of African Americans popular among a “refined readership” (Jones 7). Through literary texts those outside of the African American community, particularly in Northern states, could enter this racial space without ever leaving the comfort of their homes. This trend is quite duplicitous given what Michael North proposes are the shifts in uses and understanding of Black English. In the colonial and antebellum periods, “black English had been considered not just corrupt in itself” or a corruption of Standard English “but also the cause of corruption in others” (21). During these eras, the English spoken by slaves was evidence not only of their inability to grasp Standard English but their racialized position as dangerous outsiders. North makes a keen observation in that in the 1880s “the decade in which the standard language movement became a ‘thriving industry’, also marked the beginning of another, seemingly quite different industry: dialect literature” (21). The conclusions regarding dialect literature from Jones and North reaffirm the malleability of African Americans whose subjectivity is constructed and re-constructed by the dominant society. It appears the establishment of an American literature coincided with what appeared to be the need for reinforcing the negative societal stereotypes about African Americans already engrained within the nation.

Aside from African American writers Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chestnutt, whose uses of the local color genre and dialect offered them a space to reimagine the Negro character as a counter image to antebellum stereotypes, most of the writers using African American dialect were white. Writers such as Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Stephen Crane, Thomas Page, and Irwin Russell were utilizing dialect during this time. Reed Smith suggests that Mississippi writer Irwin Russell was a pioneer in dialect usage, “able to capture the dialect of Negroes in Mississippi, preceding Joel Chandler Harris

and Thomas Page in his use of the African American pronunciations, idioms and traditions demonstrated most effectively and famously in his work “Christmas Night in the Quarters” published in 1876” (Smith 14). Dialect usage by white authors to portray black characters had two different goals. On one hand, the use of dialect portraying blacks as happy with an ease of speech countered the dire images of slavery brought to the North by those who had escaped and told their tales of heartache, abuse and inhumane treatment. On the other, for southern readers, this reaffirmed the paternalistic image of slavery while presenting a comforting nostalgic look backward in the midst of the uncertainty of the Reconstruction. Many authors incorporating African American characters used dialect to give regional charm to their writing. Sterling Brown’s article, “Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors,” lists seven different stereotypes perpetuated by white authors in literature. In using these stereotypes, Brown argues “Authors are too anxious to have it said, ‘Here is the Negro’ rather than here are a few Negroes whom I have seen” (56) thus creating an unfounded collective understanding of African Americans rather than an individual one. He goes on to suggest these stereotypes further the “great injustices in American literature [that] he has in American life” (56) meaning through these constructions African American characters face the same prejudices and racism on the page as in society. By repeating collective clichés and the seven stereotypes Brown discusses in his work, white authors reinforced racialized difference.

Of the seven stereotypes in Brown’s essay, the Contented Slave and the Local Color Negro appeared most often in sentimental literature and folklore collections beginning in the mid-1800s. The Contented Slave presents African American characters as loyal and happy to remain enslaved or as George Fitzhugh wrote in his proslavery propagandist literature that the slave, “was happy as a human could be” (246) in bondage. Brown states that the Contented Slave was “designed originally to defend slavery, it is now a convenient argument for those wishing to keep the Negro in his place – out of great love for him, naturally - believing that he will be happier to do so” (64). In these closing remarks, Brown effectively brings together the origin and the reason for perpetuation of this stereotype. Because the local color genre emphasizes regionality, the closely named Local Color Negro, a companion stereotype to the Contented Slave, is rooted in a particular space including its dialect. Authors who employed local color

focused on “the quaint, the odd, the picturesque, the different” (Brown 78) overlooking key cultural, race, and class differences. Local colorists who portrayed African American characters “were more concerned with fidelity to speech and custom, with revelation of his difference in song and dance and story, than with revelation of Negro character; they accepted at face valuation the current moulds into which Negro character had been forced” (Brown 78). The concern with speech fidelity yielded many works that faithfully reproduced African American speech. Brown cites the work of Page and Russell as well as Lowcountry writers Julia Peterkin, Dubose Heyward, and Ambrose Gonzales for their authentic dialectal recreations. The appeal of the African American character in local color text is in the language, song, and regional presentation, but this depiction is often a caricature of African Americans and as Brown suggests was nothing more than a portrayal of the same old contented slave (Brown). For southern white writers, the local color genre allowed them to show the South in a different light after the Civil War, but also these male and female writers found local color fiction a convenient tool for the expression of racial paternalism (MacKethan).

Despite the different authorial goals, both the Contented Slave and the Local Color Negro share a common thread in that both are directly linked to the representation of language on the page or “literary dialect”. The study of literary dialect uses in American fiction begins with the work of George Philip Krapp’s *The English Language in America* (1952). While Krapp’s study is an important starting point, his conclusions dismiss the uniqueness of regional dialects to what he calls “low colloquial” (243) and continually privileges standard American English over the regionality of dialect. Therefore, I draw upon the more recent work of Sumner Ives to define the term of literary dialect away from Krapp’s biased judgments. In his article “A Theory of Literary Dialect” published in 1950 Ives defines literary dialect as the “phonetic interpretation of the spelling devices” (32) used by the author and the ways in which the phonetic and visual presentations of dialect demonstrate the not only the regional differences but shape the appearance of social, class and racial divides within the text. Ives’s work values not only the deviations away from Standard English but also his readings emphasize the ways in which an author attempts to represent regional dialects with as much authenticity as possible. He contends that an author,

even one rooted in the people he or she is attempting to represent, will have necessary literary and visual variations in their work. Those distinctions, Ives believes, give shape to the narrative despite calling the level of dialectal accuracy into question. Ives's work serves as a more productive foundation for understanding the dialect and Gullah language authors used in their texts I will address than Krapp's text. Ives's theories are still used by many scholars studying dialect uses, but for my purposes his definition of literary dialect with its privileging of difference and regionality is a constructive way to analyze dialectal functions in the dialectical representations of the Gullah language prior to the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

### THE UNCLE REMUSING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SPEECH

In 1843, Edgar Allen Poe published "The Gold Bug", a short story set on the Gullah space of Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, and the plot centers on William Legrand who has become obsessed with finding a hidden treasure after being bitten by a gold colored bug. He, along with his northern friend (and unnamed narrator) and his African American servant, Jupiter, use the bug and a deciphered cryptogram to lead them deep into the island wilderness where they find a tree and a skull which lead them to discover the buried treasure. Scholars have considered this tale to be one of Poe's earliest works of detective fiction, but what is most important for my purposes is the way in which Poe attempts to recreate the Gullah language used by African American residents of Sullivan's Island.

Poe's use of dialect appears to reflect Poe's travels to the south and his brief residence on a Virginia plantation, but, his representations of Gullah appear to have "represented the speech of Black slaves who he had known in his youth" (Dillard 95) utilizing an "eye dialect" rather than an informed attempt at Gullah language.<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Toner suggests that many small aspects of Poe's dialect use reveal his lack of interaction with or understanding of the Gullah language and people. She cites Poe's use of the word *poor* in the text as one example. Repeatedly, Jupiter refers to himself or to Master Will (Legrand) as

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<sup>2</sup> Minnick cites the work of Ellis, 1994; Cooley, 1997 and Tamasi, 2001 as a few of the scholars still using Ives' work as a foundation (*Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech*).

<sup>3</sup> George Philip Krapp (1924), J.L Dillard (1972), and Jennifer Toner (1993) both discuss Poe's interaction with white and black residents of the south as a connection to his brief use of dialect in his works.

“poor Massa Will” or “I sa poor soul fo sure” (811, 826). If Poe made the shift from *poor* to *po*’ he would have at the very least represented a typical written dialectical mode or at most would have linked to the way in which Gullah people say this word, but he does neither.<sup>4</sup> The tale is peppered with inaccurate dialect and use of Gullah language, but as Toner deduces this is not simply Poe’s misuse of the language but his need to demonstrate his power over the text. Toner suggests Poe’s use of *poor* instead of *po*’ represents a “linguistic surprise that encodes the authorial signature - characteristically Poean – upon the text” (5). She further states that this signature has a negative impact on the text. I suggest that this negativity is due to placing inauthentic language into the African American characters, no different than the damaging stereotypical linguistic others have taken to subsume control over the narrative and away from the Gullah characters. Even though Poe’s short story is not generally thought of as a representation of Gullah language, he makes an attempt to recreate it in “The Gold Bug,” his recreation of the language, however, exposes his limited interactions with it or Gullah culture. His story uses the language as a way to differentiate his tale from other dialect stories without intentions of accuracy.

While Poe had no comprehension of the Gullah language, but chose to borrow from it, Ambrose Gonzales was well versed in the Gullah language. Gonzales was the son of Cuban revolutionary leader General Ambrosio José Gonzales and Harriet Rutledge, daughter of the wealthy South Carolina rice planter, state senator, and writer, William Elliott.<sup>5</sup> Gonzales grew up on his parent’s Sea Island plantations and developed an extraordinary grasp of the Gullah language. His publications of Gullah folktales appeared first in newspapers and later in full-length texts. His work reveals a fascinating working knowledge of the Gullah language that stands today as one of the best-printed records of that

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<sup>4</sup> Gonzales’ and Virginia Geraty’s collection of Gullah vocabulary both cite “po” as the correct representation of the Gullah use of ‘poor’; however, Gonzales’ glossary also list “thin”, “lean”, or “low in flesh” as additional definitions of the word ‘poor’. Had Poe been more familiar with the language, he may have known the importance and multiplicity of this word.

<sup>5</sup> To date there is no full-length biography of Ambrose Gonzales, information used in this paper derives from lecture notes and Nation Master Online Encyclopedia (<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Ambrose-E.-Gonzales>).

language by someone outside of the Gullah community.<sup>6</sup> While we can look to Gonzales for a record, and therefore acknowledgment, of Gullah language, his forward to *The Black Border* displays a decidedly racist and dismissive undertone:

The words are, of course, not African, the African brought over or retained only a few words of his *jungle tongue*, and even these few are by no means authenticated as part of the original scant baggage of the Negro slaves... *the contribution to language made by the Gullah Negro is insignificant*, except through the transformation wrought upon a large body of *borrowed English words*...they have *reshaped* perhaps 1,700 words of our language by virtue of an unwritten but a very definite and vigorous law of their own tongue. (17-18; emphasis mine)

Gonzales' own biases and beliefs about the Gullah language have been disputed in the eighty years since the publication of *The Black Border*, but his wording, and thusly his own narrative regarding Gullah language, establishes the tales he puts forth as dismissible and insignificant.<sup>7</sup> The language contains little value; for Gonzales, Gullah language is only poorly imitated English. Yet curiously enough, he chooses to collect and publish the very same words he disregards. Gonzales' blatant disavowing strategies harm and detract from the text he presents.

