

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: “WELCUM, OONA. TIME FA WE LAAN BOUT GULLAH” (WELCOME, EVERYONE. TIME FOR US TO LEARN ABOUT GULLAH): PENN CENTER’S ROLE IN THE PRESERVATION OF GULLAH GEECHEE’S CULTURAL HERITAGE

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“Welcum, Oona. Time Fa We Laan Bout Gullah” (Welcome, Everyone. Time for us to learn about Gullah): Penn Center’s Role in the Preservation of Gullah Geechee’s Cultural Heritage focuses on the historic Penn Center, formerly the Penn School, on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, as a selected site of analytical inquiry and as a premier cultural institution that preserves Gullah history and heritage. This project makes use of interdisciplinary methods from several fields—material culture, museum studies, self-ethnography, visual analysis, and historic preservation, among others—to illuminate the history and culture of the Gullah people. I use these methods to argue that the Penn Center presents a competing “voice” to prevailing discourses because it rewrites and revalues Gullah history. This dissertation delineates how the Gullahs have responded to the dominant discourses through counter-narratives, cultural practices, and individual and community activism. It

argues that the Penn Center disrupts discourses seeking to stereotype the Gullah culture by functioning as a site of resistance to mainstream definitions, as a site of the reclamation of voice and agency in the process of self-definition, and as a site for the preservation and celebration of Gullah Geechee culture and cultural identity. In demonstrating the contribution of the Penn Center, this dissertation renders attention to issues related to race, class, and gender as these issues have surfaced in the history and culture under discussion.

This project also offers analysis of material culture housed at the Penn Center's York W. Bailey Museum. Drawing upon the theories of Stuart Hall on cultural identity and E. McClung Fleming on material culture analysis, this study offers analysis of cultural objects and photographic images found in this museum space. This dissertation concludes with oral history narratives that further illuminate the competing "voices" found that shed light on Gullah cultural identity and the manner in which Gullah people must navigate and negotiate the larger American sociopolitical landscape.

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GEECHEE’S CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Dedication

To My Uncle “Bubba”—Roosevelt Chaplin

You taught me to love unconditionally, to dream incessantly, and to make these dreams come true. I only wish you were here to relish this moment with me, but I know you are at the heavenly gates smiling and that you cradled me as I walked this journey and other journeys. Thank you for not missing any of my school plays and for picking me up from college even on the days that you suffered a sickle cell crisis. No one except you knew the pain that you endured, but you never complained. You always said your nieces were smart, wonderful, and beautiful, and because we believed your words, we traveled proudly and with individuality. It is because of your grounding and your teachings that I overcame and will continue to overcome numerous challenges. Thank you for instilling in me what it means to acquire an education and to use it for the common good. I will always take your memories with me.

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Chapter 1: Passing on Gullah Narratives: An Introduction to Gullah History

“Once I heard about them, no amount of library research and no amount of reading about the Sea Islanders could quench my desire actually to see for myself how they managed to retain so many more remnants of their West African ancestry than African-Americans in other parts of the country.”
Patricia Jones-Jackson from *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (1987)

"Welcum, Oona. Time Fa We Laan Bout Gullah: Penn Center's Role in the Preservation of Gullah Geechee's Cultural Heritage" attempts to situate the reader in the world of Gullah culture, which is the topic of this dissertation. "Welcum, Oona. Time Fa We Laan Bout Gullah" can be loosely translated to mean "Welcome, everyone. Time to learn about Gullah." I choose the Gullah phrase both to steep the reader in the Gullah language—the language of my childhood and of the stories of my youth—and to engage the reader in the act of interpretation that this dissertation undertakes. The subtitle specifies the particular focus of this analysis: the Gullah material culture found at the historic Penn Center on St. Helena, South Carolina. To understand why this subject has become the focus of my life for the past two years, however, the reader must also understand where I am from and who I come from.

Growing up in the inner-city enclaves of Charleston, South Carolina, I listened to and watched my family and friends pass on Gullah's rich traditions, customs, and folklore. These generations of Gullahs embraced the culture by speaking our language and making cultural treasures, such as sweetgrass baskets, casting nets, and food. My sisters and I learned the Gullah language easily since we grew up in a household with three generations of Gullah women who were steeped in the tradition. These women also placed constant significance on owning the land in the rural areas of Charleston County, which they affectionately referred to as the

“country.” While she completed her weekly gardening duties, my mother¹ narrated to me why it was important to own and maintain the land, and those stories still resonate in my mind until today. Memories of growing up in the Gullah community are part of what propelled me to write this dissertation and shape *how* I write this dissertation. I vividly recall the poignant, non-linear narratives told to me throughout my childhood and young adulthood, which highlight the close knit communities and the steely determination of quiet, but powerful women like my mother, grand-aunt, and great-grandmother nurturing me. As I matured into adulthood, I came to understand this cradling culture serves as a bridge linking my past and present, connecting me to my cultural heritage and history.

The Gullah Geechee culture and language were developed by descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to America primarily because of their skills in the cultivation of rice and who lived in relative isolation on the coasts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Their geographical location along the southeastern coast of the United States enabled them to maintain their language, foodways, customs, and spiritual practices throughout slavery to present. Their contributions to the American national and cultural fabric can be traced back as early as the 17th century, and their heritage is rooted in West African traditions. It is commonly believed by many in their communities that the term *Gullah* is derived from Angola. According to Emory Campbell, a Gullah expert and former director of the Penn Center, “[i]t is widely believed that the regularity of enslaved Angolans arriving at various coastal ports gave rise to the term ‘Gola Negroes[,]’ which later

¹ My mother, Ella M. Chaplin, remained connected to her rural roots by working close to the land, despite moving to the city of Charleston as a young adult. Her oral life history in the dissertation illuminates her customs, traditions, and beliefs.

became Gullah.”² The term *Geechee* also has geographical roots, and Campbell also identifies the origin of this word: “...Many[,] particularly African Americans[,] use the term *Geechee* to describe this culture. It is commonly accepted that enslaved West Africans were smuggled into Georgia waterways settling along the Ogeechee River in South Georgia.”³ These historical and geopolitical factors are keys to understanding the survival of and continued interest of the Gullah *Geechees*. Some people from the Carolinas prefer the term Gullah, while some from Georgia and north Florida might prefer the term *Geechee*. For the sake of this scholarship, I will use the term Gullah to apply to particular regions of South Carolina: the Penn Center and its surrounding areas.

While I am aware of my personal cultural investment in this project, I am also keenly conscious of the broader historical and cultural validity of a research project such as the one I undertake here. On my frequent visits to my hometown, many circumstances remind me of the environment of my youth, and I become deeply concerned and saddened by the rapid cultural displacement that is occurring in the Gullah community due to the activity of wealthy economic developers. Many physical and cultural boundaries were and are still present in Charleston, and these physical and mental borders reflect and create class separations in the community. I am reminded of “A Talk to Teachers,” in which James Baldwin explores his feelings of cultural and physical alienation and loss due to socioeconomic inequality: “The Park Avenue I grew up on, which is still standing, is dark and dirty. No one would dream of opening up a Tiffany’s on that Park Avenue, and when you go downstairs

² Emory S. Campbell. *Gullah Cultural Legacies*. (Hilton Head: Gullah Heritage Publishing Services, 2008), 5.

³ *Ibid.*

you discover that you are literally in the white world.... You know—instinctively—that none of this is for you.”⁴ Here, Baldwin expresses his dismay over an area in which resources are not equally available to all residents, particularly children. A similar impact can be felt on my former neighborhood in Charleston, which is no longer a home to working-class Gullah people. The natural terrain of the peninsula has been obliterated by \$500,000 homes and commercialism. What has occurred is a deepening of the socioeconomic, cultural, and racial divide in the city. Cultural displacement has become rapid; however, cultural, racial, and economic separations and boundaries are not recent phenomena. The accelerating divide has produced the need for social and political activism in the Gullah Geechee community and is part of what inspires me to study their history and culture.

Additionally, my choice of career as a congressional aide played a pivotal role in further shaping my resolve to join those dedicated to the preservation and accurate interpretation of this endangered culture and its history. This involvement has also played a pivotal role in further shaping my resolve to write about, explore, and study preservation of my community. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor⁵ arose in response to a history of economic development that has threatened the

⁴ James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” delivered on October 16, 1963, as “The Negro Child: His Self-Image”; originally published in *The Saturday Review*, December 21, 1963. While Baldwin’s essay examines the racial divide between black and white children, my work adapts Baldwin’s premise by applying it to the racial and cultural separation that has happened and still happens to the Gullahs. In fact, one can see this divide—racial, cultural, socio-economical, and otherwise—happening across the country.

⁵ According to *The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan* published in 2012, “during the planning process, the Commission made [the] decision to remove the forward slash in reference to Gullah Geechee people, communities, history, and culture, as it was originally written in the special resource study and subsequent designating law. This change was made in order to represent one culture within the Corridor and to mirror the unique identity that is distinct to the Gullah Geechee cultural community.” Additionally, *The Management Plan* further acknowledges that the Gullah Geechee culture is “multidimensional and dynamic; the culture varies from community to community.”

culture since the 1950s, when Charles Fraser, a wealthy land developer, bulldozed Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, in order to build luxury resorts. Since that time, the Gullah people have been faced with the threat of cultural extinction. The land grabbing, as it is called, jeopardizes and menaces the culture, the vital threads of which have begun to struggle against erosion from the larger American national fabric. Institutions such as the historic Penn Center aid in this struggle. Taking the Penn Center as its locus of inquiry, this dissertation poses a number of pertinent questions: What does this site say about the Gullah culture and cultural identity? How can one read Gullah material culture to reveal discourse on race and gender and as it re-narrates Gullah history? What are the roles of preservationists, community activists, and Gullah scholars in contributing to the sustainability of Gullah culture? How have grassroots organizations, institutions, and individuals captured local, national, and international attention by sustaining this significant heritage?

“Welcum, Oona. Time Fa We Laan Bout Gullah: Penn Center’s Role in Gullah Geechee’s Cultural Preservation” focuses on the Penn Center (formerly known as Penn School) on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, as a selected site of analytical inquiry and a premier cultural institution that preserves Gullah Geechee history and heritage. However, understudied is the importance of the material artifacts—blacksmithing, sweetgrass baskets, and the photographic image—at its York W. Bailey Museum. Because of the multiplicities and diversity of the Gullah Geechee communities, it is impossible to focus on all of the various narratives in the communities. Therefore, it is my aim to draw attention to these material aspects found at the Penn Center. While elucidating the impact of material culture on Gullah

communities, oral history narratives are used to spotlight the nature of the historical and cultural importance of these objects. This project makes use of interdisciplinary methods from several fields—material culture, museum studies, self ethnography, visual analysis, and historic preservation, among others—to illuminate everyday cultural practices of Gullah people. Furthermore, I use these methods to argue that the Penn Center serves as a competing “voice” to prevailing discourses because it rewrites and revalues Gullah history. Lastly, the Center allows for the acknowledgment of notions such as Gullah cultural identity. With attention to race and gender, this study spotlights both the Penn Center and the objects contained in its York W. Bailey Museum (hereafter referred to as the Museum or the YWB Museum) in order to map the manner in which the Penn Center undertakes the preservation of the Gullah culture.

My project reveals that the Gullah culture has been oversimplified, stereotyped, and essentialized in mainstream culture. Then, through archival research, object/material and visual culture analysis, and oral histories, my project debunks these myths and oversimplifications to reveal a people who have proven to be resilient and determined and who have striven to maintain their culture and heritage. Attention to Gullah history and culture and also to the history and role of the Penn Center reveals competing “voices” that counter dominant discourses that devalue the culture. In particular, the dissertation focuses on the Penn Center’s curatorial holdings at the York W. Bailey’s Museum that serves as a disruptive narrative, challenging dominant stories of race, class, and gender that typically circulate around popular depictions of Gullah culture.

Methodology and Methods

Throughout the project, my study reveals how the Gullahs embrace their ancestral heritage through material culture such as blacksmithing objects, sweetgrass baskets, casting nets, and other forms of material culture. These objects evince the ways Gullah culture has survived despite historical change, generational influences, and economic development. Indeed, these objects represent forms of what Stuart Hall would call “cultural forms of resistance.”⁶ This study uncovers the cultural resistance that can be seen in Gullah artifacts displayed in the Museum exhibition and through celebration of African cultural retentions. Blacksmithing, sweetgrass baskets, and the photograph of the midwife/community activist are well preserved material objects from the Gullah culture; however, these objects are not frozen in time. My method also accounts for the ways that these objects are evidence of a dynamic culture that is always changing. Drawing from Hall, I argue that [Gullah cultural products] “belong to the future as much as to the past. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”⁷ Also reflected in the material culture, museum spaces are evidence of an amalgamated culture, as Hall describes in his definition of cultural identity⁸ (for example, African, African American, and American—troubling distinctions among these). Because hybridity is displayed in the museum space, the distinctions between these categories are blurred. For example, the museum space underscores the African

⁶Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 394.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

within the African American and therefore the American, and it shows the interconnectedness of these categories.

Interviews and oral narratives are indispensable given the ways that knowledge is produced in the Gullah culture and community. Oral narratives are used to identify competing ideological voices and to provide historical background on the objects at the Museum. These reveal preservation strategies in various Gullah communities and intangible and tangible aspects of the Gullah culture. These oral narratives are critical to the project because they reveal how the Gullah communities are preserving and continuing their culture (including the creation of material culture such as sweetgrass baskets) in spite of massive land development. The oral tradition is central to the Gullah culture, and one of the tenets in the Gullah tradition is the belief in passing down memories of traditions and values to younger generations. These oral histories also reveal how components of the culture, especially the language,⁹ have been kept alive in spite of the many generational shifts and the historical events. Also, despite emancipation and due to segregationist practices, literacy practices for the Gullahs and other Blacks were prohibited. Even today, the Gullah language (not a written language) is still passed down orally, and its linguistic richness thrives when spoken among family members who are cooking Gullah dishes, fishing to acquire the seafood to prepare the culinary dishes, and making sweetgrass products. In addition, oral histories allow me an opportunity to explore the lives of women in my family, who are deeply rooted in the Gullah culture, as well as the lives of other Gullah community members. The idea of self-

⁹ See chapter two of the dissertation that references Herb Frazier's *'Behind God's Back Gullah Memories: Cainhoy, Wando, Huger, Daniel Island, St. Thomas Island, South Carolina*. He discusses the importance of oral traditions being passed down in Gullah communities.

ethnography is important to examine in this dissertation since it involves my personal relationship to this community. Beyond the oral histories, archival research and interviews provide the historical background of the Museum and the Penn Center, particularly as it relates to preservation efforts. Material and visual culture reveal the competing “voices,” cultural identity, and issues pertaining to race, class, and gender within the culture.

As an organizing framework for this study, I draw upon an eclectic combination of discursive positions, namely theories on museum studies, power relations, African American Studies, and Black Diaspora Studies. Theories of material culture, drawn from such scholars as Timothy Ruppel, Jessica Neuwirth, Mark Leone, and Gladys-Marie Frye, reveal how various covert and overt African spiritual spaces render cultural identity.¹⁰ This examination reveals that a history of debasing views applied to the Gullah people are countered by the valorization of Gullah culture history in this space—e.g. through presentation of sweetgrass baskets and of the history of blacksmithing objects. The issue of race as it surfaces in museum studies can be explored in the exhibition space of the York W. Bailey Museum because racial and cultural identities are represented in Gullah material culture.

Museum scholars uncover how marginalized “voices” and how power and identity are perceived in museum spaces. Of use will be the scholarship of Corrine A. Kratz and Ivan Karp, who note the importance of preserving cultural identity in

¹⁰ Timothy Ruppel, Jessica Neuwirth, Mark Leone, and Gladys-Marie Frye, “Hidden in View: African Spiritual Spaces in North American Landscapes” *Antiquity* 77, 296 (2003): 321-335. This theoretical approach used by these authors will be useful to reveal the significant historical, cultural, and personal memories kept alive by the material elements at the Museum and the Penn Center.

museum spaces.¹¹ While Kratz and Karp indicate the importance of preserving cultural identities in museums, attention is not rendered to the Gullah culture as they speak of global and marginalized voices. To give this needed attention, I draw on the scholarship of Michael Gomez.¹²

In addition to examining the objects housed at the Museum, it is relevant to assess the importance of this space as a cultural repository or museum. Andrea A. Burns¹³ notes the significance of the continued existence of cultural museums and, thereby, their triumph. She indicates that through the activism of community leaders, “a new history of [B]lack political power”¹⁴ emerged “during the late twentieth century.”¹⁵ One can see that this kind of “black political power emerged” out of the Penn Center as well. While not heavily funded, the Penn Center continues to promote the history and culture of a people who have been culturally, economically, and physically marginalized.

In an analysis of the YWB Museum, material culture methods are utilized. In particular, I draw from such scholars as Fath Davis Ruffins in the field of museum

¹¹ Corrine A. Kratz and Ivan Karp. “Introduction to Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, eds. Ivan Karp, Corrine A. Kratz, Lynn Szewaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 11. The authors note that “Museums and heritage sites were also perceived as a means of claiming or appropriating a role in broader public spheres and of legitimating identity, history, and presence, and perception that shaped” national discourses.

¹² Michael Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country's Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Gomez argues that Black Americans in the South originated from various African ethnic cultures but developed one identity following transatlantic trade in order to sustain their strength. This discussion is relevant to the rendering of Gullah identity at the York Bailey Museum.

¹³ Burns examines the evolution of four Black museums and uncovers how they achieved their historical voices in spite of serving an underrepresented group and in spite of being marginalized in the American cultural landscape and in the field of museum studies. Andrea A. Burns. *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*. (University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst & Boston: MA, 2013) 11

¹⁴ Burns, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

studies to demonstrate how objects reflect cultural memory.¹⁶ Likewise, E. McClung Fleming's material culture model is used to analyze the objects in the Museum. Additionally, in the area of material culture studies, the issue of power deserves treatment. Therefore, Randall McGuire and Robert Paynter's¹⁷ analysis provides insight when treating cultural dominance and resistance in museum spaces. Advancing another line of resistance relevant to present discussion of Gullah material culture, Leland Ferguson¹⁸ can also be useful in this area of examining the their spiritual and religious practices during enslavement. The above mentioned literature is critical in the application of Gullah material culture. Importantly, certain power structures pose difficulty for the Gullahs from obtaining their material to create their cultural objects and the means to preserve their land.

By applying both the theoretical framework and the methodology noted above to the study of the selected site, this dissertation breaks new ground, contributing to the field of American Studies, African American Studies, and Gullah Studies. In addition, at the most basic level, this study serves to draw attention to a culture which has largely been understudied and which is struggling against land appropriation. In addition to drawing attention to the history and importance of Gullah culture, this

¹⁶ Fath Davis Ruffins. "Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820-1990" in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, eds. Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer and Steven Lavine, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), Ruffins' work on preservation efforts in museums will be applied to such objects as the blacksmithing objects in the York W. Bailey Museum. The project reveals that the culture has been revalued and re-narrated, while rendering notions of race, class, and gender.

¹⁷ Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter, eds. "The Archaeology of Inequality: Material Culture, Domination, and Resistance" in *The Archaeology of Equality and Inequality*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1991). The authors use archaeological and landscape evidence to demonstrate the inequalities that have existed over the years in the areas of race, class, and economics. This theoretical application will be adapted to analyzing Gullah's culture and history.

¹⁸ Leland Ferguson. *Uncommon Ground: The Archaeology of Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

study expands upon the critical/scholarly attention that the culture has received and gives attention to the Penn Center and its York W. Bailey Museum.

This study traces the manner in which artifacts and museum installations can be read as texts and as historical narratives, and as it reads these objects, it adds further dimensions to the treatment of issues already addressed in critical discussions of Gullah culture, language, and history. Further, by exploring the contributions of the Gullahs through their everyday cultural practices, this study provides a broader context for how to preserve and interpret Gullah's history and culture. As such, this study is also intended to provide additional awareness of and appreciation for this culture. My research celebrates the dynamism of the Gullah culture and history. By applying theories pertaining to cultural identity and to cultural objects, museum spaces, my research builds upon extant theoretical frameworks but breaks new ground in their application.

While there is plentiful scholarship on historic preservation, more scholarship is needed to African American preservation, particularly to Gullah communities, is needed. In essence, the purpose of the Penn Center and the Gullah culture is to provide a narrative about the contributions of these African Americans to the American cultural fabric. This site reflects the resilience of the Gullah people, but at the same time, it represents a site of cultural space and place, memories, and identity. This site provides evidence for the reason to preserve and to accurately interpret the Gullah's history and contributions to the American fabric, and it raises awareness about Gullah history by showcasing material objects and traditions that have been steeped in the culture in spite of generational changes and economic development.

Generally, the extant literature on Gullah Studies demonstrates that while preservationists and grassroots activists acknowledge that the culture is endangered, they also celebrate the Gullahs' resilience and their resistance against these changes. Critical research on Gullah culture may broadly surveyed in four main categories: 1) preservation and resistance; 2) Gullah expressive culture 3) domestic craft, cuisine, and folkways; 4) property and cultural retention uses; and 5) African cultural heritage and the museum continuum. Among the authors who treat issues such as preservation and resistance is Orville Burton¹⁹ who details the Penn Center's preservationist accomplishments and its service as a political and cultural presence in the Gullah community. Moving beyond studies such as this one, this dissertation examines the history of the Penn Center as it has rewritten social and cultural boundaries through institution building. Likewise, native Charlestonian, Herb Frazier,²⁰ also undertakes preservationist efforts through specific rural areas in the Low country of South Carolina and rendering their historical and cultural significance in Gullah's "memories."²¹ In a similar vein, Wilbur Cross²² examines how the Gullahs preserved and continued the unique components of their culture—e.g. foodways, spirituality, language, traditions, medicine, and material culture—while exploring the narratives of Gullahs who continued their ancestral connections to parts of West Africa. My scholarship builds on the work of Cross because it shows how Gullah history and

¹⁹ See Orville Burton's *Penn Center: A History Preserved*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014) In this historical account of the Penn Center, the author significantly lends attention to this premier cultural center triumphing through turbulent, historical and financial times.

²⁰ Herb Frazier. "Behind God's Back." *Gullah Memories: Cainhoy, Wando, Huger, Daniel Island, St. Thomas Island, South Carolina*. (Charleston: Evening Post, 2011)

²¹ Ibid. Taken from the title of the author's book.

²² See Wilbur Cross's *Gullah Culture in America*. (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 2008)

culture debunk mainstream narratives. Emory S. Campbell,²³ one of the pioneers in Gullah preservation, renders a collection of Gullah's traditions, practices, and beliefs that have sustained the Gullah communities for centuries.

Documenting the major effort to preserve the Gullah culture undertaken in this era, *The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*²⁴ offers a brief history of the Gullah Geechee people and the culture, while laying out the significance, purpose, goals, and interpretive themes of sites within the Corridor, the Penn Center being one of the sites selected to be preserved. This document is a useful tool because my research discusses the preservation, continuation, and interpretation of the Gullah Geechee culture and the importance of a site such as the Penn Center. Likewise, Patricia Jones-Jackson²⁵ uses ethnographical accounts to render a historical review of how the Gullah culture has been sustained, with attention to its storytelling, folkways, and spirituality. This book contributes to my research because it outlines what has been done so far to preserve the cultural traditions, particularly on the Sea Islands. I build upon Jones-Jackson's work because the oral histories I conduct further convey the preservation efforts of people within the Gullah community, with particular attention in this case to the importance of the Penn Center. Lorenzo Dow Turner, a renowned linguist, conducted the first major study on the Gullah language in the 1940s, and his seminal work, groundbreaking in the field,

²³ Emory Campbell. *Gullah Cultural Legacies: A Synopsis of Gullah traditions, customary beliefs, art forms and speech on Hilton Head Island and vicinal Sea Islands in S.C. and Georgia*. Hilton Head Island: SC. Gullah Heritage Consulting Services. 2005.

²⁴ Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. 2012. *Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*. Prepared and published by the National Park Service, Denver Service Center. "Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act, passed by Congress on October 12, 2006." (*Corridor's Management Plan*)

²⁵ Patricia Jones-Jackson. *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986)

mapped the linguistic integrity of the Gullah language.²⁶ Since the 1940s, sociolinguists like Jones-Jackson built upon Turner's work by travelling to the Sea Islands and to the African continent to make additional connections between the Gullah and African languages. Likewise, Jones-Jackson stresses the importance of passing down oral traditions in the Gullah community and how these "roots"²⁷ are major components to the survival of this culture.

Throughout history, Gullahs have sustained their African expressive cultural elements, e.g. spirituality, folkways, and other practices. Scholars document their importance—both past and present—in museum spaces and on plantation sites. Broader histories of the Gullah people and culture also inform the present study and its analysis. Margaret Creel²⁸ historicizes religion in the Gullah community, exploring its connection to slave practices, its resistance to mainstream rites, its African origins, and its communal practices. This work is helpful because it places the Gullah culture—as it relates to spiritual and religious practices—in historical context. However, while Creel's work focuses on slavery—my work focuses on how these cultural practices have been sustained beyond enslavement. Antoinette

²⁶ Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* is considered a seminal text when examining Gullah's linguistic integrity. Furthermore, Turner made significant connections between the Gullah language and languages spoken in Africa, Brazil, and Mexico. Although Turner conducted field work, he was not an ethnographer by training, which indicates his commitment to studying and reflecting on the complexity of the culture. In her Director's Statement for the "Connecting the Worlds of the African Diaspora: The Living Legacy of Lorenzo Dow Turner Symposium," Camille Giraud Akeju affirms that "Lorenzo Dow Turner has influenced the growth and development of: the academic discipline of Creole studies; linguists and linguistics; Gullah studies; comparative anthropology; African Diaspora studies; and comparative studies of world music and culture. His data and analysis of the contributions of formerly enslaved Africans to the history, language, and culture of America undergird the contemporary investigations of renowned linguists and anthropologists." (Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, November 12-13, 2010)

²⁷ Taken from Jones-Jackson's *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*.

²⁸ Margaret Creel. *"A Peculiar People": A Slave Religion and Community- Culture Among the Gullahs*. (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

Jackson²⁹ argues that the voices and contributions of the ancestors who contributed their skills to the success of the plantations have gone unheard and unremarked by many historians. The present study argues that that these voices can be heard—that is, they can be inferred through the artifacts in the museum space and on the landscape. William Pollitzer’s³⁰ scholarship explores African retentions within the Gullah culture and is considered by many Gullah scholars to be a significant text on this discourse. This research is relevant to my dissertation because my study explores how the selected site functions to preserve the intangible and tangible African Diasporic aspects of the culture and to reveal its various voices. My research builds upon Pollitzer’s work by focusing on how the Penn Center celebrates such African elements.

Domestic craft, cuisine, and folkways within the Gullah community have also been given attention in the scholarly arena; however, this has largely been relegated to sweetgrass baskets (and their connection to the land that grows the sweetgrass materials) and to rice plantations. These studies are important to my research because they speak to the African connections in the Gullah culture, to the contributions of the Gullahs to the American cultural fabric, and to the competing voices present in the culture. Joyce Coakley³¹ offers a pictorial and written history of the 300-year-old art of sweetgrass basketry and of the people in South Carolina Lowcountry, many of whom still embrace this tradition. Moving beyond the history of this tradition, my

²⁹ Antoinette Jackson. *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites*. (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012)

³⁰ William S. Pollitzer. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

³¹ Joyce V. Coakley. *Sweetgrass Baskets and the Gullah Tradition*. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005).

research adds an interpretive lens to the discussion of this craft by examining how cultural identity are seen through this and other material culture produced within the Gullah tradition.

