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Rebekkah Mulholland

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CULLAH MI GULLAH, RE-IMAGINING AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE  
ARTISTS AND THE SEA ISLANDS: EXPLORING AFRICANISMS AND  
RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS IN CREATIVE WORKS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of  
Master of Humanities

By

REBEKKAH MULHOLLAND  
B.A., Wright State University, 2009

2012  
Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

June 5, 2012  
[June 8, 2012]

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Rebekkah Mulholland ENTITLED Cullah Mi Gullah Reimagining African American Female Artists and the Sea Islands Exploring Africanisms and Religious Expressions In Creative Works BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities

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Tracy Snipe, Ph.D.  
Thesis Director

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Ava Chamberlain, Ph.D.  
Director, Master of  
Humanities Program  
College of Liberal Arts

Committee on Final Examination:

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Tracy Snipe, Ph.D.

---

Dana Patterson, Ph.D.

---

Jennifer Subban, Ph.D.

---

Andrew T. Hsu, Ph.D.  
Dean, School of Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

Mulholland, Rebekkah. M.H. Master of Humanities Program, Wright State University, 2012. *Cullah Mi Gullah*, African American Female Artists and the Sea Islands: Exploring Africanisms and Religious Expressions in Creative Works.

While the Sea Islands have captured the interest of scholars and artists, especially since Zora Neale Hurston's groundbreaking novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), this thesis provides a historiography of Africanisms and religious expressions explored in Gullah literary traditions within African-American women's fiction, specifically with regards to the works of Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa. Following Hurston's example, during the 1980s Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Paule Marshall further laid the groundwork for writers to signify upon. This qualitative study of Dash's 1991 film and novel *Daughters of the Dust* (1997) along with Ansa's novels *Baby of the Family* (1989) and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996) highlight sources these women and visual artists like Johnathan Green creatively draw upon to construct narratives while exploring related motifs. These works reflect the growing interest in the southern landscape with regards to the Sea Islands and Geechee cultural traditions.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dr. Baker- Thank you for helping me to realize my dream and for letting me know it was okay to go for it.

Dr. Chamberlain- Without your support this would not have been possible. Thank you for your unwavering support throughout the program.

Dr. Okia-Thank you for asking the hard questions that clarified my thinking on this project.

Dr. Patterson-I am eternally grateful for your support. You have been amazing throughout this process and my academic career.

Dr. Snipe-Thank you for comic relief! All jokes aside, thank you for being my advisor, mentor and friend. You have been exactly what I needed to get through this process. I truly appreciate you having my back through everything.

Dr. Subban- Thank you for rescuing me! I am forever appreciative for your creative and thoughtful comments.

## Introduction

This work focuses on select fiction and inspired works by contemporary African American female artists pertaining to the Sea Islands in relation to the legacy established by literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston. For the purpose of this essentially qualitative study, African survivals are referred to as Africanisms while specific cultural traditions like the ring shout and ‘seeking’ are described as forms of religious communication.<sup>1</sup> This chapter provides a historiography of the validity of Africanisms and religious expressions used in literary traditions pertaining to the Gullah peoples, mainly in black women’s creative writing; historiography is historical research or the presentation of history based on critical examination of primary and secondary sources subjected to scholarly criteria. Using the historiography model, I will analyze how Geechee cultural norms are rendered in filmic discourse and visual images in Julie Dash’s chef-d’oeuvre, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), which she later converted to a sequel book in 1997, and Tina McElroy Ansa’s novels, *Baby of the Family* (1989) and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996).

The research methodology is strengthened through the use of primarily secondary resources such as novels, films, articles, essays, interviews, and photography as well as archival materials and critical reflections. This study should contribute to the expanding

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<sup>1</sup> Historian Dr. Margaret Washington Creel argues that she does not “argue for ‘survivals,’ a somewhat lifeless term implying passive existence. But I do argue for the presence of dynamic, creative, cultural trends of African presence among the Gullahs.” Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 6.

analyses of African American female artists' vital creative contributions to historical, cultural, academic and artistic works that add to the increasing body of literature about the Gullahs and barrier or Sea Islands. Using an interdisciplinary research approach (engaging history, folklore, and anthropology as well as literature) this work seeks to examine the Sea Islands, its people and vibrant culture.

Seventy years ago anthropologist Melville Herskovits published the pioneering and controversial book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. It was an attempt to disprove the myth that Africans in America have no cultural ties to Africa. He argued that “a rich complex culture existed in pre-Colonial Africa.”<sup>1</sup> As Africans were dispersed throughout the New World, the amount of culture that survived depended on four factors: climate and topography, the organization and operation of plantations, the numerical ratio of Negroes to whites and the extent to which contact between Negroes and whites in a given area took place in a rural or urban setting.<sup>2</sup> Historian R.L Watson elaborated further on Herskovits' arguments. If the climate and topography of the area resembled that of Africa, the possibility of cultural “survivals” increased. The organization and operation of the plantations is defined as the less contact there is between blacks and whites, the greater the chance to develop “Africanisms.”<sup>3</sup> The numerical ratio of Negroes to whites means as long as the number of whites is small the greater the chance for survival. As far

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<sup>1</sup> R.L Watson. “American Scholars and the Continuity of African Culture in the United States,” *The Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 4 (1978): 375, 375-386.

<sup>2</sup> Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph E. Holloway defines Africanisms as “those elements of culture found in the New World that are traceable to an African origin” (ix). Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).



as the setting, rural settings are “more conducive than urban for retention.”<sup>4</sup> What Herskovits found was there were more survivals in Latin America than in the United States because the climate closely resembled that of Africa; also there were a small number of Europeans and the setting was an urban area.<sup>5</sup> Watson points out that Herskovits did not develop the point that the slave trade did not last as long in the United States as it did in Latin America, ultimately rejuvenating African cultural traditions.<sup>6</sup> However, Herskovits drew his evidence exclusively from the Caribbean and South America. On the other hand, Newbell Puckett’s anthropological studies were groundbreaking.<sup>7</sup> It was actually the first study of African survivals in the American south. Carter G. Woodson’s *The African Background Outlined* (1936) specifically discusses folklore, spirituality, the written and spoken words and visual arts as being African cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Herskovits asserts there was widespread acceptance that “Africanisms have disappeared as a result of the pressure exerted by the experience of slavery ...”<sup>9</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier, Robert E. Park and Edward B. Reuter supported his claims. Sociologist

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<sup>4</sup> Watson, 375.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Watson, 375.

<sup>7</sup> This study brought forth some 10,000 folk beliefs of Southern blacks revealing African cultural traditions in African American burial ceremonies, religious expressions including but not limited to ghosts, voodoo and conjuration. Newbell Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926).

<sup>8</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The African Background Outlined* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). W.E.B DuBois’ 1939 study entitled *Black Folk, Then and Now*, focuses on the Caribbean, Suriname and Brazil African cultural traditions have been noticeable. W.E.B DuBois *Black Folk, Then and Now* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Herskovits, 3.

Edward Franklin Frazier's 1939 book *The Negro Family in the United States* puts forth the argument that Negroes have been completely stripped of their heritage by being brought to America. Older African men and women being forced into a new situation "had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labor and take over...the folkways of the American environment."<sup>10</sup> The situation however, was different for their children. Frazier states that the American environment was the only one the children knew so those "few memories" that were passed onto them were soon forgotten, while developing "motivations and modes of behavior in harmony with the New World."<sup>11</sup> Both Frazier and sociologist Robert E. Park concur that the amount of African traditions Negroes brought to the United States was small. In fact, Park adamantly stated that Negroes have nothing that can be traced back to Africa. In his article "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," Park stated "...the Negro left almost everything but his dark complexion and tropical temperament."<sup>12</sup> Sociologist Edward B. Reuter reinforced the statements made by Frazier and Park with the observation that Africans via the slave trade and the Middle Passage "lost every vestige of the African culture."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1950s American scholars continued to accept the view of African survivals held by Frazier, Park and Reuter, while scholars in the 1970s had a very

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<sup>10</sup> Herskovits, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Park. "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," *The Journal of Negro History* 4 no. 2 (1919): 116, 111-133.

<sup>13</sup> Herskovits, 379.

different view of Africans in America and their African heritage. Historian Peter H. Wood's *Black Majority, Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1974) is a study of African cultural influence in the United States. Wood's argument is that elements of African cultural traditions in South Carolina were "less altered by European influence."<sup>14</sup> This provides an example of what Herskovits describes as being conducive to survivals. The most controversial work came from Eugene D. Genovese with *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974). For Genovese the ties to Africa were apparent; all the scholars mentioned, Genovese "analyzes the African connection most fully and gives it the broadest role."<sup>15</sup>

Studies conducted in the 1970s credited Africa as being a factor in the lives of slaves. These new studies of African history saw an abundance of references to the works of Africanists from schools with programs in African studies such as the University of Ibadan, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), the University of Dar es Salaam and the Northwestern University African studies program, which was founded by Melville Herskovits. Pioneers Kenneth Dike, J.F. Ade Ajayi and J.P. Fage were affiliated with Ibadan while Phillip Curtain was affiliated with UW-Madison, Basil Davidson association was with SOAS and Rodney Walter was with Dar es Salaam.

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<sup>14</sup> Watson, 379.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 380.

Before African scholars like Dike, Ajayi and Fage were studying and writing African history, African Americans such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were playing a vital role in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The latter two writers sought to establish “a folk heritage as the source of, and inspiration for authentic African American art form.”<sup>16</sup> The Harlem Renaissance was a black pride movement that saw an explosion of works by African Americans in the form of art, music and literature that helped to represent the idea of the New Negro, a term coined by Alain Locke.<sup>17</sup> The Harlem Renaissance presented African Americans with the opportunity to become published by mainstream publishing houses. There was an abundance of publications of magazines, newspapers, journals and novels. Many works of fiction drew people’s attention from all over the nation, thus leading to the popularity of scholars such as Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

Zora Neale Hurston, an essential figure of the Harlem Renaissance, was an anthropologist and folklorist. Growing up in Eatonville, Florida “a pure Negro Town”<sup>18</sup> (in Hurston’s words) and attending school in Jacksonville, Hurston was exposed to African cultural traditions early on. In college she studied anthropology, which led her to conduct research throughout the Caribbean and the American South. During her travels, she documented African and African American folklore, African religious rituals and

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<sup>16</sup> Hazel Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Leroy Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1925), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 12.

African cultural traditions. Hurston's popular novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was set in the Gullah region of Florida; it laid the groundwork for future generations of African American female artists to draw upon, especially for those whose works are set in the Sea Islands, focusing on the African roots and cultural traditions.

In part the Harlem Renaissance and protest writers such as Richard Wright laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. Blacks were fighting for equal rights and reclaiming voting rights that were granted with the ratification of the fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. As the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. adopted Mahatma Gandhi's principle of *Satyagraha*<sup>19</sup> nonviolent resistance<sup>20</sup> during boycotts, sit-ins and protests. As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, boycotters and protesters were met with severe violence that led to critical injuries and death. In 1966 the Civil Rights Movement took a new radical direction with the Black Power Movement. Stokely Carmichael, the newly elected leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), insisted that African Americans take up arms and be prepared for battle.<sup>21</sup> While activists were using their voices to fight racial discrimination and injustices, Black authors were addressing these issues through their writing. This era was known as the Black Arts Movement.

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<sup>19</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1980* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 54.

<sup>20</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (N. Chemsford, MA, 2001), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Sitkoff, 210.

Larry Neal, a scholar of African-American theatre, states that the Black Arts Movement “is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black power concept.”<sup>22</sup> The impact of the Black Power concept and the Black Arts Movement had on identity was pivotal. Blacks took pride in their “blackness” such as choosing to wear afros. The political and social ideologies of the Black Power concept with the aesthetics of artists and novelists of the Black Arts Movement resulted in an even greater presence of Afro-Americans in all areas of the arts. The Black Power movement was the catalyst that heightened the awareness of and concern for African survivals in Afro-American culture.

Beginning in the 1970s novels by Afro-Americans became mainstream, achieving best-selling and award winning status. During this time Afro-American women artists such as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and Maya Angelou made their presence known; post Black Arts Movement artists like Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara produced works that focused on African survivals and cultural traditions. Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980) emphasized the significance of oral history, memory and folklore pertaining to black women in history, specifically with the Gullah people and culture on the Sea Islands. At the same time Afro-Americans were establishing a new name for themselves. At a conference in Chicago in December of 1988 Jesse Jackson and a number of other black leaders announced that the term “African-American” was the preference because “[t]o be called African Americans has cultural integrity... [i]t puts us in our proper historical context... with a degree of

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<sup>22</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review* 12 no. 4 (1968): 29, 28-39.

accepted and reasonable pride, they connect their heritage to their mother country and where they are now.”<sup>23</sup> This especially held true for African American female artists who used the Sea Islands to explore African survivals and cultural traditions Herskovits referred to as Africanisms and unique religious expressions of the Gullah people.

Anthropologist Paula Ebron states that for African American female artists the Sea Islands “have become a significant site of meaning in African American cultural history,” contending that works produced by African American female artists have made the Sea Islands “a powerful site of ‘remembered’ African American community.”<sup>24</sup> Along these lines this thesis will explore artists such as Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa who call upon the Sea Islands as a signifier or signified landscape by referencing Africanisms and religious expressions. Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes signifyin(g) as “modes of figuration itself.”<sup>25</sup> The term derives from the Trickster which is found in African mythology, folklore, and religion. In African American literature the concept of signifying is used to analyze the interaction between the definitive works of prominent African American writers specifically Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. Along with the concept of signifying, I utilize Gates’ theoretical construct to discuss his concepts of “tropological revision” and “talking texts.” Tropological revision refers to the repeating of tropes as well as images from texts by other black Diasporic

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<sup>23</sup> Ben L. Martin, “From Negro to African American: The Power of Names and Naming,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106 no. 1 (1991): 83-107.

<sup>24</sup> Paula Ebron, “Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 100 no.1 (1998): 94, 94-105.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Louis Gates, “The “Blackness of Blackness”: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 no. 4 (1983): 686, 685-723.

artists with difference or revision in trope, theme or narrative structure. The concept of talking texts refers to black Diasporic artists referencing and even challenging the texts of other Diasporic artists.<sup>26</sup>

There are a number of African American female artists who have used the Sea Islands as a site of “African American cultural memories” and a location of remembrance of “community histories and myths.”<sup>27</sup> Jeanne Moutoussamy Ashe’s work on Daufuskie Island in the 1970s is a photographic collection of the Gullah people. She portrays them as a unique group of black Americans with a rich African culture.<sup>28</sup> Ntozake Shange past and present works (*Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) and *Some Sing, Some Cry* (2010)) use the Sea Islands as a space both real and imagined.<sup>29</sup> Carrie Mae Weems’ photographic project entitled Sea Island Series 1991-92 captures the visible traces of the Gullah community off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina.<sup>30</sup> A native of Charleston, South Carolina, artist Arianne King Comer depicts black life on the Sea Islands. Her

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<sup>26</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 217.

<sup>27</sup> Ebron, “Enchanted Memories,” 94.

<sup>28</sup> Jeanne Moutoussamy Ashe, *Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Courtney Thorsson explains that this imaginative vision allows African American female artists to answer the question posed by Countee Cullen, “What is Africa to me?” She explains that by writing an “African- informed space” African American female writers move away from those images that negatively portray Africa. Courtney Thorsson, “Dancing Up A Nation: Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*,” *Callaloo* 30 no. 2 (2007): 644, 644-652.

<sup>30</sup> Carrie Mae Weems trained as a folklorist documented the remnants of African culture that have been preserved by this geographically isolated and tight knit community for 300 years. “Carrie Mae Weems Biography,” Jack Shainman Gallery, accessed September 2, 2011, <http://www.jackshainman.com/artist-biography44.html>.



exhibit “My Spirit Speaks,” includes pieces that illustrate her Gullah ancestry through vibrant colors, mesmerizing patterns and powerful images.<sup>31</sup>

As artists such as Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa were emerging, so were numerous other works depicting life on the Sea Islands. Virginia Geraty, a Gullah preservationist, thought the original play *Porgy and Bess* by Dubose Heyward would be more authentic if the language spoken was Gullah; out of this came *Porgy: Gullah Version*, which she translated.<sup>32</sup> The Sea Islands have also been the focus of many documentaries. *Family Across the Sea* (1990) which documents African American cultural ties to Africa and the homecoming for a group of Gullahs to Sierra Leone; *Home Across the Water* (1992) shows the impact of resort development on the Sea Islands in South Carolina and Georgia; and *The Language You Cry In: Story of a Mende Song* (1998) chronicles how African Americans maintained links with Africa throughout the Middle Passage, slavery and segregation. There are a number of other films that depict the Sea Islands with various themes of art, music, culture and life. There are also books and television programs geared towards younger audiences such as Nickelodeon’s syndicated *Gullah Gullah Island*.<sup>33</sup> This series was the first and only television show of

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<sup>31</sup> I attended the 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional Pilgrimage Tour from March 2-4, 2012 in Alabama with a group of Wright State students and Dr. Snipe. On Saturday March 2, 2012 we visited the Rosa Parks Museum where Comer’s exhibit was displayed. Comer is known as a batik artist. A batik artist is someone who produces colored designs on fabric/textiles by dyeing them; wax is applied to the areas of the fabric that are not dyed.

<sup>32</sup> In 1990 Dr. Geraty’s play *Porgy: A Gullah Version* premiered in Charleston’s Garden Theater not too far from where the real life Porgy and Bess resided on Cabbage Row. *Porgy: A Gullah Version*, directed by (1990: Charleston, SC: Video Records, 2006), DVD.

<sup>33</sup> *Gullah Gullah Island* was a series designed for preschoolers starring husband and wife duo Ron and Natalie Daise. The series is also the first to feature an African American family as the main characters.

its kind to feature a Gullah family. The show as well as the children book's about the Sea Islands partake in themes of cultural loss among the younger generation, helping them to broaden those "few memories" while also teaching youth the importance of cultural preservation and pride.

Additionally, cultural institutions such as the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston and the Penn Center on St. Helena Island both located in South Carolina seek to preserve the Low Country's Gullah Heritage. The Annual Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration commemorates the Gullah people and their heritage; this festival is designed for people of all ages to enjoy. In 2010 I attended the *Sea Islands Black Heritage Festival* on St. Simons Island, Georgia as a first hand observer. During this festival there was a celebration of the arts with music, singing and various artworks. It also included a worship service at the First African Baptist Church and a Sojourn with the ancestors on the beach that was reminiscent of a baptism.

The production of various works focusing on the Sea Islands moved the Gullah culture into the mainstream. They have also been essential to providing a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Sea Islands as well as preserving the culture by

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Moira McCormick, 1995. "Nickelodeon on a roll; Learning Station's bright idea." *Billboard* 107, no. 41: 66. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 26, 2011). During this time a number of children's books and songs were produced also. Muriel Branch, *The Water Brought Us: The Story of the Gullah Speaking People* (New York: Cobblehill Books/Dutton, 1995), Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, *Been in the Storm So Long a Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales, and Children's Games from Johns Island, South Carolina*, 1990, Smithsonian Folkways, CD.

“insuring that some traditions do not fade from memory but remain vibrant.”<sup>34</sup> For African American female artists this holds true, especially, for Julie Dash who has ties to the Sea Islands through her father’s side of the family. St. Simons Island has been home for Tina McElroy Ansa and her husband since 1984.<sup>35</sup> This study establishes how African American female artists such as Dash and Ansa use the Sea Islands specifically to build upon Melville Herskovits’ argument that African survivals and cultural traditions have not been lost due to the enslavement of Africans as well as during the Middle Passage.