Gonzales continues to guide the reader by introducing each of his forty-two tales in *The Black Border* with an 'establishing narrative' or descriptions that clearly display his viewpoint rather than re-quoting the tales from the storyteller. The first line of "Noblesse Oblige", the first tale in the collection, reads, "Joe Fields was the most onery looking darkey on Pon Pon" (19). In "My Maussuh," the following tale that again features Joe Fields, describes him as "black, yellow-eyed, knock-kneed, slew-footed" (24). This racialized and damaging physical description is preceded by a commentary on slavery that reflects a

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<sup>6</sup> Joe Opala, in a discussion I had with him in the summer of 2008, made this claim, which other scholars such as Margaret Wade-Lewis have supported. Although the accuracy regarding Gonzales' recording of the language continues to be a subject of debate among linguists, his texts remain the point of origin for most academics.

<sup>7</sup> For a further discussion on the African origins of the Gullah language, please consult Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949, rpt. 2002) and Irma Cunningham's "A Syntactic Analysis of Sea Island Creole" (1992).

Southern paternalistic ideology: “How beneficent must have been the institution of slavery under kindly master” (24). In “Old Barney,” Gonzales retells the story of Barney, a former slave who persists in stealing food and remains uncontrollable by the community. The storyteller relates the story from a community vantage point, but Gonzales first establishes Barney as “pompous” and his speech as “unusually good save for his ludicrous use of “she” and “her” for all things singular, animate or inanimate” (53). This example not only reflects the biased views of his subject, but furthers his introductory comments on Gullah language. The “ludicrous use” he describes is echoes of African grammatical structures retained in the Gullah language. Although it is unlikely Gonzales would have had any conception of African linguistics, the extensive glossary included in *The Black Border* is a valuable understanding of antebellum Gullah. His ability to hear the language and translate it to English is so well done that it was one of Lorenzo Dow Turner’s guiding documents, and a comparison between Gonzales’s glossary *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) and Virginia Mixson Geraty’s *Gullah Fuh Oonuh: a Guide to the Gullah Language* (1997) show more similarities than variations. Thus, Gonzales’s knowledge of the Gullah language was that of someone linguistically inside the community. Gonzales posits his own descriptions of those he is recording in the framing narratives of each tale rather than recount the tales he was told or remembered from his childhood. His additional narratives create the structure into which he places the Gullah slaves or freedmen and, as we can see from this small sampling, his opinions of their language and tales seems conflated with his own racialized views.

Nearly a century before Ambrose Gonzales published *The Black Border*, William Gilmore Simms was including Gullah characters and their language in his work. Born in Charleston in 1806, Simms spent much of his life in the Lowcountry, and his familiarity with the place and its people, like Gonzales, is evident in his novels, poetry, and short fiction. Simms short fiction utilizes the Gullah language to add both a verisimilitude and realism to his texts. With no linguistic training, Simms’s writing transfers his auditory knowledge of the language to the page with remarkable accuracy. J. Allen Morris’ research suggests that Simms’s reproduction of the Gullah language was done with “an almost scientific precision” (47) in his use of sounds and vocabulary. The accuracy of Simms’s language use is further solidified by

Morris' connections between Dr. Reed Smith's linguistic work and the glossary of Gullah words produced by Gonzales. He argues that, "a study of the words of Simms's stories in connection with the scientific framework of Dr. Smith suggests that Simms was familiar with the fundamental principles governing such linguistic changes as consonant shifts, the dropping or slurring of letters, and aphaeresis" (49) determining that the spelling of the Gullah words, the use of Gullah phrases, and the overall style of figurative language mirror the Gullah language with authenticity and accuracy.

In "The Lazy Crow, A Story of a Cornfield," many of the words and phrases echo Morris's research. For example, Scipio the Gullah slave of Mr. Carrington, calls him "Mossa" early in the story. The spelling of "mossa" differs slightly in spelling to Gonzales' glossary where he spells master as "maussuh." Another example is in the word 'self', that Simms spells with no 'l,' but Gonzales spells with the 'l.' These slight spelling differences may be reflective of the almost one hundred year difference between the two authors or to localized variations on the Gullah language. Words such as 'brudder' for brother, 'bin' for been and the dropping of hard consonantal sounds such as 'st' in words like 'stop' or 'stand' mirror the research conducted by Smith and Turner as well as the glossary provided by Gonzales. The last similarity in Gullah language use is in the phrase "I terra un drop he hoe and pull foot dis way" found on page 54 of "The Lazy Crow." This common Gullah phrase that means to hurry over is also found in the same form in Gonzales glossary. Regardless of the years between Simms and Gonzales it is evident is that both possessed an intimate knowledge of the Gullah language. Morris suggests that Simms recognized the "positive literary value" of the Gullah language and that his use of dialect improved his characterization in his Negro stories (47). The narratives surrounding his use of dialogue, however, tell a different tale.

Simms was able to recreate the Gullah language yet his characterizations, like Gonzales's framing prose, reflect his own personal views on race and slavery. An ardent supporter of slavery, Simms wrote many essays and articles touting his ardent support of slavery and the benefits for African American people. In "Slavery in America, Being a Brief Review of Miss Martineau on That Subject" in 1838, Simms believed "indeed, the slaveholders of the south, having the moral and animal guardianship of an

ignorant and irresponsible people under their control, are the great more conservators, in one powerful interest of the entire world" ("Slavery in America" 246). Simms believed the African people in America needed the guidance of their masters to establish civilized social and religious customs, but he also saw the need to reform the system of slavery. In his early works, his staunch proslavery beliefs "undermined his ability to create fully rounded and realistic characters" (Perkins 83). Despite the inclusion of Gullah language, like Joel Chandler Harris, William Gilmore Simms aided in the creation of stereotypical representations of African American characters, including the faithful, loyal subservient slave/contented slave in his early novels.

Simms's novel *The Yemassee* demonstrates Brown's stereotype and the ways in which these authors present slaves who refuse emancipation in order to stay side by side with their kind masters. At the conclusion of the novel, Hector is given the offer of freedom by his master Gabriel Harrison, who has been a kind and generous to him his entire life. Hector vehemently refuses freedom:

"I dam to hell, mossa, if I guine to be free!" roared the adhesive black, in a tone of unrestrainable determination. "I can't loss you company, and who de debble Dugdale will let feed him like Hector? 'Tis unpossible, mossa, and dere's no use to talk 'bout it. De ting aint right; and enty I know wha' kind of ting freedom is wid black man? Ha! you make Hector free, he come wuss more nor poor buckrah - he tief out of de shop - he get drunk and lie in de ditch - den, if sick come, he roll, he toss in de wet grass of de stable. You come in de morning, Hector dead - and, who know - he no take physic, he no hab parson - who know, I say, mossa, but de debble fine em 'fore anybody else? No, mossa - you and Dugdale berry good company for Hector. I tank God he so good - I no want any better." The negro was positive, and his master, deeply affected with this evidence of his attachment, turned away in silence. (*The Yemassee* 225)

Simms works within the Contented Slave paradigm by implying without his master to guide him he would fall into drunkenness that would lead to his demise, alone in a ditch if he were to be freed as well as the literal 'damning' of freedom. Hector's declaration that "I tank God he so good" positions the white

masters within the *noblesse oblige* framework. This concept where it is the responsibility of the privileged to act with generosity and goodness toward those less privileged was at the heart of slavery along with the notions of paternalism; Hector likens his master to God, the benevolent force that will guide him to a moral life. Following this exchange, Hector pledges his undying subordination not only to his master but to Master Harrison's fiancé, Bess, going so far as to sing about his pleasant state of servitude:

he went off to the boats singing -

"Go hush you tongue, black nigger,  
Wha' for you grumble so?  
You hab you own good mossa,  
And you hab good misses too:  
'Che-weet, che-weet,' de little bird cry,  
When he put he nose under he wing,  
But he hab no song like Hector make,  
When de young misses yerry um sing." (228-229)

Even though Simms constructs Hector as strong, independent, and intelligent throughout the novel, he cannot escape Simms paternalism, to the point of rejecting himself – through the use of calling himself “nigger” – in favor of being yoked to his master and new mistress, cheerfully continuing his enslavement and through Simms portrayal of Hector, the Negro is presented to the reader as content to remain a controlled being as demonstrated through the use of his own language. While the examples from Poe, Gonzales, and Simms offer a productive entry into the commodification of African American dialect and incorporation of Gullah language into American literature, it is in the folklore of Joel Chandler Harris where the incorporation of literary dialect becomes a means of literary power over African American subjectivity.

Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* is perhaps the most recognizable example of the ways in which African American storytelling and vernacular enter into popular literature. As the South was recovering from the Civil War and in the midst of the Reconstruction, the “New South” was emerging

with more industrialization and more African Americans taking on visible roles in government and business. The “New South”, however, had a hunger for the “Old South,” and Harris’s publication of folktales from now former slaves told through the gentle, old African American man Uncle Remus fulfilled that need for antebellum nostalgia. In 1879, Harris published his first Uncle Remus tale, “The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox as Told By Uncle Remus” in the *Constitution* and continued to publish thirty-four additional tales in the newspaper (*Nights with Uncle Remus* xxi). The tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and others found in the African American slave quarters form the basis for Harris’s Uncle Remus folktales. These tales, as well as many others, would become the popular collections *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883), and *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892).

Joel Chandler Harris first encountered the animal trickster tales that would become the basis for his collections while working on the Turnwold plantation as an apprentice for the local paper *The Countryman* (Mixon). Harris tried to take a scientific approach to collecting this folklore by having the stories verified by at least two sources (Bickley). In the introduction to *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris discusses his research and processes of collecting the folklore for his collections. Harris cites various scholars who support the veracity of the folktales he allows the character of Uncle Remus to tell his young, white listener. In addition to his academic research, during his four years at Turnwold plantation Harris was able to establish a sense of trust with the slaves that allowed him to record their tales. Harris writes, “Curiously enough, I have found few Negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folklore included in this volume” (*Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* 20-21). In earning their trust, enough to collect and transcribe their tales, Harris positioned himself as a folklorist; the creation of Uncle Remus and the artistic use of dialect made him an author.

Harris used both his creative abilities and his folkloric research to create Uncle Remus. In many of the surrounding narratives to the specific folktales, Uncle Remus possesses the traits of the African

American storyteller such as being able to tell an engaging tale, drawing from the animal tales of their ancestry, and using some version of a moral to end each tale. In many of the tales in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, the tales begin with the young boy asking a question about the previous tale. Although the reader is made aware of the gap in time between tales, perhaps a day or two between stories, this small piece mirrors the traditions of call and response found in the telling of folktales and within the African American community. Harris was also savvy enough to understand the styling needed for a good tale for his southern audience. Harris's creation of Uncle Remus reveals the subtleties found in the regional as well as racialized dialects of the South. Sumner Ives's extensive work on literary dialect and the works of Harris discloses how deftly Harris was able to recreate the variations between the upper and middle class whites, the poor whites, and African Americans. Ives wrote, "Harris must have had a keen ear and exact memory for he used the distinguishing marks of several dialects in his characterizations" ("Dialect" 224-225). Harris, a native Georgian, knew his region and this familiarity is shown in the structural, lexical and rhetorical modes he engages in his tales. Ives studies show that Harris knew to revise the use of 'd' for 'th', to use 'f' rather than 'th' for words with silent 'th' at the end of words such as mouth or tooth; add emphasis and alter certain syllables or to create words that accentuated "particularly ornate" characteristics of the African American community when constructing the language of Uncle Remus (Ives, "Dialect"). The rusticity with which Harris was able to construct the dialect and dialogue in his volumes of Uncle Remus tales show clear differences in race and class.