Likewise, blacksmithing and foodways within the Gullah culture have also been treated in contemporary scholarship. The art of blacksmithing has been given biographical attention by John Michael Vlach.³² This work not only provides insight on the personal importance of blacksmithing to Philip Simmons but also reveals the historical and cultural significance of this craft. It is useful to this study in that it offers a broader context for blacksmithing objects that are housed in the York W. Bailey Museum. Scholarship on foodways has been studied through a gendered perspective. Josephine Beoku-Betts³³ explores the significant role of cultural practices pertaining to food as this relates to women's roles in shaping the Gullah culture of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. My research furthers such work because it provides oral narratives by both men and women who have participated in Gullah traditions through foodways, spirituality, language, blacksmithing, and community building.

Attention to African cultural connections in the Gullah tradition has also been given scholarly treatment, and this study draws upon such work. Objects housed at the York W. Bailey Museum that are analyzed in this dissertation, for example, include fanner baskets used in rice cultivation. Joseph Opala³⁴ reveals a connection between the Gullahs and the people of Sierra Leone in relation to rice production,

³² John Michael Vlach. *Charleston Blacksmith*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981)

³³ Josephine Beoku-Betts, "We Got Our Ways of Cooking Things: Women, Food and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah." *Gender and Society* 9 (October 1995).

³⁴ Joseph Opala. *The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-America Connection*

highlighting the fact that specific African people were the enslaved because of their skills in cultivating this difficult crop—rice. Similarly, Judith Carney³⁵ examines the African origin of rice cultivation while debunking the fallacies that white slaveholders were responsible for this agricultural contribution. While acknowledging the role of enslaved Africans and their descendants in rice cultivation in the South Carolina Lowcountry, Carney stresses the economic importance of this crop. While Carney’s work renders a historical perspective on South Carolina rice cultivation, my research situates the enslaved and their contributions to the rice economy in the context of a museum space and a cultural landscape, as well as historically. Like Carney, Edda L. Fields-Black³⁶ yields attention to the genesis of rice cultivation but situates her scholarship to the contributions of those African captives in South Carolina and Georgia. As a cultural preservationist, Ronald Daise³⁷ also identifies West African origins of the Gullah culture, as he recounts personal connections to Gullah heritage. Although this book is a memoir, it is useful to my study because Daise discusses Gullahs’ shared history, e.g. traditions, language, and folkways.

The research also engages my experiences with other curatorial exhibitions, especially on the contributions of Lorenzo Dow Turner, the father of Gullah Studies. The Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum’s exhibit *Word, Shout, Song:*

³⁵ Judith A. Carney. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³⁶ Edda Fields-Black. *Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

³⁷ Ronald Daise. *Gullah Branches, West African Roots*. (Orangeburg: Sandlapper Publishing Company, 2007).

*Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Communities through Language*³⁸ conveyed the complexity of the unheard voices within Gullah communities through its audiovisual representations of the Gullah language and through artifacts. This museum installation is useful to my work because of its interpretive and historical overview of the Gullah culture.

To reveal the resistance tradition posed by the Gullah people in general and the Penn Center in particular, this dissertation is broken into six chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two of the dissertation discusses and presents a history of the Gullah culture. This chapter begins by arguing that dominant discourses³⁹ have devalued and stereotyped the Gullah people and their culture; for instance, the Gullah Geechee “language [has been] portrayed in a comedic respect.”⁴⁰ This chapter further argues that the Gullah people and the culture have historically responded to the dominant discourses through counter-narratives, cultural practices, and individual and community activism, showing that despite the threat of extinction due to land grabbing, the culture still thrives.

Chapter three situates the Penn Center in its historical context, arguing that the Penn Center serves as site of the preservation efforts undertaken throughout the Corridor, efforts that allow for the interpretation of the Gullah culture that is being undertaken in this dissertation. This chapter identifies the Penn Center as the selected focus of this study because it promotes the heritage and history of the Gullah people,

³⁸ The exhibit was held from August 2010 through 2011 and also revealed connections between Gullah traditions, Brazilian and West African cultures. Likewise, it elucidated the pioneering contributions that Professor Lorenzo Dow Turner made to Gullah culture. I attended this one day symposium, met Gullah scholars, and saw the Gullah culture through another historical, curatorial lens. The exhibit was curated by Alcione Amos.

³⁹ The dominant discourse can be defined as ideology accepted as the normal; created by those in power.

⁴⁰ Emory Campbell, telephone interview with author, August 20, 2013.

particularly through initiatives to educate Gullahs about land rights and to educate the public about Gullah culture. Chapter three also gives a history of the Penn Center, arguing that this history parallels the history of the Gullah people and reveals the manner in which the people and culture have historically responded to the dominant discourses through counter-narratives, resistance culture, and individual and community activism.

Chapter four includes an analysis of objects housed at the York W. Bailey Museum. In this analysis, I demonstrate how such objects can be read as texts and historical narratives that reveal the history and culture of the Gullahs, while also revealing discourses on race, class, and gender as these function within the community and perceptions of the community. By examining cultural identity as it is revealed through the selected objects and their historical contexts, this dissertation both uncovers competing voices (privileging analysis of the way that Gullah voices have resisted dominant ideologies), and it further explores the relationship between the Gullah culture and the African continent (as seen in the Gullah language and Gullah cuisine).

Chapter five includes oral histories of members of the Gullah community and argues that the participation of these community members is needed in order for a fuller rendering of the history and culture of the Gullah people as it relates to the issues undergirding this dissertation, such as economic development, cultural identity, and so on. These oral histories not only reveal facets of the Gullah culture and efforts to preserve it, but they also speak to the importance of the Penn Center and its York W. Bailey Museum in relation to how these promote the history and culture of the

Gullah people. For example, these oral histories reveal that the York W. Bailey Museum elicits cultural memories and culturally-based interpretations of the Gullah culture and that the Penn Center serves as an emblem of Gullah culture in the national memory, re/writing the manner in which the people and culture are viewed. These oral histories are offered to supplement the arguments made in chapters two, three, and four with voices from within the Gullah community. In addition, such oral histories show the way members within the Gullah community preserve and continue Gullah cultural traditions, revealing that the culture is still thriving despite economic development and generational change.

The epilogue—the conclusion of this dissertation project—consists of a summary of the research findings presented throughout this work, and it details the implications of these findings for the relevant fields, including American Studies, African American Studies, and Gullah Studies. The epilogue also offers avenues for related future research.

In order to fully situate and illuminate the Penn Center and its museum holdings, a comprehensive history of the Gullah culture is critical. A reading and reassessment of this history not only grounds this study, particularly for those unfamiliar with the culture, but also provides one of the reasons why this culture and its history should be preserved. Therefore, the following chapter situates the subject matter of this dissertation in its historical and cultural context. The Gullah culture is not merely one characterized by a history of marginalization or one slated for destruction; it is a culture of survival and triumph through resistance. Additionally, the history section will be referenced throughout the dissertation when conducting

analysis of Gullah material culture, and it serves as needed information that informs the oral histories ending this story. Moreover, the following chapter provides a fresh interpretive lens on that history at the same time that it acknowledges the historians and other scholars in the Gullah community in a study which seeks to highlight those voices that have been excluded from the mainstream cultural narrative.

Chapter 2: Counter-Narratives, Cultural Practices and Marronage

The Gullah Geechee culture serves as an example of how African diasporic elements have survived as part of the fabric of American culture. As previously mentioned, vestiges of this existence can be seen in many areas—the language, the physical landscape, the food culture, and other manifestations of material cultural production. Despite the threat of extinction due to undermining factors such as cultural marginalization and land grabbing by exploitative real estate developers, there are between 250,000-500,000 Gullah Geechees who live on the Southeastern coast where they actively maintain their cultural practices. Anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, sociologists, and Gullah scholars have offered various points of view concerning Gullah history and the culture.

The development of scholarship in the areas of historic preservation and museum studies offers a fresh and necessary look at the history of the Gullah Geechee culture. Until recently, written accounts of the culture have provided chronologically ordered discourses on the development of the culture; the historical literature is sufficient in this area. Therefore, this chapter highlights the history of the Gullah Geechee culture without adhering to a strict focus on chronology in order to emphasize the manner in which the culture has historically striven to counter mainstream discourses that have been negative in their Gullah portrayals. The chapter begins by providing a look at a few misconceptions, stereotypes, and misinterpretations of the people and their culture by some members of mainstream society. In addition, this chapter delineates how, in the course of everyday living and

practices, many Gullahs engage in what might be called counter-narratives.⁴¹ That is, their lives stand to refute the misinterpretations advanced by mainstream culture.

Depictions of Gullah Communities

Historically, and even today, Gullah people often have been viewed as illiterate, unable to write and speak “standard” English, slow to integrate modern ways of living, and unable to adapt to basic changes in technology. Additionally, they have been perceived as needy and dependent, reliant, even, upon “outsiders” for their survival. But, the opposite is true. In fact, over time the Gullah people have proven how they adapted to changes in their environment and how they navigate between their Gullah language and “standard” English.⁴² The negative portrayal of Gullah people has been well-documented in American cultural production.

One of these mainstream narratives is the 1935 opera entitled *Porgy and Bess*, a collaboration by George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, and DuBose Heyward. It is based on a 1925 memoir entitled *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward and a play by the same name penned by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy. The play premiered in 1927. The opera tells a fictional story about a poor, black beggar named Porgy, who resides in the slums of Catfish Row, a fictional location in Charleston, South Carolina. One of the central plots of the opera focuses upon Porgy trying to save his abused lover from a drug dealer. Because the opera represents Gullah culture (and Black culture in general) as simplistic, some critics point to the problematic portrayals and racial

⁴¹ Counter-narratives will be used to refute or argue against the widely accepted, negative views about the Gullah culture.

⁴²See Patricia Jones-Jackson’s *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. The sociolinguist discusses the linguistic prejudices imposed on the Gullahs by non Black linguists. She debunks these stereotypes made by these linguists through her research on the Sea Islands in connection to West African countries.

stereotypes found in this work. As recorded in the *African American Registry*, white American composer Virgil Thompson stated after the debut of the opera that “[f]olk lore [sic] subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935.”⁴³ Thompson goes on to suggest that the knowledge base of the figures represented in the opera is devalued by others (majority culture) in Western culture. Many Black Americans were, indeed, able to speak for themselves during this time; however, their voices were muted when mainstream narratives were constructed for them. Writers like Dubose and Heyward did not consider these Black voices when writing and producing this production. Since this opera was written by white Americans (as were the preceding play and memoir), Blacks were denied the forum in which to express racial and cultural autonomy on the mainstream musical stage in what was still the Jim Crow Era.

Unfortunately, many Blacks, like those in Gullah communities, did not have the financing needed to produce cultural media about Black culture for the masses like whites such as Heyward and the Gershwins did.⁴⁴ Some views of Blacks in the mainstream culture were based on stereotypes that were also portrayed in the media. Donald Bogle identifies prominent stereotypes of Blacks portrayed in early film in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1989). *Porgy and Bess* renders stereotypes of the Gullah people and culture, in particular. While the collaborators of this cultural production

⁴³ Virgil Thompson. *African American Registry*, October 10, 1935, www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/porgy-and-bess-opens-broadway-mixedreviews accessed (7/14/15)

⁴⁴ I am grateful to my sister, Shonda D. Chaplin, for the information she provided me that served as a guide while I was writing this section.

base their narrative on the Gullah people and their African connections, the opera does not capture the many facets of a culture that is tenacious, proud, and industrious, nor does it capture a language that has the distinct grammatical structure and diction of the Gullah language.

Tellingly, the opera portrays the main character as a beggar, and the other characters are gamblers and drug users who speak with accents that do not resemble the Gullah language. The Gershwins did not include any Gullahs in their production of the play in order to emulate the real “African” identity of this cultural production. Importantly, members of the original opera were concerned that “their characters might play into a stereotype that African Americans lived in poverty, took drugs, and solved their problems with their fists.”⁴⁵ One may ask why the collaborators, if they wanted to draw on the African influences in Gullah culture, did not focus on the positive, uplifting elements found in Gullah’s culture instead of racialized and stereotypical depictions of African American life, spotlighting illiterate and culturally inept characters. In fact, instead of these stereotypical depictions, the authors could have demonstrated how the African-centered culture “solve their problems” through education and community building. Likewise, the production could have demonstrated how the Gullahs are culturally and economically independent, in lieu of illustrating the poverty-stricken character Porgy.

Mainstream representations of Gullah culture have also been rendered in novels and memoirs, and one example is Pat Conroy’s *The Water Is Wide: A Memoir* (1972). This memoir (adapted from Conroy’s experiences as a teacher on Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, in the late 1960s) narrates the lives of school children living

⁴⁵ Ibid.

on Yamacraw Island, the fictional site of a Gullah community. Conroy's devaluation of Gullah culture in *The Water Is Wide* is revealing: "Of the Yamacraw children, I can say little. I don't think I changed the quality of their lives significantly or altered the inexorable fact that they were imprisoned by the very circumstance of their birth."⁴⁶ I would argue that Conroy's assessment of Gullah culture functions as a form of cultural imperialism. He recounts his efforts to significantly "change the quality" of the lives of Gullah children. Yet, a goal of members of Gullah communities is to preserve their history and culture in the face of mainstream culture's misrepresentations of them, including assumptions that they "felt imprisoned" (cited above) living on the Sea Islands. Importantly, these children were affected by factors other than "the very circumstance of their birth," (cited above), including segregationist educational practices. However, as will be offered below, the people of this dynamic culture fought illiteracy that resulted from segregationist practices. By ignoring the value of cultural knowledge possessed by members in Gullah communities and by indicating the need for a wholesale overhaul of the community, Conroy's memoir disparages the Gullah culture that it seeks to represent.

Outsiders were not the only ones capable of providing or inculcating good educational and moral values in these children. In fact, segregationist practices did not prevent Gullah children from obtaining good schooling. Gullah communities created ways to self-educate, and they encouraged teachers from urban areas. One example is through the narrative of Mrs. Ruby Middleton Forsythe or "Miss Ruby,"⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Pat Conroy. *The Water Is Wide*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 303.

⁴⁷ She was affectionately known as by "Miss Ruby" by her students. It was and still is common for blacks to attach Mister or Miss to first names as means of endearment and reverence. "Miss Ruby's" legacy still lives on since there is a nonprofit organization called Miss Ruby's Kids through the

who was a Black teacher from Charleston, South Carolina, and educated many children for over sixty years in a one room schoolhouse during a sixty year time period. Forsythe taught at Holy Cross Faith Memorial School starting in 1938 until 1991 on Pawley's Island, South Carolina, which was the only educational facility available to blacks on the island.⁴⁸ She encouraged her students through the following: “[She] ‘felt that at an early age teachers must build esteem, a bit of independence, dependability, and a desire not to be the tail end the time.’” Students should be taught ‘not to be dependent on somebody else.’”⁴⁹ Forsythe's diligence and largess in the Gullah community attests to self-sufficiency and drive.

Although *The Water Is Wide* is based on Conroy's experiences as a school teacher on one of the Sea Islands, it reveals that parts of mainstream culture disseminate misconceptions about Gullah people. Ignoring their culturally-specific knowledge, Conroy becomes “disgusted” (cited above) with the assumed ignorance of the Gullah school children. He notes of his “ambitious” teaching: “I slammed twenty-three of these strange facts down their throats, hoping they would gag on the knowledge. My voice grew tremulous and enraged, and it suddenly felt as if I were shouting from within a box with madmen surrounding me, ignoring me, and taunting me with their silence.”⁵⁰ In associating the children with “madmen” “surrounding” him and in feeling “taunted” by the children's silence, Conroy unwittingly admits his own sense of alienness; he also demonstrates that silence may indicate not ignorance

Georgetown County United Way; its mission is to “prepare parents to be their child's first, best teacher and support both parents and child throughout the child's school career.” Valinda W. Littlefield, “Teaching for Confrontation during Jim Crow” in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* by Valinda W. Littlefield, edited by Marjorie Julian Spruil, Valinda Littlefield, and Joan Marie John. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 22

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Conroy, 293.

but resistance, what Michel Foucault might call “exercise of power.” Conroy’s aggressive pedagogical tactics reveal his frustration with the students, his lack of knowledge of the culture, and his need to impose his cultural and ideological values on children who have not expressed any distaste for their own culture or any desire to leave their geographic location. This fiction perpetuates the stereotypes that Gullahs do not or cannot adapt to change and that they must rely on the help of outsiders to help them adapt, to educate them, and to provide them with structure. Importantly, Conroy never lived on the Sea Islands before his one-year teaching assignment, and he is originally from Georgia. His work reveals that he is not aware of the cultural complexities and nuances that cement the Gullahs and that distinguish Gullah culture from other cultures in other parts of the world. Conroy’s focus is on the children’s “illiteracy” and on his role as a magnanimous teacher, but he never focuses on the strong familial and communal structure or on the community-building found in most Gullah living. Conroy presents his tale of a culture that appears to be primitive and that lacks educational and cultural awareness; however, he does not depict the heroic story of a group of people who are indeed educationally, culturally, and economically sufficient.

Conroy’s portrayal of the Gullah children presents the perception that they did not accomplish much educationally; clearly, he did not view them as equal to their white counterparts during this time period. He asserts in his memoir: “Slowly, the awareness came to me that no matter what happened, my struggles and efforts could not eradicate the weight and inalienable supremacy of two hundred years: the children of slaves could not converse or compete with the offspring of planters, the

descendants of London barristers, the progeny of sprawling, upward-climbing white America.”⁵¹ In fact, many white Americans created many borders that were placed around Gullah communities, such as equal access to public facilities, access to land ownership, and access to cultural and economic independence. Conroy’s presence on the Sea Islands as a do-gooder does not change his mind about the Gullahs’s social and educational inequality, even though he is seen by the superintendent of school as a “benevolent” addition to the educational system: “And to think you would walk right into my office and offer to teach those poor colored children on that island. It just goes to show you that God works in mysterious ways.”⁵² In fact, Conroy notes that the school on the island was not his first selection: “I don’t know if God had anything to do with it, Doctor. I applied for the Peace Corps and haven’t heard. Yamacraw seemed like a viable alternative.”⁵³

Conroy does not highlight the sense of family and community cohesiveness that is prevalent in the Gullah community, and his narrative does not emphasize the Gullahs’s desire to achieve a better quality of life like everyone else in the country. Conroy views these students as lacking literacy and ambition. Conroy depicts the children and the Gullah community in which they lived as having no cultural, historical, and educational awareness: “The people of the island have changed very little since the Emancipation Proclamation. Indeed, many of them have never heard of this proclamation.”⁵⁴ Many of these children were already being groomed to become leaders in the community, but Conroy considers their language and their

⁵¹ Ibid., 161

⁵² Ibid., 1

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 4

adherence to their folkways as cultural impediments. One sees Conroy's egotistical concern with his own efforts, his own missionary-oriented cultural and political curriculum and agenda; his comments seem to be more about him and his superior stance than about the children he purports to be educating. Furthermore, in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, a more accurate narrative has been transmitted not only through the objects at the York W. Bailey Museum but also through the lens of the Penn Center.

Counter-narratives Produced by Gullah Communities

Fiction and cultural productions, unfortunately, can aid in perpetuating the misinterpretations or stereotyping of the Gullah culture and other marginalized cultures; these forms of media have the power to reach wide audiences. In addition, people from these cultures should not have to justify their racial or cultural equality or cultural practices to people after reading Conroy or viewing Gershwin. While fiction and cultural productions present examples of how the Gullah culture has been misrepresented, one can find real-life illustrations of these depictions as well.⁵⁵ For example, Bernateen Cunningham's case study entitled, "Attitudes of School Personnel in Charleston, South Carolina, Toward the Gullah Dialect," examines the cultural misinterpretation and the devaluation of the Gullah language in the public school system. A speech pathologist from Charleston, Cunningham, agrees with noted socio-linguist Patricia Jones-Jackson that the language, as well as the culture, should be embraced:

⁵⁵ Chapter five of the dissertation references some of these counter-narratives through the voices of Dr. Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook and Rose Chaplin-Rouse. They reference their professional and academic experiences that relate to the stereotypes and misinterpretations of the Gullah culture and language.

From her questionnaires that were administered, the data suggest that school personnel respond negatively to children's use of Gullah's language, prompting Cunningham to suggest there is a definite need for educational and cultural training of teachers working with Gullah-speaking children (1989), in attempt to foster recognition of the unique linguistic features of this visible language.⁵⁶

Here, one sees the misconceptions that people carry into places such as public schools. When some teachers are culturally uneducated, like Conroy, these prejudices can greatly impact students.

Despite these misperceptions and portrayals, the Gullah people have proven how they have adapted to changes in their environment and how they navigate between their own world and that of the larger society. This is precisely what Conroy, Heyward, and others failed to represent or recognize. Rather than buy into this devaluation, Gullah people historically have pooled together their social, political, economic, and cultural resources as a form of everyday survival. As a result, they have—over time—developed a collective sense of self that has endured and will continue to endure for generations.

The Penn Center's Role in Building Gullah Identity

Although much more attention will be given to the Penn Center in chapter three, it is worth noting that the Center's role in undergirding various forms of activism by Gullah people—including the Civil Rights struggle—lends proof to the Gullahs' equality and to their viability in relation to “the offspring of planters, the descendants of London barristers.”⁵⁷ It speaks to the culture's ability to be agentive despite the odds, a notion that popular cultural narrates tend not to consider, and it

⁵⁶ *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Environmental Study, Public Review Draft*. National Park Service, Southeast Region, Division of Planning and Compliance, December 2003, pg. 307.

⁵⁷ Conroy, 161.

does not account for the intellectual capability and social adaptability of Gullahs and their descendants. For instance, when African captives from various ethnic groups arrived in the southeastern United States, they were highly skilled and spoke distinct, various languages. Michael Gomez details how various African ethnic groups were separated when they arrived; however, “Africans and their descendants attempted to fashion a collective identity in the colonial and antebellum American South. It is a study of their efforts to move from ethnicity to race as the basis for such an identity, a movement best understood when the impact of both internal and external forces upon social relations within this community are examined.”⁵⁸ Gomez’s account indicates that while this loss of ethnicity occurred, the enslaved formed this new “collective identity” in order to escape the enslavement process.⁵⁹ Although the Gullahs (not to mention other Blacks of the Diaspora) were devalued in myriad ways, they triumphed by preserving their history and culture and in the Gullah context, the Penn Center has played a major role in this endeavor.

Early History: Transplanted Skills and Counter-Culture

The Gullahs’ early history reveals that Gullah culture emerged as a Black diasporic counter-culture.⁶⁰ This tendency toward the creation of counter-culture is evidenced by the fact that the African captives who formed Gullah communities (like

⁵⁸ Michael Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country’s Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 3

⁶⁰ A counter-culture is being defined in this context as a culture that rejects the values, structures, ideologies, and/or standards of mainstream culture. It was important for the Gullahs to implement this counter-culture in order to maintain their racial and cultural identity throughout and after enslavement. “A countercultural action or expression communicates disagreement, opposition, disobedience or rebellion. A counterculture rejects or challenges mainstream culture or particular elements of it, e.g. finding new ways to represent yourself when you are misrepresented or simply not represented.” “Learning Dreamers and Dissenters” from *British Library Board* www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen accessed (April 1, 2014)

other Blacks who were enslaved) resisted the process of enslavement and successfully defied, at least in part, attempts at acculturation. In recounting the early history, then, this chapter offers evidence of the manner in which Gullah culture emerged as a counter-culture—culture that subverted many of the goals of the institution of slavery and that resisted the cultural devaluation and the expectations of transplantation.

Historical accounts reveal that during the 1700s white planters in the American South sought Blacks from specific parts of West Africa for rice cultivation. In *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, William Pollitzer, drawing from historical records, examines the growth of the importation of African captives in order to cultivate rice and indigo. Citing his visit with Dr. Eliane Azevedo, Pollitzer reports that “[f]rom the founding of Charles Town [later known as Charleston, South Carolina] the importation grew astronomically. The total for 1706 was only 24, for 1707, 22, but by 1724 it was 604.”⁶¹ According to Pollitzer, importation “rose sharply in the 1740s with demands for labor for rice and indigo cultivation and peaked in the nineteenth century.”⁶² Subsequent attempts to make illegal the importation of African slaves were unsuccessful because, as Pollitzer notes, “the bans were never complete for slaves [who] were imported illegally.”⁶³ Indeed, these African captives supplied the white planters with both the knowledge to cultivate and manage rice fields and also the knowledge of what tools were needed to cultivate rice. As indicated by Pollitzer, white planters preferred West Africans from parts of Gambia, Angola, and the Gold Coast because of their skills in rice cultivation and

⁶¹ Cited by Pollitzer, 41

⁶² Pollitzer, 41.

⁶³ Ibid.

because of their physical and mental characteristics.⁶⁴ John Tibbetts in “African Roots, Carolina Gold” expands on this connection: “By the 1720s, Carolina rice growers were telling slave traders that they wanted skilled Africans from the Rice Coast above all others.”⁶⁵ These West Africans, who were involuntarily brought to places such as Charleston, South Carolina, comprised the earliest known Gullah communities. In another vein, many of these African captives had a resistance to malaria because of the sickle-cell trait, which was not discovered until around the 1930s.⁶⁶ This inherited trait enabled them to work these swampy lands and cultivate the rice crop.

In *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*, Judith Carney suggests that “knowledge of rice cultivation likely afforded them [skilled slaves] some leverage to negotiate the conditions of their labor.”⁶⁷ Carney further attests that “[r]ice is a knowledge system that represents ingenuity as well as enormous toil.”⁶⁸ While Carney indicates that the work was unpaid and laborious, she also notes that it also required excessive skill and intelligence. John Tibbetts reveals that the enslaved used irrigation to build the systems needed to grow and cultivate the rice: “With rough tools, [the enslaved] cleared immense wooden swamps. Then they constructed massive hydrological systems—dams, dikes, and floodgates (called “trunks”)—used to irrigate rice fields where they sowed and

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ John Tibbetts, “African Roots, Carolina Gold,” *Coastal Heritage* 21, 2006, 4.

⁶⁶ See Pollitzer. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 18. He gives the correlation between the sickle trait and the sickle cell disease.

⁶⁷ Judith Carney. *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 8

⁶⁸ Ibid.

weeded the grain.”⁶⁹ Antoinette Jackson notes how these systems that developed have not disappeared: “Today this very same irrigation process of trunk minding is done by Park Service personnel at the ACE basin National Wildlife, which illustrates the importance of making visible African knowledge of irrigation practices on Sea Island rice plantations contained within the historical record.”⁷⁰ These historical accounts recognize how this highly skilled labor has not been spotlighted; additionally, today’s recollections also demonstrate how much technology would be required to cultivate the rice.