### **Chapter overview and summaries:**

This work consists of five chapters. Chapter one explores the Sea Islands beginning with a description of its location and people in North America, ultimately tracing the Sea Islands roots back to Africa. This approach highlights the importance of West Africa, explaining why it is relevant to the Sea Islands. Through what Tracy Snipe calls a “Gullah Renaissance,” I will examine the current creative and artistic output related to the way of life on the Sea Islands. The term Gullah refers to the people living on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and the term Geechee is for those living on the islands of Georgia, but for the purpose of this study I will use Gullah interchangeably to describe and reference islanders living on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

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<sup>34</sup> Tracy Snipe, “An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands,” in *The African Presence in Black America* ed. Jacob U. Gordon (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004), 285.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Thomas, “Filmmaker’s Unique View of the Black Experience: Movies: Julies Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* evokes her African Heritage ‘with a freshness about what we already know’,” *LA Times*, March 20, 1992 accessed September 12, 2011 [http://www.latimes.com/1992-03-20/entertainment/ca-4304\\_1\\_juliedash](http://www.latimes.com/1992-03-20/entertainment/ca-4304_1_juliedash). “Author’s Bio and Family Photos,” Tina’s Homepage accessed September 12, 2011 <http://www.tinamcelroyansa.com/bio.html>.

The term Gullah also describes the language spoken on the Sea Islands. For so long the Gullah language was called “backwards” and referred to as “baby talk” until Lorenzo Dow Turner conducted quantitative research on the Sea Islands for fifteen years, listening and recording as well as writing the language; ultimately he compared it to the languages spoken by people of West Africa.

The second chapter entitled, “We carry these memories inside of we”, examines visualizations in Julie Dash’s 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. The year 2011 marked the twentieth anniversary of the narrative film *Daughters of Dust*. The story takes place the day before members of the Peazant family depart the fictitious Dawtuh Island. Like many other female artists, Dash’s portrayal of the Sea Islands highlights the importance of embracing and preserving the richness of this culture, thus validating film as a medium.<sup>36</sup> I explore the themes of flying Africans, Yoruba deities and secret societies. Using Gates’ theoretical model of signifyin(g), I show how the story of Ibo Landing is told and how it ultimately made its way back to Africa. Julie Dash chooses many of her characters to represent Yoruba orisha. These orisha serve as intermediaries between mankind and God. Enslaved Africans brought their orisha tradition as they were dispersed throughout the

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<sup>36</sup> Toni Cade Bambara states that Dash’s film posed the question “How shall a diasporized people communicate?” The answer is through “independent films.” Dash’s cast consists of actors and actresses who have worked in films done by those she worked with at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). These colleagues made up the LA rebellion, the first group of graduates from the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers; a couple of them becoming leaders in the contemporary independent cinema movement. Toni Cade Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye,” in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays & Conversations* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 118.

New World. For example, in Brazil there is the Candomblé and in Cuba the Santería.<sup>37</sup> These enslaved Africans also brought with them secret handshakes and signals, which were a part of the secret societies of West Africa known as the Poro and Sande. The Gullah name for Poro is “pora,” meaning “the great secret society of men.”<sup>38</sup> Only men are allowed in the Poro society where sacred rituals are performed. The Sande secret society conducts rites of passage ceremonies that initiate adolescent girls into womanhood. The Gullah name “zoe” means “the wearer of the mask in Sande society”.<sup>39</sup> Also present at these ceremonies are masks that embody female roles in society. The Poro and Sande societies are found in Sierra Leone and Liberia; the Sande can also be found in Guinea.

*Daughters of the Dust* (1997) is unlike many other novels that have film adaptations; the novel is the sequel to the narrative film. Whereas the film speculated about what would happen to those leaving the island, the novel chronicles what has happened since then. The story takes place in 1926 between the rural landscape of Dawtuh Island and the urban landscape of Harlem. The discussion of *Daughters of the Dust* the novel is entitled “Some Folk de Gift Fe Lie.” This third chapter analyzes the themes of oral, religious and familial traditions. I discuss the theme of oral tradition first through breaking down the various types in African and African American cultures. On

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<sup>37</sup>In the United State there is an African village named *Oyotunji* located in Beaufort, South Carolina founded by Oseijman Adelabu Adefunmi I in 1970. Terrance Zepke, *Low Country Voodoo: Beginner's Guide to Tales, Spells and Boo Hags* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press Inc, 2009), 105.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 154.

<sup>39</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms*, 154.

the Sea Islands religious traditions are deeply rooted within oral traditions, which I explore through the development of the Gullah church. It was prohibited for slaves to worship. So they came up with the “invisible institution” that describes the secret places slaves met to worship. Some may wonder why was it okay for slaves living throughout the Sea Islands to have a place to worship. Slaves on plantations on the Sea Islands were provided with places to worship circa 1820. These places were called praise houses. The Gullah church incorporates traditional practices associated with Sea Island religious services such as the ring shout performed only by those who are members of that particular church. The concept of call and response happens when a new verse of a spiritual is introduced by the song leader to which the chorus responds. I also show how familial traditions are rooted in the oral tradition. Dash explores the African and African American cultural tradition of naming by demonstrating how Sea Islanders preserve real or constructed memories of Africa within oral narratives as means of kinship ties, connecting individuals with geographically distant landscapes.

“This isn’t superstitions I’m talking about” is the title of the fourth chapter, which provides an analysis of Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*. In this coming of age story Ansa’s protagonist, Lena McPherson was born with a caul or a veil covering her face; the caul is a membrane that covers an infant’s head at birth. In African American folk traditions a person born with a caul is believed to have supernatural powers such as the ability to foresee the future and see ghosts. Drawing on the concept of call (caul) and response, I analyze Lena’s relationships with those around her, while

exploring their roles and reactions to her (un)veiling. Nurse Bloom, who functions as a midwife, demonstrates her medical wisdom by performing the ritualistic process of preserving the caul by making a tea for Lena to drink. Lena's mother Nellie rejects the custom via burning the caul and tossing the tea out, causing Lena to become vulnerable to evil spirits. As a young child, Lena encounters ghosts from a child in a portrait to meeting the ghost of a slave on the beach. As she gets older such encounters with spirits become overwhelming; Lena keeps her visions to herself causing her to become isolated from others, including members of her family. When Miss Lizzie, Lena's grandmother, passes away she encourages her granddaughter to open up about the feelings of insanity that Lena has suppressed for so long. Every person in Lena's life, including the slave named Rachel she met on the beach teaches her the importance of finding and loving herself.

“This ain't nothing but a vapor” is the title of the fifth chapter. In *The Hand I Fan With* (sequel to *Baby of the Family*), I explore conjure in relation to Ansa's ghost story. Lena McPherson is a single, forty-five year old successful business owner. Lena has had difficulty maintaining relationships with men because of her ability to look into their past and see negative aspects of the men's lives. One night Lena and her best friend conjure up a man for Lena. I analyze how the African American conjure woman is defined and depicted in relation to Marie LeVeau in contemporary novels such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* (1993).

When she least expects it, the man she conjures up appears as a one hundred year old ghost; at first as a vapor then in his physical form. The presence of Herman forces Lena to confront the spirit world she finally comes to accept, re-conceptualizing her faith which includes Catholicism, Yoruba cosmology, voodoo, hoodoo and southern Baptist belief. This religious syncretism along with Herman's presence puts Lena in touch with her inner self. As Herman's mission of healing comes to an end, his physical body evaporates, causing Lena's extreme feelings of anger to interfere with nature. It results in a powerful storm that causes the bridge that connects her property to the fictitious town of Mulberry, Georgia to wash away; this is symbolic of Lena finally putting a halt to being the hand everyone fans with. In totality the creative works of Tina McElroy Ansa and Julie Dash provide a deeper understanding of Africanisms through literary and visual arts that will certainly be further analyzed after the upcoming release of the film *Baby of the Family* based on her debut novel with the same title.



## Chapter One

“De Wey Wi Speak, Duh Wey Wi Lib”: Understanding Gullah- the People, their Folkways and the Language they Speak

“The ways of the Sea Islanders...offer valuable insights into an Afro-American culture...”<sup>1</sup>

“It’s like the history of the middle passage. All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it’s like a whole nation that is under the sea.”<sup>2</sup>

I arrived on St. Simons Island, Georgia on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I made my way across the causeway connecting St. Simons Island with mainland Brunswick, Georgia.<sup>3</sup> Crossing the causeway offered a breath taking view of the Frederica River whose waters looked like they were touched by the sky; I was told this was called the Marshes of Glynn by a couple who travel to St. Simons Island quite frequently. The Sea Islands are a set of barrier islands extending approximately 400 miles<sup>4</sup> from Jacksonville, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida.<sup>5</sup> The Sea Islands landscape can be described as low, flat islands

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Since the 1930s the islands have been accessible by bridges and causeways connecting them to the mainland. Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird, “Introduction to Sea Island Folklife,” *Journal of Black Studies* 10, no. 4 (1980): 387.

<sup>4</sup> Twining and Baird, 387.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll Greene Jr., “Coming Home Again: Artist Jonathan Green Returns to his Gullah Roots,” *American Visions* 5, no. 1 (1990) quoted in Tracy Snipe, “An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands,” in *The African Presence in Black America* ed. Jacob U. Gordon (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004), 272.

isolated by grass covered marshes and trees that alternate between pine, palmetto and live oak drooping over with Spanish moss. As I am taking in the scenery, this sense of peace washed over me and I remember having this same feeling when I arrived in Durban, South Africa about a month prior to this trip.

For the purpose of this study I will focus on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, which before the presence of European slavers and enslaved Africans, Native Americans considered home. This is evident in the names of various islands such as Wadmalaw, Sampit, Santee, Yamassee, Pee Dee, Winyah, Waccamaw and Yacamaw.<sup>1</sup> The descendants of those enslaved Africans are referred to as “Gullah” in South Carolina and “Geechee” in Georgia; I will use the term Gullah interchangeably to describe the African Americans living on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. The Gullah people can directly trace their roots to Africa, west and central Africa precisely.

Circa the 1520s the Spanish explorer and wealthy sugar planter of Santo Domingo, Lucas Vásquez de Aylón founded a colony near the shore of Sapelo Sound, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> This was the first colony Europeans established on the southern shores of North America. European explorers soon realized that the climate and soil texture was similar to that of West Africa. Europeans discovered that in South Carolina and Georgia rice crops needed a moist and semi-tropical climate. Having no experience with rice cultivation, Europeans needed people who were knowledgeable about this crop.<sup>3</sup> They soon recognized that importing Africans from West Africa would be advantageous

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<sup>1</sup> Jones-Jackson, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hoffman, “Lucas Vásquez de Aylón’s Discovery and Colony,” in the *Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South, 1521-1704*, eds. Charles Hoffman and Carmen Chaves Tesser (University of Georgia Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Opala, “The Gullah: Rice, Slavery and the Sierra Leone-American Connection (USIS, 1985), <http://yale.edu/glc/gullah/index.htm>.

because they were rice cultivators. So in 1526 de Ayllón and other Europeans began to import West African slaves signaling the beginning of slavery in the low country.<sup>4</sup>

Europeans were willing to pay higher prices for Africans from what they called the Rice Coast during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade generated eight coastal slave regions in Africa.<sup>5</sup> The first slaving region is the Senegambia which consists of Senegal and the Gambia. Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal and part of Liberia make up the second region, the Upper Guinea coast. The Windward Coast is the third region that includes part of Liberia, Ghana and the Ivory Coast; this region is also known as the Rice Coast. The fourth region is the Gold Coast made up of Ghana. The fifth region, the Bight of Benin is Togo and Benin. The Bight of Biafra is the sixth region which encompassed the Niger Delta and the Benin River. The West Central coast or the seventh region was comprised of Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo), Congo, Gabon, Namibia, and Angola. The eighth region, (known as the South East) included Mozambique and Madagascar. Millions of Africans were enslaved in these regions and shipped to North America.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, "Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón's Discovery and Colony," 41.

<sup>5</sup> The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the New World. The Europeans brought manufactured goods from Liverpool, Bristol and London such as guns and textiles. They then went to Africa (west, central and southeast) to load their ships with cargo, Africans. From Africa Europeans then sailed to the New World (the Americas, the Caribbean and the Chesapeake colonies) to disperse their cargo. The different plantations throughout the New World sent plantation goods like sugar and cotton to Europe. Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54. William Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 37. Alistair Boddy-Evans, "Slavery Regions for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," accessed October 15, 2011, <http://0.tqn.com/d/africanhistory/1/0/8/M/SlaveryOrigins001.jpg>.

<sup>6</sup> Pollitzer, 39.

Historian Paul Lovejoy charts the number of Africans exported from these eight slaving regions to the New World from 1690-1900.<sup>7</sup> There were 479,900 from the Senegambia region (4.7%) and 411,200 (4.0%) from the Upper Guinea region. The Windward produced 183,200 (1.8%) and from the Gold Coast there were 1,035,600 (10.1%). The numbers for the Bight of Benin were 2,016,200 (19.7%) while the Bight of Biafra generated 463,700 (14.3%). The West Central coast spawned the most with 4,179,500 (40.8%) and the South East coast brought forth 470,900 (4.6%). The number of African slaves taken from these eight slaving regions during this time period totaled 10,240,200.

Once Africans were rounded up and shackled around their necks and arms, they were stored in slave forts and castles before boarding the ships that would forever displace them from their home. Slave forts and castles were built and controlled by European powers, the Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danes and English.<sup>8</sup> Goreé Island, off the coast of Dakar, Senegal was a center for the slave trade. On this 45 acre island is the Slave House built in 1776 by the Dutch.<sup>9</sup> It has a series of rooms, or 8 square foot cells<sup>10</sup> storing “men, women and children who had been branded with a red-hot iron on the breast.”<sup>11</sup> The slaves would then be jam packed like sardines in a can into the small cells and then “...seated almost stark naked on the dirty floor, chest to back from one end of

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<sup>7</sup> Allistair Boddy-Evans, “*Trans-Atlantic Exports by Region, 1650-1900*,” accessed October 17, 2011, <http://0.tqn.com/d/africanhistory/1/0/5/M/SlaveryTable001.jpg>. The map compiled the data from tables 1.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1, and 7.4. Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: a History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Kennell Jackson, “*America is Me*” (New York: Harper Collins, 2009),

<sup>9</sup> This is the last slave house standing. It is now a museum. “Goreé Island, Home of ‘The Door of No Return,’” African American Registry, accessed October, 18, 2011, [http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/goree-island-home-door-no-return](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/goree-island-home-door-no-return). Peter Schwab, *Designing West Africa: Prelude to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Calamity* (New York: MacMillan, 2004), 70.

<sup>10</sup> “Goree Island.”

<sup>11</sup> Schwab, “*Designing West Africa*,” 70.

the room to the other, with their legs looped around the person in front of each of them, they would await for days, perhaps weeks, the arrival of the slaving ships.”<sup>12</sup> This was the tone for the various slave forts and castles throughout West Africa.

According to Anyidoho and Gibbs, there were seventy-six forts and castles in 1848 when the slave trade was abolished.<sup>13</sup> Of all the forts and castles Elmina, Cape Coast and Bunce Island hold significant importance. São Jorge da Mina Castle later named Elmina was built by the Portuguese in 1482. This is the oldest and biggest slave castle in West Africa.<sup>14</sup> The Cape Coast castle was the center of the gold and slave trade during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Cape Coast castle was built in 1653 for the Swedish African Company for trade in timber and gold.<sup>15</sup> This castle is considered the most important because at the height of the trade it served as the headquarters for the British, who during this time were the busiest European slave traders on the coast.<sup>16</sup> Bunce Island, although not as well-known as the other two, is one of the largest slave castles. Located in Sierra Leone it played a vital role in shipping; it was because of its location that it became a strategically important shipping port.<sup>17</sup> Slave forts and castles like these were just a preliminary of what was to come next.

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<sup>12</sup> Schwab, “Designing West Africa,” 70.

<sup>13</sup> Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang, “Cape Coast Castle: The Edifice and the Metaphor,” in *Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds. Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (New York: Rodopi, 2000), 24.

<sup>14</sup> As different European powers gained control over Elmina, the architecture changed “to match this growth of power and control of the trade.” Simon Gikandi, “Slavery and the Culture of Taste” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Juang, “Africa and America: Culture, Politics and History” (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2008), 231-232.

<sup>16</sup> Anyidoho and Gibbs, “Cape Coast Castle,” 24.

<sup>17</sup> Yussuf Simmonds, “African Slave Castles,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2009, accessed October, 18, 2011, <http://www.lasentinel.net/African-Slave-Castles.html>.

After being cooped up in the forts and castles, Africans boarded the slave ships; for many the Atlantic Ocean would be their final destination. This part of the journey is called the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage took place between Africa and the New World. The conditions on the ships were worse than in the forts and castles. The conditions on the ships were agonizing. Again slaves were packed tightly together for most of the journey and food and water resources were scarce leading to malnutrition.<sup>18</sup> Diseases ran rampant because of the lack of sanitation and parasites spreading infections from one human to another due to open wounds from the chains and whippings.<sup>19</sup> Many slaves were thrown overboard when they died and also when someone had or was even suspected of being infected with diseases (such as malaria, smallpox, yellow fever and diarrhea) to prevent the diseases from spreading.<sup>20</sup> The journey into the New World took anywhere between four and eight weeks. For those Africans who survived this brutal ordeal they finally landed on the shores of North America, more specifically the Sea Islands.

Of all the islands throughout the Sea Islands, Sullivan's Island (near Charleston, South Carolina) is perhaps one of the most important. Of the millions of Africans shipped from West Africa to North America, the port of entry was Sullivan's Island for forty percent. Julie Dash and many others refer to Sullivan's Island as being "the Ellis Island for the Africans."<sup>21</sup> Approximately 40% of African Americans can trace their ancestral

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<sup>18</sup> Pollitzer, "Gullah People," 37.

<sup>19</sup> Pollitzer, "Gullah People," 37.

<sup>20</sup> Oftentimes Africans chose to jump over board because they believed that their souls would return to the place of their birth. Raymond Arnold Winbush, *Should America Pay?: Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 255.

<sup>21</sup> Ellis Island (located at the mouth of the Hudson River in New York Harbor) was the port of entry for immigrants entering the United States from January 1, 1892 until November 12, 1954. Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film* (New York: The New Press,

roots to Sullivan's Island.<sup>22</sup> On Sullivan's Island were "pest houses" that quarantined newly arrived Africans before being sold into slavery.<sup>23</sup> The first pest house or "lazaretto" was built in 1707.<sup>24</sup> The next eighty years brought four more pest houses to the area, however, residents complained and the last pest house closed and was sold in 1796.<sup>25</sup>

Charleston physicians would inspect the incoming ships to protect the area from contagious diseases. If there was any suspicion of a ship carrying infection all passengers were placed in isolation. Africans and in selected instances even white passengers coming from Europe and other American colonies were held on board the ships, or in pest houses. Pest houses were buildings used to quarantine 200-300 Africans and sometimes other individuals for fear that they were affected with communicable diseases. For these men and women confinement could last anywhere between 10 and 40 days.<sup>26</sup> Africans were held the shortest amount of time in order to be auctioned in Charleston to work on plantations throughout the Sea Islands.<sup>27</sup>

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1992), 6. Dennis Szucs, *Ellis Island: Tracing Your Family History through America's Gateway* (Provo, UT: Ancestry Publishing, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> 40% is roughly the same percentage of white Americans whose ancestors were processed through Ellis Island. Bob Janiske, "Sullivan's Island was the African American Ellis Island," National Parks Traveler, last modified March 9, 2009, [www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2009/03/sullivan-s-island-was-african-american-ellis-island](http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2009/03/sullivan-s-island-was-african-american-ellis-island).

<sup>23</sup> "Sullivan's Island."

<sup>24</sup> Carlin Timmons, "African Passages," National Park Service, March 2, 2009, accessed October 17, 2011, [http://www.nps.gov/fosu/planyourvisit/upload/African\\_Passages.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/fosu/planyourvisit/upload/African_Passages.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> "African Passages."