The bulk of Harris' animal tales are told by Uncle Remus in the dialect that represented the African American slaves of Harris' own 'upland' or mainland home and reflect what Sterling Brown defines as "The Local Color Negro"; in his second volume *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, however, Harris introduced three additional black narrators: Aunt Tempy, the cook in the Big House; 'Tildy, the house maid; and Daddy Jack, an "genuine African" (*Nights* 134). Daddy Jack was a Gullah, "brought to Georgia in a slave-ship when he was about twenty years old, and remained upon one of the sea islands for several years" (134), who would visit the Home Place plantation of Uncle Remus each year. The Daddy Jack character used the Gullah language in his dialogue. The differences in

grammar, sentence structures, and vocabulary are evident in the few tales where Daddy Jack speaks. This is one of the early exchanges between Daddy Jack and Uncle Remus from the tale “African Jack”:

Daddy Jack: "I no lakky dem gal wut is bin-a stan' pidjin-toe. Wun 'e fetch pail er water on 'e head, water churray, churray. I no lakky dem gal wut tie 'e wool up wit' string; mekky him stan' ugly fer true. I bin ahx da' 'Tildy gal fer marry me, un 'e no crack 'im bre't' fer mek answer 'cep' 'e bre'k out un lahf by me werry face. Da' gal do holler un lahf un stomp 'e fut dey-dey, un dun I shum done gone pidjin-toe. Oona bin know da' 'Tildy gal?" "I bin a-knowin' dat gal," said Uncle Remus, grimly regarding the old African; "I bin a-knowin' dat gal now gwine on sence she 'uz knee-high ter one er deze yer puddle-ducks; en I bin noticin' lately dat she mighty likely nigger. (138)

The men are discussing Tildy the housemaid and both use the term “gal” as well as other common African American dialectal representations, but what is of importance to note in this passage is the word “oona.” This is a variation of “oonuh” or the Gullah word for ‘you.’ One word, however, in this example displays his unfamiliarity with the Gullah language. I suggest in the sentence, “Wun 'e fetch pail er water on 'e head, water churray, churray,” a Gullah speaker would use the more common word of “tote” for “fetch.” The Gullah word “tote” means to carry and is used as a verb, even today, in reference to going to get something. Harris, if he were more intimately knowledgeable about the everyday uses of the language, I believe may have made that small change. Overall, this is a small example demonstrates the ways in which Harris was familiar with the slight differences between African American dialect and Gullah.

In his introduction to *Nights with Uncle Remus*, Harris wrote of the Gullah language in both positive and negative terms. Harris understood the complexities of the Gullah language, coming to the same conclusions on grammar as Turner did in his work. Harris was able to hear that the language “recognizes no gender and scorns the use of the plural number except accidentally” (xxix). Furthermore, Harris incorporated this trait by using “e” for ‘he,’ ‘she’ or ‘it’ and “dem” rather than ‘them,’ recognizing that “dem” “may allude to one thing or may include a thousand” (xxix). Harris believed that Gullah was an “admirable vehicle for story-telling” (xxix) He then quickly prefaced that positive sentiment with a

statement rife with negative language: “It is the Negro dialect in its most primitive state, the Gullah talk of some of the Negroes on the Sea Islands being merely a confused and untranslatable mixture of English and African words” (xxviii). The Daddy Jack stories were not as popular with readers as those featuring the more familiar African American dialect of Uncle Remus, and Harris abandoned the use of Gullah in further stories. Harris’ assumptions about the use of Gullah in texts may seem skewed but as Reed Smith pragmatically concludes, “the peculiar difficulties of representing [Gullah is] its sounds in written speech” and this “difficulty exists not only for the writers but for the readers as well...it will probably always keep Gullah from becoming as popular as the easier, upland dialects [used by] Harris” (10, 15).

I propose two different reasons for his abandoning of the Daddy Jack character. Harris showed his tales “were true folklore because a story told by Uncle Remus or Aunt Tempy would frequently remind Daddy Jack of a similar one he had heard. Though basically the same story, he would preface his variant by saying: ‘oono no bin-a yerry um lak me.’ or You haven’t heard it like me.” (Brookes 46). This is a shared feature of African American and Gullah storytelling to continue the tale and/or one tale leads seamlessly into another, but this was of no consequence to Harris. Rather, he used Daddy Jack to help verify his folkloric work and as his stories became more and more popular, he no longer needed this literary form of corroboration. The second reason I suggest Harris no longer used Daddy Jack is yoked to the profitability of his collections. Daddy Jack relates five different stories in *Nights*, and each of those stories has a connection to ghosts or to conjure. Harris in his brief interactions with Sea Island residents realized they have a stronger connection to the supernatural, stating they were “more superstitious” than Inland Negroes. The idea of conjure, voodoo, or any type of mystical ideas would have been incongruent with the kindly, Christian Uncle Remus – a characterization of African Americans readers embraced. The Daddy Jack stories subverted the Uncle Remus image, and I believe Harris recognized an image of blacks embracing ideas outside of the norms of his readers would not be well received. It is perhaps why he chose to abandon the different Daddy Jack and embrace the familiar and desired image of African Americans found in Uncle Remus.

Harris’s overall creation of Uncle Remus furthers the paternalistic ideas of the Old South, and it

is in this creation where Harris's work as a folklorist and as an author engaging dialect is most harmful. In *Nights with Uncle Remus*, the first tale is prefaced with Uncle Remus being homebound and his meals are delivered by Tildy at the request of his mistress, Miss Sally. Harris writes, "Uncle Remus made a great demonstration over the thoughtful kindness of his 'Miss Sally.'" "Ef she ain't one blessid w'ite 'oman," he said, in his simple, fervent way, "den dey ain't none un um 'roun' in deze parts" (*Nights* 8). This is a small piece in a large text but this is the first image the reader sees of Uncle Remus. This is an antiquated image of dependence and gratitude for the kindness of his mistress and furthers the paternalistic ideology of the Old South. In *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings*, the tale of "Why Mr. Possum Loves Peace," begins this way: "ONE night," said Uncle Remus—taking Miss Sally's little boy on his knee, and *stroking the child's hair thoughtfully* and caressingly" (40; emphasis mine). Uncle Remus, while kind, is also portrayed in these few lines as the loving caretaker of the boy. This is an image that harkens back to the ideology of slavery where the slave was happy to take care of their white charges. This idea is continued on page 54 of the collection as Harris writes as the introduction to the tale "Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox":

ONE evening when the little boy, whose nights with Uncle Remus were as *entertaining* as those Arabian ones of blessed memory, had finished supper and hurried out to sit with his venerable patron, he found the old man in great glee. Indeed, Uncle Remus was talking and laughing to himself at such a rate that the little boy was afraid he had company. *The truth is, Uncle Remus had heard the child coming, and, when the rosy-cheeked chap put his head in at the door, was engaged in a monologue....* (54; emphasis mine)

What is demonstrated here, just three tales after Uncle Remus's role as caregiver is established, is the further joy with which Uncle Remus anticipates the young boy's arrival. Up to this point there is no mention of Uncle Remus's immediate family, thus the reader sees only the intimate relationship between him and the white child. In this way, Uncle Remus echoes the ways in which slaves, both male and female, were

separated from their families and the assumptions made by slave owners that the dismantling of the family meant little to the slave. Slaves, who interacted with the master's family, particularly as caregivers for the master's children, were expected to reposition their love, care, and connection for their own families to the master's. Uncle Remus's "glee" in anticipating the child's arrival is another small word choice for Harris to continuing the paternalistic ideologies of slavery. In these few examples – and many more exist throughout the collections Harris wrote - Uncle Remus seems only to exist as a representation of a by gone-era but also as the source of entertainment for his young, white male listener.

By using the word "entertainment," I suggest that Harris turns the folklore and vernacular language he constructs into amusing stories, participating in "literary minstrelsy" of African Americans. I construct the idea of a literary minstrelsy from the writings on blackface minstrelsy discussed in Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. In his examination of the history of minstrelsy, Lott surmises that the minstrel shows and use of blackface allowed white culture to try on blackness. Viewers of minstrel shows could see and become a part of what was presented to them as African American culture. Although these staged replications of the black community were reductive and racist, these shows allowed blackface performers to commodify inauthentic black culture for capitalistic gain (Lott 39). The nation needed blackness to establish whiteness. For the upper class, blackface minstrelsy and the ridiculous displays of African Americans reaffirmed their racist beliefs while the use of minstrelsy placated the anxiety of working class whites through a performance of blackness that allowed them to feel in a position of racial authority even if they did not have economic power. Instead of physically putting on the black face makeup, Harris takes up the pen to write as a black man making a profit from African American narratives and creating a character that was attractive to upper and lower class white readership.

The concept of a literary minstrelsy connects to Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In her work, she examines the definition of "literary whiteness" as defined by "literary blackness" (9) or what she defines as an "Africanist presence" within the canonical literature of America. Morrison's contention is that "Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a

sometime allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (17). To Morrison, “American Africanism” is a “persona [that] was constructed in the United States” and this constructed persona is found in imaginative uses such as literature. Thus, per Morrison, “Africanist” is a term for “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (7) and it is “the fetishizing of color, the transference to blackness of the power of illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire” (36). This presence is not wholly American, as Morrison notes, because “Africanism” and some aspects of an ‘invented’ Africa” (7) are found in South American and European literature. What makes American Africanism unique is that Americans struggled to find an identity as a people and as a country. To create this identity it became necessary to find out what Americans were not - and that was black. Once established, this Africanist presence allowed for personal power over another, superiority over another group and the formation of ‘other’, in essence Americanness. This formation transferred from daily life to the pages of the national literature, thus building the images of blacks in American literature.

The literary minstrelsy of blackness comes primarily from the dichotomy of using dialect in Harris’s collections. Living on the plantation allowed Harris to hear and understand that specific dialect of the mainland Georgian African Americans. Sumner Ives notes in his essay addressing the use of dialect in Harris’s work that Harris is able to use both the social and regional dialect that reflects the local folkways (“Dialect Differentiation in the Stories of Joel Chandler Harris”). Harris, who was not a linguist but prided himself on understanding the nuances of regional black dialect, uses that knowledge to his creative advantage while at the same time constructing a nostalgic stereotype of the elderly black male for his readers. On one hand, as with Gonzales work, Harris’s collections are valuable resources not only for folklore, but also as a collections regional dialect of the late 1800s. This use, however, becomes minstrelized due to the vehicle of Uncle Remus’s character, and the use of his dialect furthers the stereotypical nature of Uncle Remus. Alice Walker offers an interesting perspective on this creation,

furthering my idea of the minstrel nature of the creation of Uncle Remus. Walker writes that Harris never told the tales he so carefully constructed for publication to his own children and goes on to state:

I think he understood what he was taking when he took those stories and when he created a creature to tell those stories. There were very few people who were slaves who have 'nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline' of that institution, and to base the personality of the storyteller on such a preposterous foundation constituted a deception beyond Harris's attempt to somehow pass himself off as a black man. (29)

In passing "himself off as a black man," Harris takes the best of what was born from a wretched institution and warped that into a false representation of folklore and storytellers. Walker is correct, I believe, in calling Uncle Remus a "creature," one that was created from Harris's vantage point as one who looked in on the African American folklore traditions but did not truly see it. In turn, he constructed an image of a storyteller full of pleasant stories and exaggerated dialect as an image of enslavement, an image that was solidified with the release of Disney's *Song of the South* in 1946 based upon Harris's collections.