The skilled labor required to cultivate rice plantations was quickly devalued. Leland Ferguson writes briefly about the devaluing of the skill of enslaved Africans: “In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, planter-histories revised the pioneering past by diminishing the importance of skilled slaves and glorifying the role of masters.”⁷¹ Importantly, Ferguson also notes that “stories of old-time slaves who built their own houses, found their own food, and taught their owners about growing corn, sweet potatoes, and money-making rice had passed out of the oral tradition.... Their skills had been demeaned, and their story had been forgotten; but their archaeological remains awaited discovery.”⁷² Though the slaves were producing enormous profits, their expertise and their labor was being erased from cultural and national memory. Tibbetts speaks to how much slave labor profited the economy: “Rice plantations shaped and reshaped the lowcountry geography and economy,

⁶⁹ John Tibbetts, “African Roots, Carolina Gold,” *Coastal Heritage* 28 (1), 2014, 4.

⁷⁰ Antoinette Jackson. *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012), 77.

⁷¹ Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 59.

⁷² *Ibid*, 62.

making Charleston one of the richest cities in the world, but it was wealth built primarily on slave labor.”⁷³

Although the West African captives were being conditioned throughout the enslavement process, they resisted this conditioning through subtle measures, assertive actions, and aggressive acts of defiance that sustained their cultural cohesion. Pollitzer describes how the enslaved Blacks resisted the enslavement process and devised ways toward freedom: “As blacks fought back, their resistance took many forms, including arson, poison, and conspiracy.”⁷⁴ Pollitzer also points out that the enslaved West Africans were aware of the consequences of their defiance: “While punishment of slaves included branding, mutilation, whipping, burning, castration, and execution, [these] measures undoubtedly increased the sense of cohesion among the black population...”⁷⁵ Despite such brutal occurrences, as this dissertation demonstrates, these enslaved Blacks developed and maintained a communal identity through the retention of African language (words and patterns), through the retention of Diasporic spiritual traditions and mores, and through the preservation of Diasporic forms of material culture.

Spiritual and Religious Practices

Members of Gullah communities found cohesion not only through the relative isolation afforded by their geographical location on the Southeastern coast and on the Sea Islands, but also through the formation of a culture that retained elements of their original African culture. There are African retentions and cultural preservation related to religion and foodways within Gullah communities, as well as examples of

⁷³ John Tibbetts, “African Roots, Carolina Gold,” *Coastal Heritage* 21, 2006, 4.

⁷⁴ Pollitzer, 54.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

marronage—as seen in the example of the Black Seminoles (detailed later in this chapter), who not only preserved Gullah cultural practices but who fled the Southeastern coasts in order to preserve these cultural practices and resisted enslavement.

The Gullahs sustained African spiritual and religious practices and formed syncretic religious traditions. Leland Ferguson notes: “Archaeological evidence of African-style religious practice in America reinforces and makes tangible our sense that slaves brought to the Americas not only a variety of practical skills, but also elements of their African spiritual beliefs.”⁷⁶ Ferguson further indicates that “[a]ll along the south Atlantic coast archaeologists have reported finding small numbers of predominantly blue glass beads on slave sites, beads similar to those used as charms in Africa and Near Eastern countries to ward off the ‘evil eye.’”⁷⁷ Ferguson gives other examples of African spiritual retentions in Gullah communities: “They [the enslaved] heard stories of the awesome power of magic power and religion, and they probably saw artifacts like bowls and tobacco pipes with mysterious marks scratched into their surfaces.”⁷⁸ Margaret Washington Creel notes the cultural cohesion that existed among Gullah communities in spite of the religious beliefs and practices that were imposed on them by slaveholders and attests to the importance of such retentions: “Insofar as people develop their own culture[,] they are not slaves.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 118.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 116

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 118

⁷⁹ Margaret Washington Creel. *‘A Peculiar People’: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullah* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 79.

That is not to say that those African religion retentions remained isolated from European-Christian slant. Rosalyn Browne, former director of history and culture and the Penn Center and St. Helena Island native, notes that the Baptist religion, which was introduced to the Gullahs by missionaries, is the predominant religion practiced.⁸⁰ Creel traces the influx of the Baptist religion into the area:

Most early Baptists came to Carolina in search of religious freedom and economic opportunity.... In addition to fervor for their faith, Baptists were as eager as others to acquire obvious forms of individious distinction—land and slaves. In proportion to their numbers, which remained comparatively small as the colony grew, Baptists expanded their economic interests and spiritual influence throughout the Low Country. As slaveholders, Carolina Baptists contributed to developing attitudes about slavery.⁸¹

Their contributions included the types of punishments—such as castration—that would be inflicted on the enslaved if they attempted escape.⁸² While the Baptists came to the Lowcountry to explore religious and economic freedom, they participated in the institution that prevented the Gullahs from enjoying these options. Of relevance here, however, is the fact that the Gullahs inflected the Baptist religion with African spiritual practices. According to Browne, the religion practiced within Gullah communities is a syncretic mixture of Africanisms and Christianity.⁸³ Despite the colonization process of the Baptists, the Gullahs were able to retain some of their own religious and spiritual practices. Creel indicates that “[t]he Baptist faith became the Gullahs’ own personal religion, one they molded and fashioned away from the watchful, critical eyes of the forces of spiritual ‘superiority’ and physical

⁸⁰ Rosalyn Browne, telephone interview with author, February 16, 2015.

⁸¹ Creel, 78.

⁸² Ibid, 79.

⁸³ Rosalyn Browne.

exploitation.”⁸⁴ While the Gullahs practiced an altered form of Christianity, they also maintained spiritual traditions that originated from West African traditions such as the ring shout⁸⁵ practiced in praise houses.

Connections to Land—Foodways

In addition, belief systems in Gullah communities countered or differed from those of the dominant culture include ideas drawn from African spiritual traditions. For example, like the early American Indians, Gullahs maintain a spiritual connection with the land but also a material connection and one that often enabled them to be self-sustaining. Far from a romanticized notion, this association with the land enabled not only cultural practices related to religion but also those related to food cultivation, acquisition, and preparation.

Gullahs pay homage to their forbearers by harvesting food on the land that was toiled by their ancestors. It is part of the Gullah spiritual tradition to act as good stewards of the land by caring for it and making it materially productive. It is also part of this tradition to maintain property that has been in the family for many years because this land is recognized as an ancestral link to African roots; therefore, Gullahs try to maintain acreage that has been left to them by their ancestors and to pass it down to their progeny as part of their legacy. In other words, this legacy is not passed down primarily as real estate but as cultural and spiritual linkage. This spiritual linkage with the land has an impact on Gullah foodways. For example, as a

⁸⁴ Margaret Washington Creel. *'A Peculiar People': Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullah* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 251.

⁸⁵ The ring shout is a sacred dance ritual originating from West Africa. According to the *Word, Shout and Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting through Language* exhibit that I visited at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum on November 11, 2010: [The ring shout] “was directly inherited by Muslim slaves that had been brought to the Sea Islands. The Arabic pronunciation of shout is sha'wt.” People in the Gullah Geechee culture still preserve these traditions; for instance, the ring shout is performed by the McIntosh County Shouters from McIntosh County, Georgia.

result of the importance of rice cultivation in Gullah history, many Gullahs eat rice daily (sometimes twice daily). One significant rice dish is Hoppin' John,⁸⁶ a dish made with field peas, white rice, some form of pork, and "lots of love." Hoppin' John is eaten primarily on New Year's Day, and eating this dish is known to be homage to the African ancestors who labored freely on the land to cultivate and grow rice. One's eating this dish on New Year's Day is also said to indicate that one will have food in one's home for the rest of the year and that one will have good luck for the entire year. This dish was cooked widely by enslaved Gullahs and can be "trace[d] to Africa and the sugar islands of the Caribbean.... The slave trade brought the black-eyed pea from West Africa to the West Indies. By the early eighteenth century, colonists carried it to Carolina, where slaves grew it in provision gardens."⁸⁷ Without the Hoppin' John, the Gullah culinary repertoire is physically and spiritually empty for many Gullah people, who honor those family traditions that have been passed down due to the matrilineal strength within the Gullah culture. Many people from Gullah culture prepare this sacred dish throughout the year, stressing that they do not wait until New Year's to enjoy this menu item.

While John Tibbetts emphasizes the contributions of the enslaved to the cultivation of rice, he fails to acknowledge the continued significance of rice for today's Gullahs: "Still, for most lowcountry whites and many urban blacks, rice holds no special meaning now—with one exception[:] Hoppin' John."⁸⁸ Tibbetts's statement is not entirely true because many people in Gullah communities continue to

⁸⁶ Folklore states that the name of this dish originated from a man named John who walked with a limp. Emory Campbell, telephone interview with author, January 15, 2016.

⁸⁷ John Tibbetts, "African Roots, Carolina Gold," *Coastal Heritage* 21, 2006, 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

eat rice on a daily basis; though, they may not eat it two or three times daily, as Gullahs once did, and they may eat healthier portions since it is now known that white rice has a significant glycemic index. As will be presented in subsequent sections of this chapter and in other chapters of this dissertation, spiritual and ancestral connections exist between the Gullahs and other forms of material culture, such as casting nets, sweetgrass baskets, and ironworks. Here, the use of rice within early and contemporary Gullah culture is rendered to reflect the manner in which the culture was formed from African traditions and African-American syncretic practices that have been preserved across generations, constituting the distinctiveness that exists in Gullah culture.⁸⁹

Archaeological research also indicates that the enslaved Gullahs demonstrated resistance through their foodways. According to archaeologist Theresa A. Singleton, “archaeological evidence for the foodways of enslaved people comes from two sources: the study of food remains recovered from the excavation of refuse deposits and the study of equipment used for procuring, processing, and serving food.”⁹⁰ Not only the Gullahs but also other enslaved on various plantation sites sought multifarious ways to secure food: “Coastal slaves apparently hunted and fished throughout the year, collecting shellfish, sea catfish, stingrays, sharks, mullet, turtles, opossum, raccoon, and rabbit. Many of these food resources could be captured easily using nets or traps while the captor attended to other chores.”⁹¹ Hence, this

⁸⁹ See Josephine Beoku Betts’ “We Got Our Ways of Cooking Things: Women, Food and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah.” *Gender and Society* 9 (October 1995). Beoku Betts highlights women’s role in preserving food practices in the Gullah culture.

⁹⁰ Theresa A. Singleton. “The Archaeology of Slavery.” *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, 26 (1995). 125.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

archaeological finding is important because objects like the casting nets have been important to Gullah communities, signaling Gullah culture and cultural identity and representing Gullah cultural autonomy, as will be further explained in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation. Importantly, Singleton points that her “study was intended to explain how the enslaved population of coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida was able to increase by reproducing itself, unlike many slave populations found elsewhere in the Americas.”⁹² In her study, then, Singleton maps out how Gullah communities were able to sustain themselves and their ways of life in spite of enslavement.

Marronage⁹³

A central element of Gullah culture that reflects religion, naming practices, and even the linguistic element is the recognition of the Black Seminoles. They not only retained African cultural and linguistic elements and preserved aspects of the Gullah culture but also fled enslavement in order to do so, undertaking an act of resistance that constitutes actual marronage. Alcione Amos—museum curator, historian, and curator of the exhibit *Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Communities through Language*—highlights the significance of the Black Seminoles at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum. A portion of the

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ According to Marjoleine Kars, writing in July 24, 2013 on “Maroons and Marronage” for *Oxford Bibliographies*: “The term ‘maroons’ refers to people who escaped slavery to create independent groups and communities on the outskirts of slave societies. Scholars generally distinguish two kinds of marronage, though there is overlap between them. ‘Petit marronage,’ or running away, refers to a strategy of resistance in which individuals or small groups, for a variety of reasons, escaped their plantations for a short period of days or weeks and then returned. ‘Grand marronage,’ much less prevalent, and the topic here, refers to people who removed themselves from their plantations permanently. Grand marronage could be carried out by individuals or small groups, or it could be the result of plantation-wide breakouts, or even colony-wide rebellions. Although exact numbers do not exist, and in any event may have been smaller than previously thought, maroon societies were created throughout the Atlantic world.” www.oxfordbibliographies.com accessed (28 July 2015)

exhibit entitled, “Black Seminoles: The Gullahs that Got Away,” narrates the story of the Gullahs who escaped from Georgia and South Carolina and found refuge in Florida. These Black Seminoles have been able to retain their culture and language to this day. According to the exhibit, in the 1970s researchers discovered that the language spoken by the Black Seminoles was an ancient form of Gullah no longer spoken in the Sea Islands but definitely linking the Black Seminoles to their kin in that area: “Although Professor Turner never knew of their existence, it was indirectly due to his work that their language was discovered.”⁹⁴

The history of the Black Seminoles resonates deeply in this discussion of the emergence of Gullah culture as a resistance culture because of their marronage and because of their retention of African and Gullah linguistic elements. According to Amos, the Black Seminoles were able to retain their language, including naming practices, which are similar to those of the Gullahs, as Amos notes in her article “Black Seminoles: The Gullah Connections.”⁹⁵ Amos further indicates that the Black Seminoles have survived in spite of their migratory patterns (which include movement outside of the United States to Mexico) and in spite of having to fight in the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) to ensure their constant freedom. They also blended Spanish and Seminole linguistic patterns with their original, African-inflected Gullah language. Resistance permeates Black Seminole history because the Black Seminoles created a culture of survival and because they exhibit “courage, were always looking for a better place, were cohesive, had a native intelligence, and

⁹⁴ Anacostia Community Museum Exhibit. 11 November 2010. www.anacostia.si.edu

⁹⁵ See Alcione Amos, “Black Seminoles: The Gullah Connections.” *The Black Scholar* 41, no.1 (2011): 32-47.

kept the language.”⁹⁶ Additionally, Amos notes that the Black Seminoles are very mixed ethnically because they had to move around a great deal from place to place to ensure their freedom.

The Black Seminoles reflect direct resistance in early Gullah communities by resisting enslavement through fleeing and always taking pride in refusing to be enslaved in South Carolina and Georgia, choosing, rather, to form a migrant maroon community. Kenneth Porter states that “[w]ith the outbreak of war between England and its former colonies in 1775, fugitive blacks from Georgia and South Carolina found Florida a safe haven once again.”⁹⁷ Indeed, Amos indicates that she unearthed the linguistic connections between the Black Seminoles and the Gullahs, connections reported in “Black Seminoles: The Gullah Connections,” through editing Porter’s manuscript. She also communicated with the Black Seminoles during the 1970s about their connection with the Gullahs. More recently, linguist Ian Hancock “arranged a meeting between representatives of Afro-Seminoles and Sea-Islanders, their first contact in more than a century and a half. Bridges have gradually been built between other Gullah speaking communities.”⁹⁸

Like Amos and Hancock, other scholars have found an interest in the connection between the Black Seminoles and the Gullahs. For instance, Anthony Dixon has studied the Black Seminoles in relation to the Black Diaspora. His specialization focuses on the migratory patterns in Florida and the Bahamas. Dixon’s research highlights that the Second Seminole War was occurring during Indian

⁹⁶ Alcione Amos, personal interview with author, October 28, 2014.

⁹⁷ Kenneth W. Porter. *The Black Seminoles: History of A Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 5.

⁹⁸ Lorenzo Dow Turner. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, rpt. 2002), xlix.

Removal Act and “the United States government’s objective became to return as many Black Seminoles, if not all, to slavery.”⁹⁹ Dixon further asserts that “the Second Seminole War was indeed the largest slave rebellion in United States’ history.”¹⁰⁰ Examination of the history of the Black Seminoles reveals that the early Gullahs waged various forms of resistance, ranging from those undertaken within the institution of slavery to the act of escaping this institution. Resistance included the retention of African spiritual and linguistic traditions and the creation of syncretic religious and language practices as well as the creation of foodways that blended African and New World traditions. While some resistance may be seen as more subtle, that of the Black Seminoles was overt and often direct. Indeed, the marronage embarked by the Black Seminoles may be seen as a paradigm for the broader resistance undertaken by the Gullahs in non-maroon communities. In addition, the act of preservation is evident in African cultural heritage and syncretic Diasporic culture, linguistic practices, traditions and cultural practices, and religious and spiritual practices.

Gullah Language and Folklore: Linguistic Counter-Culture and Generational Shifts

In addition to developing and retaining their own spiritual traditions and foodways, early Gullahs undertook resistance to enslavement, cultural disparagement, and dehumanization through the formation and preservation of the Gullah language and by passing this language down through generations of Gullah people. While work by Lorenzo Dow Turner remains the touchstone in this area, particularly in its

⁹⁹ Anthony Dixon. *Florida’s Negro War: Black Seminoles And The Second Seminole War 1835-1842* (Tallahassee: AHRA Publishing, 2014), 6.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 7.

exploration of the African connections in the Gullah language, I want to stress the manner in which the formation of the Gullah language and its continued use serve as counter-cultural components in Gullah history and culture. Indeed, the Gullahs practiced resistance by continuing to use words and structures from their African languages after enslavement and following emancipation.

Early Gullahs retained African linguistic influences as a vital part of their language and culture even when white slaveholders could not understand this speech. Because the slaveholders spoke to newly transported African slaves in European tongues, the enslaved started speaking the European languages interlaced with their African languages. Because the Gullah language is a creolized language, Gullahs were able to retain words and structures from their African languages on plantations along the coasts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, where Gullahs lived in relative isolation. The tenacity of the early Gullahs in holding on to the Gullah language is recounted throughout the critical literature. Laura Towne, one of the founders of the Penn School in 1862, noticed the Gullahs speaking their language and recognized in it “melodic speech patterns ... [that she] wrote about in her diaries and letters home.”¹⁰¹ In histories of the Penn School, it is noted that even though the School, later the Penn Center offered a Northern-based curriculum teaching “standard” English, Gullahs remained linguistically connected to their African heritage. Towne realized that even if she had tried, she could not fully enact cultural imperialism on these recently freed people by successfully forcing them to abandon the Gullah language.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Wilbur Cross. *Gullah Culture in America* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 2008), 146.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Beyond the early Gullahs, one finds that Gullah communities have defied mainstream culture in sustaining their linguistic integrity in spite of generational shifts and cultural changes. In this vein, later African-American linguists including Patricia Jones-Jackson built upon Dow Turner's research. These scholars have unanimously acknowledged the linguistic integrity of the Gullah language and, in suggesting its linguistic value, and have indicated why it should be preserved. While many people—including linguists, academics, and others in the mainstream culture—have dismissed the language as poorly spoken English, the Gullahs have maintained their linguistic culture and have done so in spite of the cultural imperialism that people in the mainstream culture attempted to impose upon them. The Gullahs saw (and many Gullahs still see) that using this language is a way of defying the way the dominant culture defines the language—as an unintelligible or bastardized dialect of English. Although the Gullah people took (and still take) pride in speaking their language, they were (and still are) forced to navigate between “standard” English and the Gullah language and to navigate linguistically culture that devalue the language. The scholarship is replete with examples from earlier linguists and other members of the mainstream society who have devalued the Gullah language. Patricia Jones-Jackson cites that linguist Ambrose E. Gonzales referred to the language as “slovenly and careless of speech.”¹⁰³ Jones-Jackson indicated that Gonzales claimed that “these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier colonist, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as

¹⁰³ Ambrose E. Gonzales cited by Patricia Jones-Jackson. *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 132.

well as they could, and enriched with certain expressed African words, it issued through their flat noses, and thick lips.”¹⁰⁴

Jones-Jackson indicated the marginalization towards this speech and asserted the “studies by Lorenzo Dow Turner refuted Gonzales’s convictions.”¹⁰⁵ Like Turner’s research, Jones-Jackson debunks the myths of Gonzales and others who endorse mainstream perceptions of the Gullah language. She reports that the Gullah language has its own syntax and phonetic system, and she reveals the complexity of the language by carefully delineating its intricacies in linguistic terms. An example that Jones-Jackson displays that demonstrates the importance of oral transmission: “Some folk de gift fe lie.”¹⁰⁶ She argues that “[s]ince Turner’s study, most research on the Gullah culture has recognized its legitimacy as a linguistic system. However, no one has studied all of the various categories which are components of any language.”¹⁰⁷ While many Gullahs believe that the linguistic elements of their language are unjustly understudied due to cultural and academic prejudices, the Gullahs continue to preserve this lasting component of their heritage for future generations because of its distinction. Another way the Gullahs have countered prejudicial views regarding the language is through the publication of the Gullah Bible or *De Nyew Testament*¹⁰⁸ (2005) which translates the King James Version of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 135.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 32. The phrase is loosely translated into “Some folks are gifted liars (storytellers).”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Passage taken from *Revelations 7:1*, “*Atta dat. A see fo angel dem, da stanop at de fo cona ob de wol. Dey beena stop de fo wind ob de wol wa been wahn fa blow, so dat dey ain blow tall pon de wata por pon de dry groun or ginst dem tree.*”(And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree). *De Nyew Testament. American Bible Society: New York, 2005.*

the Bible into Gullah. The Sea Island Translation Team joined with linguists to complete this preservation goal, taking 25 years to complete this effort.

Charleston native Herb Frazier, a writer, marketing and public relations manager, also indicates the importance of the Gullah history and language being passed down, particularly in a written form, and he indicates why this had not been done until recently. Frazier asserts: “Until now, the remarkable history of Gullah people on the Cainhoy peninsula and St. Thomas and Daniel Islands was passed along orally but seldom compiled and written down. That’s because Gullah people had been enslaved, literally and figuratively. Most could not read or write. Few were allowed formal educations.”¹⁰⁹ He goes on to offer the relevant history: “Until Emancipation in the 1860s, most people of African heritage didn’t even have surnames. Yet by digging through historical records and newspaper accounts and speaking to longtime residents of the area, the story of the lives of people mortared to this land in a tabby of blood, sweat and tears is now being told in an ordered fashion.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, this author advocates for the cultural preservation through community cohesion and for documenting the Gullah’s history in written form so that future generations can have tangible as well as intangible memories of the contributions of their forbearers. Given his reasoning, it is clear that *De Nyew Testament* allows for the preservation and continuation of the linguistic and cultural elements of the Gullah people.

While preserving the Gullah language is critical to preserving the cultural and historical life of the Gullah people, Gullahs have also thrived on shared folklore

¹⁰⁹ Herb Frazier. “*Behind God’s Back.*” *Gullah Memories: Cainhoy, Wando, Huger, Daniel Island, St. Thomas Island, South Carolina.* (Charleston: *Evening Post*, 2011), 20.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

creating cultural cohesion. The oral tradition, for instance, is very crucial to many Gullahs, and it is utilized when stories, histories, beliefs, and mores are being passed down to younger generations or to other people. The strength of this powerful oral tradition lies in the power of passing down stories and folklore from one generation to the next through the voices of the people from within this particular culture. One example of this oral tradition at work is the “Ibo Landing” story that serves as a form of resistance in the communities. This folklore, referencing Africa and slavery, dating back to the 19th century, tells the story of how Africans resisted enslavement. In addition, the folklore also extends to how the captives would rather drown themselves as opposed to be enslaved.¹¹¹ Ronald Daise¹¹² references another Gullah folktale, “People Could Fly,” and it serve as an analogous with freedom, basic movement, and worldliness. Employing folklore in the Gullah culture resonates with African cultural traditions and demonstrates a form of resistance to forces that might elide Gullah history, culture, wisdom, and beliefs, and their importance. Despite variations in the way the stories are passed down from culture to culture and from storyteller to storyteller, the oral tradition reveals continuity across Gullah culture and is one of the measures that ensure that continuity, both across Gullah culture and

¹¹¹ Julie Dash’s *Daughter’s of the Dust: The Making of An African American Woman’s Film* details the importance of this folklore: “Ibo captives, African captives of the Ibo tribe, when they were brought to the New World, they refused to live in slavery. There are accounts of them having walked into the water, and then on top of the water all the way back to Africa, you know, rather than live in slavery chains. There are also myths of them having flown from the water, flown all the way back to Africa. And then there is the story—the truth or the myth—of them walking into the water and drowning themselves in front of the captors...It’s because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth. So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future.” (30)

¹¹² Ronald Daise’s *Gullah Branches: West African Root* elucidates that “[in] the Gullah folktale[,] ‘The People Could Fly,’...a group of enslaved Africans sprout wings and fly away. Tired of suffering, longing for home, and unbound by fear the characters listen to magic words called out by an old African and find themselves rising upward. Soon they are winging above and away from the plantation owner and overseer until they are *going...going...gone*. (167)

across generations. The oral tradition and folklore consist of the culture, and they constitute one of the performance elements in the culture. Despite enslavement and continuing struggles following emancipation, as well as other historical and cultural shifts, the basic linguistic and cultural elements that comprise the storytelling and the folkloric tradition still exist and can be transmitted to future generations.

Gullah linguistic and folkloric traditions created counter-cultures that resisted the mainstream cultural expectations of loss of the oral traditions. Many people in the culture continue to demonstrate determination to preserve their linguistic connections to Africa in spite of how the language has been and still is being devalued. Many people demonstrate this resistance culture by forming cultural alliances that protect oral traditions and language patterns.

Material Culture: Early Pathways toward Independence

Notwithstanding the history of enslavement, the Gullahs withstood the resultant oppressive culture and formed themselves into communities of individuals who had achieved self-sufficiency and economic independence. Because of their historical and cultural relevance, they have debunked the myth that the Gullah culture has made significant contributions to the American fabric. Early material culture produced by the Gullahs reveals they created homes, arts, crafts, and engaged in other practices like midwifery that resisted mainstream devaluation of the culture and created pathways toward independence.

Blacksmithing

Other uses of material culture within Gullah communities afforded them socioeconomic independence and allowed sustainability. One art that demonstrated this preservation was blacksmithing. It is well-documented that craftsmen such as blacksmiths, who made horseshoes and a variety of other implements, attained status and often some independence on plantations; indeed, those trained in this art later transformed blacksmithing from a trade implemented in the service of oppressors into a creative occupation that enabled cultural and economic independence. Following emancipation, generations of blacksmiths who trained in the art by their forbearers, began to create their own designs using iron, including designs that represent cultural symbols and spiritual beliefs within Gullah communities and reflecting the Gullahs' dynamism. For example, a piece of artistry such as "the snake gate"—naming a detail in the Gadsden House gate—created by the famed master blacksmith Philip Simmons signals the preservationist component of the culture: "The snake detail is a riff on the 'Don't Tread on Me' flag that [Christopher] Gadsden designed during the American Revolution and whose yellow background and coiled rattlesnake continue to reverberate as a political symbol today."¹¹³ Rossie Colter, the Philip Simmons Foundation, noted that other examples of the Philip Simmons's work can be found in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and in other places around United States.¹¹⁴ For instance, she indicated he created the gazebos at the Charleston International Airport, which serve

¹¹³ Robert Behre, "Philip Simmons Gets His Last Wish," *The Post and Courier*, February 7, 2015.

¹¹⁴ Rossie Colter, personal interview with author, June 7, 2016.

as welcoming pieces for people entering the city.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, she attested that the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History of Culture will display Simmons's artistry, along with the works of Carlton Simmons (nephew) and Joseph Pringle (cousin).¹¹⁶ By their creations appearing in the Museum, it illustrates the continuity of the culture, fluidity across generations, and shared memories.