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Nichols, "Sullivan's Island Pest Houses: Beginning an Archaeological Investigation" (presentation, Digging the Afro American Past: Archaeology and the Black Experience, Oxford, Mississippi, May 17-20, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> "African Passages." The Fort Sumter National Monument houses a Commemorative Marker on Cannon Row on Sullivan's Island marking the port of entry for Africans in "bondage and degradation." There is also the African Passages Exhibit at Fort Moultrie Visitor Center outlining Sullivan's Island and the Atlantic Slave Trade. It also houses the bench dedicated on behalf of Toni Morrison and the Toni Morrison Society. In honor of these Africans who arrived on Sullivan's Island, Toni Morrison dedicated a "bench by the road"

While working on these plantations slaves sung songs referred to as work songs. These work songs served different purposes. For example, some work songs were sung to accompany labor of various forms. Work songs were a part of African culture before Africans came to America; therefore, these songs were the first type of music sung by slaves in America.<sup>28</sup> Work song lyrics reflect the type of labor being performed such as building railroads, chopping wood, hauling bales and pulling barges.<sup>29</sup> The most common work songs were those sung by boatmen. These roles of the boatmen consisted of deck hands, rowers and steamboat men. The songs sung by boatmen were call and response.<sup>30</sup> For example, the song “Sundown Below” was a way for boatmen to communicate with their captain. When the sun went down and became too dark to row, the men sang “Sun is down an’t mus’ go.”<sup>31</sup> This let the captain know that it was time to stop working for the night.

Work songs also provided encouragement. The music served to alleviate monotony and encouraged slaves while working, helping to lighten their daily burdens as well as giving them an outlet to express their feelings and an opportunity to receive solace. All work songs, however, were not necessarily connected to work. Many songs expressed everyday issues and frustrations of how slaves were being treated from the beatings and their overall stations in life, enslavement. Out of these work songs grew spirituals.

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in their memory to commemorate slaves and their history. The bench dedication ceremony took place on July 26, 2008. Anne McQuary, “Bench of Memory at Slavery’s Gateway,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2008, accessed October 15, 2011,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/28/arts/design/28benc.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>28</sup> Tilford Brooks, *America’s Black Music Heritage* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1984), 43.

<sup>29</sup> Hildred Roach, *Black American Music, Past and Present* (Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1994), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Call and response is an African musical tradition in which somebody will call out and someone else will answer.

<sup>31</sup> Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 221.



These spirituals were coded songs. The coded songs held hidden messages of escaping slavery through the Underground Railroad. There are two types of coded songs, signals and maps.<sup>32</sup> In the signal songs singers would communicate that a planned escape was coming. In map songs slaves were directed to specific points of escape throughout the Underground Railroad. The song “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” a map song told slaves to follow the drinking gourd which is the Big Dipper, to the brightest star that being the North Star and they would then find someone to take them to freedom. “Steal Away” was signal song sung by Nat Turner.<sup>33</sup> In this song he alerted slaves about meetings. The spiritual “Wade in the Water” was a warning signal to slaves informing them to travel alongside the riverbank to throw the dogs chasing them off of their scent.<sup>34</sup> Harrier Tubman favored the song “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”. As an escaped slave herself she risked her life conducting hundreds of slaves to freedom. This song refers to carriages and wagons used to transport fleeing slaves the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> “The Gospel Train’s A’Comin” alerted slaves that a group was preparing to escape and travel north to freedom. “Gospel Train” was code for the Underground Railroad.<sup>36</sup> Slave masters were not privy to the meeting or the Underground Railroad because when they heard these coded songs they would assume that their slaves were singing for spiritual reasons because of the Biblical references.

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur C. Jones, “Spirituals as coded communication,” *University of Denver*, accessed October 21, 2011, <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/freedom/coded.cfm>.

<sup>33</sup> Nat Turner was a slave from Virginia who in 1831 led the most famous and successful slave revolt. Arthur Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of Spirituals* (Boulder: Leave A Little Room, 2005), 48.

<sup>34</sup> Owen Sound, “Songs of Freedom,” *Owen Sound’s Black History*, accessed October 21, 2011, <http://www.osblackhistory.com/songs.php>.

<sup>35</sup> Sound, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*.

<sup>36</sup> Sound, *The Gospel Train’s A’Comin*.

Work songs and spirituals developed on the Gullah Sea Islands furthered other styles of music, like the blues. After the Civil War and Emancipation freed men and women found themselves struggling to find work and make a living to take care of their families. The blues are narrative songs about everyday difficulties African Americans were facing. After slavery was abolished, music sung in African American churches shifted from spirituals that were once sung out in the fields to a different kind of religious music known as gospel. The messages in gospel music are hopeful, unlike the blues.<sup>37</sup> Out of the blues came jazz. Although the birthplace of jazz is New Orleans, it has strong roots in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Established in 1891 by Reverend Daniel Jenkins, the Jenkins Orphanage Band in Charleston taught African American children to read and play music.<sup>38</sup> The children would first learn to sing the part and then given instruments to play the part. By 1895, the band was organized touring the United States. South Carolina's own jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie known as the King of Bebop developed two styles of music, bebop and Afro-Cuban jazz.<sup>39</sup>

Jazz then gave way to country. Country music grew out of blues and folk music.<sup>40</sup> Instruments that often accompany country music include the fiddle, harmonica and banjo. The banjo was developed by enslaved Africans based on the banjar; an African instrument with strings stretched across a drum.<sup>41</sup> Country then gave way to musical

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<sup>37</sup> The Gullah Kinfolk of Beaufort, South, Carolina are a well-known gospel choir. Wilbur Cross, *Gullah Culture in America* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 189.

<sup>38</sup> "The Jenkins Orphanage Bands," Kenyon.edu, last modified July 21, 2004, <http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/1998/music/jenkins/jenkins-orphanage.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Tony Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to go: Music from the Streets of New York-77* (New York: W.W Norton and Company Inc., 2009), 85.

<sup>40</sup> See page 41 for a music evolution chart. Portia Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *The African Presence in Black America* ed. Jacob U. Gordon (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 156.

forms such as Rock n Roll and Rhythm and Blues or simply R&B; this genre contributed to Soul music. Soul music was one musical style that has been labeled as Pop music.<sup>42</sup> Popular styles of music such as R&B and blues provided the foundation for Reggae, a Jamaican style of music with its syncopated rhythms, upstroke guitar strums and chanting lyrics. Surviving the Middle Passage, call and response and improvisation provided the basic elements of Hip/Hop and Rap music. This style of music can be traced back to West Africa. In West Africa storytellers called griots told stories of the tribe, history and folklore to the beat of drums. Rappers tell stories of their lives to a beat.<sup>43</sup> The evolution of African music in America started with the work songs in the Gullah Sea Islands and gained widespread recognition with audiences domestically and internationally.

In addition to music, quilting is another important art form. In African American culture during and after slavery and on the Sea Islands today quilting was and still is an important aspect of life. There are three types of quilting traditions. The first style is associated with the Underground Railroad coded quilts. The second types are those created by Harriet Powers who emphasize narrative (oral) traditions. The third are the strip quilts which are specifically linked to women on the Sea Islands. The coded quilts of the Underground Railroad held secret messages that were patterned to help slaves escape. It was illegal for slaves to read and write. It was also illegal to teach slaves to read and write; therefore, codes were key aides helping slaves *route* their way to freedom.<sup>44</sup> Quilts were hung over fences and in some places in windowsills to “air out.” Unbeknownst to

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<sup>42</sup> The best example of popular music is James Brown. Known as the Godfather of Soul, Brown has roots in South Carolina.

<sup>43</sup> Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God's Hop Music, Message and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 137.

<sup>44</sup> Owen Sound, “Underground Railroad Quilts,” *Owen Sound's Black History*, accessed October 24, 2011, <http://www.osblackhistory.com/quilts.php>.

plantation owners and overseers, the quilts passed important information to slaves. The codes embedded on these quilts were created by both black and white abolitionists. They helped slaves to communicate without worrying about their master's being able to interpret the meanings because in slavery secrecy provided slaves with protection.<sup>45</sup> The codes ranged from dance, spirituals and symbols, all of which were patterned specifically to deliver messages to slaves preparing to escape. Each pattern represented different meanings.

Flying Geese signaled slaves to follow the direction of the flying geese as they migrate north in the spring.<sup>46</sup> This symbol also guided slaves to water, food and resting places. The North Star beckoned two messages. The first relayed the message of preparing to escape and the second message was to follow the the North Star to freedom in Canada.<sup>47</sup> The song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* was in reference to the Big Dipper; two of its points lead to the North Star.<sup>48</sup> The Monkey Wrench signaled to fleeing slaves to gather all the tools necessary for their journey.<sup>49</sup> Physical tools included compasses, knives, food and coins; mental tools were alertness, knowledge, and discerning the motives of strangers.<sup>50</sup> Sailboats are indicative of nearby bodies of water or the availability of boats.<sup>51</sup> Drunkard's Path was a warning signal. When slaves saw this they knew to travel a zigzag route to elude pursuing slave hunters and hounds in a certain

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<sup>45</sup> "Railroad Quilt Code."

<sup>46</sup> Owen Sound, "Quilt Codes," *Owen Sound's Black History* accessed October 24, 2011, <http://www.osblackhistory.com/quiltcodes.php>. Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 179.

<sup>47</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 179.

<sup>48</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 179.

<sup>49</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 177.

<sup>50</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 177.

<sup>51</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 180.

area.<sup>52</sup> A slave spotted travelling south would not be suspected of escaping. The Dresden Wheel (Plate) pattern was thought to indicate the cities of Dresden, Ohio and Dresden, Ontario.<sup>53</sup> Wagon Wheel or Carpenter's Wheel signaled to slaves to pack the items necessary to travel by wagon. When travelling by wagon slaves could conceal themselves in hidden compartments.<sup>54</sup>

There are several variations to the wagon wheel. For example, the symbol Crossroads referred to Cleveland, Ohio. This was the main crossroads with several routes to freedom.<sup>55</sup> Bear Paw's signaled slaves to follow a mountain trail out of view and then follow an actual bear's trail which would lead slaves to water and food.<sup>56</sup> The Bow Tie (Hourglass) indicated that travelling in disguise was essential or at a certain point they had to change out of their slave clothing into those of a person whose status was higher than their own.<sup>57</sup> The Britches pattern symbolized that a slave needed to dress as a free person.<sup>58</sup> The Shoofly symbol identified a person who could guide and help slaves escape. This person was a conductor of the Underground Railroad and knew the codes well.<sup>59</sup>

Slaves who saw the pattern of tumbling blocks or boxes knew it symbolized that a conductor was in the area and that it was time to pack up and go.<sup>60</sup> Upon seeing a Rose Wreath, slaves knew that someone had died on the journey. It is an African tradition to

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<sup>52</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 179.

<sup>53</sup> Pictured in the colored photo section of chapter 2 "The Underground Railroad." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 181.

<sup>54</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 177.

<sup>55</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 178.

<sup>56</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 178.

<sup>57</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 177.

<sup>58</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 180.

<sup>59</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 177.

<sup>60</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 181.

place floral wreaths on the graves of the deceased.<sup>61</sup> Trust was an important factor along the Underground Railroad. Seeing the Log Cabin pattern communicated to slaves that this particular person hanging the quilt with this pattern was safe to speak to or in some cases a safe house was near.<sup>62</sup> Appearing after the Civil War, the Double Wedding Ring was believed to symbolize the chains of slavery and that these chains could be removed.<sup>63</sup> Slaves, who married, did not partake in exchanging rings.<sup>64</sup> Instead, they jumped the broom.

The abolishment of slavery in North America brought on a different style of quilting traditions. Born in 1837 in Georgia, Harriet Powers gained recognition for the two quilts she created. Her quilts are referred to as Bible quilts because of the Biblical stories appliquéd onto the quilts. The appliqué technique Powers used can be linked back to West Africa with the Fon of Benin and the Ewe, Fanti and Ashanti of Ghana.<sup>65</sup> The first Bible quilt was exhibited in 1886 at the Cotton Fair in Athens, Georgia and is now housed at The National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.<sup>66</sup> It contains 11 Bible scenes arranged in three rows. The scenes on this quilt represent some of Powers favorite Bible stories from both the Old and New Testament such as Adam and Eve in the garden naming the animals; Satan amidst the seven stars; Cain killing Abel and Cain venturing into the land of Nod. This particular

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<sup>61</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 178.

<sup>62</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 178.

<sup>63</sup> "Quilt Codes." Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 179.

<sup>64</sup> It is argued that jumping the broom is not an African tradition, however, the broom in certain parts of Africa represent s the establishment of new households. Kristina Seleshanko, *Carry Me Over the Threshold: A Christian Guide to Wedding Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 84.

<sup>65</sup> John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 48.

<sup>66</sup> William R. Ferris, *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts* (Boston: G.K Hall & Co., 1983), 67.

quilt also references Jacob's dream, the Baptism and Crucifixion of Christ and the betrayal of Judas and The Last Supper as well as the Holy Family.

The second Bible quilt Powers made in 1898 now hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>67</sup> This quilt has fifteen panels arranged horizontally in three rows of five.<sup>68</sup> Again Powers used stories from the Old and New Testament. Ten of the patches are Bible stories and the other five are of local history. The Bible stories are Job praying for his enemies; the Serpent lifted up by Moses; Adam and Eve in the Garden; John Baptizing Christ; Jonah casted overboard; God creating two of every kind, male and female; two of every kind of animals; the angels of wrath and the seven vials; the creation of animals continued; the crucifixion of Christ between two thieves.<sup>69</sup> The local histories are of memorable environmental phenomena including the dark day of May 19, 1780; the falling of the stars on November 13, 1833; cold Thursday on February 10, 1895; the Red Light Night of 1846 and rich people were taught nothing of God.<sup>70</sup>

Harriet Powers' quilts gave way to the current quilting tradition known as strip quilts on the Sea Islands today. What distinguishes quilts made on the Sea Islands from others are the strip and patchy formations. Strips of cloth are sewn together either by hand or with a machine into long strips.<sup>71</sup> These quilts strongly resemble those of Ghana and Benin. In West Africa men would weave cloth into long narrow strips, sewing the edges together. On the Sea Islands women use available scraps of cloth they can acquire

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<sup>67</sup> Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt, *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1980), 22.

<sup>68</sup> Vlach, *Decorative Arts*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> Vlach, *Decorative Arts*, 46.

<sup>70</sup> Vlach, *Decorative Arts*, 47.

<sup>71</sup> Mary A. Twining, "Baskets and Quilts: Women in Sea Island Arts and Crafts," in *Sea Island Roots*, eds. Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1991), 135.

to make quilts. The cloth is cut into long rectangular pieces sewn into a long strip and the back is cut from the lightweight material. Batting is placed between the layers as the quilt is stretched on wooden frames.<sup>72</sup> A border is often added to pull the design together.

The colors on the quilts also functions as symbols. The colors red, blue and white are important to the Gullah culture. Red symbolizes danger, fire, conflict and passion.<sup>73</sup> Blue is considered a good color. It is used on doors to repel negative vibes to keep the bad spirits away.<sup>74</sup> White is also seen as a good color, symbolizing purity and innocence and is used on solemn occasions like funerals and festive times such as weddings.<sup>75</sup> The designs, however, are improvised.

During slavery quilting provided an outlet for slaves. This activity helped to establish a kind of emotional stability and independence.<sup>76</sup> For Gullah women on the Sea Islands quilting allows them to establish kinship networks. Kinship networks empower African American women with self-help and self-esteem.<sup>77</sup> Whereas in slavery quilts were used to help slaves route their way to freedom, on the Sea Islands quilts communicate affection. They also relay a family's history such as marriages and births.<sup>78</sup> Family members are able to look at the patches and identify whose clothing, drapes or household cloths they belonged to before they became a part of the quilt.<sup>79</sup> In Africa the

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<sup>72</sup> Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 137-8.

<sup>73</sup> Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 137

<sup>74</sup> Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 138.

<sup>75</sup> Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 138.

<sup>76</sup> Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 180.

<sup>77</sup> Floris Bennett Cash, "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition," *The Journal of Negro History* 80 no. 1 (1995): 31.

<sup>78</sup> Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 180.

<sup>79</sup> Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 136.



textile industry was a man's job but when Africans were brought to the New World the task was generally passed onto the women.

Unlike quilting, sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia filipes*<sup>80</sup>) basket making is an activity that men and women both continue to participate in on the Sea Islands much like in West African societies. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century Sweetgrass basket making was brought to the Gullah Islands of South Carolina by enslaved West Africans. They found the palmetto leaves and grasses to be similar to those used in their native land.<sup>81</sup> During slavery African Americans assembled sweetgrass baskets that were used as sewing baskets, flower baskets and baskets for children's toys in the "big house." Some of these items can be seen in the Old Slave Mart Museum in Charleston.<sup>82</sup> Today many baskets are made for tourists. Mary Jane Manigault weaves and sells her baskets to tourists along Highway 17 in Mount Pleasant in South Carolina.<sup>83</sup>

These baskets come in various shapes and sizes. There are round, oval and oblong baskets; sewing, market, storage and clothing baskets, fruit baskets with handles; cookie baskets with lids; hat boxes, flower baskets, missionary bags, and ring trays.<sup>84</sup> Basketry, much like quilting, also has strong kinship ties. In Charleston it is a family affair as

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<sup>80</sup>This is a long stemmed plant that grows besides the marshes of coastal Carolina. Adding a variety of color includes, the dark brown needles of the long pine leaf (*Pinus palustris*) alternate with this golden yellow grass; binding the coils together in a rhythmic spiral are strips of leaves of palm (*Sabal palmetto*). When called for, a stronger fiber (*Juncus roemerianus*) of black rush or rushel grass is used; in earlier times strips of white oak bark (*Quercus alba*) was used for binding large, heavy duty work baskets. In order to punch a hole for the binder the tool used is called a "bone" because it once was an animal bone but is now the handle of a filed down spoon. Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 181.

<sup>81</sup>Joyce Coakley, *Sweetgrass Baskets and the Gullah Tradition* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 9.

<sup>82</sup>Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 131.

<sup>83</sup>Twining, *Sea Island Roots*, 130. This area became a thriving business market for African American women because a Charleston merchant rejuvenated this craft as a commercial enterprise circa 1916. Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 181.

<sup>84</sup>Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 181, see pictures of these baskets in detail. Dale Rosengarten, *Row Upon Row: Seagrass Baskets of the South Carolina Low Country* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1986). Also look at Coakley *Sweetgrass Baskets* for pictures of elaborate baskets and decorative pieces.

Joseph Foreman pulls sweetgrass for his cake basket and his wife Evelyina who comes from a long line of basket makers, the Manigaults, makes sewing baskets. Their two daughters mix traditional techniques with some new ones to make hat boxes and sewing baskets.<sup>85</sup> The idea of mixing traditional ideas with new ideas can also be seen in Gullah cuisine.

For a deeper understanding of Gullah history and culture, African crops and slave cuisine are studied. Transplanted crops from Africa that were brought on board the slave ships for the slaves to eat while enduring the Middle Passage included rice, okra, Tania (a popular root plant in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina), black-eyed peas, yams, kidney and lima beans.<sup>86</sup> Other crops brought from Africa included peanuts, millet, sorghum, guinea melon, watermelon and sesame.<sup>87</sup> These African crops provided the basic ingredients needed for the meals slaves prepared for their masters. *Fufu* is a common dish in Africa that was recreated by enslaved Africans in the New World. In South Carolina it is called “turn meal and flour.” It consists of cornmeal and flour mixed together in a pot of boiling water.<sup>88</sup> In the fields slaves made “hoecakes,” which evolved into “pancakes” and “hotwater cornbread”.<sup>89</sup> The traditional meal for slaves was called *Juba*. On Saturday or Sunday the leftovers from the Big House were thrown together in a

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<sup>85</sup> Rosengarten, *Row Upon Row*, 17. As a boy Mr. Foreman learned how to make baskets. The older folks teach the young folks as a way to preserve family traditions.

<sup>86</sup> Wilbur Cross, *Gullah Culture in America* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2008), 180, Joseph Holloway, “What Africa Has Given America: African Continuities in the North American Diaspora,” in *Africanisms in American Culture* ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>87</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms*, 45, Cross, *Gullah Culture*, 180.

<sup>88</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms*, 48.