*Song of the South* was one of the first films to mix animation with live action, a fact that I believe is ironic since the character of Uncle Remus, portrayed as live action by actor James Baskett, is represented in a cartoonish way throughout the film. The characters of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and other animals are animations, yet the portrayal of Uncle Remus as a happy slave is one of caricature. In an article on *Song of the South*, David Mikkelsen writes:

Disney's 20th century re-creation of Harris's frame story is much more heinous than the original. The days on the plantation located in "the United States of Georgia" begin and end with unsupervised Blacks singing songs about their wonderful home as they march to and from the fields. Disney and company made no attempt to render the music in the style of the spirituals and work songs that would have been sung during this era. They provided no indication regarding the status of the Blacks on the plantation. Joel Chandler Harris set his stories in the post-slavery era, but Disney's version seems to take place

during a surreal time when Blacks lived on slave quarters on a plantation, worked diligently for no visible reward and considered Atlanta a viable place for an old Black man to set out for. (*"Song of the South"*)

As this review of *Song of the South* reveals, the taking of Harris's creative construction of African American folklore and those who tell those tales was hugely distorted in multiple ways. From the inaccuracy of the time period to negation of "the spirituals and work songs that would have been sung during this era", Disney proceeded cinematically to place African American folklore and the sound of their language firmly within the box of entertainment without regard or respect for the culture that provided their material. As Mikkleson states, the "re-creation" is "much more heinous" than Harris's original work, but I suggest that Harris's treatment of folklore through the creation of Uncle Remus as a representative voice of antebellum nostalgia opened the door for the Disney Company to construct such a racially stereotypical interpretation of African American traditions and language.

The Disney Company re-released *Song of the South* in theaters in 1956, in 1972 for Disney's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and in 1980 in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Harris, thus perpetuating the stereotypes it so clearly portrays. It is only as recently as 2001 that Disney has stopped releasing the film in theaters and, at present, has no plans to release the film on DVD or through streaming services.<sup>8</sup> The damage, however, has been done. As Alice Walker states in her essay, "The Dummy in the Window," after seeing *Song of the South*, "we no longer listened to them [folk stories]. They were killed for us. In fact, I do not remember any of my relatives ever telling any of those tales after they saw what had been done with them" (26). In this recollection, Walker details the true damage of Harris's creation of Uncle Remus and Disney's use of it: the taking away of any value and therefore any use of African American folktales for the African American community. Her essay discusses the genesis of Harris's tales, but she closes her essay with the most telling statement:

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<sup>8</sup> For more discussion on the release of *Song of the South*, please see this website dedicated to the film: <http://www.songofthesouth.net/faq/>.

Joel Chandler Harris and I lived in the same town, although nearly one hundred years apart. As far as I'm concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage. How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me. (32)

This statement is telling, not because Walker is angered by the reprinting of the folktales by Harris, but by what she perceives to have been stolen from her through those publications and uses in popular culture: her ancestry. The created frame of Uncle Remus, his portrayal in print and film, make Walker embarrassed for the tales that sustained her ancestors. Walker further explains this connection to her ancestors when she recounts another emotion when seeing *Song of the South*. When she saw the film, she “experienced it as vastly alienating” because in the character of Uncle Remus she saw “aspects of my father my mother, in fact all black people I knew who told these stories” but not in a positive way. This portrayal made Walker perceive their folktales as “meaningless” and “separated from my own folk culture by an invention” (31-32). Ultimately, the commodification and misrepresentation found in the folklore collections of Joel Chandler Harris publicly, but perhaps unintentionally, participates in the disavowal of the African American folklore: by recognizing their tales as worthy for collection and simultaneously dismissing their value through harmful framing strategies. Harris’s attempt to recreate both African American dialect and Gullah language furthers this disavowal, ignoring the unique forms of language used by the African American storyteller.

#### **GULLAH WOMEN’S “TALK” IN *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST***

Originally, Julie Dash intended to use “thick Gullah language with subtitles and then segue into Gullah dialect” (Tate 72) in her 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* but dismissed that idea once the project began, choosing instead to provide viewers with a modified version of Gullah language. This is in part, I believe, because the rendering of early twentieth century Gullah would have been near impossible and, as previous writers have discovered, a textual approach to the dialectal pronunciation of Gullah is at best an inexact art. Dash stated in an interview with Jacqueline Benton that the language is “not Gullah in its

purest sense” (26). The Gullah language is a recognized English-derived Atlantic Creole, but what Dash does present for her viewers is version of Gullah speech through vocabulary as well as grammatical and syntactical traits found in the Gullah language. These strategies result in the sound of the Gullah language, which is crucial in portraying the Gullah people more so than a true linguistic rendering.

*Daughters of the Dust* follows a fictional Gullah family, the Peazants, on the last day before many of the family will migrate to the North. Led by the family matriarch, Nana Peazant, the film focuses on the women’s roles as the carriers of traditions and beliefs that are firmly linked to an African heritage, and the modifications made to the language by Dash provide a “talk’um” for Gullah womanism.

The Gullah dialect as well as other strategic maneuvers Dash makes with language reflects Salikoko S. Mufwene’s conclusions on the Gullah language he outlines in his article “Misinterpreting *Linguistic Continuity Charitably*” found in the collection *The Crucible of Carolina: Essays in the Development of Gullah Language and Culture*. Mufwene proposes a model of convergence that mediates the three-pronged debate among scholars on the development of Gullah. On one side of the debate are those scholars who stay rooted in the early scholarship I have previously discussed where the emphasis is the English or European contributions to Gullah. The second linguistic perspective stresses the Caribbean influences found in Gullah by scholars such as Frederic Cassidy (1994). Cassidy draws upon the social, linguistic, and historical links of the slave trade between Barbados and South Carolina in the seventeenth century as well as the earliest documented literary use of Gullah in the poem “Buddy Quow” that contains Gullah and Jamaican linguistic influences to construct his perspective.<sup>9</sup> A native speaker of Jamaican Creole, Cassidy argues that the early contact between masters and slaves along this Caribbean Colonial trade route formulated the Gullah language, stating, “by the end of the eighteenth century, Gullah and Jamaican creole were similar enough to be taken as virtual equivalents” (Cassidy 16). The third side of the debate examines and privileges the African retentions found in Gullah, a perspective that began with Lorenzo Dow Turner’s work on the language and Melville Herkovitz’s study of African retentions in *The*

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<sup>9</sup> The poem “Buddy Quow”, written in 1800 was found in the Archives of the Indies, housed in Spain in 1924. Donald R. Kloe published the poem under the title “An Anonymous Poem in Gullah-Jamaican Dialect” in 1974.

*Myth of the Negro Past*. Mufwene draws attention to the simplification of this perspective by which those who believe only in the English/European model discount the very definition of creolization.

Michael Montgomery, editor of *The Crucible of Carolina*, holds a similar view to Mufwene stating:

All too often, comparisons between African and Africa-American cultures have searched solely for African “survivals” or “retentions” and have tended to be anecdotal. Generally, these studies have lacked a rigorous, principled basis and have relied on simple descriptive models that equate superficial resemblances with derivatives from Africa. (3)

Texts such as William Politzer’s *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* and *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia* draw links between various aspects of the culture and history but are wholly rooted in the connections of African retentions. Joseph Holloway as well favors this Afrocentric approach adding to Turner’s early work by discovering additional African connections, such as naming practices of the Bantu found in the Gullah language. Where Mufwene’s theory is the most valuable of the modern theoretical stances on the language is in his accentuation on the continual merging of not only European and African languages but also the cultural, societal, and geographic elements at work in the language. The polyvocal lens that Mufwene presents is beneficial in examining the modifications of the Gullah language into a Gullah dialect at the center of *Daughters of the Dust*. His concept furthermore speaks to the fruitful inclusion of African and European languages and the redefining of English words that Dash uses to create the cinematic language for her film.

Just as Dash originally envisioned the film with rendering of authentic Gullah language and subtitles, she also intended to use minimal dialogue. In an interview with Karen Alexander, Dash explained that one of the financiers, American Playhouse, “insisted on dialogue” (*Feminism and Film* 226) and thus she added more, which expanded the use of modified Gullah speech. The increased dialect and dialogue proved very effective in contributing an auditory rhythm to express the way in which the sound of Gullah dialect creates a movement of strong and weak tones throughout the film. The Gullah language has a natural ebb and flow, where the emphasis on certain words in a sentence has “striking resemblances to those of several West African languages” (Turner 240). In his research, Lorenzo Dow

Turner determined that the intonation characteristics such as the use of tones that fall from high to mid, alternation of low and mid or low and high tones throughout a statement, and the mix of high or mid tone at the end of a sentence found in Mende, Krio, and Vai languages among others mirrors Gullah. Dash uses these tonal elements that Turner determined within the Gullah language rather than pure linguistic accuracy to create a Gullah dialect for the audience.

Gullah is not a static entity; it has and will continue to evolve as it is used in the Sea Island communities. Dash understood the tenuous implications the attempt at a faithful recreation of the Gullah language could hold for her project while simultaneously understanding that the appropriation of the language of a community by someone outside of it opens one up to multiple critiques. For example, “Queen Quet” Marquetta Goodwine, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and native Gullah speaker, has maintained that, “Gullah was not spoken in the film [and] that the character who came the closest to speaking it accurately was Nana Peazant” (Benton 26). The challenge facing Dash was to create a form of dialogue that honored the Gullah language while emphasizing her artistic vision for the film. For the sake of artistic poetry rather than ethnography, the choice to create a Gullah dialect rather than a recreation of the Gullah language demonstrates her understanding of the broader issue of fluidity within a language. This understanding manifests itself in the dialectal representation Dash produces in the film.