History demonstrates that the cultural and economic independence of blacksmithing is rooted in generations before Philip Simmons. For instance, Philip Simmons learned this trade at the age of 13 from his mentor, Peter Simmons, who had been enslaved. Peter Simmons was taught blacksmithing by his father, who had also been enslaved. Although blacksmithing is an apprenticeship/autodidactic trade, much planning and artistry goes into this work. For instance, the creator of such artwork must have a good grasp of fundamental mathematics and must be able to accurately navigate the creative process.¹¹⁷ My close attention to blacksmithing here underscores its importance in the Gullah culture, part that reveals the manner in which the Gullahs repurposed material culture, turning a craft into an art in a way that subverts the historical oppression associated with the craft and that creates a culture-sustaining art.

Sweetgrass Baskets

The making of sweetgrass baskets is also an important part of both early Gullah and contemporary Gullah history and culture. Although enslaved Gullahs made the fanner baskets to separate the rice grains from the chaff on rice plantations, Gullah men and women later crafted sweetgrass art objects in order to ensure their

¹¹⁵ Rossie Colter

¹¹⁶ Rossie Colter

¹¹⁷ Carlton Simmons, personal interview with author, July 5, 2014.

socioeconomic independence and to counter mainstream assumptions that Gullahs lack creative and artistic ability. Although the fanner basket is not used today for agricultural purposes, it is highly recognized in Gullah culture and is made and/or displayed as a form of cultural preservation. Sweetgrass baskets are signature pieces that directly reflect the Gullahs' African heritage, and the creation and interpretation of these baskets signal the importance of preserving the Gullahs' African cultural legacy. This invaluable art of sweetgrass basket making has been passed down inter-generationally by both men and women, though it must be noted that early basket makers were largely made by men, who made the larger baskets with which to transport vegetables and other sizable items. Centuries later, basket makers create their artistry for display, profit, and creative purposes, as well as to preserve the Gullahs' African heritage and to serve a wide variety of practical uses. Sweetgrass objects include hats, jewelry, fruit and vegetable baskets, storage baskets, and church collection plates. This artistry, like blacksmithing, reflects resistance by constituting a valued part of Gullah culture, by countering mainstream devaluation of the culture and people, and by serving as a pathway to independence.

Casting Nets

The Gullahs also demonstrated their cultural and economic independence through the creation of the casting nets: "After the Civil War and through the early 1900s, many Native Islanders farmed the land for themselves and fished in surrounding waters to make their living. Gullah fishermen knitted their own fishing nets with a needle that was often made of palmetto wood. The art of making and

casting these fishing nets came from West Africa.”¹¹⁸ As noted here by Anita Singleton-Prather, the art of making these handmade fishing nets is derived from West Africa; the materials used are the wooden needle and the nylon needed to create the fishing net. Before the Sea Islands underwent development, the Gullahs made these fishing nets as a means to catch seafood such as shrimp, fish, crabs, and oysters. This is another example of the Gullahs’ perseverance and creativity, as well as their ability to create their own avenues of cultural and economic sustainability. The food that is obtained is used to prepare oyster dishes and traditional Gullah recipes containing shrimp, crab, and fish. Like blacksmithing and the making of sweetgrass baskets, the techniques used in the creation of these fishing nets are passed along from generation to generation, some children being taught as early as twelve years old. Because rivers separated the Gullahs from the mainland, members of Gullah communities (re)discovered these creative, artistic, organic means to provide for their families and/or generate income while also maintaining their links to Africa.

Gullah communities continue to demonstrate vibrancy, resilience, tenacity, and to persist in activism. Beginning with examples that reveal the way mainstream narratives have stereotyped Gullahs throughout the years, this chapter sought to render the history of the Gullah people in a manner that reveals the way these people have developed a resistance culture and the way their culture function as a counter-culture—defying stereotypes and defying extinction. This chapter reveals how components of the Gullah culture came in to being and that such components of the Gullah culture—including syncretic spirituality/religious practices, creolized

¹¹⁸ Anita Singleton-Prather, “Gullah Net: Explore Gullah Culture in South Carolina with Aunt Pearliesue!” www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/aunt_pearliesue/index.html accessed (6 June 2013).

language use, Black Diasporan land associations, and unique material culture/foodways—are critical to the sustainment of the culture. Offering the history of the Black Seminoles as an example of literal marronage within the history, this chapter asserted that the Gullah culture can be seen as undertaking maroon resistance because of its preservation of African cultural retentions and rejection of wide-ranging assimilation.

Emory Campbell notes that “Gullah history and heritage were virtually unknown, even in the Southeast, until the [Lorenzo Dow] Turner studies were made. Even then, his work faded from public knowledge, and the Gullah culture lapsed again, almost into oblivion, until a slow revival began in the last quarter of the 20th century.”¹¹⁹ One finds that the Gullahs’ heritage and culture have demonstrated the strength, resilience, and renewal of the Gullah people. These people endured enslavement, and they faced cultural displacement after the Civil War; however, they seized opportunities that allowed them to sustain their traditions, customs, language, and family and communal structures. These trailblazers in American history armed themselves with tools of cultural and economic self-sufficiency at institutions such as the Penn School.

This chapter, providing a revised lens through which to render Gullah history, demonstrates how the cultural practices have been inaccurately interpreted by some in mainstream culture. Also, it has sought to debunk the myths disseminated by those who do not share the Gullah narrative and/or who have misrepresented issues of race

¹¹⁹ Emory Campbell (forward). Wilbur Cross. *Gullah Culture in America*. (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 2008), ix.

and class as these appear in the Gullah community. While this chapter, in its exploration of Gullah history and culture, merits additional attention, for the purposes of this study, that will be left to other scholars. Here, this exploration situates the broader discussion of the Penn Center, of Gullah material culture, and Gullah oral narratives.

The next chapter narrows the discussion of Gullah history, culture, resistance, and activism by placing the Penn Center in its historical context and by showing the manner in which the Penn Center revises Gullah history and preserves Gullah culture in its promotion of Gullah heritage. In addition to revealing the way that the Penn Center serves as a link to the community and a resource for land preservation, language retention, and other cultural issues, the next chapter reveals that the Center serves as a transformative entity in the Gullah community, mapping its development from a school founded by Quakers to educate newly freed persons to its emergence as a premier cultural center.

Chapter 3: The Penn Center: Institution Building and Material Culture

“More than a century since its founding, Penn Center still remains at the forefront in the fight for human dignity.”

U. S. Congressman John Lewis, Georgia’s 5th District and Civil Rights Icon¹²⁰

Introduction

Today, the Penn Center’s cultural and symbolic significance remains undeniable. In spite of the economic and other challenges that have occurred throughout its history, the Penn Center, once the home of the historic Penn School, has endured and thrived. *The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan* lists the Penn Center as one of the sites along the Corridor to be preserved and recognizes its significance to the Gullah Geechee culture through its work as an active cultural institution. The Center’s mission is clearly directed: “to promote and preserve the history and culture of the Sea Islands.”¹²¹ In addition, the Penn Center itself and the York W. Bailey Museum—including its interior landscape—also serves as a manifestation of Gullah culture; the National Trust for Historic Preservation “designated [it] as a national historic site in 1974,” noting that it is “the oldest and most complete center for the study of the Gullah culture on the East Coast.”¹²² Likewise, its historical significance is further documented: “It is the first African American site in South Carolina, whose primary purpose was to safeguard the culture and heritage of a Gullah Geechee community.”¹²³

While research on the Penn Center has already been undertaken by historians, Gullah Geechees, academics, and scholars—by those who seek to learn about this

¹²⁰ www.penncenter.com/what-we-do accessed (July 7, 2016).

¹²¹ <http://penncenter.com/history> accessed (June 12, 2013).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

premier cultural institution and its role in celebrating and promoting the history and culture of the Sea Islands—this dissertation advances that research through examining the material culture.

Extant scholarship verifies the significance of the Penn Center. Among the work done thus far, oral histories of Penn School graduates have been collected and used to detail the educational accomplishments of the institution. In addition, two book-length works offer overviews of the history and import of this institution. Early history of the Penn School is rendered in Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*, which delineates the historical background of the Port Royal Islands and reveals how they had an impact on the Sea Islanders. This included the founding of the Penn School. More recent history is found in Orville Burton's *Penn Center: A History Preserved*, which renders a detailed account of the Penn Center, especially its preservationist accomplishments and its service as a political and cultural presence in the Gullah community. Moving beyond these studies, this chapter examines the history of the Penn Center as it has rewritten social and cultural boundaries through institution building and preserving and promoting Gullah history and culture. In particular, it introduces the role of the York W. Bailey Museum, a material arm of the Center that advances the social cultural dimensions of the culture.

The Penn Center was founded as the Penn School in 1862 during the Civil War and six months before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation Act. As briefly mentioned, it was founded as part of the Port Royal Experiment, which “was put in place to determine whether or not freed blacks could live independently. The

Port Royal Experiment offered a means through which the Gullahs were able to sustain themselves...to see if they could survive as freedmen or not.”¹²⁴ As part of this experiment, the Penn School was founded by two Northern missionary women with the objective of educating formerly enslaved Blacks and helping them attain independence after emancipation:

The purpose of the Penn School is to provide the best possible education from a Christian point of view for the boys and girls of the Sea Islands and the seaboard area between Charleston and Savannah, to train the mind, the hand and heart for competent citizenship and for the upbuilding of the economic and cultural life of this part of our world; to enable all those who come within its reach to be rural—wise, community conscious and self-discipline persons with a profound concern for the continual redemption of self and society.¹²⁵

Ironically, despite the purpose and point of view of the founders, the Gullah students at the early Penn School resisted acculturation (to some degree) by preserving their language and their African-related cultural practices, e.g. linguistic, spiritual, and folkloric traditions. Towne and Murray, the two founders, gave this school its name, the Penn School, in honor of William Penn (a Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania) and after Towne’s homeplace.¹²⁶

The placement of the Penn’s papers in 1962 is of importance to note in this discussion. The Penn Center’s archival collections, housed at the Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, are also available to scholars and researchers, and a sizable investment has been made to digitize this information and the accompanying

¹²⁴Emory Campbell. Gullah Heritage Trail Tour. Conducted by Emory Campbell. 15 July 2015. For additional reference on the *Port Royal Experiment*, see Willie Lee Rose’s *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*

¹²⁵ Unauthored, undated, Box 23, Folder 248, Penn School Papers, 1862-1977 and undated (bulk 1862-1949), Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Library Special Collections. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹²⁶ www.penncenter.com/what-we-do accessed (October 13, 2014).

photographic collection. Additionally, the Penn Center wanted to make the resources and the site accessible for the preservation and history of the culture. In addition to its accessibility and preservation efforts, Penn also realized education as a major impetus behind placing these papers at the University of Chapel Hill, especially during the segregation era.

Educational Awareness: Penn Center Subverting Disparaging Valuations

The early history of the Penn Center reveals that while it was founded as a school to educate the formerly enslaved in reading and writing, it also served to subvert educational, cultural, and social barriers. Although the Penn Center was founded as the Penn School to educate the formerly enslaved in reading and writing, this founding also revealed and subverted educational, cultural, and social barriers. In 1862, educational barriers were already in place in American society, and those who turned to the Penn School were not able to obtain a formal education in any other format setting. The Penn School subverted these educational prohibitions by taking as its mission the education of the Gullah people. From its inception, then, the Penn School challenged the devaluation of Gullahs and other African Americans; its buildings and tools were used to educate the Gullahs and to enable self-sufficiency. At the same time, however, because the focus of the founders was acculturation of the Gullahs into the Anglo-American cultural landscape, these early students also resisted the loss of their Gullah culture. Indeed, the newly emancipated Gullahs were aware of the physical, cultural, and racial barriers present even within the borders of the Penn School. In spite of boundaries, they pursued efforts to preserve their culture. Part of preserving their culture was recognizing the importance of land. Before I

detail these preservation efforts, it is useful to understand the role of women in helping to educate Gullah people.

The genesis of this institution can be traced to its two founders, both women from the North: Laura Towne, a Pennsylvanian Quaker, and Ellen Murray, a Unitarian. Likewise, one can see the first Black teacher at the Penn School, Charlotte Forten. Towne and Murray's dedication to the abolition of slavery led them to "liv[ing] and wor[king] on St. Helena Island for the remainder of their lives—roughly the first forty years of Penn School's existence."¹²⁷ Rupert Holland, editor of the letters and diary of Laura Towne, indicates the impetus behind Towne's decision to open the Penn School: "Following the first gunfire of the Civil War by the Confederate army when its batteries attacked Ft. Sumter in Charleston Harbor, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers."¹²⁸ Holland notes that "both she [Towne] and Ellen Murray were disturbed by this news. They wanted to help the Union."¹²⁹ Towne's training was rooted in homeopathic medicine, and she thought this training would be useful on the Sea Islands, especially after the Civil War.¹³⁰ Soon after its founding, like Towne and Murray, their colleague Charlotte Forten, a free, middle-class Black woman from Massachusetts, also went to the Penn School to educate the newly freed Blacks and dedicate herself to the abolitionist cause.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Oliver Burton. *The Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 4.

¹²⁸ Rupert Sargent Holland, from his published version of letters and diary of Laura M. Towne, 25 April 1862, Box 32, Folders 335-336B, Penn School Papers, 1862-1977 and undated (bulk 1862-1949), Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Oliver Burton. *The Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 12.

¹³¹ Penn School Placard. York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012.

Like other reformers of the era, Towne, Murray, and Forten defied both racial, gender, and geographical expectations while undertaking their political missions as abolitionists. During this time, it was not commonplace for two young white women and a Black woman to re-locate to the South and defy the injustices of slavery and the inequities found in post-emancipation South. It would have been less arduous for Towne, Murray, and Forten to remain in their respective Northern cities and fight the anti-slavery cause; however, they decided to assume more assertive roles by moving to one of the heartbeats of the Confederacy—one where the Civil War was still occurring and where their lives would be endangered. In *Penn Center: A History Preserved*, Orville Burton notes the dangers as well: “Even in the best of times, no one could forget that a war was raging and that Penn School was very close to enemy lines. Safety was always a concern; on September 26, 1862, Towne worried about...spies at Port Royal. She [Towne] wrote, ‘It is said there is every probability of an attack.’”¹³²

The determination of the students at the Penn School and their founders resulted in success in spite of obstacles. Towne’s diary entries note that although certain measures prevented her from living on the island to teach these students, it did not impede their thirst for learning. Burton notes: “Towne mostly had kind words to say about the children. Schools were a high priority for the Sea Island people; as soon as they had the opportunity to learn, they requested teachers.... Towne decided to work with a school on the Oaks Plantation on nearby St. Helena Island. Whites preferred to stay off the [S]ea [I]slands, plagued as they were by insects and

¹³² Oliver Burton. *The Penn Center: A History Preserved* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 22

malaria.”¹³³ This statement contradicts the view held by plantation owners that the enslaved and the formerly enslaved did not desire to read, to learn, and to be independent. After receiving assistance from Ellen Murray, whom Towne respected in the field of education, “the two women took up residence at Oaks Plantation House (Figure 3.1), and Murray taught her first class [there] on June 18, 1862.” Later, they would teach in Brick Church. Burton goes on to quote from Towne’s diary: “Ellen had her first adult school to-day, in the back room—nine scholars, I assisted.”¹³⁴



Figure 3.1. The Oaks Plantation House- From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

¹³³ Ibid, 13-14.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 15.

Clearly, the Gullahs, here referred to as “scholars,” were more than ready to learn. Esteemed graduates like York W. Bailey, the first Black doctor on the Sea Islands, and Mary Smalls, the first trained midwife, eventually graduated from this institution.

Funding the Penn School also reveals Towne’s leadership ability and the nontraditional gender role she played as a founder of this institution. Financing the Penn School was met with many challenges, but the founders and the students discovered ways of sustaining the institution. In order to procure the initial funding for the Penn School, Towne wrote letters to benefactors requesting donations.¹³⁵ Likewise, other letters from Towne indicate that she held fundraisers and solicited the support from her Northern alliances to maintain the buildings and purchase supplies for the school.¹³⁶ Towne was cognizant that the school needed expanded space and funding in order to thrive (a point to which I will return). In her position as a founder of the school, she undertook both financing the institution and ensuring its continued fiscal viability, defying the association of women with domesticity that dominated the era.

Charlotte Forten not only defied gender expectations but also racial boundaries. She re-located to South Carolina in spite of danger in the South for a Black person. Burton notes that “volunteering so close to Confederate lines was dangerous for a [black] woman. If captured, Forten ran the risk of being sold into slavery.”¹³⁷ Forten could have remained content as a free woman with privilege if she was not concerned with some of the uncertain conditions of the Confederate

¹³⁵ Laura Towne’s Diary. 5 May 1861, Box 233, Folder 336B, Penn School Papers 1862-1977 and undated (bulk 1862-1949), Penn School Papers. Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Burton, 16.

South. In addition, the climate in the Lowcountry was an obstacle for Forten, as it would be for many people unaccustomed to the swampy areas. Unfortunately, Forten's tenure at the Penn School was short-lived because the extreme humidity exacerbated her health condition: "Because she could not bear the heat of the day, Forten had already stopped traveling to school and instead held classes at a carriage house where they lived, about half a mile from Penn at Frogmore Plantation."¹³⁸

Although this action attests to her tenacity, it also informs the reader of the toll the weather condition had on Forten in spite of her intention to remain on the island.

Burton indicates that Forten taught "for eight months at other places around the island and helping at Penn School when Ellen Murray was very ill with malaria. Forten's influence at the Penn School extended well beyond the time she spent. As an educated African American woman, she was a role model for the students, and her work helped put the school on the path to success."¹³⁹ Despite the risk of her physical health and safety, Forten undermined gender and racial expectations of the day, emphasizing her own commitment to education.

Early Education of Land Retention

In addition to persistence undertaken by the founders and the teachers, students at the Penn School also resisted the discourses of the day that besmirched Blacks in general and the Gullahs in particular. Their success belied the underlying racism of the Port Royal Experiment, which was premised on the question of whether or not Blacks could survive on their own. In spite of the paucity of funds, the

¹³⁸ Ibid, 23-24.

¹³⁹ Burton, 24; Burton notes that Forten's dedication led her to return to Penn School for later visits, and "she returned to South Carolina to teach at the Shaw Memorial School" cited by Burton from (*Journal of Charlotte Forten Grimke*, 43).

circumscribed space at the School, and the occurrence of the Civil War, the students at the Penn School were determined not only to survive but also to thrive. Excelling educationally and intellectually, the newly emancipated Penn School students illustrated that Gullah people were capable of being full participants in American society. They defied all expectations. When Towne and Murray came as part of the Port Royal Experiment, they came to aid freedmen but were not certain if the freedmen were capable of surviving on their own. Ultimately, the freed Blacks—the Gullahs—made use of the educational resources at the Penn School and refused to be seen as societal problems by retaining cultural independence and attaining economic independence. Indeed, their numbers grew, and with it, the Penn School, so much so that they had to be transported to different buildings. Because the number of students grew, the Penn School required a larger space, and its founders secured the donation of the Brick Church for a school: “[The Brick Church] had been built by enslaved workers in 1855 for white plantation owners, and when whites fled the area, former slaves made the church their own.”¹⁴⁰ Clearly, Towne and Murray’s educational and outreach efforts had been successful. Next, they outgrew this space and needed more room to teach the students; therefore, they sought adequate space on more land while retaining Brick Church: “The new school was ready in January 1865. A gift from the Freedman’s Aid Society of Pennsylvania, the three-room frame building arrived in already-built sections.... This building, one of the first prefabricated structures in American history, was put into service as the first real schoolhouse in the South

¹⁴⁰ Burton, 15-16.

designed for the instruction of former slaves.”¹⁴¹ This action demonstrates the vision, determination, and prolific fundraising efforts of the founders.

Although this building was built in 1865, its postmodern structure and fabrication can be seen as visionary, predating the postmodernism that followed World War II. In essence, the school was built into sections somewhere else and brought onto the land for the educational purposes of the students, which unseated the ideas of the era regarding how buildings should be constructed and how Black people in the Confederate South should be educated. According to Burton, “the school was located on fifty acres of land across from the Brick Church, land sold to Penn School by Hastings Gantt, a freedman, entrepreneur, and local civic leader on St. Helena.”¹⁴² The fact that this building was sold to the Penn School by a freedman indicates that Blacks were beginning to pool their resources in the community, especially educationally, financially, and politically.

Repurposing of Brick Church

The fact that the Brick Church was built by the enslaved (such work being at the time also being the purview of men) epitomizes the irony and hypocrisy of the institution of slavery, since those enslaved were forced to build a structure that enabled the oppression of Black men, women, and children. Reading the Brick Church—which became a school after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation Act—as characteristic of the transgression of boundaries undertaken in the formation of the Penn School, one sees the way racial, gender, social, and economic boundaries were unseated due to the change in way spaces were allocated. No longer a place of

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 25.

¹⁴² Ibid.

privilege for white men, as it was when it was constructed, the Brick Church now fell under the purview of two white women, Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, who founded the Penn School. Situated in a central location within the community, the Brick Church now became a tool of education and empowerment for Gullahs, training Gullahs to become professionals. Blacks at that time realized that the achievement of an education was the path to economic freedom and independence, and the emergence of the Penn School from a church that once symbolized the oppression for the Blacks who built it instilled a promise for this achievement. Indeed, the initial building served those who prevented Blacks from reading and writing and who otherwise inflicted continuous harm—denying Black women the notions of womanhood and motherhood that were available to their white counterparts, denying to Black people the sanctions of marriage available to their white counterparts, and denying to Black people the opportunity to worship in the same space as the people who enslaved them (the space that they themselves had built). The Brick Church became a school that supported the learning of Gullah people.

Additionally, Gantt's bequeath highlights the importance of land ownership to the Penn School, foreshadowing the way the Penn Center would later educate Gullahs on how to retain their property. Like the other early buildings, this building speaks to resisting the dominant narrative about the status of the enslaved, narratives of subordination and lack of ambition. In fact, this and other buildings remain on the grounds of the Penn Center today as vital resources for public service and community outreach.

In addition to vocation, arts, and the classics, the success of the Penn School was determined, in part, by its curriculum. Towne and Murray modeled the school's curriculum after those of Northern schools. Orville Burton indicates that "[b]y 1867, secondary education at Penn School had become the best on the island, and the most qualified elementary students applied to Penn for high school education. Murray selected the most promising secondary school students from 'an endless list of applicants for admission' from the island's other schools."¹⁴³

However, although early students at the Penn School saw their independence through the lens of harvesting a classic education, they also saw it through the lens of harvesting land: "Whatever managers of plantations might have thought, few former slaves confused wage labor with freedom. Real freedom, as republican ideology understood it and religious expectation framed it, required autonomy, and in an agricultural economy that mean living off one's own land."¹⁴⁴ These emancipated people looked to the future by seeking land and by passing down their land to their heirs. They created an ancestral link that still lasts today because of the determination and resilience of many Gullahs on and along the Sea Islands.

Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School

While Laura Towne and Ellen Murray conceived a classical education for the Penn School graduates, the next two directors, Rossa Cooley and Grace House, both white Northern women, prodded the Penn School toward a more vocational direction. From 1901 until 1948, the Penn School became the Penn Normal, Agricultural and Industrial School. It was remodeled after "the industrial arts curriculum taught at

¹⁴³ Pennsylvania Freedmen's Bulletin 3 (April 1867): 5, published as part of American Freedman 2 (April 1867); Butchart, "Laura Towne and Ellen Murray," 21., cited by Orville Burton

¹⁴⁴ Burton, 30-31.

Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes.”¹⁴⁵ As depicted in the Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum, this transition was achieved by combining agricultural and vocational subjects with community development.¹⁴⁶ As Burton notes: “Cooley and House revised Penn’s educational goals, and for the next forty years it followed the Hampton or Tuskegee idea of industrial education, adhering to Booker T. Washington’s philosophy rather than that of W.E.B. Du Bois and the ‘talented tenth.’”¹⁴⁷ W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of the “talented tenth” was criticized by many for its elitism because it identified leaders as a selected group in the Black community. As Blight suggests, DuBois believed that “an educated black elite (10 percent) ought to lead and provide an uplifting example for the masses of the race.”¹⁴⁸ In contrast, Booker T. Washington had a different philosophy and urged Southerners, both Black and white, to remain in the South and enfranchise Blacks in the socioeconomic milieu. While many of Booker T. Washington’s views appeared to be accommodating to the segregationist aims of racist whites, his program was intended to move Southern Blacks toward economic independence. In fact, Washington believed that the Blacks in the South should be “so skilled in hand, so strong in head, so honest in heart, that the Southern white man cannot do without [the]m.”¹⁴⁹ Washington subordinated advancement in the profession as only one of the paths for

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012.

¹⁴⁷ Burton, 4.

¹⁴⁸ David Blight and Robert Gooding Williams, eds and Intro to W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black of Folk*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996,) First Published, 1903 by A.C. McClurg and Company.

¹⁴⁹ www.sciway.net/afam/penn.html accessed (November 6, 2015).

Blacks, calling for Blacks to excel “in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic, and in the professions....”¹⁵⁰

Washington’s views seemed to appease the fears and desires of segregationist whites while placing limitations on Blacks: “Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor.”¹⁵¹ Despite the apparent conflict between DuBois and Washington, Joyce A. Hanson asserts that “[w]hile Washington and DuBois disagreed on the means to achieve their objective, the goal—racial equality—was not in dispute. Both sought to gain inclusion for African Americans, Washington through economic means, DuBois through political means.”¹⁵²

The Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School followed Washington’s plan, including one of the locations that trained midwives (Figure 3.2). Its strategy was to emphasize training in vocational skills and to persuade people in the community to employ the students who had vocational skills so that they could support themselves and their families. Indeed, Cooley and House focused on Blacks achieving saleable skills that would allow them to function in society.

¹⁵⁰Booker T. Washington. americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/btwashington.html accessed (February 10, 2016).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Joyce A. Hanson. *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 21.



Figure 3.2.-Darrah Hall; Midwifery Graduation at Penn School- From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center's York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

This focus adhered to one of the earlier missions of the Penn School, which sought to advance the number of Blacks in vocational occupations in the rural areas. While the two new directors shifted the direction of the Penn School in order to advance the needs of the students, the Washingtonian model, because it deemphasized the professions, had limitations as an educational paradigm. Nevertheless, students of the Penn Normal School used this model as a mode of resistance, honing their skills in order to embark upon the path toward economic and cultural independence. Skills such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and cobbling reveal that vocational occupations taught at the Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School were needed by the community. These skills and others (such as the making of fanner baskets) also ensured the continuation of the Gullah culture, thereby resisting mainstream narratives that devalued it. Although they were deemed inferior because of their race and culture, they became highly skilled artisans, contributing greatly to the economic and cultural fabric of the Sea Islands.

The Penn Normal, Industrial, and Agricultural School also underwent other changes. Its administrative staff became more racially inclusive and more outreach focused. Burton describes the way the Penn Normal School transformed both racially and ideologically: “The board now included two African Americans (after the resignation of the white principals, Howard and Alice Kester, in 1948); both were college presidents and both owed their places on the board to Howard Kester. They were the renowned educator and president of Morehouse College, Benjamin E. Mays, and the former Penn School teacher and supervisor Joshua Blanton, who left Penn in 1922 to become president of Vo[o]rhees College in Denmark, South Carolina.”¹⁵³ The election of these Black board members foreshadows the next transition of this institution—the shift in 1948 from the Penn Normal School to Penn Community Services, Inc., “an agency focusing on self-sufficiency and the advancement and development of Sea Island community and its inhabitants.”¹⁵⁴ The Penn Center, as we know it today, was born in 1950 and focused on community development and cultural preservation. Although in its nascent stages as a Center, it implemented programs that greatly benefitted community members during times of segregation and those who needed economic resources: “it trained midwives, opened the first daycare center for African Americans, developed community health care clinic, and started Teen Canteen for local teenagers.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Burton, 70.