<sup>89</sup> Holloway, *Africanism*, 48.

huge pot and slaves from the house and fields shared this concoction of meat, vegetables and bread.<sup>90</sup>

Continuing in the tradition of using African crops to create meals, Gullah food has become very popular in its own right. Hop 'n Johns is a popular Gullah dish. This is a traditional West African dish that consists of black-eyed peas and rice cooked together.<sup>91</sup> Another Gullah favorite is chitlins or “chits,” which is made up of the small intestines of hogs. This dish has roots in slavery; slaves were given the discarded animal parts like, hog maw, pig’s feet and intestines.<sup>92</sup> “Gullah food,” historian Veronica Davis Gerald who is of Gullah descent states “is one of the oldest African American traditions being practiced today.”<sup>93</sup>

The Gullah language, however, is considered one of the strongest examples of a continued African cultural tradition. The Gullah language developed as a need for communication amongst Africans from different tribes and their European masters. Gullah is a creole language made up of English and numerous African languages such as Krio. Krio is the *lingua franca* of Sierra Leone in West Africa. This connection makes the Krio and Gullah languages first cousins, showing that the languages “are related

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph E. Holloway, “Slave Crops and African Cuisine,” *Slavery in America*, accessed October 27, 2011, [http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs\\_es\\_cuisine.htm](http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_cuisine.htm).

<sup>91</sup> Holloway, “Slave Cuisine.”

<sup>92</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms*, 48.

<sup>93</sup> Jesse Edward Gantt Jr. and Veronica Davis Gerald, *The Ultimate Gullah Cookbook: A Taste of Food, History and Culture from the Gullah People* (Atlanta: Sands Publishing, 2002) qtd. in Wilbur Cross, *Gullah Culture in America* (Westport: Praeger Publishing, 2008), 175. Gullah food has become so popular that recipes have been published in dozens of cookbooks and used throughout Eastern and Midwest states.

through a common heritage rather than as direct descendants”<sup>94</sup> states U.S. anatomist William S. Pollitzer.

The Gullah language was dismissed as a valid language. It was referred to as “baby talk” and backwards. Businessman Ambrose Gonzales who grew up speaking the Gullah language with slaves and freedmen who worked on his family’s rice plantations described the language as being “slovenly and careless”.<sup>95</sup> Samuel Stoney and Gertrude Shelby agreed with this assessment. They thought that maybe only six or seven African words were used.<sup>96</sup> It would take some time for the Gullah language and its African roots to be given the proper recognition establishing Gullah as a legitimate language.

In 1932 Lorenzo Dow Turner spent fifteen years living on the Sea Islands listening to, recording and writing the phonetic alphabet leading to him analyze the languages spoken by the West African people whose ancestors were brought to the Sea Islands. Out of this extensive research came Turner’s pioneering book, *Africanisms in the Gullah Language* (1949). Using the Gullah phonetic alphabet, Turner characterized the Gullah language as syntactical features, morphological features, word formations, sounds and intonations. This groundbreaking work changed minds about Africa’s influence on the speech of the Gullah people and the linguistic heritage of African Americans in general.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps, the best example of the Gullah language is exemplified in Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

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<sup>94</sup> Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 129.

<sup>95</sup> Ambrose Gonzales, *The Black Border* (Columbia: The State Company, 2010), 10.

<sup>96</sup> Samuel Stoney and Gertrude Shelby, *Black Genesis: A Chronicle* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930), xv qtd. in William Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 108.

<sup>97</sup> Pollitzer, *Gullah People*, 109.

## Chapter Two

“We carry these memories inside of we”: Myths and Legends in Julie Dash’s film

### *Daughters of the Dust*

“If you surrendered to the air, then you could ride it.”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter three themes are discussed: Flying Africans, Yoruba deities and Secret Societies. The first section “Flying Africans” explores the legacy of Ibo Landing. Through Gates’ concept of signifying, the historiography of Ibo Landing is provided to show how the story of the legend is told in African and African American film and literature. During her research for the film, Dash found Ibo Landing in reference to different Sea Islands, explaining that “...almost every Sea Islands has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say ‘This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened.’”<sup>2</sup> I demonstrate how the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) through its use of dialogue and themes, talks to the works of other African American female artists specifically Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

The second section, “Yoruba Deities,” references the spiritual representation of Dash’s characters. According to traditional Yoruba beliefs, the world is connected by two realms. The first realm is the “visible world of the living” called *Aye*. The “spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Penguin Group, 1977), 337.

<sup>2</sup> Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film* (New York: New World Press, 1992).

world of the orisas,” which is made up of the ancestors and spirits is known as *Orun*.<sup>1</sup> For the Yoruba, the Creator rules over the entire universe with many gods/goddesses serving underneath him are known as *Orisha* or Yoruba Deities. The orisha/character pairings are Yellow Mary/Yemaya, Trula/Oshun, Eula/Oya, The Unborn Child/ Eshu-Elegba, Nana Peasant/ Obatala and Eli/Ogun. The clue to the Yoruba archetypes is provided by Dash in handwritten notes in the film script.<sup>2</sup> After learning these important details, the representations become clearer.

The third section “Secret Societies,” moves from discussing spirituality of the Sea Islands to examining cultural aspects within this specific location. *Daughters of the Dust* cinematographer Arthur Jafa capture male characters flashing hand signals and engaging in movements both of which derive from secret societies from West Africa. In West Africa men and women separately participate in societies. The purpose of these societies is to draw members of different kinship groups into cross cutting associations.<sup>3</sup> The secret society for men is Poro and Sande is for women. The Poro and Sande are the most famous, which are found among the Mende, Kpelle, and Sherbo peoples of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

In naming her film *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash paraphrased a passage from the Biblical book of Ezekiel, “O ye son of the dust.”<sup>4</sup> *Daughters of the Dust* takes place on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1902, 400 years after the arrival of the first Africans in the New World and 37 years after the Civil War. Set on the fictitious island of Dawtuh Island off the

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Mullen, “Yoruba Art and Culture” (Phoebe A. Herst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, California, 2004), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Dash, *Making*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz, *Anthropology: What Does it Mean to be Human?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 320.

<sup>4</sup> Zeinabu irene Davis, “An Interview with Julie Dash,” *Wide Angle* 13.3&4 (1991), 111.

coast of South Carolina, the story begins on the eve of the emigration of some members from Ibo Landing to the mainland. The film follows various members of the Peazant family as they prepare for a festive dinner, or a last supper, to commemorate the departure of those leaving Dawtuh Island. Dawtuh Island has been home for the Peazants for several generations. Nana Peazant is the eighty- eight year old matriarch of the family, she preserves the African cultural traditions and religious expressions taught to her by her West African ancestors. The Peazants are the descendants of the West African slaves who lived on Ibo Landing.

Arriving to the island are cousins Viola and Yellow Mary Peazant who had already migrated to the mainland. Viola Peazant, a devout Baptist, brought along Mr. Snead, a photographer from Philadelphia, to document this momentous occasion.<sup>5</sup> The New World is represented by Viola and Mr. Snead through their mannerisms, demeanor and attire. Yellow Mary, a “ruin” woman, is returning from Cuba with her companion Trula. Her presence forces the family to confront the abuses against black womanhood. Although Yellow Mary ridicules her family’s’ lack of sophistication, she strongly desires a deeper connection with her family, the land, and cultural traditions that have been embedded in grandmother Nana’s everyday life.

Haagar, a daughter in law of Nana, regards Gullah culture and beliefs, represented by Nana as archaic and embraces the family’s move away from the island to the north. Migrating to the mainland for Haagar means access to a better way of life and vast opportunities for herself and her daughters, Myown and Iona. Iona is involved with St.

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<sup>5</sup> Mr. Snead represents the “Talented Tenth,” a term coined by W.E.B DuBois in the early 1900s. The term describes the top ten percent of African American men becoming leaders of the race through education, becoming scholars and their involvement in social change. W.E.B DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem* ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: James Pott & Co., 1903), 33.

Julien Last Child, the last of the Cherokee nation living on the island. She struggles with the tough decision of either leaving the island with her mother, father and sister or remaining on the island with St. Julien and Nana.

Eli and Eula are more reluctant than other family members to leave the island, although they feel it is necessary to move away from the place Eula was raped. Although white people are visually absent on screen, their presence off screen is not ignored. The island for Eli, Nana's grandson, represents malevolence. Unlike Haagar, who wants to move as far away as possible, Eula accepts Gullah culture and beliefs. Of all the family members migrating north, she is most likely to continue the traditions passed down from Nana Peazant. While Viola and Haagar struggle with their Gullah connections, the Unborn Child of Eli and Eula, as well as Nana Peazant, hold onto and embrace connections to the past. Serving as one of the film's narrators, the Unborn Child's spirit appears in the form of a little girl. Akin to Nana Peazant, the Unborn Child, functions as a bridge between the past, present and future as well as the living and the dead.

Nana Peazant, the family's griot, celebrates the ancestors by visiting their graves and practicing the old ways. She places colored bottled on trees outside of the family's compound to protect its members from evil spirits and bathes in the salt water. The land, its memories and traditions are important to Nana because they offer a connection for the islanders to a distant African homeland. Although Nana does not want the family to leave, she recognizes that migrating from the island does not have to result in the abandonment of cultural traditions.

In interviews, Dash emphasizes her desire to tell the story of the Peazant family in a culturally specific way. Like the African American female artists before her, she



underlines the structure of African storytelling techniques and the sounds of black speech. The narrative structure of *Daughters of the Dust* reflects the patterns of an African griot expanding outward and inward at different moments. The focus of storytelling emerges at the very beginning of the film through the voice-over of an unknown woman. Some scholars say it is the voice of Nana Peasant, others argue it is Yellow Mary's voice. The voice-over expresses the numerous blended stories and experiences that eventually unfold on the screen. She announces to the viewing audience, "I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. 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. I am the silence that you cannot understand. I am the utterance of my name."<sup>6</sup> The emergence of this voice places oral tradition at the center of the film, making black women the bearers of the story. Film scholar Geetha Ramanathan explains the griot's relationship to and within the narrative. Ramanathan argues, "as a griot she does not use the third person, but the first, enmeshing herself in the history, and naming herself as a griot."<sup>7</sup>

One of the first scenes shows a boat bringing Viola, Mr. Snead, Yellow Mary and Trula to the island. Mr. Snead brought along a kaleidoscope. As Trula looks through the kaleidoscope, Mr. Snead explains its function, "*kalos*: mutable, *eidōs*: form, *skopien*: to view. If an object is placed between two mirrors, inclined at right angles, an image is formed in each mirror... Then these mirror images are in turn reflected in the other mirrors, forming the appearance of four symmetrically shaped objects."<sup>8</sup> For Dash the

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<sup>6</sup> *Daughters of the Dust*. DVD. Directed by Julie Dash. 1991; New York, NY: Kino International, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006) 82.

<sup>8</sup> *Daughters of the Dust*. DVD. Directed by Julie Dash. 1991; New York, NY: Kino International, 2000.

kaleidoscope is a metaphor. In an interview she explained that she “wanted to rephrase the African American experience in such a way that... the visuals would be so haunting it would break through with a freshness about what we already know.”<sup>9</sup> Joel Brouwer states that by twisting “what we already know” Dash has “created a new way of seeing and reading the African American experience.”<sup>10</sup>

Influenced by not only the literary works of African American female artists, Dash also draws upon the works of musical artists. In 1975, she directed and produced a short film, *Four Women* (1975), based on Nina Simone’s 1966 song.<sup>11</sup> Soon after *Four Women*, in 1977 she produced Alice Walker’s *Diary of an African Nun* (1970). It originally ran in *The Black Woman: Anthology* (1970). The film follows an African nun who is consumed with fear, doubt and agony over her decision to take her vows. As she lies in bed, agonizing over her forthcoming decision she hears the drums of her village beckoning her. The themes and concerns in *Four Women*, *Diary of an African Nun* and later *Daughters of the Dust* reflect the thematic concerns of black filmmakers in the 1970s such as Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, Charles Burnett and Ben Caldwell.

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, black filmmakers at UCLA’s graduate school of film challenged and changed Hollywood’s depiction of black people

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Thomas, “Filmmakers Unique View of the Black Experience.” *Los Angeles Times* 20 March 1992. Date accessed January 12, 2012. [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-20/entertainment/ca-4304\\_1\\_julie-dash](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-03-20/entertainment/ca-4304_1_julie-dash).

<sup>10</sup> Joel Brouwer, “Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*,” *African American Review* 29 no. 1 (1995): 5.

<sup>11</sup> Set to Nina Simone’s stirring ballad of the same name, Julie Dash’s dance film features Linda Martina Young as strong “Aunt Sarah,” tragic mulatto “Saffronia,” sensuous “Sweet Thing” and militant “Peaches.” Kinetic camerawork and editing, richly colored lighting, and meticulous costume, makeup and hair design work together with Young’s sensitive performance to turn longstanding Black female stereotypes to oblique, critical angles (taken from <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/events/2011-10-07/daughters-dust-1991-four-women-1975>).

and culture. Their efforts became known as the LA Rebellion.<sup>12</sup> Their perspective on film was influenced and inspired by the political and cultural movements in the United States, Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>13</sup> The rebellion consisted of filmmakers from two periods. The first group was Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark and Ben Caldwell. The second group consisted of Bill Woodberry, Julie Dash and Allie Sharon Larkin. Foluke Ogunleye argues that the members of the L.A. off campus groups “exhibit[ed] a unity of purpose and vision.”<sup>14</sup> Toni Cade Bambara argues *Daughters of the Dust* is grounded in the discourse of black committed black cinema, which is reflected in the film’s themes of folklore and religious and spiritual continuum as well as Dash’s use of actors who have worked in independent cinema.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1970s African American female artists used themes of family, history, women and folklore in their works much like the independent black filmmakers. Even though there were differences in form, structure and development, Gloria J. Hudson argues literature and film created by black female artists “function as communicative art forms voicing similar issues and concerns germane to black women’s experiences in

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<sup>12</sup> Foluke Ogunleye writes, “The term L.A. Rebellion was coined by Clyde Taylor to describe a school of African and African American cineastes-in-training at UCLA’s graduate film production program between 1967 and 1978. The school, according to Jacqueline Stewart, was ‘organized to produce politically and ‘aesthetically’ rebellious films’ which were principally aimed at challenging negative Hollywood presentations of Black character and culture” (159). Foluke Ogunleye, “Transcending the ‘Dust’: African American Filmmakers Preserving the ‘Glimpse of the Eternal,’” *College Literature* no. 34.1 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Bambara, “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement,” 119.

<sup>14</sup> Ogunleye mentions the filmmakers not only formed study groups and view socially conscious cinema, they also worked as crew members on each other’s films. Ogunleye, “Transcending the ‘Dust’: African American Filmmakers Preserving the ‘Glimpse of the Eternal,’” 159. Dash explained that when selecting actors for the film, she purposely choose actors and actresses who worked on other independent films. Cora Lee Day (Nana Peazant) appeared in Haile Gerima’s *Bush Women*. Kayee Moore (Haagar Peazant) appeared in Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* and Billy Woodbury’s *Bless Their Little Hearts*. Barbara O (Yellow Mary) appeared in Dash’s *Diary of an African Nun*. Davis, “An Interview with Julie Dash,” 113.

<sup>15</sup> Bambara, “Reading the Signs,” 121.

America.”<sup>16</sup> In her films Dash uses both African American literature and film as sources of influence and inspiration. She “signifies” upon African American women’s literature by “rewriting the received textual tradition” within the space of the film.<sup>17</sup>

Occupying the role of the signifier, Dash draws upon the work of African American female artists to creatively retell African and African American history. By choosing film as a medium, she has also created a new way of learning these histories through the use of dialogue. In *Daughters of the Dust* Dash uses the text of African American female artists as source material for visualizing the black experience by incorporating a passage from Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. The specific passage Dash borrows from recapitulates the story of Flying Africans and Ibo Landing. Marshall came across the story of Ibo Landing in a collection of narratives in the 1940s Georgia Writers Project entitled *Drums and Shadows*. Although Dash incorporated Marshall’s description of Ibo Landing into her film *Daughters of the Dust*, she argues that portions of the screenplay were already written prior to reading *Praisesong for the Widow*. She asserts, “I had written something already for my character to say while she was standing at the banks of Ibo Landing and then I came upon Paule Marshall. I read it and said: ‘This is Ibo Landing; this is glorious the way she’s written it.’ So we got in touch with her.”<sup>18</sup> The legend of Ibo Landing encompasses the myth of the Flying Africans, both of which emphasize enslaved Africans’ possession of spirit, body and eventual return to Africa.

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<sup>16</sup> Gloria Gibson- Hudson, “African American Literary Criticism as a Model for the Analysis of Films by African American Women,” *Wide Angle* no. 13.3&4 (1991): 50.

<sup>17</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., “Not Without My Daughters” *Transitions* 57 (1992): 164.

There are many versions of the legend that appear in African American literature such as in Ralph Ellison's short story "Flying Home" (1967), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1975), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), and Virginia Hamilton's *The People Who Could Fly* (1985). Flying Africans at Ibo Landing has been told through the African Diaspora from the coastal areas of the United States, the Caribbean and part of the Latin America.<sup>19</sup> This legend has also appeared in the contemporary works of black female artists such as Toni Cade Bambara, Marsye Condé and Jamaica Kincaid. The works by these artists integrate the complete tale of the Flying Africans in culturally telling ways.<sup>20</sup> The legend makes its way back to Africa in the female British Nigerian filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah's film *Welcome II the Terrodome* (1995).<sup>21</sup>

Early in the film *Daughters of the Dust* establishes Ibo Landing as an important geographical landmark by the text that appears on the screen: *Ibo Landing: The Sea Islands, 1902*. Eula Peasant narrates the story of Ibo Landing, identifying herself as a griot in the film. According to Dash there are two myths and one reality in regards to the myth of the flying Africans.<sup>22</sup> The first myth describes Africans walking on water back to Africa. The second myth recounts Africans flying back to Africa. The third myth or truth is Africans, still locked in chains, walking into the water and drowning themselves. In the film, two of the three myths are represented. Walking alone on Ibo Landing with the spirit of her Unborn Child running towards her and then disappearing into her body, Eula

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<sup>19</sup> Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* no. 16.1 (1989-1990): 22.

<sup>20</sup> Lorna McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," *New West Indian Guide* no. ½ (1990): 33.

<sup>21</sup> The film opens with the drowning of Africans at Ibo Landing and then shows the captives waking up circa the year 2000 in an entirely different world. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Dash, *Making*, 29.

narrates the story of the flying Africans. Standing along the shore Eula tells her baby about the Ibo captives being brought to the land as slaves and how those captives walked on the water back home to Africa. As she is recounting the story, Eli walks on the water to a large figure of an Ibo captive floating in the water away from the shore. Serving as a visual reminder of African heritage, the floating figure states Brouwer, also serves as the pride of a legendary group of Africans who refused to be enslaved.<sup>23</sup> This visual imagery also serves as reconciliation between African Americans and their African past and also between Eli and Eula.

The second version told by Bilal Muhammad rejects Ibos walking on water explaining that they drowned instead. The story recounted in *Drums and Shadows* explained that “a group of slaves from the Ibo tribe refused to submit to slavery led by their chief and singing tribal songs, they walked into the water and were drowned at a point on Dunbar Creek, later named Ebo (Ibo) Landing.”<sup>24</sup> By bringing forth these accounts of the myth, Dash demonstrates that her interest lies in not understanding the accuracy of the myth but rather the power of it.

In the works of African Americans no matter the version of the myth flight functions as a symbol of resistance. Within this context, “flight transcends a particular state of being- slavery.”<sup>25</sup> In African Diasporic folklore salt blocks flight, preventing its symbolism of transcendence. Zora Neale Hurston documented the myth of the flying

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<sup>23</sup> Brouwer, “*Repositioning: Center and Margin*,” 9.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gomez explains that the march of the Ibos at Dunbar Creek located on St. Simons Islands, Georgia may have occurred in 1803 when a group of Igbo was taken from Savannah to St. Simons. Ibo has alternate spellings, Ebo and Igbo. Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 118-19. Mary Granger, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 313.