Though Julie Dash made no attempts at rendering a “pure” Gullah language, she did employ Gullah coaches on the set to extract the sound of the language, creating a dialect that would be recognizable by those familiar with the Lowcountry region. Ronald Daise, local Sea Island author, activist, and producer of the children’s television show “Gullah, Gullah Island,” aided with the set design, translated the English script into Gullah, and coached the actors in the Gullah dialect. Daise states of the Gullah language:

“Gullah denotes a way of life for a peculiar and special group of African Americans who have maintained the purest forms of African mores in this country...Gullah bonds its speakers with others of the African Diaspora. About 90 percent of the vocabulary is English, but the grammatical and international features are largely West African. Our West African forbearers skillfully developed Gullah as a communication system effective enough

to make themselves understood in a strange land where even their talking drums (which could transcend cultural and lingual barriers) were prohibited. When the enslaved Africans were brought to the coastal islands off South Carolina and Georgia, their secondary, or trade language, became the dominantly used Creole language, known today as Gullah. They've maintained their African born speech patterns and customs because the unbridged waterways isolated them from the mainland for many years.” (qdt. in Machiorlattie 105)

Daise only had a few days with the actors reviewing the lines of the script to ensure they expressed the language with a Gullah sound. The documentary “The Making of The Daughters of the Dust” shows Daise and Vertamae Grosvenor working with cast members. One of the lines that was to be delivered by Viola, “can’t you see any better, yet” was written in English, but Daise coached actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce to change the line to “you can’t see any better, ye’.” By switching the placement of the word “you” and modifying “yet” to “ye’,” Daise reconstructed the line to a more Gullah structure. He also worked with her to place emphasis and her inflection on the last word of the sentence “ye’” which is a characteristic of Gullah producing the dialect sound throughout the film. Many slight pronunciation changes were made throughout the film to reflect the Gullah language.

The change from “woman” to “ooman” effectively combines the English with the tonality of the Gullah language and presents a small shift toward Gullah womanism. The pronunciation of the word “ooman” has the most impact during the scene with Yellow Mary and Eula toward the end of the film. When Yellow Mary makes the decision to stay on the island the screenplay reads, “I need to know that the people here know my name. (shouting for everyone to hear) I’m Yellow Mary Peazant! And I’m a proud woman, not a hard woman” (*Making* 80). In the film, however, the dialogue was changed to “And I’m a proud ooman, not a hard ooman” (*Daughters*). The emphasis on being a proud ‘ooman’ is followed by Eula stating that if Yellow Mary is a “ruin’d” woman then so is she; the script stating “we never enjoyed our womanhood” but the performance of Alva Rogers shapes those words into “we never was a pure ooman” (*Daughters*). The tonal emphasis on the word “pure” and the first syllable of “ooman” places the raped Eula along the same lineage of the prostitute Yellow Mary, both strongly connected

because “dey all good ooman” (*Daughters*). This scene reflects the group mentality in Gullah womanism over the individual. In this scene, Eula and Yellow Mary are connected by a shared experience of sexual exploitation, but both women will not allow that outside force to take their womanhood any longer. As well, Yellow Mary shouts her name in this scene and through the “productive power of the spoken word” or *nommo* “in order create self” (Asante 17). Because Yellow Mary chooses not to leave the island with the other family members, she is creating herself as a Gullah ooman. The addition of ‘ooman’ in the film contours the auditory dialect with Gullah words still heard and used in the Lowcountry, providing the film with a regionalized verbal sound as well as using Gullah vocabulary to define Gullah womanism.

Dash’s use of words from Gullah link back to the African retentions that remain in the language, but she also uses African words to express the retentions of culture that shape Gullah womanism. Joel Brower states that, “the Gullah tongue, which Dash took great pains to reproduce faithfully, sounds like its African antecedents, making it a literal echo of Africa” (Brouwer 7). While Brouwer may have been over-reaching in his praise of African antecedents, Dash does honor the African retentions found in Gullah culture. Early in the film, Viola’s mother is cooking on the beach while the Peasant children are seated around her. She places the cuttings from the okra she is preparing for gumbo on to their foreheads and quizzes the children:

Viola’s mother (to the children): “Oh, I love you!” (Holding okra) “Now, this means...”

Children (singing out together): “Gumbo!”

She points to a POT

Viola’s Mother: “Pot called...?”

Children: (singing out): “Sojo.”

Testing what she’s taught them,

Viola’s Mother: “Water... Water...?”

Children: (proudly): Deloe!

Viola’s Mother: Fire?

Children: (triumphantly): “Diffy! Diffy!”

Viola's Mother (laughing proudly): "Yes! Now, that's all that grandma remembers."

(*Making* 104)

Viola's Mother closes this scene with "that's all that grandma remembers" (104), which signifies the limited retentions that remained from slavery. Choosing only a few African words to include in this scene alludes to many of the recorded slave narratives where informants remember just a few African words or phrases that were handed down to them. The collection *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* that includes many Gullah voices contains African words that the informants could remember from a grandparent or elder. Two specific examples are linked to the words of that would enable flight. Prince Sneed remembers the following words in his version of the legend of the Flying African, as the slaves were resting in the shade: "Duh dribuh say 'Wut dis?' and dey say *kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe* quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away" (79). These words are similar to the words of an African song that William Delegal, who at over one hundred years old, could remember from slavery. Dash captures the memory of language as Viola's Mother speaks to the children, but, the connection back to African languages is not the only diasporic linguistic element Dash incorporates into the film.

The use of French and Spanish languages in the film, although brief, shows the European influences found on the Sea Islands. Bilal Muhammed, who represents the Muslim religion, uses Arabic in his prayers at the beginning of the film and French toward the end. When he says to Mr. Sneed, "They bring me here, as a boy, from the colonies in the French West Indies," he speaks in French with subtitles, but his next line of dialogue is in English (*Making* 151). This temporary French moment is Dash's link to the Caribbean/United States portion of the slave trade as well as the French history on the Sea Islands. Patricia Nichols discusses the legacy of the French Protestants, known as the Huguenots, who attempted a settlement on the Carolina coast in the late 1600s as a means of refuge against the religious persecution in France. The French founded five churches in the Charles Town (now Charleston) area, but by the 1700s the descendants of those settlers abandoned their language for the more popular English (Nichols). Even

though the French abandoned their language, the impact of their presence is still felt in the area and language much like the Spaniards.

Spanish explorers reached the coastal regions of the Carolinas and Georgia during the early history of the colonies, arriving as early as 1550. The Spanish explored the region, establishing the settlement Santa Elena on what is now Parris Island in South Carolina, remaining there from 1566 to 1587; in Georgia, the Spaniards resided on what is now St. Simons Island (“US History”). In addition to the Native American tribes that lived on the coastal regions and islands, the Spanish helped to shape the area in the years prior to the American Revolutionary War. This impact is still visible on St. Simon’s Island near the battle site of Blood Marsh and the ruins of Fort Federica where in 1742 the British defeated Spanish troops to secure the area as a British colony.<sup>10</sup> Although Yellow Mary is more associated with the Spanish language because she lived in Cuba as a concubine, Dash touches upon their history on the islands through Yellow Mary’s use of Spanish in the film.

As Eula and Yellow Mary are looking out over the water midway through the film, Eula asks her, “Say gin...how dey say wata (water) in Spanish?”. Yellow Mary replies, (smiling) “Agua”. The camera closes in on the expression on Eula’s face as she repeats in a whispering tone, “Agua....Agua” (*Making* 119; *Daughters*). Eula repetition of “agua” shows a freshness that this linguistic discovery has upon her. The movement of the camera lens as it focuses on her face visually shows the pleasure she feels learning a new word for something she has seen her whole life. Dara Greaves states, “Dash’s inclusion of this exchange resist conceptions of Gullah as static” (11). Though Greaves is correct in believing this scene dispels the notion of the Gullah language as stagnant, it shows much more. It harkens back to the ways in which the Sea Island region began as a Spanish settlement and more importantly how the language will continue to develop in the future via a blend of multiple cultural and linguistic influences.

The development of a recreated Gullah language and Gullah womanism continues with the reinvention of word definition during one of the closing scenes of the film. As the family gathers at Ibo Landing after the picnic or the last supper the family will have together, “Nana leads them through a

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<sup>10</sup> The information about Fort Federica comes from a tour I took in 2009 with Amy Roberts on St. Simons Island.

religious ceremony, “A Root Revival of Love” (*Making* 158). Although Dash’s screenplay directions call this a “religious ceremony”, this is not a traditional Christian rite. Jennifer Machiorlattie calls this moment a “ritual of remembrance” (107). The ceremonial performance by Nana Peazant is what I would further suggest is a ritual of Gullah womanism. Nana places the “hand” she created for the family on top of Viola’s Bible along with Yellow Mary’s St. Christopher’s charm and “with a firm grip, Nana takes a hold of Bilal’s shoulder” (159). As she takes physical objects that represent the Christian and African and by touching Bilal who represents the Muslim religion, Nana extends her role as the guiding narrative force of the family creating a visual diasporic symbol to compliment her voice. The “hand” she creates is not one of dictionary definition; it is a “memory bundle”.

To call this bundle a “hand,” Dash accomplishes multiple goals. First, she refashions an English word. A “hand” is first defined as “the end part of a person’s arm beyond the wrist” but it is also used in reference to the power to direct something, such as “the day to day running of the house was in her hands” (“Webster”). Nana Peazant is the elder of the family, and it is certainly by her hand that the family is guided, but the “hand” she makes is a woven pouch of fabric and hair. As “keepas a de kulca”, this small piece of memory she creates for those leaving to take allows them to have their family ancestry with them. Secondly, Dash creates a historical, diasporic definition to this word. During the scene, Nana pulls from her tin can of memories a lock of her mother’s hair and states:

Nana: (to the women around her) “When I was a child, my mother cut this from her hair before she was sold away from us.”

Nana adds some of her own hair to what she has saved of her mother’s hair. She kisses the hair and inserts both of them in the “Hand” she is creating.

Nana (cont’d): Now, I’m adding my own hair. There must be a bond...a connection, between those that go North, and those who cross the sea. A connection. We are as two people in one body. The last of the old, and the first of the new. We will always live this double life, you know, because we’re from the sea. We came here in chains, and we must survive...there’s salt water in our blood... This “Hand”, it’s from me, from us, from them

(the Ibo)...Just like all of you....come children, kiss this hand full of me.” (*Making* 151, 159)

Machiorlatti states, “when African children were born into slavery and taken away from their mothers, all their mothers could do for remembrance was cut a lock of her hair and wrap it in the child’s swaddling” (107). This allusion to slavery accentuates the connectivity between the old and the new; the “hand” that Nana gives those going to the North is a symbol of protection as a slave mother’s hair would be to the child she would not be able to care for. Nana closes by saying, “Take my ‘Hand’. I’m the one that can give you strength” (*Making* 160). This moment melds together the Christian allusion of the hymn “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” sung in Baptist churches with the definition of the word in its English language form as well as creating a new diasporic word of protection she has created within the film’s closing moments. As the members of the family are preparing to depart, it falls to Nana to ensure the family remains united despite physical distance. In African and Gullah belief systems, “the ancestors must be remembered for the continuing protection, and failing to keep their memory alive leads to the destruction of the community” (Busia 208). Nana Peazant is the embodiment of Gullah ancestry and the protector of the family because she holds the history in her hand.