¹⁵⁴ www.penncenter.com/what-we-do accessed (July 7, 2016).

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Political and Economic Activism

One of the primary goals of the repurposed Penn Center was political and economic activism. The Penn Center re-established during and in part because of the Civil Rights Movement. Its focus on community activism was evident when it hosted an integrated group of Civil Rights activists. Now the Penn Center, its leaders met with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and with other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and demonstrated their solidarity with protest issues involving racial discrimination in employment, education, and other arenas.



Figure 3.3-Dr. Martin Luther King visiting with Penn director Courtney Sicheloff, his wife, Elizabeth and son John. From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Members of the SCLC used the Penn Center “for retreat and strategic planning.”¹⁵⁶ Though its earlier mission had shifted from focusing from vocational education to include political and civic activism, the Penn Center still challenged the stereotypes of Blacks in general and Gullah people in particular. They did this by showcasing political consciousness and intellectual aspirations within the Gullah community as well as direct agitation against racism.

¹⁵⁶ <http://penncenter.com/history> accessed (October 1, 2012).

Cultural Preservation: Land Sustainability/Community Building

Direct agitation against racism and against the disparagement and displacement of the Gullah people is also evident in the history and culture of the Penn Center. For example, the Center established the Black Land Services in 1972. Through this program, the Penn Center advocates on behalf of the Gullah community for property rights, and it provides legal resources to keep Sea Islanders informed about their rights and cultural legacy. Essentially, the Center has become a grassroots organization that arms residents with information about their cultural identity—the connection to the land being a major component of this identity. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was an escalation in land taxes; the Penn Center, however, sought to prevent the Gullahs from losing this valuable asset. Burton notes that in 1972, the Penn Center, “under the direction of John W. Gadson (the first Black director of the Penn Center), and with the help of Charles Washington Jr., a Beaufort lawyer, established Black Land Services, Inc., an organization whose purpose was to save black land ownership in Beaufort, Jasper, Hampton, Colleton, Charleston, and Dorchester Counties.”¹⁵⁷ These cultural preservationists have rigorous experience in community organizing, which connects to the preservation of the Gullah culture.

Burton affirms:

To assist native sea islanders in preserving their land in the midst of sweeping changing and higher tax assessments, Joseph McDomick, who had come to Penn Center in 1964 to do community organizing, began to direct Black Land Services in 1972. McDomick designed a program of education, legal services, individual consultations, and strategic loans. He helped with wills and boundary disputes, a common problem, since many people who had held land since the late 1800s had not recorded plats and boundaries at the county courthouse.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Burton, 99.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 102

The Center has not remained static in its efforts to preserve this precious resource, and Burton attests:

Representing the Penn Center, McDomick attends the annual tax sales, and there has been ‘a great turnaround’ in local owners’ ability to keep the land. Over the course of the years, the county treasurer has established a routine. Because of Penn Center’s diligence and its value within the community, the treasurer first declares that before the bidding begins, the Penn Center would like to make a statement. McDomick then requests that others do not bid against the current owner.¹⁵⁹

This action attests to the Penn Center’s resourcefulness, organization, and legal knowledge. The Penn Center’s role as a cultural center thereby has become even more critical because Gullah land ownership—which had provided memories, stability, and security for the past generations—has been endangered. The Penn Center thus became a comrade in the struggle over Gullah land retention.

The Penn Center also demonstrated cultural preservation through implementing the Land Use and Environmental Program during the 1980s. Gullahs believe in sustainability through the land and the environment.¹⁶⁰ “At the Penn Center, sustainability included the preservation of land and culture in the midst of one-sided economic development.”¹⁶¹ Through this program, the staffers at the Penn Center also advocated for environmental quality for the residents on the Sea Islands.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ See introductory and oral history chapters of this dissertation when Ella M. Chaplin asserts ways in which Gullahs live off the land and the importance of caring for the environment. In fact, other residents present other captivating narratives of living off and caring for the land. For instance, Sara Reynolds Green, founder of Marshview Community Organic Farms, illustrates the significance of harvesting the land. She implemented an after school program that inculcated skills in students from St. Helena Island, and she asserts: “We’ve taught them how to plant, how to harvest, how to sell, because they’re [a] part of the customer relations in selling the produce, how to cook, and how to serve.” Green “passes her knowledge of self-sufficiency on to younger residents.” www.thegullahproject.org/photo-gallery/marshview_organic_community_farm accessed (July 7, 2016).

¹⁶¹ Burton, 110.

These established programs provided community outreach and inculcated the value of cultural preservation to the children and future generations. Here, Burton stresses: “Under the leadership of a local African American teacher, Mary Sweetenburg, the program [Program for Academic and Cultural Enrichment] worked with children from ages two to seventeen on teaching and learning, social stability, understanding the land and natural habitats, preserving the environment, cultural development, and personal enrichment.”¹⁶² Furthermore, Burton acknowledges the community building and the Center’s preservationist achievements. This attainment signifies the importance of land preservation and community building in the Gullah culture.

The Penn Center’s Role: The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Law

The Penn Center’s political activism continued in the 21st century. It played a pivotal role in the establishment of The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Law that was established in 2006.¹⁶³ Discussions of resistance to cultural debasement and cultural disintegration within Gullah history would be incomplete without some attention to the efforts by those sensitive to and supportive of Gullah Geechee culture to preserving it, as ordered by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Law. The Corridor “celebrates and recognizes the contributions made to American culture and history by those African Americans known as the Gullah Geechee....”¹⁶⁴ The Corridor encompasses four geographical areas—South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida—that speak to the people’s cultural connections to Africa,

¹⁶² Ibid, 109.

¹⁶³ *Lowcountry Gullah Culture Special Resource Study*. U.S. National Park Service, 2008.

¹⁶⁴ Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. 2012. *Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*. Prepared and published by the National Park Service, Denver Service Center.

economic and cultural sustainability; importantly, the law recognizes a living culture. Representative James E. Clyburn (D-SC) authored the legislation that established the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Having taught high school students like myself in the schools of the peninsula in Charleston, Clyburn, a vocal advocate for historic preservation, recalled the cadence in the Gullah language—the ways that voices change, rise, and fall while Gullah people are speaking. Recalling the rich heritage of Gullah culture, Congressman Clyburn believed that this culture should be preserved for future generations. The purpose of this legislation was to ensure this preservation and to create an awareness of the Gullah Geechee culture.

The legislation was introduced because of the Gullah Geechee culture being at risk of extinction. This law did not materialize quickly; it took more than seven years for the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act to become law. This public service journey on behalf of the Gullah people began in 2000, when Congress authorized the National Park Service to conduct a “Special Resource Study” on Gullah culture. The purpose of the study was “to determine the national significance of Gullah culture and the suitability and feasibility of adding various elements of Gullah culture to the National Park System.”¹⁶⁵ The National Park Service (NPS) held initial public meetings with Gullah Geechee people to discuss the nature of this study, and the NPS proceeded with analyzing and reviewing the public’s comments. Between 2002 and 2003, the NPS held seven more public meetings, “conducted peer and scholarly reviews of the study document, and released the draft of the special

¹⁶⁵ *Lowcountry Gullah Culture Special Resource Study*. U.S. National Park Service, 2008.

resource study for public review.”¹⁶⁶ In 2004, a bill to establish the Corridor was introduced by Congressman Clyburn, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Gullah Geechee Coast on the list of *America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places*. In 2005, the bill to establish The Gullah Geechee Corridor was reintroduced to Congress.

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Management Plan regularly references cultural identity, a phrase found throughout the document and a center component of this dissertation. It indicates the ancestral link to the land in its document. For example, in the section entitled “The Primary Interpretative Themes of the Corridor” of *The Management Plan*, referring to members of Gullah Geechee communities, asserts that “The Corridor promotes awareness that Gullah Geechee people have influenced the nature and cultural landscapes of the region, and their cultural identity is connected to a particular geographical setting.”¹⁶⁷ The Plan goes on to stress that “ownership and retention of the land are crucial for the preservation and survival of [the] Gullah Geechee culture.”¹⁶⁸ The Gullah Geechee people remain connected to their major resource, (the land) their forms of material culture (sweetgrass products) because they are naturally grown in spite of the massive land development by outside forces. In addition, many cultural preservationists feel that the linguistic connection, which is also part of the cultural identity, is critical to sustaining the Gullah Geechee culture in spite of the stereotypes. The “shame” that was attached to fluently speaking the Gullah Geechee language should be extinguished because it is the key to preserving

¹⁶⁶ Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. 2012. *Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*, 23. Prepared and published by the National Park Service, Denver Service Center.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

the heritage and resisting the myths and stereotypes about the culture. Here, Rosalyn Browne of St. Helena Island highlights the need to sustain this component of the culture: “So there’s a race against time to preserve these things because of the human elements that are holding the authenticity of who we are. And language is critical to our identification.”¹⁶⁹

Penn Heritage Days

On August 18, 1981, the Penn Center began more actively involving younger generations in the preservation of the Gullah’s heritage and culture.¹⁷⁰ The purpose of Penn Heritage Days was to “expose the public to Penn School, the Sea Islands’ history and culture, and the various Africanisms that still exist. But most important, it is a gesture to reveal to each and every person that Penn School is a place where people can learn about themselves and about the African Americans of the Sea Islands.”¹⁷¹ Over the years, it has proven that the Penn Center has transmitted the historical breadth and depth of the Gullah Geechee culture to people from various parts of the world. The executive director of the Penn Center at this time, Emory Campbell and the Penn Club Program Committee implemented “Penn Heritage Day,” which later became the Penn Center’s Heritage Day Celebration. This occasion, begins the third Thursday in November and lasts for four days; people from various parts of the Lowcountry anxiously wait for this popular event. It becomes a time for people to connect and reconnect with community members about the importance of passing down traditions and customs. A huge spotlight of this celebration is the parade that is held on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, which includes elementary

¹⁶⁹ *Gullah Geechee Cultural Management Plan*, pg. 17. St. Helena, SC. June 2009 Meeting

¹⁷⁰ Emory Campbell. “Why Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration?” (St. Helena Island, SC, 1981).

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

students, fraternities and sororities, groups of farmers, military people, fire departments and other community people. In order to showcase the Penn Center's commitment to honoring the people who have been dedicated to passing down its traditions for generations, "the Islands' eldest women and men, representing wisdom, endurance, vision and courage, are the first in line."¹⁷² The Heritage Day Celebration was implemented in order "to raise the interest of the people of the southeast region and other parties of the nation and to raise at least \$15,000 toward funding the on-going operation of Penn Center."¹⁷³ People celebrate, participate in, and honor the culture by singing gospel songs and by observing craft demonstrations that include the making of sweetgrass products, casting nets, bateau boats,¹⁷⁴ and quilts.

Noted historian Aunt Pearlie Sue (Anita Singleton-Prather) educates the public about Gullah's heritage through her various performances, i.e. singing, storytelling, and folklore. The musical group that she founded, The Gullah Kinfolk, also performs with her during Penn Heritage Day Celebration. Prather's educational performances have a global impact for the audiences: "As a storyteller and singer, [she] has performed at many festivals, including the Spoleto USA international arts festival in Charleston."¹⁷⁵ Her dramatic presentations demonstrate the importance of cultural preservation and how critical it is for inter-generational passing of these traditions. "Based on her grandmother, Aunt Pearlie-Sue's character has entertained audiences with Gullah-flavored folktales for over 10 years. Prather is also the curriculum coordinator for the Education of Gullah Culture Through the Arts in the

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Emory Campbell. "An Idea is Born: Penn Center's Heritage Day Celebration." (St. Helena Island, SC, 1981).

¹⁷⁴ Boats handmade by Gullahs; used in the Sea Islands while net casting to obtain seafood.

¹⁷⁵ www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/aunt_pearliesue/index.html accessed (June 28, 2016).

Beaufort County School District.”¹⁷⁶ Her performance and oral transmission showcase how the Penn Heritage Days actively celebrates and preserves the culture. In addition, it represents the importance of oral transmission in order for the younger generation of Gullah to learn about their transatlantic heritage and in order to educate non-Gullah Geechees who desire to learn about and experience the Gullah Geechee cultural legacy, West African and Caribbean nation flags are displayed, indicating that the Gullahs hailed from or passed through particular areas. Each year, the Penn Heritage Day has a theme. Some of the themes included: “The African American Family: Preserving Leadership through Cultural Involvement” (1994) and “The Black Seminoles: Gullah Pioneer Freedom Fighters” (1998).¹⁷⁷ During one of the Penn Heritage Days Parade, one can see the participants wearing their African attires and holding such banners that have the label “Children of Sierra Leoneans Overseas.” In addition, other participants are seen wearing American clothing and holding a banner entitled “Flags of the Gullah People.” These Days reinforce the cultural and historical significance of the celebration of the Gullah people. It is important that the Historic Penn School is located on Martin Luther King Highway. Burton indicates Dr. King’s special connection to this premier cultural repository: “At Penn Center, King was able to be candid; he could make claims about the direction of the civil rights movement that he would not be able to voice publicly.”¹⁷⁸ During these Penn Heritage Days, the Gullah people, assume their “voices public[ly]” during this occasion.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. accessed (June 20, 2016).

¹⁷⁷ Emory Campbell, telephone conversation with author, June 16, 2016.

¹⁷⁸ Burton, 85.

The theme for The 33rd Annual Penn Center's Heritage Days Celebration in 2015 was fitting: "Sea Island Roots: A Celebration of Reconnection." It honored their "reconnection" with their past and present, or as Queen Quet and Dr. Valerie Jackson affirmed it "as one of the largest homecoming celebrations on St. Helena Island."¹⁷⁹ On the opening day of the Penn Heritage Day, people gathered at Brick Baptist Church and participated in traditional praise services, which represent the religious and spiritual practices of the Gullah Geechee culture.

On Friday, ("Youth Education & Famlee Fun Friday"), some people participate in the demonstrations of certain crafts and arts. For instance, one can find people giving quilting lessons to children, so they know the significance of the craft, which are used for cultural and historical narratives. Also, sweetgrass makers give demonstrations of their artistry to illustrate their cultural and historical relevance. Tours are given of the York W. Bailey Museum, so Gullah Geechees and others are interested in the culture can see the historical and cultural artifacts. In a section entitled "De Gullah Roots Village Presenters," 92-year old Captain Joseph Legree, Jr. of St. Helena, South Carolina, demonstrates his net casting skills after practicing it for over 80 years. In addition, Majid Drummers of Savannah, Georgia, present their African drumming and stilt walking techniques that symbolize the connective tissues to the African continent. Queen Quet, mostly known to be dressed in African attire and fluently the Gullah language, gives cultural and historical perspectives on the culture. Likewise, Quen Quet, referring to herself as an "arti-vist," can be seen interpreting the culture through dancing, singing, and acting. The festivities will be

¹⁷⁹ Queen Quet and Valerie Jackson. "33rd Annual Penn Center Heritage Days Celebration: Sea Island Roots: A Celebration of Reconnection." (St. Helena Island, SC, 2015).

incomplete without the Gullah Geechee cuisine of okra soup, red rice, and whiting fish, thus recognizing the African link. The Penn Center solidifies its commitment to education by conducting its annual College and Higher Education Fair located at Frissell Hall.

These are only few examples of the manner in which the Penn Center undertakes the celebration and preservation of Gullah culture and in which it advocates for the needs and continuance of the Gullah community. In addition, one may note the establishment of the York W. Bailey Museum in 1994, the partnership with other institutions to build affordable healthcare on St. Helena Island in 2008, and any variety of other educational and community services offered by the Penn Center. The examples given from the history of the Penn Center are here given to showcase the way in which this institution, from its inception until the present day, has disrupted discourses seeking to stereotype the Gullah; has functioned as a site for the reclamation of voice, agency, and self-definition by the Gullah people; and has served as a site for the preservation and celebration of Gullah Geechee culture and cultural identity.

This chapter has demonstrated that while social, cultural, socioeconomic, and racial boundaries surrounded the Penn Center, the people within the Gullah culture unseated these borders through such actions as education, community and institution building, civic engagement, and heritage preservation. These people “pictur[ed] the promise”¹⁸⁰ for future generations of Sea Islanders and for those who wanted to learn

¹⁸⁰ This quote is taken from the opening exhibit of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture’s *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise* held from January 30, 2009 to February 28, 2010. These photographs at this exhibit captured Black Washingtonians and their determination through changing times and racial upheaval.

about the Gullah culture. The Penn Center serves as a cultural repository that historicizes the Gullah communities and their cultural complexity.

The next chapter hones in on a part of the Penn Center in order to examine Gullah material culture as a specific carrier of knowledge, history, heritage, and identity. Through the ardent efforts of the York W. Bailey Museum, one can see how Gullah cultural identity and cultural memories are manifested in artifacts and objects so that people can appreciate the history and access the present. The exhibits demonstrate how academic achievement was combined with agricultural and vocational subjects to promote community development and activism. This examination of Gullah material culture focuses on activities that were taught at the Penn School—such as the making of fanner baskets, blacksmithing, and midwifery—and the chapter will show how Gullah cultural identity and cultural memory have been preserved and interpreted in this museum’s space. This combination of activities is a form of community activism.

Chapter 4: Historicizing and Analyzing Gullah Material Culture: Cultural Identity and the Holdings at the York W. Bailey Museum

Introduction

Within the bounty of the Penn Center is the legacy of Dr. York W. Bailey. The York W. Bailey Museum was established in 1971 to honor Dr. Bailey (Figure 4.1), a surgeon and graduate of the Penn School who “returned to St. Helena Island in 1906, remained there until 1956, and implemented the only medical practice on the island.”¹⁸¹



Figure 4.1 Dr. York W. Bailey
From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo.
Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

In lieu of pursuing a lucrative medical career after graduating from Howard University, Bailey not only re-located to the Sea Islands to establish healthcare for

¹⁸¹ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012.

Islanders but also allowed the residents to barter with pigs, chickens, and other farm animals for his medical services.¹⁸² To preserve Bailey’s legacy and to ensure that his altruistic deeds are remembered, the Penn Center not only named its museum in his honor but has preserved his medical instruments with the museum space (Figure 4.2). After entering the building that houses the Museum, patrons see these instruments, which are displayed in a case located to their immediate right.



Figure 4.2 - Dr. Bailey’s Medical Instruments
From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

In the 1970s, the Penn Center expanded their preservationist goals by establishing the York W. Bailey Museum. As historian Orville Burton asserts, “John Gadson, Sr., first African-American director of the Penn Center, also understood the cultural significance of the Penn Center’s history. Realizing that culture needs preserving as much as land does, Gadson supported the idea of a cultural museum.”¹⁸³ This discernment by Gadson displays the insight and community cohesion that are

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Burton, *Penn Center: A History Preserved*, 103.

typical of institution-building at the Penn Center. As part of the Penn Heritage Day Celebration, attendees visit the Museum and are exposed to the cultural production and history of the Gullah people. In addition, the Penn Center enlists support from both the national and local community to ensure its ongoing success as a cultural and historical entity. According to the former executive director of the Penn Center, Emory Campbell, “The museum benefited from some funding from the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare and most especially from the direction of Agnes Sherman, ‘a legend at Penn Center,’ who had also been instrumental in getting the Beaufort County bookmobile to come to St. Helena Island.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, Sherman was a major organizer of the museum, helping to acquire many of the Sea Island artifacts. Artifacts in the exhibit reveal that the activities taught at the Penn School—such as blacksmithing, the making of fanner baskets (Figure 4.3), and practicing midwifery—sought to produce economic independence. Although these activities are no longer taught as vocations at the Penn Center, their presence in the museum illustrates the importance of sustaining these cultural memories.

¹⁸⁴ Emory Campbell Interviews by Rumsey, September 17, 2002, 11 cited by Burton, 103.



Figure 4.3-Fanner Baskets created by Penn School Students
 From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo.
 Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

On this point, Jules David Prown situates the importance of material culture with this succinct definition: “[It] is the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time,” he asserts. Prown further indicates: “The term *material culture* is also frequently used to refer to artifacts themselves, to the body of material available for such study. The term *material culture* thus refers quite directly and efficiently, if not elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, material, and of its purpose, the understanding of the *culture*.”¹⁸⁵ Through the examination of Gullah artifacts, one is better able to understand the characteristics that the culture and the people embody. The artifacts at the Penn Center represent the economic sustenance, self-sufficiency,

¹⁸⁵ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter. An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method.” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no 1: (1982), 1.

and empowerment that still exist in the Gullah culture. Thus, the Museum “interprets the history of the Penn School and shares the cultural legacy of the Sea Islands.”¹⁸⁶

The Exhibition Space

The museum is one of several buildings on the grounds of the Penn Center. The others include a welcome center, which houses a gift shop, and a conference center. When you approach the one-level, white and red house-like structure, the first things you see are oak trees draped in Spanish moss.¹⁸⁷ Upon entering the doors of the museum, visitors are greeted by a docent, a Penn School graduate. Although the Museum is a modest size, it suggests a much larger landscape because of its focus on displaying Gullah Geechee history and culture. Once in the museum, visitors are directed to a room off to the left where they view a 20-minute film on the history of the Penn Center. The museum-goes enter the small viewing room that houses 50 chairs. Some Gullah community members who encounter the film are able to recollect personal memories and share them with future generations. For tourists, the video might offer a perspective that debunks what they thought they knew about the region and the people.

Following the 20-minute historical video, visitors are free to walk back to the main entry room and view the displays. In the room—where there are multiple displays—visitors can start and end the visual/material experience at any point.

¹⁸⁶ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012.

¹⁸⁷ For some Gullahs, like me, these mosses still carry cultural and spiritual meanings, especially because they served a variety of needs. Some recount that these mosses were taken from trees in order to treat pain or to lower blood pressure, while others remember using them to seal the cracks in their homes. While some outside of the culture may think of these mosses as thin, straggly, and weak, some Gullahs view them for their homeopathic utility, seeing in them the means to heal and protect. These mosses on the grounds of the Penn Center in essence symbolize strength and continuance, reflecting the Gullah culture and the material culture once found in homes within the Gullah community. These are some of the oral traditions that my mother and grandmother passed down to me since I was a child. She reflected on this ingenuity during our conversation on October 24, 2015.

Therefore, it is important that the curator tell a story of Gullah culture that is asynchronous and not chronological. This fluidity of time and space—to some degree—mirrors the ebb and flow of Gullah culture and its evolution. Gullah people adapted and borrowed, even while maintaining their cultural lifeways. This is reflected by the exhibition room design.

The main exhibition, entitled *Education for Freedom: The Penn School Experiment*, houses several permanent and some temporary exhibits. The overall exhibition is designed to tell the story of the Penn School and its history. Included in this narrative are illustrations of social, economic, and cultural practices that have sustained and undergirded the Gullah people. As noted by Rosalyn Browne, former director of history and culture at the Penn Center, the script panels located throughout the exhibit indicate a “progression of time”¹⁸⁸ because the Penn Center and the Gullah people have not remained static. Browne also asserts that “[t]he objects [in the York W. Bailey Museum] reflect the vision of the people who came to the Penn School.”¹⁸⁹ Through their vision, the creators of these objects shaped their culture and their history as well as American history with tenacity and diligence. The exhibition indicates how the people in the culture have adapted to the changes of society even though some in mainstream society may have expected them to disappear. The narrative also dramatizes, through its focus on material culture, the manner in which the Penn School transformed from a place primarily of agriculture and broadened to include medicine, trade, and activism during the Civil Rights Movement. The

¹⁸⁸ Rosalyn Browne, telephone interview with author, February 16, 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Rosalyn Browne

exhibition also contains photographs of Penn School students plying their respective crafts, trades, and artistry.

Blacksmithing

The blacksmithing objects—the anvil, the shin guard, and other tools of the trade—housed in the Museum reflect the transition from slavery to freedom, from relative dependence to relative economic autonomy—as well as the cultural duality of the Gullah people. These artifacts are placed in the far corner of the exhibition space, which affords adequate spacing for these particular heavy objects. According to Browne, these blacksmithing objects were made on the premises of the Penn Center by people who attended the institution.¹⁹⁰

Placing these blacksmithing objects in historical context emphasizes the way they represent historical transitions. During slavery, blacksmithing was a skill that select Black men learned.¹⁹¹ But they learned the skill to profit their white slave owners. When blacksmithing occurred during enslavement, these men were skilled laborers on plantations. The history of these blacksmithing tools at the Museum originates with the students at the Penn School using them to create self-sufficiency. The materials are made of iron. They were used to create functional items such as wheels for carriages. Prior to the Penn School, blacksmithing skills were passed on by family members.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Rosalyn Browne

¹⁹¹ For further information on the details of blacksmithing, see John Michael Vlach. *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1981. Vlach notes that “Peter Simmons, [no relation to Philip Simmons] born in St. Stephens, some forty miles north of Charleston, in 1855, spent his early childhood in slavery, grew up during Reconstruction, and earned his fortune in the Charleston district. His skills as a blacksmith and wheelwright Peter learned from his father Guy, who evidently worked as a plantation smith. Peter Simmons was the man [who] learned this young fellow here [Philip] the trade.” (pgs. 12-13)

¹⁹² Rosalyn Browne

Using E. McClung Fleming’s “history, material, and function,”¹⁹³ we can really get at the importance of blacksmithing to Gullah culture. Fleming’s model acknowledges the importance of these items for the sustainability of a culture. Fleming asserts: “Every culture, however primitive or advanced, is absolutely dependent on its artifacts for its survival and self-realization.”¹⁹⁴ Despite the fact that Fleming’s analysis refers to a 17th-century cupboard, components of his model can be applied to Gullah material culture, especially since the history of some of these objects (like the anvil and sweetgrass baskets) can be traced back as far as 300 years. Fleming uses “history, material, and function” in his formula to analyze objects. Using this formula in a Gullah context allows the cultural and national identity of the people to come forth. It also illustrates that these “artifacts [reflect] a culture’s survival and realization” (cited above).

Blacksmiths used the anvil to keep themselves alive—both practically and symbolically—and to gain relative authority despite the degradation of Blacks fostered by the institution of slavery. While the blacksmithing objects housed in the Museum are examples of the work that Gullah craftsman made at the Penn School and of the tools used in that craft, this representation looks back to a more complex utility. The anvil (Figure 4.4) is a flat tool with a sharp end that is used by blacksmiths for hammering and shaping iron. Following emancipation, the anvil’s massive weight—due to its construction from wrought iron—was turned into a “weapon” of creativity, cultural productivity, and economic livelihood by the

¹⁹³ E. McClung Fleming. “Artifact Study: A Proposed Model.” *Winterthur Folio* 9, 1974. 154.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 153.

Gullahs. In short, Gullahs have transformed a form of material culture like this one, which was initially a tool of forced labor and oppression used by the dominant



Figure 4.4-Anvil used by Penn School Blacksmithing Students from the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

culture, into a medium for cultural, racial, and economic independence. As it stands in the Museum, the anvil symbolizes what the Gullahs have achieved in spite of enslavement and subsequent disenfranchisement.