<sup>25</sup> Wilentz, “If You Surrender to the Air,” 21.

Africans in Jamaica. She wrote "...salt is not given because it is heavy. It holds duppies (spirits) to the ground. He can not fly and departs 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 were never 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."<sup>26</sup> The myth of the flying Africans is not a myth per se, but a narrative of resistance emerging from the desire for freedom.

Continuing to highlight the importance of African religious beliefs and practices in the Gullah culture, Dash uses Yoruba cosmologies to represent the development and actions of the main characters. At the beginning of the film, Yellow Mary and Trula arrive on the island by boat and joining Eula on shore. This scene represents a symbolic reunion of Yemaya, Oshun and Oya. The three characters are also captured walking or sitting together by the water at various points in the film. Sandra M. Grayson states that the water is an appropriate place because their orisha counterparts are river goddesses.<sup>27</sup>

Yellow Mary's orisha match Yemaya (or Yemoja) is the mother and creator of all rivers in Yorubaland. She is known for her use of a round fan which is "an emblem embodying the coolness and command of these spirits of the water."<sup>28</sup> According to African Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson, along with other river goddesses she is supreme in the arts of mystic retribution and protection against all evil.<sup>29</sup> He sums up her

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<sup>26</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott, 1938), 62 qtd. In Lorna McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of Myth in the Americas New West Indian Guide no. ½ (1990), 30.

<sup>27</sup> Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust and Eve's Bayou as Histories* (New York: University Press of America, 2000), 41.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 73-74.

strength as "...the wind that whirls with the force into the land. Yemoja angered the water that smashes down the metal bridge."<sup>30</sup>

Trula's orisha match is Oshun who is "the giver of children...a wealthy and beautiful woman."<sup>31</sup> The yellow dress worn by Trula is indicative of her coquettish and seductive nature. Oshun also takes charge of the profession/art of hair plaiting and hair dressing.<sup>32</sup> The women's hairstyles in the film were carefully selected to represent West African braiding designs. These designs were chosen for the actresses according to their age, facial features and place in society. The film's hairstylist, Pamela Ferrell, studied West African hair designs. She came up with styles to invoke African ethnic diversity that was a feature of life on the Sea Islands.<sup>33</sup>

Eula embodies the power and beauty of Oya "the goddess of the whirlwind and the Niger River."<sup>34</sup> She not only controls the wind, but hurricanes and tornados as well. In traditional Yoruba society, women acquire their power through leadership roles. The Yoruba belief is that without women, "no healing can take place, rain cannot fall, plants cannot bear fruit and children cannot come into the world..."<sup>35</sup> By associating Yellow Mary, Trula, and Eula with Yoruba orisha, Dash undermine "Eurocentric notions that women are always passive, powerless and subjugated to and demeaned by men."<sup>36</sup> Eula who possesses Oya's strength addresses the "daughters" by looking at the past of the Peasant women. In this past they were ruined by the sexual exploitation suffered by

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 79-83.

<sup>33</sup> Dash, *Making*, 52-53.

<sup>34</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Rowland Abiodun, "Women in Yoruba Religious Images," *African Languages and Cultures* no. 2.1 (1989), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 43.



Peasant women. Yellow Mary was viewed as an outsider by her family because she was a prostitute and considered “ruined” as a result of it, as well as being raped by a white man. Eula also looks to the future and encourages the Peasant women to change their way of thinking before migrating off the island. Also raped by a white man, she challenges the family to embrace Yellow Mary and to remember that they are all good women.

The Unborn Child represents Eshu-Elegba, the trickster Gates discusses in *The Signifying Monkey*. In Yoruba mythology, Eshu-Elegba is a messenger god and “came to be regarded as the very embodiment of the crossroads.”<sup>37</sup> Eshu has the ability to turn himself into wind to for quick travel to carry out duties such as delivering punishments. Like Eshu, the Unborn Child travels as wind to deliver a message; however, hers is not one of punishment. As a messenger on a spiritual mission, she symbolizes the crossroads through her parents Eli and Eula. During a scene in the film, the wind becomes really strong indicating the arrival of the Unborn Child. Nana turns her face to the wind, welcoming her arrival. The African ancestors send the Unborn Child with a message to her parents who are at a crossroads of leaving Dawtuh Island or staying. Eli is contemplating leaving because of Eula’s rape and thinking the child she is carrying may not be his. The Unborn Child’s mission is successful; Eli learns that she is his. Her parents decide to stay on the island to remain close to the African ancestors. This is shown in the scene when Eula tells the story of Ibo Landing and afterwards she opens her arms, welcoming her Unborn Child back into her womb. Yellow Mary also chooses to stay on the island. The Unborn Child sees that everyone who stayed on the island grew stronger and wiser.

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<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 18.

Ibo Landing is the location of many powerful experiences for Eli, a blacksmith who represents the Yoruba deity Ogun, the god of war and iron. Thompson states that Ogun “lives in the flames of the blacksmith’s forge, on the battlefield and more particularly on the cutting edge of iron.”<sup>38</sup> According to Sandra Grayson, this Praisesong, as she calls it, is relevant to Eli because he will become, as Ogun already is, the support of the newborn child.<sup>39</sup> With the guidance of a “spirit-rider,” Eli is able to walk on water as he is seen doing so as his wife recounts the tale of Ibo Landing. Eli’s walking on water is the precursor to his acceptance of the Unborn Child being his. Ibo Landing is also the site where the healing between Eli and his wife takes place.

Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* creates powerful yet subtle visuals such as the hand signals and body movements demonstrated by Eli and his cousin. These images are in reference to the nonverbal styles of communication of ancient African secret societies. The secret societies of West Africa are divided by the sexes. Poro is for the men and Sande is for the women. The Poro initiates the boys into social manhood and the Sande initiates girls into social womanhood. These societies were secret because “only members of each have certain knowledge that can be revealed only to initiated members.”<sup>40</sup> The Poro and Sande are hierarchically organized. “The higher a person’s status within the sodality, the greater the secret knowledge revealed.”<sup>41</sup> Poro and Sande represent more than the transformation from childhood into adulthood with rites of passage rituals. Kenneth Little writes that the true function of the Poro was to impress upon the new

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<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz, *Anthropology: What Does it Mean to be Human?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 460.

<sup>41</sup> Lavenda and Schultz, *What Does it Mean to be Human?*, 460.

member the sacredness of his duty to the Poro,”<sup>42</sup> ergo to the community. According to Sylvia Boone, “Sande is a socially consolidating force” and “a religion with the power to make life good and to inspire the highest aspirations among its members.”<sup>43</sup> A fee must be paid in order to be initiated and more fees are paid if advanced training and progress to higher levels are wanted. Once initiated membership into the society is automatic.

Both societies use unique signs and symbols to identify themselves and each other. These signs can be found on clothing, lodges, home and on one’s body. Five signs are associated with the Poro society: a bunch of leaves, a bundle of twigs, a plume, a spiral and two double pyramids placed point to point.<sup>44</sup> Oftentimes these symbols are tattooed on the men’s backs. Clothing and jewelry are also used as identifiers. The men of Poro use beads and big brass toe-rings as charms because it is believed that they had power. The word “Sande” has several meanings. According to Tobin and Dobard, the Sande women spoke of getting Sande from a river or stream.<sup>45</sup> They took this to mean a stone or shell being sacred within the society. It may also represent tasks performed by women such as childcare, homemaking, beauty, the arts and healing.<sup>46</sup> The main symbol for the Sande is white clay; it is used to paint the faces of initiates in training. The color white is the Sande trademark as seen in dress or headgear of members. In the film all the women except Nana Peasant wore white dresses. Throughout the film, the young girls would sing and dance or play games that would involve them keeping a rhythmic pace

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<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Little, “The Political Function of the Poro,” *Africa* no. 35.1 (1965) qtd. In Margaret Washington “Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death,” in *Africanisms in American Culture* ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 162.

<sup>43</sup> Sylvia Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) qtd. in *Africanisms in American Culture* ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 162.

<sup>44</sup> Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Random House, 1999), 40.

<sup>45</sup> Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 40-41.

accompanied with dance movements and melodies of song. For the Sande, singing and dancing are fundamental to the society. Like the songs and games played by the girls in the film, many of the songs sung by the Sande women, engage the call and response method “to evoke and maintain memory.”<sup>47</sup>

At various moments in the film, Eli and his cousin are shown play fighting. These body movements are a part of the Poro society. At one point in the film the camera zooms in on a turtle shell. On the shell is a drawing of the sign of the four moments of the sun, Sandra Grayson writes this symbol “connects the people to traditional Kongo beliefs in West Africa.”<sup>48</sup> The four moments of the sun are dawn, noon, sunset and midnight. Thompson, a prominent scholar of African art explains the four moments of the sun, “[w]hen it is midnight in the world of the living the sun is shining in the world of the dead.”<sup>49</sup> He describes the symbol as “the Kongo cosmogram mirrors the birth of a person, in the rising of the sun, the maximal power in a vertical line which culminates with the sun at noon, the death and decline in the lowering of the sun and its disappearance beneath the sea or earth.”<sup>50</sup>

The film also evokes other visual memories of Africa such as sweetgrass baskets and the bottle tree outside the family’s compound. The appearance of the bottle tree as well as the graveyard, which Nana visits regularly, reflects African beliefs surrounding the connection between the living and the dead. Decorating the graves are seashells, pots, pans, bottles and personal effects of the deceased. Dash and her design team created

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<sup>47</sup> Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust and Eve’s Bayou* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2000), 48.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 27.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 43.

Kongo style graves using Sea Islands graves as examples. In fact the site that Dash selected to shoot the film actually held ancient African graves. With her creation of *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash becomes a *jelimuso*. In West Africa in the Mende tradition *jelimuso* is used in reference to a female hereditary professional historian and musician who preserves and presents history through the oral tradition.<sup>51</sup> Dash uses oral traditions to structure the story in her next project by the same name only in a different medium, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel*.

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<sup>51</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 39.

### Chapter Three

“Some Folk De Gift Fe Lie”: Oral, Religious and Familial Traditions in

*Daughters of the Dust* (1997)

“During the antebellum period in North America, the historical prophets of enslaved African communities preserved and passed on African history/ memory and culture primarily through oral narratives.”<sup>1</sup>

“Mine history is what I know and what I had been told.”<sup>2</sup>

Six years after the release of her 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash published a sequel or a novel by the same name. In 1992 she published *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*. This book features essays by Dash and Toni Cade Bambara and a dialogue between Dash and bell hooks. Dash also includes is the screenplay with excerpts of the script in Gullah courtesy of Ronald Daise. Why did Dash write a novel to continue her exploration of Africanisms and religious traditions on the Sea Islands? What does she gain by engaging in the process of “novelization”? This chapter examines the novelization of the film, distinguishing the novel from the big screen. It demonstrates that while the novel is inspired by the film, the story is structured around its own narratives and themes.

The film *Daughters of the Dust*, set in 1902, chronicles the eve of the Peazant family's migration north. The film depicts Nana Peazant struggling to stress the importance of the family's cultural traditions to those leaving the island seeking opportunities up north. It

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<sup>1</sup> Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph E. Holloway, “Time in the African Diaspora: The Gullah Experience” in *Time in the Black Experience* ed. Joseph K. Adjaye (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 202.

follows Eli as he struggles with his wife's rape by a white land owner. He questions the paternity of Eula's unborn child. While Eula embraces Nana Peazant's religious beliefs and traditions, Haagar dismisses them. She looks forward to the family's migration north and she embraces the opportunity to leave the island in her dust. The film captures the conflicts individuals deal with as they ultimately erupt during this momentous occasion. The ending of the film captures the uncertainty family members face as they embark on their journey into the unknown.

Set primarily in the 1920s, the novel *Daughters of the Dust* examines the lives of the Peazants' after their migration to the north in 1902. The novel is divided into sections by geographical location and date: Dawtuh Island-1912, Ibo Landing, Dawtuh Island-September 1926, and Harlem-1926. By dividing the novel into sections by geographical location, Dash shows two important sites in African American history. Harlem was the site of the Harlem Renaissance and the American South, specifically the Sea Islands. The novel focuses on the next generation of Peazant women, Elizabeth (the Unborn Child in the film) and her cousin Amelia Varnes, Haagar Peazant's granddaughter.

Dash clarifies what happened to the Peazant family, those who migrated to the north and those who stayed in the South through the paralleling stories of Elizabeth and Amelia. Amelia, an anthropology student at Brooklyn College, travels to Dawtuh Island to conduct research for her thesis. Born and raised in Harlem by her maternal grandmother Haagar and mother Myown, she has very little knowledge of her Gullah heritage except what her mother told her. For her thesis she conducts ethnographic research that offers an opportunity to learn about Sea Island culture and discover her family's history. Even though Elizabeth guides her around the island, Amelia is faced

with rejection as other family members view her with suspicion as she tries to interview them. Those who shared their stories led Amelia to become concerned about the impact her thesis would have on the islanders. The stories told to her contain Gullah myths as well as individual and collective experiences. They help Amelia to understand the behaviors of others, especially her grandmother Haagar. At the end of the novel Amelia returns to the island along with her mother, Myown.

There are a number of differences between the film and novel. The film captures one special occasion for the Peazant family. This occasion was the celebration for those migrating off the island. The novel captures events as the story unfolds, such as family gatherings and church service. The novel also has more geographical locations than the film. The film takes place solely on Dawtuh Island. In the novel Elizabeth, who is a schoolteacher, travels between Charleston and Dawtuh Island. Amelia travels between Dawtuh Island and Harlem. Harlem becomes the unknown destination for the migratory members of the Peazant family as well as an important landscape in the novel.

For both the film and novel, Dash use storytelling to construct the narrative of each body of work. The film collectively tells the story of various individuals through the use of images. The novel is structured around the use of what is referred to as “telling-lies” (tales) or oral narratives. These oral narratives represent a category which divides the novel into chapters. The chapters are titled by the name of the story and identify the storyteller relaying his or her story to Amelia. The structuring of the novel involves various oral recollections such as field notes, “lies,” and letters. Dash uses these materials to tell what happened when the migrating Peazants left the island at the end of the film.



It can be inferred that in West Africa, the basis of culture was the oral tradition. Oral tradition has been used in everyday life for religious rituals, songs, dance, myths and folktales. The role of the griot is to not only keep the history of the tribe but the history of the family, their customs, and traditions in the form of stories. The griot would pass down these oral narratives to another griot, keeping the tradition of passing history orally alive another generation. Much of what is known about Africa has been learned from the stories told by griots. For example, Alex Haley's critically acclaimed novel and later miniseries *Roots* is about his own family's history. The story opens up in 1750 with the birth of Kunta Kinte in the village of Juffure, present day The Gambia.<sup>1</sup> Haley spent some time in the region where Kunta Kinte was born learning of his family's history from a griot who told him of Kunta Kinte's capture.<sup>2</sup> While searching through maritime records, Haley came across *The Lord Ligonier*, the slave ship that brought Kunta Kinte and 140 other slaves from Juffure to Annapolis, Maryland on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1767.<sup>3</sup>

Like Alex Haley, Dash shifted her narrative from one medium to another. Although Dash's method of shifting from film to the novel is not common, in the African American literary tradition it is common to move from a written piece (novel, poem etc.) to film such as *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Vanguard, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History and Genealogy," *The Oral History Review* (1973): 13.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Wright, "Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants," *History of Africa* (1981): 207. Although Haley's novel has been widely popular worldwide, it has met its share of criticism as well. In 1978 Harold Courlander filed a lawsuit against Haley claiming he copied 81 pages of his novel *The African*. The media gave little notice to the case, however, the *Washington Post* published an article entitled "Bethesda Author Settles 'Roots' Suit for \$500,000. Jack Cashill, *Hoodwinked: How Intellectual Hucksters Have Hijacked American Culture* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005), 115. Henry Louis Gates criticized Haley's 'Roots' stating that "...it's highly unlikely that Alex actually found the village whence his ancestors sprang. *Roots* is a work of the imagination rather than strict historical scholarship." Alex Beam, "The Prize Fight Over Alex Haley's Tangled Roots," *Boston Globe*, October 30, 1998. Accessed November 19, 2011. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-8512181.html>.

(2005) and *For Colored Girls* (2010).<sup>4</sup> Julie Dash moved into the opposite direction, however, the novel is not an adaptation of the film. The novel is a continuation, expanding on the themes, characters and geographical locations introduced in the film.

Historically, African history was rejected because instead of writing it down, Africans preserved their history orally. Since African history was not written down, this translated as meaning the continent of Africa had no civilization. Europeans referred to Africa as the 'Dark Continent'. Explorers Henry Morton Stanley and Sir Richard Francis Burton described Africa as being hostile and dark.<sup>5</sup> Literary authors W. Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad described Africa as being disease ridden, evil and mysterious.<sup>6</sup> These arguments could not be further from the truth. Griots argued that "[F]or all true learning should be a secret."<sup>7</sup> Oral history in West Africa took on many forms. Common forms of oral tradition are folktales. The popular Kwaku Ananse also known as Spider is one of the most important characters in West African folklore. In African American oral tradition Spider's equivalent is Anansi the Spider. This character is used to teach values, appropriate behaviors, and beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Proverbs are also popular in West African oral tradition. They are used to summarize ancestral wisdom, describe human nature, and teach societal beliefs. Nigerian

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<sup>4</sup> The transference of a novel into a film is often met with criticism. When it was released into the film, *For Colored Girls* was met with a lot of criticism, not because of it being a film adaptation of the choreopoem published in 1975 which later became a stage play, but because many audiences felt attacked or left out due to the title of the film.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent: or, The Sources of the Nile Around the Great Lakes of Equatorial Africa and Down the Livingstone River to the Atlantic Ocean* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Seale and Rivington, 1880), Stanley, *In Darkest Africa* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Seale and Rivington, 1890).

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Jarosz, "Constructing the Dark Continent: Metaphor as Geographic Representation of Africa," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 74 no. 2 (1992): 107.

<sup>7</sup> Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 8.

<sup>8</sup> "Ananse Tales." Lehigh University. Accessed November 20, 2011.  
<http://www.lehigh.edu/~tqr0/ghanaweb/anansetales.html>.

scholar Chinua Achebe uses proverbs in his novels to illustrate how Africans used proverbial wisdom in their struggle against colonialism. In his novel *Arrow of God*, the speaker is a village elder about to advise a young warrior: “if the lizard of the homestead neglects to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the Ward of the Farmland.”<sup>9</sup> Africans often use proverbs the same way African Americans use signifyin(g), a quick tongue response filled with wit.

African American oral tradition flourished as a result of the African oral traditions such as values and rituals that survived the Middle Passage. Through “lies” or oral narratives, Dash creates a space for remembering and celebrating landscapes and recreating cultural practices. Children gather around Miz Emma Julia begging her to tell them a lie. “Telling the lie” means to tell a good story. Even though there are plenty of people who can tell them a lie, they went to Miz Emma Julia because she “can win any lyin contest.”<sup>10</sup> Miz Emma Julia’s role as a storyteller solidifies her as a griot. Miz Emma Julia emulates Sapelo Island’s Cornelia Bailey. Cornelia Bailey is one of Sapelo Island’s most celebrated storytellers. She explains the role of a griot as a West African storyteller who keeps “the oral history of the tribe, as it has been passed down for thousands of years.”<sup>11</sup>

Through a Sunday morning worship service, Dash shows how religion is deeply rooted in oral tradition. For the Gullah community religion is more meaningful than any other tradition. It is a part of everyday life. The Gullah church evolved from slave culture, formed out of oppression and necessity. During slavery, slaves were forbidden to attend services. While their masters and mistresses were attending services, slaves would gather

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<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* (Plume: New York, 1999), 10.