In keeping with drawing from ancestry, Dash draws from one of the Gullah folktales, Ibo Landing, shaping the tale with her dialectical approach to demonstrate the spiritual connection that Gullah women have with men while signifying upon the novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. Marshall only makes a few minor dialectal adjustments such as the dropping of consonants at the beginning or ending of certain words to give Aunt Cuney her Gullah voice and Marshall made no attempt to recreate the Gullah language. I propose that Marshall’s goal was not to represent the Gullah language in any way but to use the tale as a point of thematic departure for her novel. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the tale is meant to repair the fractured relationship between Eula and Eli Peazant, and as such the shifts toward a Gullah dialect are a necessary component toward that goal. This literary piece becomes a speakerly one in *Daughters of the Dust*. The film intervenes, and the tale comes alive under Dash’s detail in recreating the Gullah language and the parallel narrative strategies. By incorporating Marshall’s text exactly from *Praisesong for the*

*Widow*, Julie Dash gives audio to the narrative not only because a character speaks the words, but in the dialect modifications toward a Gullah oral tradition.

In the scene, Eula restates the story of the Ibos with a Gullah dialect honoring the Gullah people. In the screenplay provided in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, the text is word for word from *Praisesong for the Widow*, yet once the film was complete the modifications to the dialogue show a clear Gullah tongue. Below is a side-by-side comparison of the beginning of the Ibo Landing tale:

*From Praisesong for the Widow*

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing. Nobody remembers how may of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you went it happened. And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran said, and take a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying on it. And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. (Marshall 37)

*From Daughters of the Dust*

It was heh dey bought 'em. Dey took 'em out de boat right heh where we jus' stand. No body 'member how many of dem it was, but dere was a good few 'cordin' to my great gran. She was a lil, lil girl at de time. De ship just come from de deep water. A great big ol' ship with sail. De minute dose Ebo was brought ashore, de jus stop take a look round not sayin a word just studyin the place real good. And de seen tings dat dey, dat you and I don't have the power fuh see. (*Daughters*)

The beginning of the tale shows many clear Gullah linguistic characteristics, such as the changes from "they" to "dey," and "here" to "yuh." The Gullah influence is also seen in the repetitive adjectival intensification. In Marshall's version, her gran was just a "little girl," but in the modifications to represent Gullah language, Eula calls her gran a "lil, lil girl." Gates writes that, "a speakerly text would seem primarily to be oriented toward imitating the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classic

Afro-American vernacular literature” (*Signifying* 181). For Dash, she expands Gates notions of speakerly text to include the often-omitted Gullah into what has become normative African American literature. This retelling and modification of Marshall African American dialect form creates a Gullah voice and side-by-side I have created a visual double voicedness that Gates also discusses in relation to the speakerly text. Voice is just as critical for Gates as visual representations of the oral tradition. Maggie Humm argues that the complex literary/visual transformations explored by African American women can offer new tropes for both the writer and the filmmaker. One of the important messages she writes, “might be that in any reconstruction of Black women’s history, forms of language are as foundational as the content of the narrative” (124). In this regard, Dash’s use of a Gullah dialect and signifying upon *Praisesong for the Widow* position her film as a cinematic version of Gates’s literary speakerly text. Humm’s conclusions also speak, I suggest, to the ways in which telling the tale helps both Eula and Eli heal from the sexual trauma of rape inherent in black women’s history.

The Ibo Landing sequence brings to bear all of the previous strategies Dash uses to construct her multilayered narrative and reveal many aspects of Gullah womanism in a single scene. In the scene, Dash closes in on the floating figure, a visual reminder of African heritage, and the Ibo Landing sign to indicate the coming story. Eula standing on the shore begins to tell The Unborn Child, represented here by the rubbing of her belly, the story of the Ibos. Eula’s monologue of the Ibo Landing tale is told in partial voiceover. Eula closes her eyes to begin the story, “It was here that they brought them” (*Daughters*) and gazes up at the sky while starting to tell the tale; the camera panning upward toward the blowing moss. Dash re-pans to the floating figure and back through the graveyard as Eula talks of the Ibos who “saw tings dat you and I no have de power fuh see” (*Daughters*). As she gets to the point in the story where the Ibos walk on water, Eli walks past her, and out onto the water just as the Ibos once did. Dash crafts a dual visual dialogue for the viewer. Eula and Eli do not see each other, but the visual combination of equally shared space helps to begin the healing process for both of them; they remain connected while simultaneously separated. Eli is drawn to the figure as Eula talks of the Ibos whose strength allowed them to overcome the chains around their necks and ankles. With that same strength at the same time Eula

speaks, Eli reaches the figure and kneeling before it places his hands over the face receiving the strength and courage Eula describes. As Eula talks of the Ibos going home to end the tale, Eli pushes the figurehead out into the water. Dash brings the parallel narratives together to end the scene as Eli walks back to the shore to kneel before Eula embracing the fullness of her belly. In Dash's screenplay notes, "Eli has seen that the fury growing inside of Eula's womb is, in fact, his unborn child" (*Making* 142). The Unborn Child says earlier in the film that "I remember how important the children were to the Peasant family...and how I had to convince my daddy that I was his child" (*Daughters*). Dash's use of cinematography, narration strategies, and visual structures of the Ibo Landing tale come together to construct this moment of healing.

For black women writers, healing often comes through memory and history that are often visualized on the page through the use of italics. For example, Paule Marshall's main character Avey Johnson hears the voice of her great aunt pleading with her to "*Come/Won't you come...?*" in *Praisesong for the Widow* or when she remembers moments with her deceased husband, Jay, Marshall show memory through this visual technique. Julie Dash creates cinematic italics that talk to the textual italic Audre Lorde uses in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. *Zami* is not a traditional biography, but as Lorde terms it, a "biomythography" combining traditional biographical modes with poetry and mythology. In her text, the conventional biography is interrupted by multiple voices, some real while others are mythic and poetic. The fragmentation of these voices coming in and out of the narrative reveals her plural self (Raynaud 230). In her tale of childhood, her adolescence and adulthood as a black lesbian taking the reader from 1940s New York to Mexico and back to 1960s America, Lorde places the individual experience at the same level as the collective one (Calle). The prologue of her biomythography begins, "*I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me – to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks*" (7). Much like the dichotomy that opens Dash's film, Lorde begins with binaries as well as visual italics. Throughout the book in order to accommodate her personal multiple experiences, Lorde creates parallel voices: a prose voice that gives the reader chronological and logistical details about

her life and a poetic, mythic voice that is usually indicated by italics. Early in the text, Lorde details having her hair straightened as she sits between the legs of her mother. In the prose there are details of this experience, “she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. I feel my mother’s strong, rough hands all up in my unruly hair” (33). There is also dialogue, Lorde’s mother telling her to “hold your back up, now! Deenie, keep still!” that are presented on the page in common novelistic form. Yet this section of common black girlhood closes with “The radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into – *the rhythms of a litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters’ hair*” (33). The graphic interweaving of italicized and non-italicized topography elevates the everyday into the extraordinary by the close of the sentence. Throughout the text, Lorde uses italics to represent her poetry. By using a similar visual strategy, the connection between black mothers and daughters becomes poetic.

To further the connective thread between memory and history further as well as the powerful links between mothers and daughters, Dash includes the Unborn Child as a parallel to Nana Peasant where Nana represents the past and the Unborn Child the future. The Unborn Child speaks to the viewer, providing as Dash notes in the screenplay a moment of “recollecting” (*Making* 80). She says, “My story begins on the eve of my family’s migration North. My story begins before I was born...Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the New World” (*Making* 80). Joel Brouwer notes “using a not-yet-born major character/narrator, Dash demonstrates the Gullah/African sense of connectedness of past, present, and future” (10). The Unborn Child not only narrates portions of the film but Dash uses her image throughout with multiple cuts of her running through the frame unseen by the characters. She effects the characters such as when she comes behind Aunt Haggard who is looking at broken blue bottles in Nana’s yard with disdain to remind of her of their heritage (*Daughters*). In another scene, she runs through the family graveyard into blue hazed smoke, then dips her hands into pots of indigo dye while men and women surrounding her stir the mixture and form the bricks; she states, “I remember and I recall” (*Daughters*). She is there to counterbalance Nana’s goals of keeping the family together, but Dash represents her youth, as she is wearing a white dress and indigo blue bow in her hair. As a child, she

“would sometimes gets distracted” (*Daughters*) placing her blue stained finger on the image of a teddy bear as the children look through their wish book, stating what they would like to have. Her voice and image is central to the representation of Gullah history and to the spiritual connections Gullahs have with past and present. In the pivotal scene of Eula’s telling of the Ibo Landing story and the parallel image of Eli walking on water out to the floating masthead, she is connected to healing saying in a voiceover, “Nana prayed for help. I got there just in time...” (*Daughters*). The Unborn Child, Nana, and Eula are linked throughout this scene and reveal the Gullah worldview regarding the connection between souls regardless of physical form.

The elements of Gullah history are woven into the film as well. To engage with a history impacted by gendered and racial oppression, black women writers have found productive ways to interrogate self-identity as well as their historical and cultural pasts in their work that serve to assist both the artist and the reader in constructing new definitions of narrative and genre. Julie Dash describes how vital black women’s literature was in shaping her film. She states the story flow of *Daughters of the Dust* “would just kind of unravel...the story would come out and come in and go out and come in, very much the way in Toni Cade Bambara’s work one character would be speaking to another and then it goes off on a tangent for several pages and then she brings it back and goes out and back again” (*Making* 32). In her conversation with bell hooks where the previous quote comes from, hooks likens this to “the concept of defamiliarization” (32) and I would further suggest this comes not only in the links back to literature but in the ways in which Dash constructs the opening sequence of her film. Just as Jacobs and Lorde subverted the genres of slave narrative and autobiography, Dash does the same to the dominant cinematic codes that govern traditional film with strategies drawn from literature.

The opening sequence in *Daughters of the Dust* begins with reading rather than dialogue over African music. The use of an “intertitle”, or a piece of filmed text used to describe material related to but not necessarily covered by the film, grounds the viewer in the history of the Gullah people while immediately linking to literature as the intertitle serves as a written prologue to the film. The second intertitle states, “Gullah communities recalled, remembered, and recollected much of what their ancestors

brought with them from Africa” (*Daughters of the Dust*). This continues the reading element, and Dash creates the diasporic link she sought as one of the goals of the film, but more importantly she uses three words – “recalled,” “remembered,” and “recollected” that will be repeated in the film. As the family matriarch, Nana Peazant not only holds the family history – in her mind and physically through the pieces of materials in the tin can she carries – but urges her family to remember and recall by stressing memory throughout the film. She says, “Never forget who we is, and how far we done come” (*Daughters*) but her memories are also recollections of the past, suggesting that memory comes from not only accuracy but imagination: “We don’t know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them, but we carry dese memories inside a we” (*Daughters*). Maggie Humm suggests that Dash visualizes the textual or “what Marshall, Walker, Christian and Lorde offer film makers is a way to connect, in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, the verbal and the social text” (127) on the screen.