For many in the Gullah community, the blacksmithing objects housed in the exhibition space bring to mind the work of a master Gullah blacksmith Philip Simmons, of Charleston, South Carolina, and these pieces may be viewed as part of the heritage of such artisans. For example, one may contextualize such pieces through the lens of Simmons. Simmons notes: “My instrument is an anvil. I guess some of you have heard me play...a tune on the anvil, the old blacksmith tune.... It’s very dear to my heart.... That anvil fed me when I was hungry, and that anvil clothed

me when I was naked.... That anvil put shoes on my feet.”¹⁹⁵ Simmons’s statement—noted in John Vlach’s biographical account of Simmons being awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1982—summarizes the way the anvil (and the craft of blacksmithing more generally) has come to embody cultural and economic autonomy and pride. The blacksmithing objects at the Museum reflect this cultural pride and economic autonomy, particularly in light of their larger history.

Indeed, today, pride in blacksmithing still continues in the lives as well as the cultural memories of some members of the Gullah community. One noted family is the Simmons family. Although Simmons died in 2009, he passed down his memories, his artistry, and his craft to his nephew, Carlton Simmons, who was an apprentice under him and who now does blacksmithing in the same shop that Simmons worked in for over forty years. Carlton Simmons still does blacksmithing because of his love of the art, but he does admit that the state of the profession has changed over the years. For instance, the material that is used to make the objects is now steel instead of wrought iron.¹⁹⁶ In discussing the importance of his uncle passing down this craft to him, Carlton Simmons also notes that his uncle taught him that “[i]ron never spoils,” indicating the lasting significance of the art.¹⁹⁷

In addition to revealing the way Gullahs survived the historical transition from slavery to freedom and to serving as an example of the way the Gullahs achieved economic autonomy, the blacksmithing objects in the York W. Bailey Museum

¹⁹⁵ Philip Simmons cited by John Michael Vlach. *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons*, 13.

¹⁹⁶ Carlton Simmons, personal interview with author, July 5, 2015.

¹⁹⁷ Carlton Simmons citing Philip Simmons.

convey discourse on Gullah cultural identity and cultural duality. Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" is helpful here. Hall offers two definitions of cultural identity. His first definition suggests that cultural identity is based upon a "shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" and that such "cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences"¹⁹⁸ of the group. This definition holds much significance for the blacksmithing objects. Given their historical context, the blacksmithing objects may be seen to convey a "shared history and ancestry"—one rooted in a shared history of enslavement.

In addition, these blacksmithing objects present discourse on cultural and racial identity at the same time that they represent a culture that has survived economic and sociopolitical changes in Gullah history. In his second definition of cultural identity, Hall notes that identity within African diasporic cultures is "one constantly reshaped by history, one that is hybrid because of cultural contact, one based on positioning within the culture."¹⁹⁹ This definition epitomizes the Gullah culture, speaking to the ways it has undergone changes and influences over time due to "cultural contact." The blacksmithing objects themselves reveal the manner in which competing cultural influences have shaped Gullah culture and identity. That is, the blacksmithing objects inscribe the "cultural contact" of which Hall speaks, having been introduced by slaveholders and having been redeployed by the enslaved (sometimes enabling them to purchase their freedom), and subsequent generations (who have made ironworking both a profession and an art). Now passed down

¹⁹⁸ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 393.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 394.

through generations within the Gullah culture, as Carlton Simmons attests, blacksmithing—as symbolized by the tools housed in the exhibit and as represented in the accompanying photograph—is a central part of Gullah culture. It reflects the hybridity of this African diasporic people.

Such objects likewise reflect the positioning of Gullahs in the larger nation—both as enslaved and as emancipated people. Despite multicultural influences and contact, Gullahs have resisted the complete loss of their African-based culture, identity, and history. There have been changes in Gullah culture throughout the years; yet, they have maintained many of their cultural traditions and much of their cultural independence. In particular, the blacksmithing objects emphasize this point. These objects demonstrate that the Gullahs have remained steeped in their cultural traditions following enslavement and are determined to preserve their cultural identity through communal cohesiveness.

In addition to raising notions of race and cultural duality as these pertain to the Gullahs, the blacksmithing objects also reveal notions of status. The shin protectors (Figure 4.5) on display illustrate the danger involved in the profession by acknowledging that the black men in this field practiced safety. The skill requires specialized training, thereby identifying blacksmiths as specialized laborers. This is seen not only through



Figure 4.5 – “Blacksmithing shins.” From the *Education for Freedom Exhibition* at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo. Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

the objects related to blacksmithing but also, as will be discussed below, through the representation of teaching sweetgrass basket making and midwifery during the days of the Penn School. These trades, along with other vocations, like carpentry and cobbling, provided forms of independence for Gullahs people.

In addition, the history of blacksmithing shown in the exhibition reveals the conflicting values of two competing discourse communities—the slave owners who introduced blacksmithing to enslaved Africans and the Blacks who passed along this tradition in order to advance socioeconomic independence within the Gullah community and other Black communities. This history also reflects the manner in which Gullah people used the tools in order to counter the position to which they were relegated by mainstream ideology. Highlighting the skills and trades enables us to see the diversity of the Gullah people. The blacksmithing objects on display not only convey part of the history of the Gullah people, but they also revise the mainstream historical narrative by revaluing—and valorizing—specialized Black laborers. These objects serve as a reminder that the blacksmiths contributed to both

the American economy and also to the formation and persistence of the Gullah cultural community.

The blacksmithing objects at the Museum also reveal the preservation effort undertaken by the Penn Center in general and the Museum in particular. In “Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts 1820-1990,” Fath Davis Ruffins notes that “[s]ince the 1960s there has been a revolution in the study of African American life, history, and culture.”²⁰⁰ By collecting and preserving artifacts such as the blacksmithing objects, the Museum assists in the effort to preserve Gullah culture so that people can appreciate it. Ruffins acknowledges the significance of such efforts: “Preservation efforts are crucial to understanding the past.... Each form of preservation adds something meaningful to our understanding of the past (and possibly the present)....”²⁰¹ The Museum is preserving Gullah culture not only because of its unique beauty and historical relevance but also in order to show the national significance of this culture. This analysis reveals the manner in which blacksmithing objects uncover the complexity of Gullah cultural identity explicated specifically through race and gender.²⁰²

Sweetgrass Baskets: The Gullah American Art

Today, if one were to visit the tourist areas of the Lowcountry of South Carolina, one would undoubtedly see mostly women weaving sweetgrass baskets. However, the York W. Bailey Museum video and exhibit on sweetgrass baskets

²⁰⁰ Fath Davis Ruffins, “Mythos, Memory, and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820-1920” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, eds. Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer and Steven Lavine, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 507.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 511.

²⁰² For more on black class identity formation, see Robin D.J. Kelley’s “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking the Black Working Class During the Jim Crow Era” and Mary Patillo’s *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

narrates a more in-depth story. One kind of sweetgrass basket, the “fanner” basket, can be traced to the 1600s in Africa. The placard in the York W. Bailey Museum states that “[a]s early as 1900, Alfred Graham taught to Penn School students how to make fanner baskets, the art having been passed down to Graham by his great-uncle, who brought this craft from Africa.”²⁰³ The placard further indicates: “He passed this tradition to his great-nephew, George Brown, who in turn taught his son, Leroy Brown, Sr.”²⁰⁴ Barbara Manigault, a sweetgrass basket maker from Mt. Pleasant, SC, indicates the materials that were used: “During the 1600s, most likely bulrush, white oak or parts of saw palmetto were used.”²⁰⁵ The fanner basket served the purpose of “fanning” or winnowing the rice. For instance, “a person could remove husks from rice by shaking them in the basket. The wind blew the hulls away.”²⁰⁶ Likewise, the fanner basket, because of its shallowness and width, served other practical purposes. For instance, the basket was also used to carry produce and babies. Today, the fanner basket is used as a form of cultural preservation and for decorative purposes.

On display in the exhibition are also other varieties of sweetgrass baskets. Through its efforts to preserve this art form and these products, the Museum further demonstrates that the Gullah culture has flourished in spite of harsh historical experiences. Pictured above the case holding fanner baskets, one can see a photograph of George Brown teaching a basketry class at the Penn School.²⁰⁷ These

²⁰³ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Barbara Manigault, telephone interview with author, August 7, 2013.

²⁰⁶ Barbara Manigault

²⁰⁷ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012

baskets reflect the important role of women (but also men) in carrying forth the tradition of fanner/sweetgrass basket-making.

Closer analysis of the baskets and the historicizing of them reveal their importance within Gullah culture. Background on sweetgrass basket making and its value are relevant because the material needed for making sweetgrass products has an interesting history. Joyce Coakley notes that enslaved West Africans “found palmetto leaves and grasses similar to those used in their native Africa.”²⁰⁸ Barbara Manigault, a sweetgrass maker from Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, acknowledges the precious nature of the materials needed to make the baskets and also the danger and difficulty involved in obtaining the material. According to Manigault, due to economic development in the South Carolina Lowcountry, basket makers must travel much farther to the fields and marshlands that contain this rare material in order to produce this intergenerational artwork.²⁰⁹

If we return to Jules Prown, we see his arguments offer relevance here. Prown discusses the “inherent and attached value associated with such material objects: one, intrinsic in the fabric of an object itself, is established by the rarity of the materials used.”²¹⁰ In interpreting the material value of sweetgrass baskets, then, one must consider the growing scarcity of the materials used in basket making. In addition, Manigault, during an oral history interview, notes that “as part of the Gullah’s African tradition of living with the land, the baskets must originate from the organic

²⁰⁸ Joyce Coakley. *Sweetgrass Baskets and the Gullah Tradition*. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 9.

²⁰⁹ Barbara Manigault.

²¹⁰ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method.” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no 1 (1982): 4

materials found on the land.”²¹¹ Because the materials grow naturally (they are not cultivated), they are even rarer. The fanner baskets and other evidence of cultural production housed in the Museum remind viewers of the Gullahs’ African heritage. In doing so, these artifacts create and/or elicit cultural memories. Thus, they serve as a powerful reference to Gullah geography, economy, and politics.

Visitors to the Museum who see these sweetgrass baskets may not realize that the setting of these baskets (in the Penn Center on St. Helena Island) is relevant because the culture of the Sea Islands represents a significant portion of American geopolitics. Additionally, the Gullahs who visit the Penn Center may or may not know that their parents and their forbears learned this important art on the Sea Islands, perhaps even at the Penn School. Keeping these items on display—especially at the Penn Center—indicates the historical value of the sweetgrass baskets and thus emphasizes the importance of cultural preservation. The Museum revalues Gullah history by celebrating the African cultural heritage of Gullah culture, and it revalues the art of making sweetgrass baskets because it shifts the focus from the narrower use of the baskets as commodities to the privileging of sweetgrass basketry as an art form.

During an interview, Mary Deas Wilson, a Gullah from Charleston, indicated that the photograph shown in the York W. Bailey Museum of the man teaching his granddaughter to make a sweetgrass basket reminds her of watching her aunt teaching her children how to sew²¹² these baskets and other wares; she remembers listening to

²¹¹ Barbara Manigault, telephone interview with author, August 7, 2013.

²¹² Some people use term sew as opposed to weave when producing sweetgrass products. According to some sweetgrass basket makers, the term weave was not used until after the 1970s. Mary Deas Wilson, personal conversation with author, March 17, 2015.

her relatives telling stories about the culture while sewing the basket. Wilson believes that every Gullah should own an item made of sweetgrass in his or her home because it preserves the history and serves as a reminder of the ancestral link to Africa.²¹³ This African cultural identity is prized by Gullah people, and Gullah's are linked to Africa through this form of material culture. This notion of cultural identity held by Wilson reflects Stuart Hall's first definition of cultural identity, which is reflective of shared cultural practices.²¹⁴ While innovations in sweetgrass basketry have occurred in the American context, the baskets nonetheless reflect African beginnings. This hybridity or merging of old and new worlds forms what we know today as Gullah people.

Wilson also comments on the craftsmanship of sweetgrass basket makers. She suggests that one can tell how well a basket is sewn by looking at it from the bottom. The tightness of the stitching, the patterns, and the creativity that is sewn into the basket suggest a particular professionalism and longevity/seasoning of the sewer. Both seeing the baskets in the Museum and the accompanying photograph of the man teaching his granddaughter the skill reminds Wilson of nostalgic moments. Indeed, she remembers travelling to the Penn Center and watching the demonstrations of sweetgrass basket making. But more than simply a look back, these memories—embodied both in the museum and in her visitor reflections—also increase Wilson's determination to preserve vestiges of her heritage and to pass them down to her son and to her grandchildren. As a relatively new sewer, she wants to impress upon her

²¹³ Mary Deas Wilson

²¹⁴ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 393-4.

child and grandchildren the tenacity that it takes to become a seasoned weaver and to emphasize this longstanding cultural and economic tradition.²¹⁵

Ideas from material culture studies are useful in unraveling the complexity and relevance of Gullah material culture and associated practices, particularly the blacksmithing trade and the making of sweetgrass baskets. For instance, analyses by Robert Paynter and Randall H. McGuire allow me to draw scholarly attention to the manner in which such objects speak to Gullah resistance against the dominant narrative about the Gullah culture. For example, they note that “[power relationships involve] a refinement of power analysis that stresses the interplay between those who use structural asymmetries of resources in exercising power, known as domination, and those who develop social and cultural opposition to this exercise, known as resistance.”²¹⁶ Gullahs have resisted the dominant forces and employed “cultural opposition” through their cultural and economic autonomy by preserving and continuing the culture. Likewise, material cultural objects such as sweetgrass baskets reflect the determination within Gullah communities to keep Gullah culture and cultural memories alive despite the obstacles presented by forces such as economic development and the destruction of the land that contains the sweetgrass material.

These objects can be further examined to demonstrate that they convey meanings that are not readily seen by the naked eye. Grey Gundaker’s scholarship allows this analysis to be conducted. In “Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards,” she dissects the historical connections and themes that are found in

²¹⁵ Mary Deas Wilson

²¹⁶ Paynter, Robert and Randall H. McGuire, “The Archaeology of Inequality: Material Culture, Domination, and Resistance” in *The Archaeology of Inequality*, eds. Robert Paynter and Randall H. McGuire, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 1.

African-American yard spaces and their objects.²¹⁷ Gundaker probes the “complexity” of objects in African American yard spaces by analyzing how these spaces “construct meanings” and by cautioning the average observer not to overlook what is “hidden” in these spaces.²¹⁸ According to her, objects in African American yard spaces are not “simple” objects; they contain historical, cultural, ancestral, and racial meanings that casual observers are not aware that they possess. By conducting cultural workshops on the site where material cultural items such as sweetgrass baskets are made and by providing the history of such objects, the Penn Center and the Museum not only preserve and continue Gullah cultural heritage, they also assist in “construct[ing] meanings” around these objects and in conveying the “complexity” of the culture that might have been ignored or might remain “hidden.” Hence, the Museum, through its preservation and continuation efforts, archives cultural memories surrounding historical objects and stresses the importance of the connective tissues that are associated with them.

The meanings encoded in the sweetgrass baskets also reflect personal and historical memories of the Gullahs. Susan Crane examines how important it is for “memory” to be interpreted. She argues that “a range of personal memories is produced [by material culture in museum exhibits], not limited to the subject matter of exhibits, as well as a range of collective memories shared among museum visitors.”²¹⁹ At the Museum, a “collective memory” is enjoyed not only by the people who created the objects but also by the people who are living in the culture and who

²¹⁷ Grey Gundaker, “Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards.” *African Arts*, 26 (1993): 59.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 60.

²¹⁹ Susan Crane. “Memory, Distortion, and History.” *History and Theory*, (1977): 46.

are embracing their ancestry. The exhibit passes down this “collective memory” to all museum visitors so that all who are invested in learning about the American cultural fabric share it. Because of this contextualization, when people view a sweetgrass basket or any other artifact in the York W. Bailey Museum, they are invited to share the “range of personal memories” about this living culture; as a result, they are encouraged to assume pride in this culture and to pursue its preservation and accurate interpretation.

A Photograph of Mary Smalls: Trailblazer in Healthcare

One way of preserving cultural pride is through photographs. Such is the case with the photograph of Mary Smalls, one of the earliest midwives in the Sea Islands community. Smalls was born and reared on St. Helena Island. Her expertise was so significant to Gullah residents that the Museum saw fit to preserve and acknowledge it. Her photograph is located in the far left of the exhibition space. The history of this photograph stems from use of the Penn Center as a training ground for midwifery; moreover, this profession was part of the “engine [the Penn Center] that kept the community going.”²²⁰ As it relates to Fleming’s “function,”²²¹ this photograph of Smalls captures the first trained midwife at the Penn School. Captions also convey that a “midwife institute [was] held ... for two weeks annually at Penn, sponsored and conducted by South Carolina Board of Health.”²²² As it relates to Fleming’s “material”²²³ section, this artifact is a black and white photograph in a glass picture frame.

²²⁰ Rosalyn Browne

²²¹ Fleming, 154.

²²² York W. Bailey Museum Visit. 17 July 2012.

²²³ Fleming, 154.

Smalls is shown in her midwifery uniform and stands with a steely demeanor (Figure 4.6). Analysis of this image in the exhibit reveals the manner in which the exhibit represents and rewrites Gullah history, the manner in which it conveys discourse on Gullah cultural identity, and the manner in which it renders notions of race and gender. In addition, this image reveals cultural cohesiveness, the determination to thrive, and the struggle for well-being within Gullah communities. It is also treats the role of women in the history of the Penn School and in Gullah communities, and it renders a narrative of the political, social, and medical contributions Smalls made in Gullah communities in spite of oppression due to race and gender.



Figure 4.6. Photo of Mary Smalls-first trained midwife at the Penn School. Photo taken of Smalls from the *Education for Freedom Exhibition* at Penn Center's York W. Bailey Museum. Author photo. Permission by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

The exhibit gives treatment to gender issues by demonstrating that women, as well men, are involved in the production of the culture. In *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: A Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker makes a comment that could be

made of Smalls. Walker gives her impression of Zora Neale Hurston's creation: "This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings...."²²⁴ While Smalls's work as a midwife sought to ensure physical health in Gullah communities, her image and accompanying narrative also point to the "racial health" that she demonstrated and strove to ensure. They suggest that Smalls and her clients were "complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" in spite of the barriers that were placed before them, barriers to affordable healthcare and to a good quality education. Placing a photograph of Smalls in the exhibit and in proximity to the blacksmithing objects not only demonstrates the evolution of Gullah culture as whole but also demonstrates that both men and women contributed to the political struggle, social life, self-reliance, and cultural production of the Gullahs. In this way, the exhibit participates in the discourse on gender as well.

In its depiction of the role of women in the history of the Penn School and in Gullah communities, the image of Smalls represents her wearing her nursing uniform. In this black and white photograph, Smalls has a firm stare and is standing with an upright, confident pose. She appears more than ready to triumph in her goals despite the segregationist challenges she faced. Information provided reveals that Smalls "was an island nurse based at [the] Penn School, who helped set up a training program for midwives, and well baby clinics were held here."²²⁵ The image of Smalls emphasizes the role women played in establishing the healthcare system on the Sea Islands at a time when segregation did not allow Blacks the same access to

²²⁴ Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 85.

²²⁵ York W. Bailey Museum Exhibit. 17 July 2012.

healthcare as whites. Sponsored by the South Carolina Board of Health, this service was important to the Sea Island residents since it provided healthcare to babies.²²⁶ While the photograph places Smalls in a traditional professional occupation for women, it also suggests that advances were made by women as individuals and as social activists within Gullah communities. Moreover, because Smalls trained women from Gullah communities to be midwives, those women were able both to further Smalls's effort and to bring affordable healthcare to Gullah communities, furthering economic independence. While Smalls's occupation may be seen as a traditional occupation for women, it can also be seen as a sign of community leadership and political resistance. Because the Gullahs and other Blacks did not have equal access to healthcare, nursing and midwifery were sites where resistance to oppression was developed. To stress the impact of Smalls's vocation and her contributions to the healthcare field, the York W. Bailey Museum has retained original artifacts from the training program—including, for example, a nurse's bag, a nurse's hat, a rubber tub, a sterilization pan, an infant scale, a certificate of registration, aspirins, gauges, and cotton balls—and has placed them in an object case (Figure 4.7).

²²⁶ Ibid.



Figure 4.7. Mary Smalls’s Midwifery Instruments
 From the *Education for Freedom* Exhibition at Penn Center’s York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo.
 Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Women like Smalls’s developed independence and enacted resistance by constructing at the Penn Center what bell hooks calls “a homeplace.” In “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” hooks notes that “[h]istorically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace (primarily black women’s responsibility), however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had [a] radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.”²²⁷ The argument made by hooks helps one to identify the political import of private spaces and woman-centered arenas and occupations. Through the representation of her image in the Museum, one can see that Smalls made the Penn School a place of learning and of resistance to segregationist or mainstream forces. Additionally, this museum space represents

²²⁷ bell hooks, “Homeplace: a site of resistance,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 43.

Smalls's form of social activism by revealing that she ensured the healthcare and the well-being of women and children. Noted photographic historian Deborah Willis discusses the importance of photographic images and how they portrayed Black women: "Black women, in particular, have been subjugated and misinterpreted in photography since the early days of the medium. This is true both in domestic treatments ... and in representations of 'exotic' others.... [A nude South African woman taken c. 1880s] and other nineteenth-century images of African women suggests the need for us to clarify and reexamine the discourse of sexuality that still prevails in twentieth-century images."²²⁸ The photograph of Smalls counters such prevailing discourses.

The relevance of the image of Smalls in relation to race as well as gender may be understood further by contrasting this image with the only other image in the exhibit that shows a woman in a professional occupation. The photograph of Laura Towne (Figure 4.8), a Pennsylvanian Quaker and one of the founders of the Penn School (Laura Murray is the other founder), shows Towne pictured with some of the Penn School's students as she teaches them to read.

²²⁸ Deborah Willis. "Introduction: Picturing Us." *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. Ed. Deborah Willis. New York: The New Press, 1994, 17, 19.



Figure 4.8. Laura Towne with Penn School Students
From the Education for Freedom Exhibition at Penn Center's York W. Bailey Museum. Author Photo.
Permission Granted by Penn Center, Inc., St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Towne and Murray were abolitionists who “prepared these abandoned slaves for freedom by helping them to survive economically”²²⁹ and teaching them basic skills and moral precepts. While this photograph, which emphasizes Towne, shows the transition of her Gullah students from enslavement to independence, it also leads one to wonder about the racial implications of inculcating the freed slaves in certain Western or Anglo-centric values. Towne was well aware of the socioeconomic and cultural divide between her and her students. Although this photograph acknowledges Towne as a founder of the Penn School and her forty years as a teacher at the school, picturing her dedication to seeing her student gain independence after emancipation, one can readily glean the racial and class barriers evidenced in the Towne’s narrative. These barriers are not immediately conveyed in the museum exhibit, which shows a white woman in a traditional occupation and in a leadership role in the Gullah community. In contrast to the image of Smalls, however, the

²²⁹ Penn Center’s Website, www.penncenter.com, accessed October 1, 2012

photograph of Towne clearly depicts community leadership coming from outside of Gullah communities, whereas the photograph of Smalls depicts leadership emanating from within Gullah neighborhoods. While both images show that women used traditional occupations through which to undertake activism and leadership in the Gullah community, a comparison of the images highlights the racialized nature of the time period and of that leadership.

The photograph of Mary Smalls represents Gullah history but also rewrites that history so that women like Smalls are heroized and valued for their achievements and their leadership in the Gullah community. While this discussion has focused largely on gender, it is also relevant to note that the image of Smalls also conveys discourse on Gullah cultural identity. The knowledgeable observer would be aware that members of the Gullah community retained and developed Diasporan herbal and medicinal practices.²³⁰ Smalls reveals the willingness of Gullah communities to embrace Western medical traditions, suggesting the syncretic nature of Gullah traditions as well as Gullah culture and identity. This photograph, then, suggests Stuart Hall's second definition of cultural identity, which focuses on cultural mixture or hybridity due to cultural influences.²³¹ The Gullah culture has been affected by various histories and is one of those that "undergo constant transformation."²³² The image of Smalls, particularly in comparison with that of Towne, reveals the impact of the intersecting discourse of race, class, and gender within Gullah communities and in

²³⁰ See Faith Mitchell. *Hoodoo Medicine: Gullah Herbal Remedies*. Columbia: Summerhouse Press, 1998. This book contains a collection of folk medicines and other cultural practices that have been retained by Gullah men and women since enslavement.

²³¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 394.

²³² Ibid.

Gullah history. Importantly, however, it also reveals the cultural cohesiveness, the determination to thrive, and the struggle for wellbeing in Gullah communities, and it does so by representing Gullahs in the process of helping themselves. The photograph of Smalls emphasizes the rich heritage of the Gullahs—a heritage that includes cultural independence, a sense of family, and the refusal to adhere to restrictions based on race, class, and gender.

Black Museum Spaces: Creating Historical and Cultural Significance

In addition to examining the objects housed at the York W. Bailey Museum, it is relevant to assess the importance of this exhibition space as a space belonging to a Black cultural museum. In “Museums on the Front Lines: Confronting the ‘Conspiracy of Silence’” in *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, Andrea A. Burns delineates the struggles of Black museums but also notes the significance of their continued existence and, thereby, their triumph. Burns examines the evolution of four Black museums and uncovers how they achieved their historical voices in spite of serving an underrepresented group and in spite of being marginalized in the American cultural landscape and in the field of Museum Studies. Burns notes that through the activism of community leaders, “a new history of black political power” emerged “during the late twentieth century.”²³³ It is important to note that Burns is chronicling the emergence and development of black museums from the 1960s to the mid 1970s, years that were filled with political turmoil for the Black community and the nation. However, the selected museums seized the political and cultural opportunities to form

²³³ Andrea A. Burns. *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 11.

their spaces, and they created spaces that spoke to the history and the cultural values of the people in their communities.

While the York W. Bailey Museum is not mentioned in Burns's examination, one can apply her findings to this museum space. She states that "[m]useums, of course, have never functioned simply as repositories for dusty artifacts. Rather, they and their collections are products of social relations, both past and present."²³⁴ This is true of the York W. Bailey Museum and its collection, which represents "social relations" dating back to the 17th century, when West Africans were brought to the Americas, bringing with them the techniques for creating sweetgrass baskets and casting nets and soon learning the techniques for blacksmithing. The collection housed at the Museum represents the cultural formation that occurred in the Lowcountry, and the Museum itself reflects the community building that occurred between people on the Sea Islands (and from other areas) and people at the Penn Center.

The collection at the York W. Bailey Museum demonstrates the pride that the Gullah people have taken in their history and their culture, as well as their desire to pass on this culture to future generations and to other communities. For instance, the blacksmithing objects serve as a reminder that the Penn Center was a school for teaching newly freed Blacks educational, cultural, and economic independence. Likewise, the sweetgrass baskets serve as a reminder of the African cultural heritage within Gullah culture, as does the casting net. Just as Burns addresses the ways African Americans responded to the devaluation of their culture and the burial of their history, the people on the Sea Islands created their own space in which to

²³⁴ Ibid, 4.

preserve and continue Gullah's history and culture, and they created their own space in which to nurture the Gullah community and inform the American public of Gullah contributions to the national fabric.