<sup>11</sup> New Georgia Encyclopedia, s.v. “Cornelia Bailey.”

in secrecy in the woods or brush arbors where they would sing, shout and pray. This secret meeting place became known as the “invisible institution.” In order to alert one another about these secret worship meetings, slaves would sing the coded song “Steal Away”. Former slave Wash Wilson recalled his experience of the invisible institution, “when de [slaves] go round singin’ Steal Away to Jesus,’ dat mean dere gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. De masters... didn’t like dem ‘ligious meetin’s, so us natcherly slips off at night down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”<sup>12</sup> Another ex-slave explained that “[t]hey would steal off to the fields and in the thickets and there...they called on God out of heavy hearts.”<sup>13</sup> Spirituals served as the music of the invisible institution. According to Wyatt Tee Walker spirituals were “...the fuel of the ‘invisible’ church...constantly fed by the oral tradition.”<sup>14</sup> W.E.B Dubois stated this particular Sea Island music is “the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.”<sup>15</sup>

On the Gullah Sea Islands the “invisible institution” ended circa the 1820s when plantation owners constructed Praise Houses for their slaves. Why was it okay for the slaves throughout the Sea Islands to have a place to worship when it was forbidden for other slaves to worship? The answer is quite simple. It was about control. Planters provided praise houses to control their slaves. There were some planters who were indeed interested in providing a place of worship for their slaves. The greater interest, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 213.

<sup>13</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Mada P. Johnston, ed., *Songs of Zion*, preface by William B. McClain. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1981), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Ashmore Cooper, “Where Everybody Is Somebody: African American Churches in South Carolina,” in *Religion in South Carolina*, Charles H. Lippy, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 125.

was in developing a sense of fear and perpetuating the belief that whites were superior.<sup>16</sup> Another reason why planters provided slaves with praise houses had to do with transportation. It was difficult for planters to transport their slaves on and off the islands because prior to the 1930s there were no bridges or causeways connecting the islands to the mainland. According to Vanessa Thaxton, the landscape hosted many waterways and the vegetation in the area was extremely dense.<sup>17</sup> In these praise houses slaves were able to worship freely. As cited in Mechal Sobel's *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*, Harriet Ware described a little chapel she saw in the 1860s as "...made very roughly of boards, whitewashed, covered with straw, rough wooden benches, the pulpit and altar made in the same way, but covered entirely with the grey moss."<sup>18</sup>

As of 1932 there were twenty-five praise houses on St. Helena Island alone. Of those twenty five only four are left. All four are historical landmarks. Ironically, these praise houses are located on former plantations. They also carry the name of the plantation owner. The four historical landmark praise houses are *The Croft Praise House*, *Mary Jenkins Praise House*, *Eddings Point Praise House* and *Coffin's Point Praise House*.<sup>19</sup> The Croft Praise House and Mary Jenkins Praise House are still in use. The denominations of the praise houses or Gullah churches are Baptist or Methodist. While staying on Dawtuh Island with her family, Amelia accompanies them to the three hour worship service. She finds the service to be different from what she is accustomed to

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<sup>16</sup> Vanessa Thaxton, "The Praise House Tradition on St. Helena Island, South Carolina", in *Keep Your Head to the Sky* ed. Gary Gundaker (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 227.

<sup>17</sup> Thaxton, *Praise House*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 147.

<sup>19</sup> Thaxton, *Praise House*, 232.

back home in Harlem. According to Marquette Goodwine, the Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, services in the Gullah church are not the same as churches in mainstream or on mainland.<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, the Gullah church is an orally transmitted tradition that intertwines prayer, music, song, dance and storytelling into a strong culture. Consequently, it emphasizes the importance of the rhetorical skills of church leaders. Rhetorical skills were often well developed among the Sea Island people because they were a mark of being properly educated within the community.<sup>21</sup> Memorized Christian Biblical passages (coupled with moral narratives of various origins) form the sacred texts of Gullah oral tradition. Gullah rituals emphasize the role of the congregation through the pastor's stimulation. The passionate relations of animated narratives are especially meant to encourage active participation among the congregation.

Amelia found herself nodding off during the service. One woman standing up to testify brought her back to attention. The woman testified about the "recent trials of her life." This part of the service is the epitome of the call and response style, which requires the person testifying to call out a statement and the congregation either repeats or replies loudly and often rhythmically. This type of involvement provides a mode of religious expression and provides the entire congregation with an active and vital role in the service.

Prayer, especially in the call and response style, is an important element of Sea Island religious ritual. Since none of the prayers are written, the person who offers it must

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Jarrett, "Introducing Folkography: A Study of Gullah Culture" (A paper presented at the 65<sup>th</sup> annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, Chicago, Illinois, August 14-18, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 77.

create all of the prayers with individual purpose. The ability to offer public prayer is a special rhetorical gift. Church members trained in the prayer-giving tradition perform their designated tasks at specified times during the service.<sup>22</sup> Prayers can be as short as a few seconds or as long as an half an hour. Individuals use alliteration, word order and other rhythmic beats to excite the congregation. This mimicked style can be found among various West African tribes.<sup>23</sup>

For the Gullah people, singing is believed to benefit the mind, body and spirit. Singing is an integral part of both the daily life of the Gullah culture and the ritual life of the Gullah church. Furthermore, “singing is as close to worship as breathing to life...They reflect an old African dictum: The spirit will not descend without song.”<sup>24</sup> The traditional African circle dances brought to South Carolina with the slaves served as the foundation for the creation of the “shout” tradition of the Sea Islands.<sup>25</sup> Drums were used in the traditional circle dance and planters outlawed them as a means of social control, so slaves used intricate hand clapping and foot stomping patterns to create a steady beat.<sup>26</sup> This circle dance is known as the Ring Shout.

When I attended the *Sea Islands Black Heritage Festival* I was afforded the opportunity to see the McIntosh County Shouters perform the ring shout. The women wore colorful dresses with matching head wraps and the men wore denim overalls, long sleeved blue shirts and straw hats. Arguably the oldest African American performance tradition in North America, the ring shout is characterized by counter clockwise dance

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<sup>22</sup> Jones-Jackson, 77, Johnston, *Songs of Zion*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die*, 78.; Johnston, *Songs of Zion*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Johnston, *Songs of Zion*, ix.

<sup>25</sup> *God's Gonna Trouble the Water*, (Beaufort: WJWJ Beaufort, SC and SC ETV, 1997) Video.; Johnston, *Song of Zion*, 75. Lorenzo Dow Turner proposed the term “shout” could be related to the Arabic word “saut” which means to dance or move around the Kaaba, Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> *God's Gonna Trouble the Water*.; Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die*, 30-31.; Johnston, *Song of Zion*, 75.

movements (making sure the feet never cross), call and response singing, hand clapping and a walking stick used to keep the rhythm of the shout. The rhythm was maintained by beating a stick to a drum-like rhythm on a wooden floor.<sup>27</sup> During the service, Amelia witnesses her family members participating in the ring shout. Feeling a bit unsure of herself, she hesitantly gets up, wanting to join and finds herself welcomed into the circle.

Oral narratives are also intertwined in the novel with familial traditions. The oral narrative “The Story of Ayodele” is the “lie” of Elizabeth’s namesake. Dash demonstrates how Sea Islanders preserve real or constructed memories of Africa within oral narratives as means of kinship ties and connecting individuals with geographically distant landscapes. Elizabeth is given the middle name Ayodele after the foremother of the Peasant family taken from Africa and brought to the Sea Islands. The story recalls various moments and landscapes: an early African childhood, the Middle Passage, Ayodele’s enslavement in America, and her spiritual return to Africa.

Like Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1794), Ayodele’s story begins with a picturesque childhood in an unspecified African village. By telling the story of Ayodele, Elizabeth highlights the African tradition of naming. During his research, Turner found thousands of naming patterns traceable to West African practices among Gullah speakers. Naming in the African tradition “is not a mere identification tag, it is a record of family and community history, distinct personal reference, an indication of

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<sup>27</sup> There are a number of books on the history of the ring shout such as Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942; reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992) and Art Rosenbaum, *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia*, with photographs by Margo Newmark Rosenbaum (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).



present status and an enunciated promise of future accomplishment.”<sup>28</sup> For Dash the name Ayodele means “her who brings joy.”<sup>29</sup> For researchers Baird and Twining it means “joy comes to the house.”<sup>30</sup> Both definitions describe expressions of a family’s gratification at the long hoped for arrival of a child.<sup>31</sup> For the Peazant family the child was the Unborn Child in the film, *Elizabeth*.

*Elizabeth*’s story of Ayodele’s childhood spotlights gender roles in Africa indicating the division of labor in which the men were farmers and the women cultivated crops. Land cultivation was an important lesson taught to each girl who “would move from field to field learning to grow the different crops from each woman” in her family.<sup>32</sup> Dash supports observation with Paymore, an African brought to the Sea Islands, who brought a set of skills with them, more specifically rice cultivation and indigo. These were important skills to have on the Sea Islands. *Elizabeth*’s story helps to construct a narrative of agrarian life in Africa and the Americas. It also identifies closeness to land as rites of passage, especially for women.

The story of Ayodele explores the challenges African Americans face when tracing their genealogical records beyond the Middle Passage by identifying an African foremother, “the first of us to walk dis lan,” as its protagonist.<sup>33</sup> Sarah, born as Ayodele, acquires a pre-history emphasized in the story through the narrative of her childhood in Africa and her knowledge of indigo cultivation.<sup>34</sup> The power of the story lies in the fact

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<sup>28</sup> Keith E. Baird and Mary A. Twining, “Names and Naming in the Sea Islands,” in *The Crucible of Carolina: Essays in the Development of Gullah Language and Culture*, ed. Michael Montgomery (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 25.

<sup>29</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Baird and Twining, “Names and Naming,” 25.

<sup>31</sup> Baird and Twining, “Names and Naming,” 25.

<sup>32</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 87.

that Ayodele is remembered as Ayodele and not as Sarah. Her birth name is recalled in the story and commemorated in the subsequent naming of the first daughter of the first son. By allowing the protagonist to maintain her African name and knowledge of indigo cultivation the story functions as a narrative of origins for the Gullah people and the Sea Islands.

It is through Elizabeth that readers get to experience the “renewal of old ways.” Elizabeth carries on familial traditions through her continuation of Nana Peazant’s bottle tree and making medicine and scented charms/pouches. Of all of Nana Peazant’s great grandchildren she is the only one to do so. In the film, Elizabeth’s father Eli is shown busting the bottles hanging from Nana Peazant’s trees out of anger as he struggles with his wife’s rape by a white assailant. After Nana Peazant joined the ancestors, Elizabeth went about restoring the tree. She had her brothers and sister fill the trees with bottles that washed ashore.<sup>35</sup> Thompson explains that bottle trees derive from Central Africa, specifically Kongo and Angola. He describes the trees as being “garlanded with bottles, vessels and other objects...protecting the household through invocation (prayer) of the dead.”<sup>36</sup> For Elizabeth the bottle trees provide magic protection for the Peazant family. In eighteenth century Brazil, an enslaved African, Domingos used bottles trees for fortune telling. It was believed that he made his divination bottles dance as well as suspend them in the air.<sup>37</sup> Domingos used the bottles to trap “criminals and evil doers,” resulting in

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<sup>35</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Farris, *Thompson, Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984), .

<sup>37</sup> Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 122.

their images appearing inside his divination bottles.<sup>38</sup> In central Africa as well as on the Sea Islands the bottle trees serve to trap evil spirits.

Elizabeth use to accompany Nana Peazant as she explored nature to gather the ingredients needed to make her medicine and scented charms. When Nana Peazant joined the ancestors, Miz Emma Julia continued to teach Elizabeth about making charms. Miz Emma Julia told Elizabeth that the charms could be used for several different purposes, such as keeping a man from straying, curing a child of meanness, and freeing a woman of carnal restraint.<sup>39</sup> For those who receive the charms, they find their own peace in the charms powers. Elizabeth is unsure of the charms powers. But she knows that each individual uses them to seek out his/her own peace in much the same way she does when she is making them. Elizabeth uses a number of ingredients to put the charms together. She uses different recipes that include honeysuckle, jasmine, sweet oil, herbs, roots, flowers, porcupine quills, the beak of a wood duck and feathers. The finished product is placed in vials, bottles or bags.

For African Americans in the South they refer to these charms as “gris-gris” or mojo bags. The origin of the term “gris-gris” is ambiguous, however, it is believed that it comes from the central African term gri-gri or gree-gree, meaning “fetish “or charm.<sup>40</sup> The term mojo is derived from the West African term *mojuba* meaning prayer.<sup>41</sup> These “gris-gris” or mojo bags are used for luck when gambling, attracting love, stopping gossip and warding off evil. Even though she is skeptical of the charms powers, Elizabeth

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<sup>38</sup> Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Jude Bradley and Cheré Dastugue, *Magic's in the Air: Creating Spellbinding Gris Gris Bags and Sachets* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2010), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Bradley and Dastugue, *Magic's in the Air*, 7.

mixes up a concoction of roots that can “bring illness and bad fortune” to a person.<sup>42</sup> People believe that if this kind of root is put on them then they are truly ill. Bradley and Dastugue state that “their mind may enact the scenario and the person will actually become sick.”<sup>43</sup> When Elizabeth makes a new batch of charms, she names them after her favorite Bible verses just like Harriet Powers who used her favorite Bible stories in her quilts.

Portraying the role of the signifier, Dash used the works of numerous other African American female artists to structure her novel. Contemporary African American female artist Tina McElroy Ansa also signifies upon other African American female artists to explore other Africanisms and religious expressions in the African American literary tradition in her debut creative novel, *Baby of the Family* (1989).

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<sup>42</sup> Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Bradley and Dastugue, *Magic's in the Air*, 8.

## Chapter Four

“This isn’t superstitions I’m talking about...”<sup>1</sup>

Caul and Response in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*

“The Negro is a sort of a seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world...”<sup>2</sup>

“Some superstitions which came up provoked argument among the midwives. Somebody said a baby born with a veil could foresee the future and see spirits. She said when little children stop, shiver and ‘scrunch up’ they are seeing spirits.”<sup>3</sup>

Tina McElroy Ansa’s debut novel, *Baby of the Family*, is a coming of age novel about an African American community in the 1950s. The story takes place in the fictitious town of Mulberry, Georgia. It is centered on the McPherson’s, a middle class family. The main settings are the McPherson family business “The Place,” the family’s home, which is a two story house sitting on a large lot, and the beauty parlor the youngest child and only daughter, Lena visits weekly and the church school she attends. All of these places play critical roles in Lena’s life as she grows up. As the novel’s protagonist, Lena is the point of intersectionality through which women in the story, Nurse Bloom, Nellie (her mother), Miss Lizzie (her grandmother) and Rachel (a ghost she encounters on a beach one summer while vacationing with her family) “re-claim and pass on their

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<sup>1</sup> Tina McElroy Ansa, *Baby of the Family* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 27.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Campbell, *Folks Do Get Born* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1946), 36.

cultural heritage.”<sup>1</sup> The story opens in 1949 in the only black hospital with the birth of Lena McPherson. The doctor and nursing staff are all in awe because Lena was born with a caul covering her face. A caul (or veil) is a membrane of the amniotic sac containing the fluid and fetus.

In African American folk traditions, being born with a caul enables one “to possess psychic abilities and the gift of prophecy. It is also believed that they have the ability to see and speak with the dead.”<sup>2</sup> This belief stems from West African folk traditions that claim, a child born with a caul covering its head is said to possess a special personality endowed with spiritual potency.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the African Diaspora, from the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Gold Coast, Dutch Guyana, Jamaica, and Haiti and to the American South, the significance of the caul is consistent “as a sign dey will be bery wise an kin talk wid duh spirits.”<sup>4</sup> This system of belief is indicative that continued African religious (spiritual) traditions and pan-African cultural links permeated throughout the Diaspora. According to Herskovits, there were certain aspects of abnormal births including the caul, which “among Africa folk [are] regarded as special types of personalities whose spiritual potency calls for special treatment.”<sup>5</sup> The interviews conducted for *Drums and Shadows* underscore the significance of the caul. An ex-slave from the Sea Island of Yamacraw, Georgia, Martha Page was born with a caul and made the claim that she could see and communicate with ghosts and spirits. Carrie Hamilton,

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley M. Jordan, *Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and White Women Writers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 197.

<sup>3</sup> The caul is also referenced in the Bible in the books of Exodus, 2 Corinthians, Matthew, Hebrews and Isaiah.

<sup>4</sup> Granger, *Drums and Shadows*, 91

<sup>5</sup> Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) qtd. in Walter Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2006), 168.

who is also from this Gullah region, claimed interaction with the spiritual world because she was born with a caul. It is because of the cultural traditions stemming from West and Central Africa that those born with a caul believe that they can or have made contact with ghosts and spirits.

Lena's caul sets up a back and forth dialogue that Geneva Smitherman explains as is the African Diasporic concept call and response. She argues that this "African derived communication process" is commonplace in the black church where all the speaker's statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (response) from the congregation.<sup>6</sup> The call and response method affects the African American literary tradition in that it shapes the concept of talking texts wherein as with this context, the works of African American female artists 'talk' to the works of other African American female artists. *Baby of the Family* talks to the works of African American female artists that also feature Africanisms and religious expression situated around narratives of ghost stories and/or conjure such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) and Jewell Parker Rhodes *Voodoo Dreams* (1993).

In the novel Nurse Bloom demonstrates her medical knowledge as she goes through the process of preserving Lena's caul. Back in the country when Nurse Bloom was a midwife, her expertise came as a result of "self-instruction and apprenticeship."<sup>7</sup> The role of the midwife in the African American community correlates to the role of the preacher, Smitherman contends that "[m]uch of what is accomplished by call and response can be witnessed by moving through the hierarchy of the traditional black

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<sup>6</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testify: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 104.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Reid, "Sisterhood and Professionalism: A Case Study of the American Lay Midwife," Ed. Carol Shepard McClain. *Women as Healers: Cross Cultural Perspectives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 219-20.

church...God must send the man who is to lead... it is the beginning of the process, that is, the *call* by God and the man's *response* by taking up the ministry...you don't go to...school to be [a] preacher...God must 'call' you."<sup>8</sup> African American midwives believed they too were called to serve the community by God. In the black community the midwife was regarded as someone who was divinely ordained as she integrated conjure as a part of her remedies. According to Herron and Bacon, an "old woman who was a conjure doctor...had a special revelation from God as do all conjure doctors."<sup>9</sup> Underscoring the dual role of the midwife in the African American community, Valerie Lee describes the midwife as being "God's servant and woman's agent,"<sup>10</sup> making her role both spiritual and political.

The black midwife during slavery was respected and maintained medical authority while other enslaved blacks were seen and treated as human chattel. Janet Carlisle Bogdan explains that when the slave ships carried black women to America, the women "came with attitudes about health care that were African-based rather than European. They came with a knowledge of midwifery and botanic roots in their slave communities...Elderly black midwives were thought of as assets in their communities...There is much evidence that black midwives were central to the structure of a slave economy wherein black women were breeders."<sup>11</sup> Nurse Bloom embodies the

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<sup>8</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 109-10.

<sup>9</sup> Leonora Herron and Alicia Bacon, "Conjuring and Conjure- Doctors," ed. Alan Dundes. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings and Interpretations of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prince Hall, 1973), 360.

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double- Dutched Readings* (New York: Rutledge, 1996), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Carlisle Bogdan, "Childbirth in America, 1650 to 1990," ed. Rima Apple. *Women, Health and Medicine in America: A Historical Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 115.



traditional black midwife, and like those black midwives who were brought to Africa, her knowledge about the profession is African based.

Nurse Bloom takes the necessary precautions required when a child is born with a veil. As she “gives Lena’s caul the right attention;” she takes on the role of the ritual specialist.<sup>12</sup> The ritual includes her “pull[ing] the caul away from the baby’s face” and “dropp[ing] the drying membrane into the still-warm bloody water in the...metal pan...swiftly...cut[ting] a piece...roll[ing] the stiff section of skin up and dropp[ing] it in the teapot. Then she...poured a stream of hot water into the teapot...[taking] a glass baby bottle...and poured the warm caul tea into it...I’ll let her mother give it to her. That’s the way it should be.”<sup>13</sup> Nurse Bloom’s preparation of Lena’s caul is submerged in the concept of *caul and response*. The presence of Lena’s caul serves as a metaphorical call to Nurse Bloom so that she may perform her preservation ritual. Nurse Bloom’s response would be the actual performance of the ritual.