I suggest the intertitle, once used in silent films to project narrative details as well as dialogue, is purposefully used by Dash to set the historical and thematic tone of the film. As the soundtrack begins after the intertitles, the viewer still hears no voice; the camera pans to the rough indigo blue stained hands of a “young Nana Peazant” (*Making* 75) with wind blowing the dust through her fingers then cuts to Nana, now 88 years old, rising out the water. Visually and in only a few seconds, Dash gives us the life of Nana, which is one of enslavement and freedom. Julie Dash did not want to show the commonly used markers of slavery such as healed welts on the back from whippings or the image of chains; rather, she shows the indigo stained hands to link to slavery and the agrarian past of the Gullah people. Indigo, as well as rice cultivation, were primary crops on the Sea Islands during slavery. The blue stain would not have remained on Nana’s hands for all of those years, but as Dash states, “I was using this as a symbol of slavery, to create a new kind of icon around slavery rather than the traditional...because we’ve seen all those things before and we’ve become very calloused about them. I wanted to show it in a new way” (*Making* 31). The visual elements Dash uses to begin her film are interrelated to the literary strategies black women writers use to represent memory and history. It is only after the visual tactics begin the film do we hear a voice, but is it not that of Nana Peazant; it is an anonymous voice. The woman’s voice

begins, “I am the first and de las’. I am the honored one and the scorned one” (*Daughters*) as the image of Nana Peazant hugging herself fades from the screen. As the voiceover continues, “I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the barren one, and many are my daughters” (*Daughters*) the camera pans through the bedroom of Eula and Eli Peazant as the breeze blows the curtains. The screen fades from their bedroom to a wide shot of a barge being rowed down the river. As the voice continues, “I am the silence that you cannot understand. I am the utterance of my name” (*Daughters*) the camera moves in closer to reveal Yellow Mary standing on the barge in a long dress and veil and then even closer to show her touching the St. Christopher’s medal she wears around her neck before the screen fades to black. The duality of the voiceover and the visual cinematic techniques provide the viewer other layers of the story and of the larger narrative of black women.

To be both the good and the bad is a simplistic way to describe the history of black women in America, but I do not say this as a negative critique. Dash efficiently represents many layers of the black woman’s experience in only a few lines and just fifteen seconds of film. To state that, “I am the wife and the virgin. I am the barren one and many are my daughters” (*Daughters*) while panning through the bedroom of Eula and Eli foreshadows one of the central conflicts in the film. Eula is pregnant, but the father is unknown; Eli, her husband could be the father but she was raped by an unnamed white man and therefore the child’s paternity is in question. The viewer comes to know this information later in the film, but by linking sexuality verbally with words such as “virgin”, “whore” and even “barren” as well as the visual of the bedroom, Dash is hinting at the central conflict in her film while simultaneously looking back to a history of sexual abuses endured by black women. Dash also brings to bear two key themes in the work of black women writers – silence and naming – in this brief sequence. Lastly, by connecting “the first and the last” Dash places her film in the continuum of black women. The opening of *Daughters of the Dust* sets the tone not only for the dual narrative structures of dialogue and visual, but the larger themes of history and memory that permeate the film.

*Daughters of the Dust* is highly literary in its presentation of memory, history, and culture and draws from a tradition of black women writers, talking to them and communicating with them. Because

the film uses direct literary links – the verbatim use of Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* – and the influence of black women’s literary narrative strategies, *Daughters* is both a cinematic piece and a literary one. Dash said, “...but after reading Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, I wanted to tell those kinds of stories. I see myself as a disciple of black women writers. They made me whole” (Alexander 227). *Daughters of the Dust* succeeded in presenting the Gullah culture in cinematic form, in large part because of the choices she made with language. To use a heavy or thick Gullah and subtitles may have taken away from the film as an introduction to the culture, in my opinion, and it was more productive to provide a sound to their language that did not resemble what many equate with a black vernacular. She made the language different but accessible, and in doing so introduced a wider audience to a piece of the African American community not often discussed. *Daughters of the Dust* allowed the women-centeredness of the culture to shine through and presents a Gullah womanist language that allows Gullah women to “talk’um fuh we.”

## CONCLUSION: “WHO DAT GULLAH, NOW?”

Since the 1800s, artistic and scholarly interest in the Gullah people has ebbed and flowed like the waves of the Atlantic against the shores of the Sea Islands. The focus in the nineteenth and early twentieth century sought to trace the culture, language, folklore and traditions that Africans brought to the Lowcountry. Some interventions aimed to embrace and to enlighten, such as Lorenzo Dow Turner’s study of the Gullah language in *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Others used the Sea Islands and its people to propagate racist ideologies such as those found in the folklore collections of Ambrose Gonzales, the fiction of Julia Peterkin, and Dubose Heyward’s novel *Porgy* (adapted in 1934 for Broadway as the wildly successful *Porgy and Bess*). The interest in the Sea Islands never completely dissipated, although it seemed to wane in the 1950s and re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s alongside the Black Power Movement and Black American’s renewed interest in their ancestral heritage. Tracy Snipe argues of the works produced during the recent Gullah Renaissance period that none is more important than Julie Dash’s 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. With its use of “stirring imagery” and depictions of “black women visually in a way I had never seen on the screen before” (277, 279), Snipe concludes that *Daughters of the Dust* is the foundation for creative artists seeking to draw from Gullah heritage. Because of Dash’s film, Snipe proposes that, “the Sea Island Renaissance” will continue to “expand in size and scope in the future” (290). Her statement is ultimately prophetic because echoes of *Daughters of the Dust* are clearly visible in one of the most important musical and visual projects by a black female artist in 2016 – Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.

Throughout Beyoncé’s visual album one finds multiple allusions to *Daughters of the Dust*, although Dash did not participate in the production. Glen Dunks writes in his review of *Lemonade* for the website “Ladyclever,” “the strongest influence on *Lemonade* was most likely that of a small – many would call obscure – drama *Daughters of the Dust*... if you were to watch it and *Lemonade* back to back, you would have little doubt that Beyoncé has not only heard of it, but seen it many times and allowed its atmospherics to seep deep down in her bones” (“*Lemonade*’s Inspiration Is Coming Back to Theaters”). Dunks’s comments are at best speculative. In my research, I have yet to find an interview with Beyoncé in

which she specifically cites *Daughters of the Dust* as the inspiration for *Lemonade*. There are, however, verifiable connections between the two projects. Cinematographer Arthur Jafa and one of the seven listed directors of *Lemonade*, Melina Matsoukas, brought their personal connections to *Daughters of the Dust* to Beyoncé's project. Jafa was the cinematographer for *Daughters of the Dust* and was married to Dash during the filming, "and it's their daughter, N'zinga, who inspired the idea of the film's narrator" ("The Filmmaker Who Sweetened Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' Guides a New Generation"). Matsoukas's connection is less interpersonal but cites *Daughters of the Dust* as highly influential to her work, stating in a 2016 interview:

"I remember seeing this film ["Daughters"] at a very young age," Matsoukas says. "It really helped shape my ideas about what film could be because it felt so different than anything I had seen before. ... I was mesmerized by its distinct voice and how authentic ... it was to that time and place. It was reassuring as a black person to see that our stories have value on screen." ("The Filmmaker Who Sweetened Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' Guides a New Generation")

Because of Jafa and Matsoukas's influence, there are many subtle visual allusions to *Daughters of the Dust* in *Lemonade*. The costuming throughout the visual album is reminiscent of turn-of-the-century dresses in white fabric and lace found in *Daughters of the Dust*, while the images of moss-covered oak trees and the tall grasses of the Sea Islands are pictorial echoes of Dash's film.

For the purposes of my project, the ties between *Daughters of the Dust* and *Lemonade* reside in the expressions of womanism. Throughout both projects, women are afforded the primary position in the majority of scenes and when men are present, they are often secondary to the female-centered relationships. In "Love Drought," Beyoncé walks along the shoreline in a white dress with ten women following her. As the lyric "Cause you, you, you, you and me could move a mountain" (Beyoncé) are sung, the women stop, face east, and then stand united with arms raised. The core concepts of womanism as empowering through authentically connected women-centered relationships are demonstrated in a

scene that lasts only a few seconds. “Love Drought” concludes with Beyoncé surrounded by women’s hands, again for only a brief moment before the voiceover tells us “If we are going to heal, let it be glorious / 1,000 girls raise their arms” (*Lemonade*). Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems both argue that the foundation of womanism is the power of women-centered relationships. The visual aspects of “Love Drought” reaffirm this power, as does the transition to the next track and the spoken word that follows those hands: Both *Lemonade* and *Daughters of the Dust* share the power of connection between women, and “Love Drought” ends with women healing one another and passing this restoration on to young women. Other moments in *Lemonade* reveal the power of women-centered connection. Prior to the musical opening of “Freedom,” we see women who are preparing food together, a single woman in gold armor who appears to have had a mastectomy, and throughout the song there are images of a variety of women seated together watching ballerina Michaela DePrince dance on stage as Beyoncé sings “A winner don’t quit on themselves.” Perhaps the most powerful connection between women is the shared grief seen in “Forward” where crying mothers of murdered sons hold pictures of their children.

The female-centered relationships in *Lemonade* are yoked to womanism but I would argue because the visual album takes its cues from *Daughters of the Dust*, this becomes a demonstration of Gullah womanism. I have proposed that Gullah womanism is derived from the African retentions found in Gullah culture as a result of enslavement. In *Lemonade*, the connection to Gullah womanism begins with understated shades of blue throughout the film. I read these visual moments as a nod to Nana Peasant’s indigo stained hands, used in *Daughters of the Dust* as an allusion to Gullah women’s work on the Sea Island plantations. While these flashes of blue connect to the Gullah culture, I extend Michon Boston’s suggestion that “In ‘Formation,’ Beyoncé could be channeling Yellow Mary” (“The Filmmaker Who Sweetened Beyoncé’s ‘Lemonade’ Guides a New Generation”) arguing Yellow Mary’s spirit is evident throughout *Lemonade* and via Beyoncé, Yellow Mary’s quest toward Gullah womanism is given a modern re-telling.

The first moment Yellow Mary’s character enters *Lemonade*, visually, is in “Hold Up.” Through the layers of bright yellow fabric in the dress Beyoncé wears, she becomes a modern day Yellow Mary.

As a symbol, yellow is a duality. Yellow can symbolize joy and happiness, but lurking in the background is a dark side of yellow symbolizing caution, betrayal, madness, or even death.<sup>1</sup> This duality is demonstrated in Beyoncé's joy and smile as she is smashing a fire hydrant and multiple car windows while the dark side of yellow is heard in the accompanying lyrics "but Imma fuck me up a bitch...What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy? Jealous or crazy? / Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately" ("Hold Up" Beyoncé). In *Daughters*, Yellow Mary wears dresses in yellow while expressing her anger as she talks about the death of her child and being hired out to a white family:

Yellow Mary: (a painful memory): "My baby was born dead, and my breasts were full of milk. We needed money, so I hired out to a wealthy family...some big, supposed to be, "muckety-mucks", off Edisto Island. High-falutin buckra."

She flinches as she recalls...

"They went to Cuba, I went with them. I nursed their baby, and took care of the other children."

(whispering)

"That's how I got "ruint"...I wanted to go home and they keep me...they keep me.