The collections at the York W. Bailey Museum exemplify the way communities of people can sustain an ongoing bond throughout the years. In "When 'Civil Rights Are Not Enough': Building the Black Museum Movement," Burns notes that "John Kinard (former director and founder of ... [what] is now the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum), defined the neighborhood museum as an entity that encompasses the life of the people of the neighborhood—people who are vitally concerned about who they are, where they came from, what they have accomplished, their values and their most pressing needs."²³⁵ Although the York W. Bailey Museum is an area and a national museum rather than a neighborhood museum, Kinard's definition is still appropriate. The Museum influences how the people of the Gullah culture remember their history, their ancestral heritage, and their cultural values and mores, and it undertakes what is needed to sustain the endangered Gullah culture.

Analysis of the objects housed in the Museum has shown that these objects convey discourse on the Gullah culture as this pertains to the representation, rewriting, and revaluing of Gullah history; the presentation of Gullah cultural identity and cultural duality (combining African and American influences); the reaction to the typing of Gullah people and culture in mainstream discourses; and the rendering of notions of race, class, and gender as these ideas impact Gullah culture and communities. The objects discussed above render the specificity of Gullah culture

²³⁵ Kinard cited by Burns, 15.

and reveal the manner in which the Penn Center and its museum undertake the preservation of this culture. Through analyses such as this, one can see that the cultural identity and cultural memories of Gullah people are manifested and/or elicited in the artifacts housed in the York W. Bailey Museum, allowing the public to appreciate Gullah history, allowing access to present Gullah culture, and continuing Gullah culture and history. Such objects may be seen to re-narrate Gullah history and revalue Gullah culture and people, “speaking” through this narrative revision and presenting competing “voices” or visions that vie with mainstream narratives. At the same time, however, literal Gullah voices are also needed to complete the present study.

Oral traditions have been and still remain critical to the Gullah culture; prior to a time when widespread education that was available to Gullah people, the traditions, customs, and mores within the Gullah community were passed down through the Gullah oral tradition. Therefore, while this chapter has presented scholarly analysis of the culture through the analysis of Gullah material culture, members of the Gullah community also undertake their self-awareness and culturally conscious discourse. The oral histories included in the next chapter illuminate the voices and the lives of everyday people who preserve the Gullah culture through their cultural practices. These histories not only reveal facets of the culture but also interpret Gullah culture and verify its influences. By following object analysis with oral histories, this study invites a comparison—one that suggests that such voices are critical to the interpretation and preservation of the culture and one that disrupts the devaluing of such voices and the oral tradition of which they are part.

The next chapter, then, offers a counterbalance to the larger dissertation project, returning it to the oral narratives that inspired the project and shaped how it was constructed. It highlights both voices from within (and adjacent to) the Gullah culture and the contributions of the speakers to the preservation of this heritage. Like the retelling of Gullah history found at the Penn Center and in objects housed in the York W. Bailey Museum, these voices also disrupt mainstream narratives about the Gullah people and their culture. This dissertation seeks to undertake its own unsettling of such narratives by letting these voices speak for themselves, even as they comment on and expand upon the project of this study.

Chapter 5: Speaking Politics, Speaking History: In Their Own Voices

While the objects at the York W. Bailey Museum reflect a curatorial, scholarly interpretation of the Gullah culture, the oral histories presented in this chapter demonstrate the multifarious ways in which the people spotlighted here have and still continue to preserve and protect the culture. Moreover, these histories reveal not only how these people fed, clothed, and nurtured themselves and their families, undertaking their own survival and the survival of the larger Gullah culture, but also how they live, celebrate, and share the Gullah culture.

In essence, during my interviews, I learned how the speakers pass on facets of Gullah history and culture while relating their experiences and opinions. Throughout my professional career, while some have disparaged Gullah people and culture, it is important that others have complimented Gullah folklore, language, spiritual traditions, and material culture—for example, those who have prized the historical and cultural significance of Gullah blacksmithing, sweetgrass products, foodways, and so on.

The practitioners, preservationists, and activists noted here are among those who have kept facets of the culture alive. They have transformed themselves, their families, and their communities through their determination and resilience and through their continuation of a sustainable culture. I believe that this addition provides what is often missing from many fictional and research works: the voices of the people themselves. In this dissertation, then, those who are often rendered only as voiceless and subjected must be heard speaking in their own voices. Up until now, *I* have written about the Gullah culture and its people. It is important that this final

chapter is devoted to the narratives of the people. In an effort to give a more direct voice to the Gullah perspective, I include transcribed accounts of interviews with a number of Gullah people. This chapter also speaks to and mirrors the importance of orality and the oral tradition within the Gullah culture. Orality is a central component of African, African diasporic, and African American cultures, and this is so in the Gullah community, in which the oral tradition has allowed the culture to survive and thrive. Including such voices draw the oral tradition into this research project, blurring the line between written and oral knowledge. This dissertation both includes and honors Gullah voices.

Furthermore, given my ethnic and cultural links, I have included conversations with two members of my own Gullah family—my mother and sister. As one who grew up in the Gullah community, it is important for me to explore the method of auto-ethnography. Ethnographers Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experience.”²³⁶ This method is significant because it has allowed me to be very self-reflexive throughout this dissertation, as well as in this final piece of the dissertation. I noted in the introduction that this study is both personal and intellectual for me; the matrilineal strength within my family prodded me through the academic, social, cultural, and intellectual components of my life. Therefore, it should be no surprise that two of these interviewees would be female family members. These women’s stories have sustained me and others throughout our lives;

²³⁶ Carolyn Ellis; Tony E. Adams; and Arthur P. Bochner. “Autoethnography: An Overview” [40 paragraphs] *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12, no. 1, Art. 10, accessed August 17, 2016, www.qualitative-research.net

they have done what ethnographer Patricia Bell-Scott describes as the “process of telling Black women’s lives.”²³⁷ Bell-Scott continues: “To tell the flat-footed truth means to offer a story or statement that is straightforward, unshakable, and unembellished. This kind of truth-telling, especially by and about Black women, can be risky business because our lives are often devalued and our voices periodically silenced.”²³⁸ Bell-Scott’s assertion of the significance of “truth-telling” is applicable to the narratives included here by Gullah women; moreover, it can be applied to the Gullah people in general and how they sustained their mores, traditions, folkways, and storytelling. In the oral histories that follow, these women and men have been forthcoming about their experiences so that others can learn, acquire wisdom, pass down information, and continue to protect this valuable culture. At the same time, however, although they are “telling Black women’s lives,” one can see that their stories, along with mine, are not monolithic; the interviewees preserve the culture differently, emphasize various facets of the culture, and render their own various lives.

My research has engaged the Penn Center and its critical role in historicizing and preserving the Gullah culture. In addition, I have argued that the Center publicly validates a segment within an already marginalized African American population. As I have indicated in the dissertation, the Gullah people compose the very living narratives that the Penn Center and the York W. Bailey Museum celebrate for present and future generations. In addition, the speakers here offer commentary on the central issues cutting across this dissertation project. For example, they are conscious

²³⁷ Patricia Bell-Scott. “Telling Flat-Footed Truths: An Introduction” in *Flat-Footed Truths: Telling Black Women’s Lives*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998. xx.

²³⁸ Ibid.

of the need to revise broader misperceptions of the Gullah people, language, and culture, and they are aware of under-acknowledged episodes within Gullah history. Likewise, the oral history narratives that follow illuminate the competing “voices” that are found within the cultural landscape and in the museum installation at the Penn Center, and they shed light on Gullah cultural identity and on the manner in which Gullah people must navigate and negotiate the larger American sociopolitical landscape. They focus attention on the importance of the Penn Center and of Gullah material culture, as well as the importance of preserving the Gullah oral tradition through archives. Indeed, collectively, they stress the significance of transposing these oral narratives into written form for future generations.

This chapter reveals that Gullahs have ensured the strength of communities that are at risk, and it does so by drawing from the oral narratives of Gullah people and another speaker involved in undertaking preservation efforts. These people, despite their range in age, have assiduously continued the Gullah culture through their individual practices, their preservation methods, and their professions. As these oral histories reveal, the cultural preservationists selected for this chapter have always striven to fulfill a certain role within the culture—one that makes them keepers of the culture. They are self-possessed and self-aware, inhabiting a cultural identity that is centered in and/or cognizant of Gullah heritage and rooted in Gullah language, foodways, crafts, and/or connection to the land.

“The inspiration and ideas for most of my fiber art come to me in my dreams. I feel an obligation to attend to them because no one else can express what I express in exactly the same way.”

Marlene Linton O’Bryant-Seabrook, PhD

Dr. Marlene Linton O’Bryant-Seabrook is a Charlestonian who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Now a scholar, educator, and fiber artist internationally known for her quilts, her lineage consists of three generations of educators, and she herself holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of South Carolina. Her concentration was Education with Special Education Cognate and she is State certified in Elementary Education, Learning Disabilities, Mentally Handicapped, Psychology, and Elementary Administration (Principal). Enabled by an eight-week quilting course that she completed in the 1980s, O’Bryant-Seabrook was soon exhibiting her work as a fiber artist. Her body of work includes a series of quilts about the Gullah culture that she started in the 1990s, and she has lectured on the Gullah culture nationally at places such as the American Folk Museum in New York. In 1999, O’Bryant-Seabrook was honored as one of the “Women Quilt Artists over the Age of Fifty” during the celebration of Creative Mentors for the New Millennium sponsored by The Anderson County Arts Center and Medicus. In 2000, she was honored as an Artist during MOJA, an annual Black Arts Festival in Charleston, SC. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including twice at the Smithsonian, and in South Africa, Namibia, France, and Japan. Additionally, she was one of 44 nationally recognized fiber artists invited to create a quilt honoring President Obama for an Inaugural exhibition at the Washington Historic Society in 2009.²³⁹

²³⁹ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook, personal interview with author, June 24, 2015.

O’Bryant-Seabrook fulfills her calling as a cultural preservationist through her roles as an educator, a lecturer, and a fiber artist. Although not Gullah, O’Bryant-Seabrook has immersed herself in the culture. She conveys this through her creative work and educational enterprise and by using her expertise to inform people nationally and internationally about the “fascinating”²⁴⁰ culture and history of the Gullah people. O’Bryant-Seabrook refers to the Gullah culture as “fascinating” because it has survived for centuries despite the sustained efforts to rid the people of their language and customs. She notes, one “must meet certain criteria to be Gullah.” During our interview at the Avery Research Center in Charleston, O’Bryant-Seabrook specified these criteria, spelling out that one must have a genealogical bloodline (Gullah ancestry) in order to be Gullah—a bloodline linked to specific communities of Blacks stolen from Africa and brought to America for their rice cultivating skills. She went on to assert that it does not matter “what stations in life you reach because your bloodline does not change.”²⁴¹ O’Bryant-Seabrook, whose grandparents moved to Charleston in 1918, readily admits to not being Gullah; however, for her, Gullah ancestry and culture are to be valued.

Upon first meeting O’Bryant-Seabrook, I noticed that she signaled her ardent embrace of the Gullah culture by wearing earrings made of sweetgrass. In fact, closer examination revealed that she was draped with the Gullah accessories and adorned with many sweetgrass products, not only the earrings but also a hat, a purse, and a bracelet. Paired with what little I then knew about her work, her strong embrace of such physical signs of the culture suggested to me that she believed in the intangible

²⁴⁰ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

²⁴¹ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

as well as the tangible aspects of the culture. Indeed, her visual display of her connection with the culture captivated me and became one of the initial reasons I wanted to conduct an interview with her. As will be shown, my intuition about O'Bryant-Seabrook was correct. Her narrative shed light on both intangible and tangible aspects of the Gullah culture, and she spoke compellingly about why it is important for her to encircle herself with visual manifestations of the culture and why her work is crucial to her and should be shared nationally and internationally.

At the onset of the interview, O'Bryant-Seabrook explained how she became introduced to the Gullah culture. She described first becoming acquainted with Sea Islanders when she commuted with her maternal grandmother, Fannie Greenwood Quarles, a teacher and principal, from Charleston to Three Trees School on James Island, South Carolina. Her grandmother commuted in order to serve this community from 1926 to 1968, forty-two years, thus serving as an example of the social activism demonstrated on behalf of the culture. Although she was not Gullah, she participated in the racial and educational uplift of a people who were deemed unequal to their white counterparts and in some instances, ridiculed by Blacks - primarily because of their distinctive language. Black teachers like O'Bryant-Seabrook's grandmother were among those who commuted from the city to the Sea Islands and taught children during the era of segregation, refusing to leave the children's educational aspirations in the hands of "outsiders." As an example of activism within the Black community, Quarles counters the narrative found in Pat Conroy's fictionalized memoir, *The Water is Wide*, in which Conroy portrays himself as a savior figure to the black students on the fictional Waccamaw Island. According to O'Bryant-Seabrook, as a child, she

herself did not have a heightened cognizance of the Gullah culture. "I didn't realize that the people were Gullah, I only knew "Gullah" as the name of the language."

When asked if she noticed any difference between the Gullah culture and the larger African American culture, she replied that she did not realize any differences except that the Gullahs lived in what was then called, "the country" while she and her family lived in "the city" and that, as she noticed, they spoke differently. It was on James Island that O'Bryant-Seabrook acquired an interest in and respect for this "rural" culture, and this was due largely to her maternal grandmother, who was passionate about teaching, not only academics, but, Black History, and who was willing to travel to teach on the Island: "My grandmother stayed for many years and was exposed to generations... because she had so much love and respect for them....so did I."²⁴² In fact, O'Bryant-Seabrook remembers "making lifelong friends"²⁴³ during her many travels to James Island as a young child. At that time, she never understood why others desired to isolate or ostracize the Gullah people—because of their speech patterns or geographical settings, and she still cannot understand this.

When I asked O'Bryant-Seabrook which objects elicit the strongest cultural memories for her and why, she gestured with excitement to the sweetgrass items with which she was adorned and proceeded to narrate a story about how she came to acquire her first sweetgrass basket. In 1995, a photojournalist from Washington, DC came to her home to interview her for a book that he was writing, *Communion of the Spirits*, and he asked her, "Where is your sweetgrass basket?" This nationally known

²⁴² Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

²⁴³ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

photojournalist expected that every Charlestonian owned a sweetgrass basket, which is the official gift of the city. When O’Bryant-Seabrook replied that she did not own one, he told her, "Well, you should!" “That stuck in my mind,” she said. “Within two weeks, I purchased my first sweetgrass basket - the largest one on display.” O’Bryant-Seabrook now owns many baskets and spoke of the pride she has when obtaining sweetgrass products. She also shared her belief that the creators of this art should be paid what their art is worth. She commented that unfair exchange happens when people try to pay these artisans much less than what they ask for their craft. In fact, she said, she pays what they ask instead of negotiating prices, showing respect for the time, resources, and talents of these artists. She further noted that “It is terrible that people, who are grateful for the increases in their salaries over decades, want to pay basket makers what they were paid in 1940.”²⁴⁴

During the interview, O’Bryant-Seabrook indicated that the community in the Mt. Pleasant area of Charleston has always made a concerted effort to maintain the Gullah culture through the selling of sweetgrass baskets. She commented that the sweetgrass artisans sit daily on the roadsides of Highway 17 in Mt. Pleasant to make and sell their wares and that they have done so for numerous decades: “For me, that’s where the culture has been more visible.... They've made more of an effort to maintain it.” O’Bryant-Seabrook asserted that this visible aspect of the culture is critical because it makes people more aware of the culture, its people, and its history.

Further in the interview, O’Bryant-Seabrook described becoming re-immersed in the Gullah culture as an adult. According to her, she reclaimed her interest in the

²⁴⁴ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

culture in the early 1990s after meeting with Joseph Opala, an anthropologist who conducted research that verified connections between the Sea Islands and Sierra Leone. This conversation made her realize how much time had passed since her childhood introduction to the culture and how much of the Gullah culture she was unaware of as a child. These realizations were the beginning of her journey in cultural preservation through fiber artistry and her continuation of Gullah cultural traditions in the form of quilting. According to O'Bryant-Seabrook, "I had flashbacks to my childhood visits to James Island. I almost had a sense of being ashamed that I did not know more about these people who had such a rich history. In fact, I decided to do a "Gullah Series" and when I completed the first Gullah quilt and wrote about it, I said that it and the ones that would follow would be redemptive. That's where the passion came, she said, and it came with a force."²⁴⁵

Despite her passion, O'Bryant-Seabrook's early efforts were not without resistance. When she began the quilting and preservation process, she had many Gullah friends who told her, "Leave it alone, Marlene."²⁴⁶ These members of the Gullah community explained to her that they had experienced excessive ridicule and ostracism as children and having moved from the island, gone to college, etc., preferred to detach themselves from the language and the culture: "If you had faced the ridicule I had faced all my life being Gullah," one of her friends told her, "you would leave this alone." O'Bryant-Seabrook was not dissuaded. Her first in the series of Gullah-related quilts drew upon *Porgy and Bess* in order to introduce Gullah culture to her viewers, a choice she made, she explained, because everyone was

²⁴⁵ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

²⁴⁶ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

familiar with *Porgy and Bess* due to the popularity of the song “Summertime.” Despite the problematic nature of the portrayal of Gullah culture in *Porgy and Bess* (see discussion of the opera in Chapter 2, above), this work alerted a mainstream American audience to the Gullah culture, and in her early work on the Gullah culture, O’Bryant-Seabrook drew upon this association.

We returned to the topic of quilting at the end of the interview, and O’Bryant-Seabrook discussed the connection between her fiber art and Gullah history, as well as her use of this vehicle both to celebrate Gullah culture and to educate the viewer about the culture and about life issues. According to O’Bryant-Seabrook, when designing quilts, the artist who is an “educator at heart”²⁴⁷ creates ways to embed lessons into the artwork: “While color and form are aesthetic necessities, the educator in me either subtly or overtly slips a lesson into each quilt: love of God, family, children; pride of heritage; respect for accomplishments.”²⁴⁸ This pride and “respect for accomplishments” are demonstrated through some of her quilts in the Gullah Series. “What God Hath Wrought” (1993) pays homage to famous blacksmith Philip Simmons; it presents his image and the tools he needed to produce his art. “The Gallery” (1994) honors the work of Gullah artist Jonathan Green and features a woman standing in a gallery viewing his paintings. A later Simmons quilt made in 2006, “Iron Work Genius,” which includes copies of hand drawn sketches of his iron masterpieces and quotes, covered his casket during his funeral in 2009. Another example of O’Bryant-Seabrook’s celebration of the culture and her education of the

²⁴⁷ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

²⁴⁸ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

viewer about the culture is her quilt which highlights the rice cultivation skills of the Gullahs.

Through scenes in the very first quilt that she made after the completion of her beginners quilting class, “Love, Love, Love: A Record of a Rich Heritage,” O’Bryant-Seabrook reflects in her artistry both on the people who have influenced her greatly and on the cultural and economic independence of Black people. In 1984, she wrote, “It occurred to me that I ought to record, for my descendants, the important contributions made to the city of Charleston, South Carolina by the descendants of slaves.”²⁴⁹ A number of scenes in this quilt series were inspired by O’Bryant-Seabrook’s fond personal recollections from her youth. “It was not until the 1990s that I learned that ‘the descendants of slaves’ to whom I referred were Gullahs. I now refer to that quilt as the precursor to my “Gullah Series.” For example, two of the scenes represent her travels to the Old City Market on Saturday mornings. One depicts a woman from James Island who grew and sold fresh produce, and was the mother of several children taught by her grandmother. This quilt serves as a tribute to those who demonstrated their fierce cultural and economic independence, even before the bridges were built; they grew their fruits and vegetables and caught seafood, and they traveled to the urban areas by ferries to sell them before cars were available.

Similarly, other cultural memories from O’Bryant-Seabrook’s childhood trips to James Island that can be found in this quilt are entitled “The Man Plowing,” “The Pump,” and “The Boy Fishing.” These scenes not only reflect the cultural and economic independence of the Gullah people but also reflect their cultural

²⁴⁹ Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook

relationships to the earth and the land, their sense of community, and their persistence. The man plowing the land with a mule for farming his crops was furthering his autonomy. O'Bryant-Seabrook adds, "These childhood memories are powerful and treasured by me because I am truly an urban person. The first night that I remember spending in a rural setting - no electricity, farm animals, etc. - was after I'd graduated from college, married, and had my first child and I still live on the Charleston peninsula, not in a suburb." "The Pump" represents a time when there was no running water available in the rural areas, but Gullahs pumped well water, demonstrating tenacity in spite of adversity. "The Boy Fishing" represents a young Gullah boy gathering crabs, shrimp, and other seafood for family meals, a skill that is generally passed down from father to son. This one quilt, which includes nineteen (19) cross-stitched scenes, serves as a further affirmation of O'Bryant-Seabrook's loyalty to and love for this culture, and she notes: "During the months of cross-stitching, I developed a deep love for the richness of my heritage."²⁵⁰ Another scene represents her childhood memory of going to Atlantic Beach, "passing the last Basket Weaver after crossing The Cooper River Bridge." In this scene, the basket maker is prominently displayed and homage is paid to this portion of the culture through representation of the importance of this craft. Such quilts reveal that the artist is preserving and passing down Gullah history and culture through fiber artistry.

Throughout our interview, O'Bryant-Seabrook spoke regarding the need to value the Gullah culture, particularly when the topic of the Gullah language arose. In fact, she referenced an experience she had while attending a play performed in Gullah in which a mother was crying because her child had been murdered. Noticing that

²⁵⁰ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

African-Americans were laughing at the scene, O'Bryant-Seabrook became displeased and walked outside. When told by an acquaintance that the African-Americans in the audience were not laughing at the woman crying but were "laughing because they couldn't understand what she was saying," O'Bryant-Seabrook asserted, "I don't believe that! People listen to operas in Italian and other languages or will see other cultural productions in other languages and would never consider the European language(s) funny because they didn't understand what they were saying."²⁵¹ Then and now, O'Bryant-Seabrook adamantly rejects any inclination to call the Gullah language "unintelligible." According to O'Bryant-Seabrook, this is one of the reasons she designs her lectures "to educate and not to entertain,"²⁵² constructing them to respond to prejudices and misrepresentations of the Gullah people. A form of prejudice that she noted is when people outside the culture ask Gullahs to speak the language for entertainment, not realizing that this could be considered an insult to the people and the culture. She suggested that, while people may be curious and ask if a person speaks Gullah, they should not ask that the language be spoken unless it is volunteered. Lecturing on the Gullah culture is part of O'Bryant-Seabrook's activism, which, like this dissertation project, aims to educate the public about the rich humanity of Gullah people and to debunk prejudices and stereotypes.

The preservation of the language is also important for this seasoned educator, and she has lectured about this aspect of the culture nationally. During our interview, O'Bryant-Seabrook suggested that the language has been preserved in particular on

²⁵¹ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

²⁵² Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

the Sea Islands, which many identify as the heart of Gullah culture and history. She also referenced the connections made by linguists between African languages and the Gullah language. As a case in point, she cited an instance when a linguist from Sierra Leone, hired by the College of Charleston after the Opala research, met with a resident of Yonges Island, an elderly woman who had lived on the Sea Island her entire life and had made very few trips to the mainland, Charleston. She spoke unaltered Krio, which is considered Sierra Leone's cousin language to Gullah. O'Bryant-Seabrook concurred with the linguist from Sierra Leone that such language retention occurred, not because the Gullahs could not learn to speak standardized English, but because "they were trying to hold on to their African language and did not want to 'contaminate their culture.'"²⁵³ In fact, O'Bryant-Seabrook further argued that Gullahs are bilingual because they are able to navigate between two languages—the Gullah language and standardized English.

After our impassioned discussion about the Gullahs' linguistic and cultural retention, my conversation with O'Bryant-Seabrook shifted to the most recent efforts to preserve and interpret the culture. In response to a question at the end of the interview, O'Bryant-Seabrook noted that the Gullah culture has not remained static, and she spoke about the significance of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Law. Regarding the law, in particular, she asserted that the Cultural Heritage Corridor created an awareness of the culture on a national and international level, created federal funds for research and consultants, and allowed the people to gain access to the resources needed to make sweetgrass baskets. "There has been a vast influx of "newcomers" in the Mt. Pleasant area, the heart of the sweetgrass

²⁵³ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

industry, and they had no idea of the centuries old legacy or the impact that gated communities, etc. had on the availability of the raw materials needed by the basket makers." According to O'Bryant-Seabrook, this law has created access to knowledge of internal economic development for the Gullahs so that they can now demand equitable higher prices for their wares. Before the establishment of the Corridor, there was so much external economic development encroaching upon Gullah land that the basket makers had trouble accessing the raw materials needed to make their artwork. O'Bryant-Seabrook asserted that she is also pleased that it seems that the younger generation is more interested in creating sweetgrass artistry than they were in the not so distant past.

In addition to lecturing at museums, on campuses and educating the public about the Gullah culture, O'Bryant-Seabrook, as a cultural preservationist, passes down her fiber artistry by conducting workshops. These are designed for both younger and older people and cater to the "interests of the audience[,] focusing on the "myth" of "African-American quilting" or subjects addressed in her quilts: Gullah culture, Women's Issues, Jazz, etc."²⁵⁴ When I asked O'Bryant-Seabrook what she would like her legacy to be, she responded humbly: "In the early 1990s, I made the concerted effort and decision to use my skills as an educator and fiber artist to expose people, wherever I found them, to the story of this rich heritage."²⁵⁵ Dr. Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook has fulfilled the potential of each opportunity she has seized, introducing the Gullah culture to some, nurturing and revitalizing it for others, and preserving its "rich heritage" (cited above) for the benefit of all. After completing

²⁵⁴ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

²⁵⁵ Marlene O'Bryant-Seabrook

this interview, O'Bryant-Seabrook invited me to view several of the various quilts that she had produced over the years and provided me with steadfast encouragement for my research.

“The heart of the Gullah culture is found in the Sea Islands. There, we find the richness of our spiritual and cultural practices, the foodways, and most importantly, our land.”

Ella M. Chaplin

Ella M. Chaplin, born and reared in Charleston in the 1940s, preserves the culture through practicing and sustaining cultural traditions and beliefs, including spiritual beliefs, language use, and foodways, as well as the oral tradition, and property retention. She attended and graduated from the public schools in Charleston. She constantly uttered that her proudest accomplishment was the successfully rearing of her three daughters, who she groomed to be fiercely independent and to be astute students of history. Likewise, her mother passed down these traits of independence to her, while also stressing the importance of passing down oral histories for future generations. During the interview that took place in her Charleston home, I was aware that one of my mother’s hobbies is preparing one of her well-sought after humming bird cakes, for it is only one aspect of her life that she is very persnickety about. I fastidiously dictated every word she vocalized since she was again passing down needed information to me for this dissertation project; of course, her role as a mother and a preserver of this living culture can never be complete. Chaplin’s interview demonstrated the nuances of the Gullah culture by not adhering to a linear narrative.