The caul can function as a blessing or a curse depending on whether or not it is preserved and the tea is properly prepared. As a blessing the caul can empower Lena, allowing her communications and interactions with the spiritual world to be positive experiences. On the other hand, if the caul does not receive the appropriate ritualistic attention, the effects warrant unwanted interaction with evil spirits. Nurse Bloom conveys to Nellie, the importance of the caul ritual and preserving the caul. She admonishes Nellie about the process stating that “...this isn’t superstitions...I’m talking about what really is...There’s all kinds of things in this world that people call superstitions because they don’t understand them or because they don’t neatly fit into their way of thinking

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<sup>12</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 18-23.

nowadays, but that doesn't mean that these things are some crazy mumbo-jumbo of ignorant country people...you must keep this caul for your child until she is grown...If it's lost or misplaced, it will make the child forgetful."<sup>14</sup> Nurse Bloom is expressing the consequences Lena will suffer if Nellie does not comply with the ritualistic procedures. This conversation with Nellie is nothing "like the nurse had thought it would."<sup>15</sup> Nellie is disinterested and dismisses Nurse Bloom's advice. Nurse Bloom feels that this is a result of Nellie's lack of "commonsense."<sup>16</sup>

Nellie does not heed Nurse Bloom's advice and warnings about Lena's caul. Nellie, as a member of the black middle class opposes the ideologies of Nurse Bloom. Nellie is a homemaker. Her socioeconomic status is evident because her husband is an entrepreneur, her three children attend private schools and the big family house is finely furnished. For the black middle class, it is often that "any peculiar beliefs or habits among blacks...tended to be looked down upon as all bad and to be forgotten as quickly as possible."<sup>17</sup> For Nellie, her goal is to disregard "all those old timey ideas"<sup>18</sup> and "old-fashioned foolishness."<sup>19</sup> In order for Nellie to do this, she tries to disconnect herself from African cultural traditions, much like the cultural figure of the black midwife.

Being a "modern mother,"<sup>20</sup> Nellie rejects Nurse Bloom's advice by tossing out the caul tea and burning Lena's caul. In a way she admires Nurse Bloom thinking she is "a sweet woman going to all this trouble for my baby." Then again she also thinks it is

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<sup>14</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 27-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 136.

<sup>18</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 34.

crazy, “a grown intelligent woman like that believing in ghosts.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike Nurse Bloom who still holds onto and embraces old West African traditions, Nellie embraces new world Western thought. Nellie brushing off Nurse Bloom’s spiritual beliefs as ignorant and superstitious clearly signals her assimilation into mainstream culture. Instead of choosing conjure as a form of worship, Nellie is devoted to Catholicism. This is evident at the McPherson family dinner table which reminds Lena of the “priest, altar boys and communicants at mass,” even “the fabric her mother had chosen to cover the chairs...alternating stripes of maroon satin and beige separated by ridges of gold-reminded Lena of the priest’s vestments of gold, purple, green, red and white.”<sup>22</sup> Before every meal the family made the sign of the cross and says “In the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen...Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen.”<sup>23</sup> This text shows that the McPherson’s form of worship is whitewashed. Nellie’s dedication to Catholicism reflects LeRoi Jones’ depiction of “house Negroes”<sup>24</sup> who desired to emulate as many aspects of white culture as possible. Nellie’s assimilation into American culture is challenged by Lena’s conjured influenced actions and experiences leaving “no room for Nellie to respond in a sensible way.” She has even considered going to the hospital to see if Nurse Bloom was able to “tell her something about the girl’s strange way,” however, “she dismisses, the idea.”<sup>25</sup> Nellie finds it difficult to deal with Lena’s behavior. After rejecting Nurse Bloom’s evaluation of Lena as a “special” child, eventually she starts to

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<sup>21</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 60-61.

feel "...that somehow the nurse really knew what she was talking about."<sup>26</sup> Although Lena's behavior is hard to deal with, she does acknowledge Lena's ability to "put magic on things," for example, "...[i]f the car didn't start after two or three tries, [she] would turn to Lena...[saying] put the magic on this car for us so I can get the boys to school in this rain... she could put magic on just about anything: a radio, the television, a stuck door, a rusty ice cream churn. Her magic...nearly always worked for a time."<sup>27</sup> In the novel the power of conjure is strong enough to influence the thoughts of a nonbeliever, such as Nellie.

The moment Lena came into the world she casted a "spell"<sup>28</sup> on the delivery room, born with a caul "[o]ver her entire head, as if draped there by a band of angels."<sup>29</sup> The caul causes the hospital staff to discuss its significance saying that she will "be able to tell you things. But the biggest power is [being able] to see ghosts...The caul is a gift from God."<sup>30</sup> With this passage Ansa presents syncretism through Lena whose religious beliefs are mixed with conjure and Catholicism. With her parents being devout Christians, Lena is immersed in Christianity at home, school and church. Her conjuring experiences are more often than not, frightening. The family "talked of her being born with a veil over her face and of seeing ghosts over her shoulder and of putting magic on things,"<sup>31</sup> however, they were not aware of the supernatural experiences that occurred.

The first time Lena tells her family about her interaction with a ghost she soon learns to keep these experiences to herself because of "the sickness, the vomiting, the fits

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<sup>26</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 3

<sup>30</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 187.

that had struck her when she told her family about the ghost.”<sup>32</sup> Lena’s most significant encounter occurs at the age of seven during summer vacation on a beach along the coast of Georgia. As Lena strolled down the beach, she came across a black woman sitting on a stump staring out at the water. The lady is the spirit of a slave woman named Rachel. While sitting on the beach, Rachel shares a story with Lena, which she soon learns is a valuable lesson. Rachel, functioning as a griot, recounts the atrocities she experienced while enslaved. She explains how she gained her freedom by drowning herself in the ocean. Rachel’s story caused Lena to become upset because of her grandmother, Miss Lizzie’s words about “color folks [not] belong[ing] on the beach.”<sup>33</sup> The story Rachel told Lena amplifies the version of Ibo Landing that Bilal Muhammad told in *Daughters of the Dust* (1997) talks about. The legend is enslaved Africans who, out of resistance to being enslaved, walked into the ocean and drowned themselves. Like Nana Peazant, Rachel represents a critical link to the past.

Through Lena, Ansa presents alternate religious beliefs, Voodoo/conjure and Christianity, which at times are misrepresented by some characters as demon/devil worship. For example, the nuns at St. Martin de Porres, the Catholic school Lena attends told stories to the children “about their adventures in the western United States, where they taught American Indian children.”<sup>34</sup> They conveyed their experiences as seeing “people...possessed by the devil...It has the devil in those poor people, they very devil that I saw with my own eyes. But the church in her infinite wisdom knows the power of Satan and has holy implements like holy water to drive the demons of hell out.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 167.

<sup>34</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 219.

<sup>35</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 220.

Referencing Puritan settler's encounters with Native Americans, historian Ronald Takaki reported Christian demonization of Native American religion, noting that Christians reduced Native American religious practices to devil worship, characterizing their beliefs as "diabolical" as though they were "framed and devised by the devil himself."<sup>36</sup> While in the principal's office, Lena experiences spirit possession, one of the most expressive characteristics in African religious traditions. Instead of viewing this as "spirit" possession, she sees it as "demon" possession describing her experience as a "demon [taking] possession of her body."<sup>37</sup> This represents the previously discussed tendency to categorize unfamiliar spiritual concepts as demonic. After this incident her peers blackball her, making this an extremely difficult time in her life. Unlike her other encounters with the spiritual world, this time a spirit possessed her. Even though Lena has been a part of the spiritual world since birth, she has a hard time dealing with the spiritual realm because she does not understand it.

Miss Lizzie, Lena's grandmother, is perhaps the most complicated character in the novel. Similar to Nellie, her position on Christianity is very clear, however, how she feels about conjure is complicated. For example, as she recalls her late husbands' fondness for New Orleans, "the city of Voudoun,"<sup>38</sup> she discounts, conjure as "voodoo stuff,"<sup>39</sup> identical to Nellie's characterization of Nurse Bloom's rituals as "hocus-pocus."<sup>40</sup> Nellie describes Miss Lizzie in the same fashion as she characterizes Nurse

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<sup>36</sup> Ronald Takaki, "The Tempest in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery," *Journal of American History* no. 79.3 (1992); 908.

<sup>37</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 219.

<sup>38</sup> Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 60.

Bloom, “You know how she is about all this old-timey stuff, she’s almost as bad as Nurse Bloom.”<sup>41</sup>

Telling stories about “haunts of all kinds,”<sup>42</sup> Miss Lizzie admits to wanting to be haunted by her late husband. She stated that “others could see ghosts when looking over [Lena’s] shoulder”<sup>43</sup> since she was born with a caul covering her face. One day an owl enters the house through the chimney while Miss Lizzie and Lena are home alone. Miss Lizzie tells Lena that “a bird in the house is a sure sign that there’s gonna be a death in the family,”<sup>44</sup> indicating that she interprets a sign from nature as an omen, signaling her beliefs in conjure. The owl crashes through the window in the dining room, afterwards, Miss Lizzie insists that they hurry up and get the house cleaned so they will not have to tell anyone a bird was in the house and that the window could be replaced before Lena’s father, Jonah, noticed it was broken. Later that evening Miss Lizzie dies in her sleep, causing Lena to become distressed. She felt that if she had told someone about Miss Lizzie’s revelation regarding the owl in the house, she could have prevented her grandmother’s death.

Following her death, the ghost of Miss Lizzie tries to comfort Lena by encouraging her to open up about her feelings of insanity and uncertainty. The visit from her grandmother leads to Lena feeling “lucky to be able to see ghosts.”<sup>45</sup> Much like the spirit of Rachel, Miss Lizzie also serves as a spiritual mentor to Lena. While talking to Lena about her experiences she finally help her to understand them. She lets Lena know that feelings of insanity among black women are okay because life “made us that way,”

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<sup>41</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 42-43.

<sup>43</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 56.

<sup>44</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 243.

<sup>45</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 261.

assuring Lena that [c]razy ain't all bad...Sometimes it's the only thing that protects you."<sup>46</sup> Miss Lizzie states that insanity is a defense mechanism for black women. As a mentor, Miss Lizzie's spiritual presence helps give Lena positive understanding of her powers. Becoming a member of the spiritual world has helped her to better appreciate Lena being special which is why she so strongly encourages her to embrace her powers and use them to find and love herself. As the story comes to an end Miss Lizzie explains to Lena that her supernatural powers are gifts. "What you are, baby, it's a gift. It's like in the Bible. It's your birthright. There's gifts that you're given in this world that you just can't throw away."<sup>47</sup> Miss Lizzie condemns her daughter-in-law Nellie for ignoring Nurse Bloom's advice about the caul tea and preserving the caul; she relays the consequences of disregarding the ritualistic process to Lena.

In African American culture, the concept of call and response reflects the "soul" of the community whereas *caul* and response in *Baby of the Family* represents the "soul" of the narrative. Like Dash, Ansa also seeks to underscore the "Africanisms that tell us to respect" our ancestors as well as making a connection between those "living and those who have passed on."<sup>48</sup> In *Baby of the Family*, spirits represent cultural ancestral figures that not only pass on wisdom but also advocate healing, spiritually and psychologically. The ghost story is central to the narrative much like the Unborn Child in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Ansa's ghost story establishes *Baby of the Family* within a lineage of African American female artists who centralize the ghost story in their narratives such as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Julie Dash.

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<sup>46</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 262.

<sup>47</sup> Ansa, *Baby of the Family*, 265.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Carroll, *I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like: The Voice and Vision of Black Women Writers* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1994), 21.



## Chapter Five

“This ain’t nothin’ but a vapor”: Conjuring up a Love Story in

### *The Hand I Fan With*

“Where there are preachers, there are also conjurers; where there are conversions there are dreams and visions. And where there is faith, there is, and ever continues to be, magic.”<sup>1</sup>

“Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself. Such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles. And the belief in the power of water to sanctify in baptism. Belief in magic is older than writing.”<sup>2</sup>

The sequel to *Baby of the Family* is *The Hand I Fan With*. Ansa opens the novel by creating a storm known as Cleer Flo’. Cleer Flo’ is what happens when the usually muddy waters turn a clear green color. This storm is a revision of the ships at bay in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. According to Nagueyalti Warren, the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, revises Frederick Douglass’ “apostrophe to the ships in Chesapeake Bay,”<sup>3</sup> in his memoir. Gates write, “Afro-American literary history is characterized by such tertiary formal revisions...often taken from different generations or periods within the traditions.”<sup>4</sup> The differences between these three tropes

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 229. There are distinct differences between the terms Hoodoo and Voodoo. Hoodoo is practiced in secret by an individual. Voodoo had priests and priestesses; it is an organized religion in which there is syncretism with the orisha of Yorubaland personified in the images of Catholic saints.

<sup>3</sup> Nagueyalti Warren, “Echoing Zora: Ansa’s Other Hand in *The Hand I Fan With*,” *CLA Journal* no. 3.46 (2003); 362

<sup>4</sup> Warren, “Echoing Zora,” 362.

are very simple. Douglass' apostrophe is about a troubled state of mind that longs for freedom from an oppressive system. Hurston's opening similarly longs for freedom, but freedom from gender stereotypes. Ansa's Cleer Flo' symbolizes the state of mind Lena is in. At the time of Cleer Flo,' Lena's state of mind is that of loneliness and her desire to have somebody in her life.

At the end of *Baby of the Family*, Miss Lizzie urges Lena to get in touch with Nurse Bloom to learn about herself, her caul and her powers. In the sequel, *The Hand I Fan*, the reader discerns that Lena kept putting off going to see Nurse Bloom. When she finally did, when she was seventeen years old; it was too late. At that that time Nurse Bloom was "suffering from early senility" and "just smiled when Lena came into her room. The old woman did not even know who she was."<sup>1</sup> Lena felt that the visions she had, the spirits she saw, the feelings she experienced and the voices she heard were all connected to Mulberry so she wanted to get away. She saw going away to college as being liberating. She just knew the things that terrorized her on a daily basis such as "the sleepwalking, the childhood memories of ghosts, her skewered premonitions, the hatred the girls at school still harbored toward her, the fear that just about anybody could be a ghost"<sup>2</sup> would be behind her once she left the town to attend college.

She attended Xavier University in New Orleans, a move Lena purposely made because "she knew she would have the support of the nuns at Martin de Porres for a Catholic institution" and also because New Orleans was just far enough away for safety."<sup>3</sup> Lena soon found out she could not out run the terrifying experiences that plagued her all of her life. At night her "wild screaming and thrashing about in her

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<sup>1</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 121.

<sup>2</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 122.

sleep”<sup>4</sup> caused the entire dormitory to call her strange, black balling her like her peers in high school did. The only person who embraces Lena is a fellow student named Marian, but everyone calls her “Sister.” Sister takes Lena to “Vieux Carré” or the French Quarter to see Madame Delphie. Sister tells Lena that “the reason you’re having these bad nights is the witches are riding you, that’s all. And I know somebody who can fix that!”<sup>5</sup> They travel to Madame Delphie’s small wooden shotgun house by taking the No. 18 bus to Elysian Fields towards the French Quarter, down Canal Street, then to Dumaine Street and halfway down the block on Rampart. Once they get there Madame Delphi tells Lena that she cannot fix her because she does not have her birth caul, however, she says she can take Lena “a step closer, maybe.”<sup>6</sup> Madame Delphie goes through a ritualistic process in which the white candle she gives Lena “can help straighten what has been crossed”<sup>7</sup> if Lena believes in its power.

With Madame Delphie, Ansa, channels Marie Laveau, who is arguably the most famous conjure woman. Marie Laveau is also known as the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans.<sup>8</sup> While conducting field research for *Mules and Men*, Hurston made the observation that “New Orleans is now and has ever been the hoodoo capital of America. Great names in rites that vie with those of Hayti...keep alive the powers of Africa.”<sup>9</sup> Hurston in a letter to Langston Hughes wrote of Marie Laveau, “I have landed in [her]

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<sup>4</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 135.

<sup>8</sup> Voodoo is the spelling when referring to the religion during the early nineteenth century. “Voodoo” is the Americanized spelling that carries negative connotations such as “voodoo science” and “voodoo economics.”

<sup>9</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 229.

kingdom and I expect her to wear the crown someday.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Voodoo Queen*, Robert Tallant refers to Marie Laveau as “the last great American witch.”<sup>11</sup> He continues on to say “yet her art bore no more resemblance to that of the New England witches...than Boston resembles New Orleans...Hers was jungle-born African in origin dooienne ever to reign on this continent.”<sup>12</sup> Marie Laveau was known for her striking good looks of which Tallant describes as “a mixture of Negro, Indian and white bloods...tall, statuesque...with dark curl[y] hair, ‘good’ features, dark skin that had a distinctly reddish cast, and fierce black eyes,”<sup>13</sup> as well as for her power. One New Orleanian spoke of seeing Laveau when he was young: “[S]he came walkin’ into Congo Square wit’ her head up in the air like a queen. Her skirts swished when she walked and everybody step back to let her pass. All the people- white and colored- start sayin’ that’s the most powerful woman there is. They say, ‘There goes Marie Laveau!’ and me I was little and I got kind of scared. You know they used to scare little children then by tellin’ ‘em they was gonna give ‘em to Marie Laveau.”<sup>14</sup> Her ceremonies were mostly public, and much like Lena, Laveau also a devout Catholic used a syncretic blend of religions in her conjuring ceremonies. Laveau included Catholic influences such as holy water, incense and statues of the saints in her Voodoo ceremonies.

The African American healing woman, female root worker, Voudou Queen, or conjure woman has appeared in the literature of writers throughout the African diaspora from as early as 1789 with Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of*

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<sup>10</sup> Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, August 6, 1928 in Kaplan, Ed., *Zora Neal Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 124.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Tallant, *The Voodoo Queen* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1983), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo Queen*, 3. The dictionary defines doyen as a female who is most respected or prominent person in a particular field.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1983), 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans*, 56-57.

*Olaudah Equiano* to the more recent *Yellow Moon* (2009) by Jewell Parker Rhodes. The conjure woman has been met with a lot of skepticism. For example, in *Olaudah Equiano's* reflection on his meeting with one during his travel to Philadelphia, he makes it clear that he was not impressed with her. He stated "I put little faith in this story at first, as I could not conceive that any mortal could for see the future disposals of Providence, nor did I believe in any other revelation than that of the Holy Scriptures."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Nat Turner expressed his disbelief in the conjure woman. He claimed that his influence over the slave community of Hampton, Virginia was not brought about "by means of conjuring and such like tricks-for to [the other slaves] I always spoke of such things with contempt."<sup>16</sup> Frederick Douglass is among those who detached themselves from certain, often misunderstood aspects of African Diasporic cultural traditions. In his memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he mentions an incident where he is given a root by Sandy Jenkins for his protection from the slave breaker,<sup>17</sup> Covey. Douglass' response was, "I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it."<sup>18</sup> The views of Equiano, Turner and Douglass are challenged at the turn of the century with the publication of *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales* (1899) by Charles Wadell Chesnutt.

In this collection of tales everyone believed in the power of conjure whether they were black, white, slave or master. Chesnutt's publication set the tone for African American fiction by providing a safe place for the conjure woman and the power of

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<sup>15</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* ed. Robert Allison (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* ed. Kenneth Greenburg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>17</sup> A slave breaker is someone who makes sure the slaves obey their masters by whipping them.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Parts 6-7* (Charleston: Forgotten Books, 1960), 76.

conjunction. Lee contends that “[r]ather than the negative association of witchcraft,” within Chesnut’s stories “conjuring has been an empowering concept...conjuring pays homage to an African past, while providing a present day idiom for magic, power and ancient wisdom, within a pan-African cultural context.”<sup>19</sup> This argument identifies Chesnut’s publication as the single most important text of the early twentieth century for fiction that situate conjure within its narrative. In 1934 with the publication of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Zora Neale Hurston followed Chesnut’s lead by centering her novel on African American folk beliefs and conjuring practices. It would be another thirty years before contemporary African American writers pick up where their literary ancestors left off.