So I "fix" the titty....they send me home." (*Making* 126)

What is evident in the film is the quiet tone of anger and grief in Yellow Mary's voice. Like Beyoncé's lyrics, it is the *telling* of the tale that is intended to be the most powerful element. Yellow Mary's tale commands attention as the camera never leaves her profile. The first five words of her narrative are grief filled while the remaining words are angry and then finally, when she says, "so I "fix" the titty" to end her story, there is venom in her voice coupled with defiance. Beyoncé in "Hold Up" acts out the progression of emotions Yellow Mary expresses in this scene.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on the different symbolic interpretations of yellow, please see "Color Matters" (<https://www.colormatters.com/the-meanings-of-colors/yellow>) and "Color Psychology" (<https://www.colorpsychology.org/>).

Yellow Mary returns to the island with the stigma of being a prostitute, and Beyoncé's "6 Inch" suggests the sexual economy of the past as well as the present. The spaces alluded to in "6 Inch" juxtapose a southern or perhaps a South American antebellum brothel with street corners, Beyoncé portrayed an exotic dancer and a limousine where Beyoncé is dressed as what I perceive to be as a high-class call girl. This section is bathed in red lighting, the lyrics are about making money via the grind, and "she professional" (Beyoncé) is repeated; each of these elements reveal common euphemisms and symbolism associated with prostitution. The most compelling reimagining of Yellow Mary's escape from forced prostitution is displayed at the end of the song. Yellow Mary sabotaged her body to get away from her master, yet in "6 Inch" Beyoncé is seen standing on the porch of the brothel with the women who were inside while the house burns down around them. The song is lyrically about money and continual work that leads to independence; the visual elements suggest the ending of sexual economy as a means for black women to earn a living, just as Yellow Mary rejected the life of prostitution to return to the island. In "6 Inch", the destruction of the place where sex work is enforced is perhaps the newly written epilogue to Yellow Mary's tale. Charlotte Watson Sherman proposes Yellow Mary is a new kind of woman: "A woman who makes independent sexual choices, Yellow Mary is financially independent, bold, mobile, and ripe with the wisdom of life, as well as respectful of nourishing aspects of tradition and family. She is a powerful model for African American women of any century" (329). Beyoncé embodies each of the characteristics Sherman suggests Yellow Mary possesses, and although Beyoncé is a "cumya," she has portrayed the Gullah culture and Gullah womanism productively to millions of people who prior to the release of *Lemonade* may have had little knowledge of Gullah but now do because of the ancestry provided by Julie Dash.

When asked by *Vanity Fair* in an interview after *Lemonade* premiered, Dash stated she that she was aware of the buzz surrounding it and when it debuted, "My phone blew up the night *Lemonade* came on and my Web site shut down . . . someone called me and said *Daughters of the Dust* is trending on Twitter. And I said, "No, it must be something else," and they said, "No, it's trending!" . . . So I finally got

a chance to see *Lemonade* and I was just very pleased. *Lemonade* is just—it breaks new ground. It’s a masterpiece. It’s a tone poem, a visual tone poem with various stories going on—vignettes. It’s just all visual, and it’s like *yes*” (*Vanity Fair*). Seeing *Lemonade*, Dash stated “took me places that I had not been seeing in a long, long time. It just re-confirmed a lot of things that I know to be true about visual style and visual metaphors. And the use of visual metaphors in creating, redefining, and re-framing a Creole culture within this new world” (*Vanity Fair*). Whether or not Beyoncé has seen *Daughters of the Dust* since the release of *Lemonade* is of little importance because what we see in the two films is a shared reverence for ancestry from one generation of black women to the next that contributes and brings to a new audience the growing body of work surrounding Gullah.

As I addressed in chapter one, the current Gullah Renaissance that began in the late 1980s is still thriving, with those inside and outside of the community adding to the increasing awareness of Gullah history and culture as a vital part of our national and Diasporic heritage. The Gullah Renaissance shows no signs of waning, particularly in popular culture. This past season of the television-cooking contest, *Top Chef* was filmed in Charleston, with episode two featuring Gullah cuisine and well-known Charleston chef BJ Dennis. Starting with the question, “Anybody know about the Gullah culture?” – only one chef had any knowledge. Dennis shared with the contestants some history of Gullah cooking and his family: “Well, my family goes back before they even legally documented enslaved Africans. You’re talking 300-plus years. We kept a lot of those Africanisms with us and you are going to see that in the food today” (*Top Chef*). In an interview with Abbie Frentress Swanson, Dennis stated, “If you want to talk about Gullah food: it is very, very vegetable and seafood based...very West African driven, Caribbean driven...rice is a staple as is okra, okra greens...if tomatoes are in season, you’re going to see some type of tomato” (“5 Questions: BJ Dennis, The Gullah-Geechee Chef”). On *Top Chef* Dennis prepared for the contestants a variation on the West African stew still made on the Sea Islands of greens, coconut milk, and peanut butter (to replace the ground peanuts used in West African cooking), shrimp salad, an eggplant stew, and red rice gumbo.

Gullah cuisine was also featured in the popular show *Chef's Table* and was discussed in the media recently with the September 2016 death of Vertamae Smart Grosvenor, who is remembered as a culinary griot, Geechee chef, and author of the book *Vibration Cooking: or, the Travel Notes of Geechee Girl*. *Vibration Cooking* is a mix of recipes and a narrative of her experiences as a black woman in America. She writes at the beginning of the book, "When I cook, I never measure or weigh anything; I cook by vibration" (Grosvenor 5). Prior to Grosvenor's death, Julie Dash was in the process of creating a film around Grosvenor's life and writings; a release date has not been set for the film. Gullah culture will be on the small screen in large ways in the spring of 2017 as season two of the WGN television series, "Underground" is centered on the Gullah and Sea Islands. In order to authenticate the Gullah culture, traditions, and songs, producers employed Queen Quet as a consultant. In season one, the Gullah song "Move Daniel" was featured in episode seven, and this season the show will include more aspects of Gullah as well as show places on the islands, including St. Helena Island.

While positive examples of the continued and expanded interest in Gullah seem to be on the rise, so do the negative aspects. What is known on the Sea Island as "land grabbing" is a continual issue for the Gullah people. As taxes are raised and homes put up for auction, developers can buy land at ridiculously low cost that puts the history embedded in the soil at risk; very few, if any, developers are buying lands to preserve them. On my last trip to St. Simons Island, I saw many signs on front lawns that read, "Don't ask, not selling," and when I asked our guide Amy Roberts about the signs, she stated, "They want to snatch up every scrap they can get and they willing to pay, not top dollar that's for sure, but what they think is 'fair'. Ain't nothin' 'fair' about swallowing up a people to make more houses that can't nobody 'round here afford" (Roberts). I discussed "land grabbing" briefly in *Mama Day*, but the recent story of Lillian Milton demonstrates the ways in which lack of money, notification, and knowledge about the tax and court systems puts Gullah people and their property in jeopardy.

When Lillian Milton tried to settle the tax bill for her home in Jackson Village, only one of three remaining Gullah communities in Plantersville, South Carolina, she was told her home was going to be placed up for auction. Milton had not paid the \$250 levy to the county for sewer service even though her

home “had not ever been connected to the sewer system” (“Gullah Geechee: Descendants of Slaves Fight for Their Land”). Only when her “boss lady gave [her] the money” (“Gullah Geechee: Descendants of Slaves Fight for Their Land”) was Milton able to pay the original bill and additional court fees to retain her property. Milton’s situation is not unique as many Gullah residents are continually fighting to retain or regain their land.

In a conversation with Wilson Moran, he discussed the ongoing fight by residents of Harris Neck to take back their lands from the federal government. In 1942, the government displaced Harris Neck residents because they wanted to build an airbase to train pilots heading overseas to fight in World War II. Moran recalled when a government official knocked on the door of his family home: “The men at the door told my father that we had to be out in two weeks and that if we did not leave they were gonna bulldoze or burn down the house...I was eleven then, but I remember the car the man was driving. A new Pontiac” (Moran). His family left, but when the war was over, they along with other residents, attempted to get their property back. “When we returned,” he said “we were told the land was going to be a wildlife refuge.” Breaking to laugh, he continued “Wildlife? They knew nothing about our lives, our connection to the land...we became the ‘refugees’ to save the wildlife...We are fighting everyday to get our land back. Land the government said we had to give up. It was our patriotic duty...when is the government going to make good on their promise and see fit to return our land to us?” (Moran). Just as I was angered when I first heard of Gullah because I did not know a culture so close to African traditions existed in the United States, I remain angered that those with the financial resources to sustain the culture refuse to do so, seeing dollar signs where history lives. It is my hope, that in some very small way, my project helps to shed more light on a culture that is being both valued and devalued depending upon the amount of financial return.

Other areas of Gullah culture are being threatened by expansion and development. Today, the most popular Gullah art form is the making of sweetgrass baskets. On the islands, there was a plentiful amount of bulrush grass, sweetgrass, and long pine needles - all of the materials for the basket weaving traditions. During slavery, the baskets were used to winnow the rice, carry water, serve food and store

food. Today, the tradition continues, but the grasses are harder to come by. The baskets are now a form of art in addition to their practical purposes. These handsome baskets greatly resemble the Sierra Leonean *shukublay*. In the documentary, *Family Across the Sea*, the baskets from modern day Sierra Leone closely resemble the baskets still created on the Sea Islands. The most popular space for sweetgrass basket-weaving is Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, where women selling and creating baskets in stands along Highway 17 can be found daily and where the annual sweetgrass basket festival is held every June. As with all things Gullah, there is a duality. On one hand, the sweetgrass baskets are sought after and revered as a form of art – examples are in museums including the Smithsonian – but the spaces where baskets are sold in Mount Pleasant is in danger of being erased because of proposed highway expansion that would displace the stands where women work. Basket maker, Henrietta Snype stated that the danger in selling on the highway, the rising prices of materials since we can no longer go to out to the fields to gather sweetgrass and palm leaves make it difficult to keep this tradition alive, but this is our history and our tradition and we are not going anywhere anytime soon” (Snype).

In conclusion, “Ooman’s Wuk” is an intervention into the field of Gullah studies and contributes a valuable addition in the creation of Gullah womanism. Drawing attention to the female acts associated with rice production allows the conversations geared toward reevaluating the economics to include a feminized narrative as well as a clear connection to African ingenuity. This places women as valued, rather than devalued, within the discussion of economics. Addressing them as part of the construction of the economy rather than simply a labor force will hopefully shift the narrative. In moving from unskilled to skilled laborers, Gullah women should take their rightful place beside male-oriented occupations as well as dismantle them as only reproducers of slaves. While some women, like Queen Quet, are visibly active, my creation of womanism is yoked to Gullah women who evoke their traditions in quiet, daily ways that impact their families and communities. This is ooman’s wuk: to sustain and express the Gullah culture for those willing to listen, really listen because, as the Gullah say, “ef oona ent know weh oona da gwine, oona should kno weh oona come frum” - If you don't know where you are going, you should know where you came from.

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