The Black Arts and Black Power Movements of the 1960s are indirectly responsible for the re-emergence of the conjure woman in the African American literary tradition. African cultural traditions such as conjuring and root work came through as a subject that captured the interest of many literary scholars. This held true of the Women’s Rights Movement out of which Deborah McDowell and Barbara Smith called for Black Feminist Criticism in literary studies. In 1983, Toni Cade Bambara commented on the new direction of the consciousness of women of color was headed in. “We’re more inclined now, women of color, to speak of black midwives and the medicine women of the various communities when we talk of health care rather than assume we have to set up women’s health collectives on the same order as non-colored women have.”<sup>20</sup> The 1970s and 1980s brought an explosion of African American women writers who made the conjure woman a cultural icon. The creative works by African American female

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<sup>19</sup> Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writer’s*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 246.

artists such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) were among the first novels by African American female artists that allowed African cultural traditions and religious expressions such as conjure, to permeate their texts. Lee emphasizes that "[a]lthough the authors write works that present a full range of African American folklore, including proverbs, myths, superstitions, folk language, folktales, folk customs and customary behaviors, dance and music, the figure of the granny midwife/ woman healer provides a pivotal structural and thematic framework."<sup>21</sup> In the 1990s, stories of African American female writers took shape as southern-born grandmothers whose healing powers consisted of cod liver oil, dreams of fish (indicating someone is pregnant) and associated body aches with the weather. Tina McElroy Ansa has joined other African American female artists by placing the conjure women at the center of her narrative.

Ansa's conjure woman, Lena McPherson, is forty five years old and the only surviving member of the McPherson family. Her parents died in a plane accident and her brothers from heart attacks before they reached the age of forty. She inherited "The Place" from her parents and also runs a realty business, making her a very wealthy woman. Her home is situated on a one hundred acre estate on the bend of the Ocawatchee River. Each room in her million dollar dream home is named after either a dead relative or a ghost. For example, the Great Jonah Room is named after her father. Lena finds herself without family and love so she uses her material resources to supply the needs of everyone else, thus becoming the hand everyone fans with. The phrase "hand I fan with" is commonly used by southern black women, signifying them "as an object to be useful

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*, 20.

and used.”<sup>22</sup> Lena takes care of everyone to stave off her loneliness. Part of the reason why she is lonely is because of the curses the caul can bring as a result of not being preserved. One of the curses of the caul is Lena being able to “gaze into another’s soul.”<sup>23</sup> She finds it hard to maintain relationships because just when Lena “got past the kissing stage and moved to the caressing stage, even before [she] got completely undressed, Lena would have to call a halt and stop the graphic pictures in her head. It was never anything like murder or assault on another human being...”<sup>24</sup> The difficulties Lena faced when becoming intimate with men were “because the powers of her birth caul would kick in and she could suddenly see.”<sup>25</sup> The powers of her caul saved Lena a lot of time and future heartache.

After marrying and giving birth to twins, Marian, but everyone calls her Sister became tired of Lena being by herself. She decided to conduct a ceremony under a full moon to summon a man for Lena before leaving for a year’s sabbatical to Sierra Leone. The ritual included candles, “white for peace, pink for love, red for winning,”<sup>26</sup> snakeskin, a vial of salt, and a picture of saints. They also used “Sister’s Adam and Eve root and Lena’s syncretism of religions. This syncretic blend included “Catholicism, voodoo, hoodoo, New Age mysticism, goddess worship and black southern Baptist/Protestant/Holiness.”<sup>27</sup> Once all of these ingredients were put together the gods and goddesses were called upon to send Lena a man.

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<sup>22</sup> Warren, “Echoing Zora,” 362.

<sup>23</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 266.



Although Lena participated in the ritualistic ceremony to conjure up a man, therefore embracing her powers, she is not prepared for the aftermath. While driving to work she feels a breeze on the back of her neck and at home while swimming she feels a presence and one day while in the shower she hears someone trying to get her attention, “Lena, it’s me. Herman.”<sup>28</sup> Confused Lena does not know what to say or do. Herman tells her he is a spirit and she thinks “[i]t’s the ghosts and stuff. It’s starting again.”<sup>29</sup> He reminds her that it was she who called him. Covering herself in a towel, she steps out of the shower to see a man in physical form, not in spirit form, standing in her bathroom. Warren suggests that the ritual Lena and Sister perform affected the nature of existence and alter the nature of reality explaining that “[t]he women speak and their words are made flesh.”<sup>30</sup> Lena fell immediately fell in love with the man she saw. “It was a face that she had seen in the arrangement of the leaves on a tree in the woods, a shape that was there in the sunlight, then gone in the shade. It was the face that she had seen in the clouds. It was a face that showed innate gentleness. It was a face, she realized, suddenly that she had seen in her dreams.”<sup>31</sup> This passage echoes Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which the protagonist Janie Mae Crawford dreamt of Tea Cake her third husband. She described him by saying “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom- a pear tree blossom in spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his strong footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God.”<sup>32</sup> Herman appears to be about thirty five-years old with skin like “bittersweet chocolate,” reminding Lena of an

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<sup>28</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Warren, “Echoing Zora,” 368.

<sup>31</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 152.

<sup>32</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1937), 126.

“old-timey...farmer,”<sup>33</sup> much like Janie’s Tea Cake. Ansa participates in what Elizabeth Meese calls textuality<sup>34</sup> with the many parallels to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Warren argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* becomes the narrative antecedent for Ansa’s textualization with its “double-voiced and signified text.”<sup>35</sup>

If one were to estimate the time frame of *Their Eyes Watching God*, they could conclude that at this time Tea Cake would be about one hundred years old, making Herman the spirit of Tea Cake. Herman is a one hundred year old spirit who has been with Lena since she was born, although she was not aware of his presence. He explains how his death was his fault by coming up on a mule from behind too quickly because his “mind was somewhere else,” causing the mule to kick him in the head. “I was dead ‘fo’ I hit the ground.”<sup>36</sup> Warren contends that the kick of gunfire that killed Tea Cake becomes the kick of the mule that killed Herman. Before Tea Cake is killed he is out of his mind because he has rabies and Herman does not know where his mind is when he is killed.

For Lena, Herman is not a “Savior, her Emmanuel, her Jehovah, [or] Redeemer,”<sup>37</sup> instead he becomes her teacher. He teaches her how to live and enjoy her own life instead of catering to the needs of everyone else, being their “fan.” Lena spends almost all of her time with a man no one has ever met or even seen for that matter. The people of Mulberry become angry when she makes them figure things out for themselves. As she distance herself from them, the manager of The Place warns her that “this town

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<sup>33</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Textuality is the process of producing a text through the transformation of other texts. Elizabeth Meese, “Orality and Textuality in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” in *Crossing the Double Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Elizabeth Meese (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 61.

<sup>35</sup> Warren, “Echoing Zora,” 362.

<sup>36</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 310.

just now beginning to see that you feeding them out of a long handle-spoon! And girl they don't like it one bit."<sup>38</sup> Since no one has actually seen Herman, the townspeople just assume she has lost her mind so they try to have her committed at the insane asylum in Milledgeville, causing Lena to become ticked off. Through Herman, Lena finally learns how to differentiate between giving to others and sacrificing herself. He admonishes her by telling her, "You can't be the hand everybody fan wid, Lena. Then you ain't nothin' fo' you'se'f."<sup>39</sup>

After Lena learns all the life lessons Herman teaches her, he tells her it is time for him to go. His physical presence disappears on the one year anniversary of his presence. Lena becomes very distraught begging Herman not to leave. He explains to her that he has to leave; life does not last forever and his physical presence 'ain't nothin' but a vapor."<sup>40</sup> Lena's extreme anger provokes a storm so powerful it washed away the bridge that connected her property to Mulberry, causing her to become further disconnected to the townspeople. The tears she cried caused the Ocawatchee River to overflow and Herman tells her "Yo' anger callin' up storms. Yo' loneliness extendin' over the county. Yo' spittin' causin' Cleer Flo'."<sup>41</sup> The storm she brewed up has threatened to destroy her property. During the storm, Keba, the thoroughbred horse she and Herman took care of, goes into labor. Since the storm washed the bridge away and knocked out all the power. She delivered the foal. Helping Keba brings Lena back to her senses. Finally accepting all of her powers, she "called on all her powers of faith and belief and love and gratitude and did the work before her. She called on all that Herman had told her and taught her and

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<sup>38</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 440.

<sup>40</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 427.

<sup>41</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 430.

shown her since he had shown up a year before and concentrated on Keba and her predicament.”<sup>42</sup> After calming herself and asking for help she receives it.

In the barn, Herman reappears in his physical form to help her as well as the spirits of her family and others: her mother, Nellie, father, Jonah, brothers, Raymond and Edward, her grandmother, Miss Lizzie, Nurse Bloom, the doctor who delivered her, Dr. Williams and Rachel, the spirit she met on the beach at seven years old while on vacation with her family one summer. The birth of the foal symbolizes a renewal for Lena as she takes on the role of a midwife, “[a]s she marveled at the birth of Keba’s foal, she marveled at the wonder of her own transformation and the gift of her family of ghosts.”<sup>43</sup> Although it hurts, Lena finally accepts Herman’s transition back into the spiritual world. She can still feel his presence, knowing he will always be with her.

*The Hand I Fan With* ends similarly to that of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Both Lena and Janie acknowledge the spirits of their men. The following passage shows how Hurston concludes her novel:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon life a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, Ansa concludes: “A slight change in the temperature of the room told Lena Herman had just entered. Then, she felt him at her ear looking over her shoulder and counting with her under his spectral breath: ‘Nought from nought leaves nought.’

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<sup>42</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 447.

<sup>43</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 451.

<sup>44</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 227.

While standing in front of the Varnette P. Honeywood calendar in her kitchen counting the days since her last menstrual period, Lena softly chuckled to herself and sounding like her dead grandfather about to set off on an adventure, said to herself and Herman, “Well Lord.”<sup>45</sup> This leads to an ambiguous conclusion; she is either pregnant or the adventure Lena alludes to could be menopause. Like their literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston, who structured her narratives around Africanisms and religious expressions, Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa also placed them at the center of their creative works.

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<sup>45</sup> Ansa, *The Hand I Fan With*, 462.

## Conclusion

The distinct beauty and culture of the Sea Islands have made them a geographically important site of meaning in African American cultural history. This rich cultural history continued due to the climate's strong resemblance to that of West Africa and the isolation enslaved Africans had to endure or having little contact with outside influences, namely their European slavers. What this translated to was a continuation of African cultural traditions or Africanisms and religious expressions that challenged the notion that the Middle Passage caused enslaved Africans to lose sight of their heritage once they reached their final destination throughout the New World or African Diaspora. The groundbreaking works of Melville Herskovits, Lorenzo Dow Turner and the historical collection *Drums and Shadows* validated the Sea Islands culture and its language by tracing it back to West Africa through cultural analysis, linguistic and oral recollections.

During the 1940s heated debates surrounding African cultural retention in America (more specifically within the Sea Islands) catapulted the interests of scholars. These arguments tapered off in the 1950s; however, the 1960s and 1970s brought a restoration of interests in the Sea Islands as well as Gullah culture. For the duration of these two decades social, political and cultural movements motivated African Americans to look to their African past to re-connect to their *African-ness*.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, African American female artists highlighted the importance of oral history, memory, and folklore as essential themes for recovering the

the history of black people, more specifically women. During the Black Arts Movement, many artists returned to Africa. Re-invoking traditions of Africana Womanism, Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara were among those who called upon Africa to visualize such themes while situating their narratives in the American southern landscape. This approach influenced the “theoretical lens” of upcoming artists of the 1990s like Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa. Dash and Ansa have continued this trend by focusing on this specific setting, structuring their narratives within Geechee cultural traditions. These Geechee cultural traditions within the Gullah region are visualizations that represent the most authentic African American community within the United States to date.

Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* was the first national theatrical released film written, directed, and produced by an African American woman. This achievement is among the many firsts for black women filmmakers. The tradition of black women becoming filmmakers started back in 1922 with Tressie Saunders who made the first film ever to be directed and produced by a black woman in the United States. The title of her film was *A Woman’s Error*. Zora Neale Hurston was also a trailblazer. During the late 1920s when she was conducting her ethnographic research in places such as Jamaica and the Gullah regions of Florida, she also filmed. This footage included scenes of children playing games and dancing as well as a baptism. Hurston’s ethnographic films are considered to be the earliest surviving documentaries by a black woman. In 1940 while filming in Beaufort, South Carolina she also captured footage of the landscape, farm workers and prison laborers. Hurston paved the way for black women to bring Gullah life to screen, introducing new audiences to the Sea Islands while emphasizing the importance of these barrier islands to American culture and history.

When *Daughters of the Dust* was released, it opened doors for other black women filmmakers throughout the Diaspora to break into the independent film industry. Undoubtedly, Africanisms and religious expressions in African American female artist's works extend well beyond the creative works examined in this study, with artists such as Jamaica Kincaid and Maryse Condé contributing to the discourse on African survivals through their fiction narratives. During the late twentieth century, the legacy established by our literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston echoed responses from Diasporic female voices such as Ngozi Onwurah. Onwurah's 1994 film *Welcome II the Terrordome* was the first independent Black British feature to be released. In the opening scene, Ibo landing made its way back to Africa. Filmed in sepia tones, West African people are shown shackled and chained at their necks and also at their legs. Myth or reality, these Ibos are seen walking into the sea to end their enslavement, "signifyin(g)" their spiritual regeneration. At the end they emerge raising their arms to break free of their shackles. Onwurah follows the legend as told by Bilal Muhammad in *Daughters of the Dust*, 1991.

Ansa also used this version of the legend. In *Baby of the Family*, Rachel the ghost Lena encountered also gained her freedom by walking into water. When the film adaptation of *Baby of the Family* is released, it will place Ansa among those black women filmmakers who have responded to the legacy Hurston established as a novelist and filmmaker. According to Ansa, the release of her first film based on her debut novel *Baby of the Family* will come in 2012. Ansa will function as the writer and producer of the film. Her husband Joneé will direct the film. The production company releasing the film is DownSouth Filmworks Inc. This production company was established by Ansa and her husband on St. Simons Island, Georgia.



The beginning of the twenty first century marked an important period for Gullah cultural activism. There is a Gullah saying that goes “*Ef oona dey frum de lowcountree an de islandt, lookya, e da time fa go bak. Disyah da wey fa cum togedda wid wi people fa hold on ta de tings wa wi peepol lef wi.*” In English this simply means that “if you are someone that is concerned about the preservation of the branch of Africa's tree that has grown in America, this is a way for you to assist in nurturing and protecting that branch.” Historically the Gullah culture was referred to as “backward” but has since been moved into mainstream culture. Highways, land development, and tourism have impacted Gullah communities. Many voices have spoken up to address the transformation of these communities.

Congressman James Clyburn of South Carolina (the first black congressman from South Carolina since Reconstruction) introduced the Preservation Act to Congress in 2006. This bill was formed to designate the Sea Islands as the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Cultural Corridor. In October of 2007, Congress passed the Preservation Act bill and the National Park Service announced its 15 member Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor Commission in Charleston, South Carolina. Emory Campbell serves as the chairperson of the Gullah/Geechee Corridor as well as the Executive Director Emeritus of the Penn Center in South Carolina. The Gullah Heritage Trails is also located in South Carolina based on Hilton Head Island; this trail is a 100 mile round bus trip narrated by fourth generation Gullahs. The tour highlights Gullah family compounds and the 50- acre National Historic Landmark District. It also includes a lunch consisting of authentic Gullah cuisine.

Gullah preservation efforts have taken off because of the growing concerns surrounding the survival of Gullah culture as well as communities. Preservation efforts have taken on many forms. In the early 1990s Alphonso Brown started the Gullah Tours in South Carolina. The two hour tour includes stops along the Underground Railroad, Catfish Row (originally known as Cabbage Row and the inspiration for George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*), the Old Slave Mart, the Sweetgrass Market and the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 2005, the Gullah Bible, *De Nyew Testament* was published. This represents a strong example of preservation efforts.

World renowned artist Jonathan Green captures Gullah life often as it pertains to female kinship ties. His compelling works have been published by the University of South Carolina Press as a photo essay entitled *Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green*. His exhibitions have gained attention in the United States, Italy, the West Indies, Germany, Japan and Switzerland. Green's vibrant artwork is created in his studio, *Jonathan Green Studios Inc.* situated on Charleston's island town Daniel Island, South Carolina. In his article, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," (2004) Snipe explores artistic flowering in this locale. Along the lines of this theme, the Columbia City Ballet celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary season by bringing Green's images to life. William Starrett's *Off the Wall and Onto the Stage: Dancing the Art of Jonathan Green*, (2010) combines ballet and music (gospel, jazz, folk songs and hymns) to explore the meaning of 22 pieces of artwork in a series of vignettes. The production features the Benedict College Gospel Choir, the number one Collegiate Gospel Choir in the United States. This performance also introduces new audiences to Gullah life and culture just like the works of Dash and Ansa.

During a scene in *Daughters of the Dust* a group of children were leaning over a “wish book” pointing out all the things they would buy once they leave their homeland for mainland. My “wish” list for the future of this work is to conduct first-hand interviews with Green, Ansa, Dash and Barbara O, which will significantly add to the research methodology. When the film *Baby of the Family* is released, I will be able to expand on themes discussed within this thesis through a critical analysis and eventually maybe interview Ansa. Also, an interview with Dash will be essential not only for adding originality to the work but also because of her connection with actress Barbara-O. O starred in Dash’s 1977 film *Diary of an African Nun*. She was also featured in Haile Gerima’s classic independent black film *Bush Mama* (1979). Barbara-O, a native of Dayton, Ohio also played the lead role of Yellow Mary in *Daughters of the Dust*. Yellow Mary is central to the film. Barbara-O’s insight into her character and the nature of the trans-Atlantic slave trade will provide a unique prospective for this work.

Although my concentration has been on the fiction of contemporary African American female artists set in the south (more specifically the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia), the focus of African survivals within other literary genres is immeasurable. The analysis of these survivals written by African American female artists and set in the urban north has been relatively untouched except for Gayl Jones’ 1998 novel, *The Healing*. To take this research further I will incorporate primary archival resources at the Penn Center and the College of Charleston Avery Research Center as well as secondary resource materials such as slave narratives, novels, short stories, film scripts and plays by female in addition to male artists. These works feature characters, themes, and motifs that are readily available for much further in-depth critical analysis.

Beyond writing, my future efforts to preserve and capture this research will also extend into the realm of the documentary. The study of Africanisms and religious expressions in these genres (as also reimagined in the creative works of Julie Dash and Tina McElroy Ansa) will further provide critical insight into the intersectionality of race, class and gender not only within Gullah culture but American culture also.

Parenthetically, my interest in this area of research began with Marlon Riggs' documentary *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1995). At one point during the film the discussion turned to the Gullah language. Although this discussion encompassed a small section of the documentary, it was an eye opener for me. After hours of researching the Gullah language, I eventually came across African survivals associated with the Sea Islands and Gullah culture. I soon recognized some of these survivals such as Flying Africans and Ibo Landing in the writings of African American female artists such as Morrison and Dash. By situating their narratives in the genre of fiction, African American female artists like Dash and Ansa introduced new audiences to an important landscape, the Sea Islands, as well as the Gullah heritage and culture. These creative works highlight the Sea Islands' history of land ownership and recall tight knit African American communities. These works also present the Gullah as self-expressive people who speak a language that provides a sense of community and continuity with the past. Through linguistic studies involving Gullah and rigorous academic research, younger generations can continue the preservation of Geechee cultural traditions and ultimately make discoveries that will be as innovative and significant as the scholarship of Herskovits, Hurston and Turner.

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