She discusses the importance of land preservation, family, economics, and foodways. At the beginning of the interview, she sat at her kitchen table shelling pecans to prepare one of her well-crafted cakes and spoke of how her mother, Susie Frazier, passed down certain spiritual and medicinal practices that continue to hold meaning for her. She beamed when speaking about her mother and detailed about the connection between spirituality and land, emphasizing that this lesson remains with

her until this day. She also asserted that land ownership was important to her family when she was a child: “Bubba [her brother] and I never dwelled on the fancy cars and clothing and plenty of jewels, but we were concerned [with] having land...because that is where the family is held together, the culture is held together, the root of everything is connected. We took pride in knowing that our ancestors left land they toiled freely on it for years. To us, land ownership meant wealth.”²⁵⁶ Chaplin reminisced “My grandfather saved his little money, using it not only to support a family of ten but also to purchase acres of land so that his family members would inherit and share both the land and the culture for generations to come.”²⁵⁷ She honored her grandfather’s legacy, I knew, by inculcating her three daughters with the importance of the history, beliefs, and practices of the Gullah culture.

Chaplin conveyed some of her spiritual practices emanated from her attending the Baptist church²⁵⁸ with her mother until she was twelve years old and singing the spirituals known in the Gullah community. She adopted these spiritual beliefs and practices because they sustained her throughout times when she witnessed inequalities. She elaborated by giving an example: “Black police officers were not allowed to arrest White people; they had to get a white cop to arrest the person. Although they earned the badge, they could not completely do the job.”²⁵⁹ The spiritual beliefs she adopted were rooted in the everyday cultural practices used within the Gullah community to face adversity, such as the challenges they faced

²⁵⁶ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁵⁷ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁵⁸ The predominant religion for the Gullahs is Baptist, which was introduced to them by missionaries around the 18th century; however, it has been mixed with Africanisms, cited by Rosalyn Browne, telephone interview with author, February 16, 2015. (See chapter two of the dissertation for more historical background.) Also, See Margaret Creel’s *“A Peculiar People”*: *Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*.

²⁵⁹ Ella M. Chaplin

having to travel miles to attend public schools. According to Chaplin, in spite of such adversity, she was determined to pursue an education because of the “blueprints her mother and grandparents set for her.”²⁶⁰ Chaplin’s spiritual beliefs, as these were generated within the Gullah culture, are evidenced in her home, where she retains tangible objects given to her by relatives who have “transitioned” and where she retains intangible memories of them. She believes that these material goods have spiritual and sentimental value and that some of these objects have served to protect her and her family throughout the years. For instance, she discussed the Bible she still brought with her from her mother’s house: “I brought a lot of stuff with me when I left the country, including Mama’s bible. It is worn; some pieces of the Bible are worn, but the foundation is still there, Jennie. It reminds me of the strong foundation of our culture.”²⁶¹ In spite of the many transformations, the people’s determination to the intangible as well as tangible has been unwavering.

After placing one of the cakes in the oven, she proceeded to her study to obtain the book where the family’s historical information can be found. Here, she points to me: “Mama, always kept these photos and the rest of this information and passed them down to me. I always show these photos and genealogical information to the younger generation so they can know who their relatives are. Also, they need to know the strength in the Dunmeyer family.”²⁶² One religious and spiritual practice that Chaplin noted is her attendance of church on New Year’s Eve, which is called

²⁶⁰ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁶¹ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁶² Ella M. Chaplin

Watch Night Service.²⁶³ This practice has been very important within the Gullah community because the worship service serves to “bring in” the New Year. In chapter two, my mother speaks about the significance of connecting foodways to New Year’s Eve. She notes: “This moment has always been very important in our home; we were taught to pray once the clock strikes midnight and to be grateful for living another year.”²⁶⁴ This spiritual and religious practice in the Gullah culture still thrives and cements the community. To this day, Chaplin attends most Watch Night Services at her church, and she has sustained this cultural practice, she asserted, because it signals spiritual rejuvenation, a strong sense of community, and the constant desire to improve her daily life: “For me, I attend these services to give thanks to for the year that has passed. It is important for me to reflect on how I can improve my daily actions [and to] come home and have my Hoppin’ John [which signifies good luck for the year] and collard greens [which signifies having money throughout the year].”²⁶⁵ As noted here, foodways are also part of the New Year’s tradition of the Gullahs, and our conversation moved back to how culinary traditions are sustained.

Just as she aimed to preserve her spiritual beliefs and practices, Chaplin diligently sustained the foodways of her family and of the Gullah culture. During our

²⁶³ Emory Campbell in *Gullah Cultural Legacies* describes Watch Night as “[t]he gathering of community members at the praise house or church or at someone’s house from about 9 o’clock until midnight on New Year’s Eve. During the gathering, members sing traditional spirituals, give testimonials of the past year and express wishes for the coming year until time to watch for the New Year’s arrival. A person (watchman) is sent outside about 15 minutes before the midnight to watch for the New Year. Before watches were available, the ‘Watchman’ watched the moon to determine when midnight arrived.”(54) Campbell further states that a praise house is a “small one-room building located in each House neighborhood, on most Sea Islands in [a] which prayer meeting was held three times weekly—Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday evening.” (46) This tradition has been kept alive and still takes place in African-American churches on New Year’s Eve.

²⁶⁴ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁶⁵ Ella M. Chaplin

discussion, she notes that her mother and aunt passed down their culinary traditions to her and that this passing on of culinary traditions symbolizes cultural continuance, unity, and resilience. As she words it, these cultural practices have always been critical for her because they “symbolize a part of the culture that we refuse to let die.”²⁶⁶ Chaplin prepares her food with love, especially the okra soup and the Hoppin’ John she fixes throughout the year. Chaplin insisted that it is difficult for her to discuss foodways without connecting foodways to spirituality. She believes that if you omit the spiritual component, you are “simplifying” the culture.²⁶⁷ For instance, she has demonstrated her belief in the practice of preparing Hoppin’ John every New Year’s Day since I was a child, and she believes that we should gather as a family to consume the dish for good luck. Several years ago, she reminded me when I left Charleston before New Year’s Day and not having the traditional Hoppin’ John. She chided me for years about this faux pas I committed, and I never sought to repeat it. Chaplin, like many Gullahs, believes that the home is spiritually empty without this culinary staple that adorns the table on New Year’s Day and at various points throughout the year. During this interview, Chaplin also constantly stressed the significance of the fact that she eats rice on a daily basis: “Jennie, don’t ever forget you are paying respect to your ancestas when you eat rice and Hoppin’ John! They labored on that land without being compensated for their work.”²⁶⁸ She carried on such culinary traditions both to nurture her family and to preserve the Gullah culture. In addition, some of these dishes taught Chaplin how to be economically savvy. A dish like okra soup, which has several ingredients (corn, okra, tomato, shrimp, meat,

²⁶⁶ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁶⁷ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁶⁸ Ella M. Chaplin

and other desired ingredients of the cook), can feed a large family for a couple of days, and this dish allows one to be creative with various ingredients while being physically and culturally sustained.

Like her daughter, Chaplin-Rouse, Chaplin preserves the culture through speaking the language, in addition to speaking to certain adages and folk sayings that her mother passed down to her. These adages, axioms, and proverbs, which Chaplin has repeated throughout her life, resonate in my memory to the present day, and they help define the mores of the Gullah culture. According to Chaplin, she finds satisfaction in knowing that she has preserved and passed down to her children what her mother taught her. She indicated: “These sayings provide grounding to your life as you got older, didn’t you find that to be the case?” During our discussion, Chaplin noted that the mores of the Gullah culture sustained the culture, a culture that by many people’s accounts should have been decimated: “Many people did not expect us to survive, chile.”²⁶⁹ Adages Chaplin preserved include those that convey persistence in spite of obstacles, those that prescribe the treatment of elders, and those that convey life’s moral lessons. For instance, Chaplin’s mother taught her about the important axiom “[o]ne penny can’t rattle by itself,” which means that two people should accept responsibility in a disagreement instead of the full responsibility being placed on one person. This truism has grounded me personally and professionally and has aided me with self confidence. Like her daughter, Chaplin-Rouse, Chaplin is self-assured in sustaining her cultural values. She does not falter when someone attempts to challenge her use of certain adages. In fact, during the interview, Chaplin

²⁶⁹ Ella M. Chaplin. During our discussion, she goes into detail about the history of her family and all the people of the African Diaspora—their struggles from enslavement to present. She notes that they not only survived but triumphed.

displayed a deliberate and serious demeanor when explaining the importance of the Gullah culture and when referencing her heritage. At one point, she smiled and got up from the kitchen table to retrieve a photograph of her mother, and she described as “the moral, intellectual, and cultural compass of her life.”²⁷⁰ Holding the photograph, she asserted that we must “hold on to” and “treasure”²⁷¹ our cultural practices and traditions because our parents have worked so hard to maintain our heritage and instill them in each generation.

She speaks to the use of non traditional medicine growing up and how it was used as part of their survival skills. Chaplin then turned our discussion to her knowledge of certain Gullah healing practices obtained during her younger years, noting that such medicinal practices allowed cultural independence. According to Chaplin, people discovered ways to remedy their maladies in spite of limited access to Western medicine. At this point in our conversation, Chaplin began to reminisce on when people “come to town.”²⁷² During this reflection, she spoke about the cohesive community she lived in when she was younger and suggested that much has changed due economic development and the practice of many younger family members leaving home. “When people were in these close knit communities, she said, they were able to keep closer contact and better maintain their cultural values and traditions, such as folkloric traditions.”²⁷³ She noted that the medicinal cures—including application of certain items from the woods or the home—were used in the country to cure many illnesses because people in the country lived in relative

²⁷⁰ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁷¹ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁷² Chaplin references people traveling from the rural areas to the city. The bridges—built during the 1950s—connected the Sea Islands to the mainland.

²⁷³ Ella M. Chaplin

isolation and did not rely on Western medicine. These healing practices were passed down from generation to generation. In fact, she pointed to a scar on her leg she incurred from a bicycle accident during childhood that was healed using one of these medicinal practices instead of the stitches used in Western medicine: “Today, that same cut would have required stitches, antibiotics, and many other requirements from the tools of Western medicine. Chile, I just don’t know if these bodies of today are as strong because of what has been done to the earth and how we care for our bodies.”²⁷⁴ According to Chaplin, we have damaged our ecosystems and the earth greatly.

Chaplin has long asserted that people’s immune systems today are not as strong as they used to be because the earth has been plagued with chemicals that it did not contain when she was growing up in the rural areas. She reiterated this during our talk and also questioned why modern medicine cannot defeat certain antibiotic-resistant infections. Additionally, she asserted that because of economic development and other factors affecting the world, we are not the best stewards of the earth. She recalled: “My grandfather grew his vegetables, and it was very economical. Some of my relatives who lived (and still live) on Edisto Island would bring fresh vegetables and fruits to their families in the city during the 1970s because they believed that freshly grown nourishment was physically and spiritually healthy and because they believed that the city folks could not obtain this ‘freshness’ from the grocery stores.” Chaplin explained that the land is the connection among all of these beliefs.

Chaplin’s connection to the earth became even more pronounced as the conversation shifted to her life picking vegetables on the farm as a child. “My friend

²⁷⁴ Ella M. Chaplin

‘Diane’²⁷⁵ and I worked on the farm during the school years and during the summers from the time when we were nine until we were sixteen years of age. From 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., we would pick vegetables, like beans.” According to Chaplin, because she was exposed to fresh vegetables and was used to making everything from scratch, it is difficult for her to take short cuts when preparing her Gullah dishes like okra soup and red rice. For instance, instead of canned or frozen vegetables, she prefers fresh vegetables. Chaplin said that picking vegetables as a child helped her because it gave her access to earthy values and sustained her economic independence.

Even after Chaplin moved to Charleston proper, she still maintained her rural values, as seen in her gardening and her desiring to care for the earth and as seen in her adamant statement: “The most desired food comes from which is grown and that the best seafood is that which is freshly caught.”²⁷⁶ I have always noticed the care that she in gardening, paying attention to the quality of soil when she plants flowers and wondering about the contents in today’s soil as opposed to the soil in the rural area where she grew up as a child. Because she connected to the earth at an early age and remains connected, Chaplin has always seen the value in Gullahs owning property and has always believed in land retention, which was the fundamental goal in her family. “This explains why she remained connected to her rural roots and continues to believe in the importance of owning the land that her ancestors were enslaved on for centuries.”

Chaplin admitted that the purpose of the Penn Center is still relevant because it educates Gullahs about their cultural heritage and independence, because it

²⁷⁵ Pseudonym used.

²⁷⁶ Ella M. Chaplin

educates people about the importance of land ownership, and because it helps advocate the importance of maintaining the language. She said that the Penn Center made her recall when she was a child and when she made trips with us to reinforce our cultural values. Chaplin suggested that the various objects in the Penn Center—blacksmithing tools, sweetgrass baskets, casting nets—remind her of how to become and remain culturally and economically independent. This led her to recount when she told her sense of economic independence that is found in the Gullah culture. She recounted: “I thought that if I were to ever lose my job, I needed another occupation that would allow me earn money.” Forty years later, her business—with her youngest daughter as co-owner—is thriving. This part of Chaplin’s life demonstrates the ideas of pooling family and community resources, cultural independence, and resilience; it shows Chaplin’s resistance to societal expectations at time when her narrative and her children’s narratives were written for them because of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In this way, Chaplin educated her children about communal values and about bringing one’s cultural and economic resources back to the community, which are the tenets of the Gullah culture.

She noted that during the upbringing of her children, she did not have much money, but she had a great deal of what cultural critic references as cultural capital.²⁷⁷ As she worded it, she had tentacles throughout the community; she drew from leaders, educators, and others to educate her three daughters despite the inequality in the educational system in the public schools in the city of Charleston. “I wanted to

²⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu referenced this term in his essay, “The Forms of Capital” (1986); he makes clear distinctions between economic, cultural, and social capital. For him, cultural capital, “represented knowledge and certain skills.” In this case, my mother did not have much economic wealth but had an abundance of cultural and social resources.

take responsibility as a parent to educate my children.”²⁷⁸ What I remember about my mother is her tenacity throughout my childhood as she moved through the peninsula of Charleston rearing three young daughters as a single parent but having a strong support system in the form of her aunt and brother. Although short in stature, she was (and still is) very spry. She walked with a gentle, powerful, and protective force when it came to her family. “Through inquiries to teachers, community leaders, and friends, I found intense educational opportunities for y’all during the summer months, opportunities outside of the public school setting.” Chaplin discovered ways to keep her daughters intellectually and academically stimulated through culturally outlets, such as piano lessons given by a neighbor, and numerous library visits under the guidance of our neighbor, who was a high school English teacher and community activist. In our discussion, Chaplin emphasized “Remember that during the summer months it was important for me to enroll you in a six-week educational program to make sure you were moving at the same pace as (or faster than) our other counterparts in private or suburban schools.”²⁷⁹ She noted that the African proverb that “[i]t takes a village to raise child” “held true in our community since the people in the community took responsibility for raising each child through nurturing, education, and protection.”²⁸⁰

Chaplin has been tenacious when it comes to preserving the Gullah culture through her spirituality and her everyday cultural practices. She noted how proud that

²⁷⁸ See Chapter two’s analysis on Pat Conroy’s *The Water is Wide*. Chaplin’s parental involvement in school and cultural activities counters Conroy’s assessment of the Gullahs as unlearned and dependent on “outsiders” for educational advancement. Additionally, her narrative reflects the involvement of the whole community.

²⁷⁹ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁸⁰ Ella M. Chaplin

her two youngest daughters are preserving their heritage through their culinary skills and that her youngest daughter decided to become co-owner of the family business. Near the end of the interview, still shelling those pecans, she looked at me and said, “I still can’t understand why you didn’t get any of the cooking skills like the rest of your sisters when you spent most of the time in the kitchen with me while you [were] growing up.”²⁸¹ I replied, “Mama, that was our bonding time, and I enjoyed hearing all of those stories about your childhood, about your wisdom, about your strength, about how I came to be Jennie.” She replied stoically, “Well, I see. I guess my hard work paid off.”²⁸² Then she smiled.

²⁸¹ Ella M. Chaplin

²⁸² Ibid.

“I love my culture because its people nurtured, educated, and cared for me all of these years. I love the company of people from different backgrounds. The pride comes in knowing that we are a people of sharing.”

Rose Mary Chaplin-Rouse

Rose Mary Chaplin-Rouse was born and reared in Charleston, South Carolina, and she was educated in the public schools of the peninsula of Charleston. She preserves the Gullah culture by speaking the language and by preparing Gullah dishes in what has been her profession for over the past 30 years. She enjoys perfecting these dishes she prepares at work or in her home space, and she credits her immersion in Gullah cultural influences and her auto-didacticism to the matrilineal strength in her family. Her impressive culinary skills have been requested by people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and she has catered at illustrious weddings, bridal showers, and other festivities. Chaplin-Rouse is employed with the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston. In fact, there are those who assume that her skills were acquired from some of the most prestigious culinary schools in the country. In spite of the stigma placed on the culture, she has been ardent in preserving it throughout the years—professionally and personally—by surrounding herself with the intangible and tangible aspects of the culture.

Chaplin-Rouse surrounds herself with visible forms of the Gullah culture in her physical space. While getting ready to conduct this interview in the living room of her Charleston home, I noticed her miniature sweetgrass baskets comfortably displayed on her side table, other sweetgrass objects prominently showcased in her curio, and photographs of the master blacksmith Philip Simmons’s artwork hanging from her wall. I also saw her Gullah culinary books and other culinary cooks on her coffee table, demonstrating how entrenched she is in her career. Before we began,

Chaplin-Rouse, ordered me, her “big” sister, not to turn on the tape recorder because she would not speak into the device: “If you don’t catch everything with your handwritten notes, you always have access to me!”²⁸³ She said with an authoritative voice. Then she turned back to her kitchen, “Right now, I am capable of giving this interview and creating my art at the same time.”²⁸⁴ By this Chaplin-Rouse meant that she would be cooking while I asked her questions. I smelled the alluring aroma of the red rice cooking in the oven and the okra soup cooking on the stove. Red rice—a Lowcountry dish that is derived from West African influences—is a culinary staple that consists of rice, onions, bell peppers, tomato sauce, and other ingredients selected by the culinarian. It became challenging to focus on interviewing my sister, the culinary expert, because I was so engrossed in the aroma that emanated from the kitchen and could not wait to satiate my taste buds after the food was finished being prepared. There was also continuous motion as I watched and moved with my sister when she sauntered in and out of the kitchen from time to time to monitor her “art.” Before I could query her about what aspects of Gullah culture resonate the most cultural memories for her, I discovered the answer for myself—food and language. Chaplin-Rouse, a clearly self-defined Gullah woman, imparted this tacit understanding through her home space, her movement, her speech, and her presence.

Steadfast matrilineal support and a desire to preserve the culture of this lineage are evidenced in Chaplin-Rouse’s narrative, which started with discussion of how she came to her love for the culinary arts and how focused she is on her profession. According to Chaplin-Rouse, her passion was ignited by her mother and

²⁸³ Rose Chaplin-Rouse, personal interview with author, July 7, 2015.

²⁸⁴ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

her grandaunt, who taught her how to prepare delightful and culturally enriched dishes. As she noted in the interview:

A lot of people ask me why my cooking is so different from others.... My cooking started at an early age... It started with me learning to cook with my mama, my Granny, my Aunt Mary; I loved Aunt Mary's meatloaf. Most importantly, Jennie, in our culture, you have to cook with lots of love, or it will not come out right. Also, when I was growing up, I watched my Aunt Mary and Uncle Ned communicate...[w]hile they were they cooking; time went by so much faster. They were talking old-time stuff. I found it fascinating. They were sharing great stories about our family's heritage.²⁸⁵

Then she boasted that her husband does not enjoy anyone else's cooking like hers.

She also asserted, "Sis, I cook with my soul and with feeling. No book or school can teach you what I know."²⁸⁶ Chaplin-Rouse credited her culinary skills to her

matrilineal influence and emphasized how the older women in her family influenced her creativity in preparing Gullah dishes and prepared her to pursue a culinary career.

Chaplin-Rouse is grateful to her mother and grandaunt for instilling in her knowledge of and pride about Gullah's unique culture. Her mother taught her how to cook all of the popular Gullah dishes, all the ones that we consider necessities in our diet.

Chaplin-Rouse's treatment of how she developed her love for cooking revealed the importance of women (though not exclusively) in passing on and maintaining Gullah food culture. It also revealed the interconnection between cooking and oral history,

²⁸⁵ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

²⁸⁶ Rose Chaplin-Rouse. She asserts that her love for her profession began during her childhood and she could "feel" it. In *Vibration Cooking Or, The Travel Notes of A Geechee Girl*, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor also talks about her culinary experiences, and she notes that "And when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook with vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it." (Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor. *Vibration Cooking Or, The Travel Notes of A Geechee Girl*. Athens: University of Georgia, 2011, xxxvii.) Although I do not share my sister's culinary expertise, I have watched her and my mother in the kitchen, and notice that they rarely use measuring cups. I always think, what gives? I always believed that it was some kind of bond they have with the culinary dishes.

and it revealed the manner in which knowledge is circulated and valued within the Gullah culture.

Chaplin-Rouse wanted to delve into some of the historical significance of one particular Lowcountry favorite, benne wafers, which she was preparing during the interview. I told her that I did not know she knew how to prepare those little wafers. She replied,

Jennie, what business am I in? Of course I can make benne wafers. Tourists seem to love them, but many don't understand the cultural relevance behind the benne wafers. But, for the sake of your paper, let me give you some background information on them... The seed was brought over here from the Motherland and preserved, planted... When the wafer is given to you, it signals good luck... Well, that's how it has been orally passed down to me. That's why some of my friends and I prepare them...continue the traditions...trade recipes. It is not difficult to make. You should try making it sometimes.²⁸⁷

Then she told me that she knew more about Gullah cooking than I did. I chuckled and could not dispute her. Chaplin-Rouse's historical contextualization of benne wafers offered a glimpse at the way Gullah history is bound up in Gullah food traditions. It also showed that her engagement in Gullah foodways is informed by historical and cultural consciousness, and it suggested, once again, the connection between cooking and the oral tradition within the Gullah community. In fact, as she herself insisted, "The culture is about close communication because that's how we managed to hold onto the stories from generation to generation."²⁸⁸

Chaplin-Rouse assumes pride in their racial and cultural identity. In essence, Chaplin-Rouse—despite prejudices based on her race, class, or gender—has

²⁸⁷ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

²⁸⁸ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

harnessed “self-knowledge”²⁸⁹ in order to preserve and continue the Gullah culture, with linguistic and culinary traditions being only examples of this. Chaplin-Rouse used cooking as an “oppositional strategy”²⁹⁰ to preserve the Gullah culture; she takes her heritage seriously and maintains it through her preparation of Gullah culinary dishes. She affirmed: “While preparing various cuisines, I created different ways to prepare them and sustain my taste buds.”²⁹¹

Chaplin-Rouse is proud to continue the rich heritage and history that her ancestors struggled to cultivate and leave for their descendants. She asserts that Gullah history is a “history that should continue to flourish” and also that “[p]eople should acknowledge the contributions of the Gullahs.”²⁹² As Emory Campbell stresses “like all cultures, food grounds the Gullah culture.”²⁹³ This includes foods like okra, various pilau (a rice dish made with okra, selected meat, spices, and selected seafood). Seafood dishes also carry particular cultural resonance because they remind Gullahs of their relatives who caught fish and crabs and brought them into the city to sell.²⁹⁴ As practiced by Chaplin-Rouse, the culinary arts are both a medium through which to cultivate and nurture the culture and also a source of professional empowerment.

²⁸⁹ Psyche Williams-Forsen notes that the Black woman “is a producer of her own self-knowledge and of her own reality, providing illustrative content to the notion that power operates in the smallest of duties in our everyday lives.” *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2006.

²⁹⁰ Williams-Forsen further notes: “These kinds of oppositional strategies allow black women to practice and preserve the food customs and rituals that are most familiar and comfortable to them in the face of class pressures and racial tensions.” Cited from *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, 91.

²⁹¹ Rose Chaplin-Rouse.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Emory Campbell. *Gullah Cultural Legacies*, 2

²⁹⁴ Also see sections of the second chapter of this dissertation that reference the origins of these foodways and how they sustained the Gullah people and culture. In addition, see the interview with Dr. Marlene O’Byrant-Seabrook, who recalls Gullahs selling the seafood and fresh vegetables that Gullahs caught and grew.

Like her mother, Ella M. Chaplin, Chaplin-Rouse, proudly conveys her racial identity and cultural heritage by embracing and speaking the Gullah language. While some Gullahs navigate between speaking two languages—Gullah and “standard” English—Chaplin-Rouse for the most part speaks Gullah as her primary language. During the interview, she acknowledges that this language has been deemed to signify inferiority by some English-speaking people. She also acknowledged that when she was a child in the public schools of Charleston, she resisted teachers trying to define her linguistic identity. She admitted that “they told me the language was something I should be ashamed of speaking.”²⁹⁵ She went on to indicate that “no one else ha[d] been told to be ashamed of his or her heritage, and it made me angry.”²⁹⁶ Chaplin-Rouse has always spoken the Gullah language with pride and makes no apologies to those who cannot comprehend her rich speaking pattern. To her, speaking the Gullah language is a form of resistance because she has been told many times throughout her life that the language is incomprehensible; however, she asserted, she is attached to the language because it reflects her race and her ethnicity: “It is rooted in my soul, and I refuse to relinquish this part of my culture.” Chaplin-Rouse has always been aware of the struggle to preserve Gullah language; however, she has never been deterred from displaying her racial and cultural identity through language, despite prodding by others to relinquish her “Gullah speech.”²⁹⁷ While she has faced ridicule because she has refused to alter her linguistic pattern, she has also become more adamant in her refusal to suppress her identity.

²⁹⁵ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

²⁹⁶ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

²⁹⁷ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

The Gullah culture has and still serves as Chaplin-Rouse’s source of social and cultural empowerment. While Chaplin-Rouse’s use of the Gullah language reflects racial and cultural identity, it also has familial roots. During our conversation, I asked her why she is more fluent in the Gullah language than her two sisters, and she explained: “Well, while I went to the country on many weekends to visit our daddy’s folks, ya’ll stayed in the city on the weekends.”²⁹⁸ Here, Chaplin-Rouse is referring to the strong cultural and historical influences on Sea Islands such as Johns Island and Edisto. Chaplin-Rouse indicated: “The language on those Islands is spoken with the fluency that we don’t have here in the city...for the most part.”²⁹⁹ As Chaplin-Rouse reflected upon her times in the country with our father’s kin, she asserted that “[t]hese relatives took pride in teaching how and why the language was spoken, the meanings of certain words—such as *oona*, which means “you,” and *fa*, which means “to”—and why it was important to retain them.”³⁰⁰ In addition, she indicated that she did not have to “navigate the world of academia.”³⁰¹ While her two sisters were formally educated, she chose to pursue another form of education—the culinary arts. Her profession did not require her to code switch, and she worked in a setting in the Lowcountry that enabled her sustain her linguistic Gullah roots.

Chaplin-Rouse acknowledged that prejudices regarding race and ethnicity have much to do with how the Gullah language is perceived by many people. Like Dr. Marlene O’Bryant-Seabrook, she agreed that if the language was being used by someone of European ancestry, people would be more likely to make more of an

²⁹⁸ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

²⁹⁹ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³⁰⁰ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³⁰¹ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

effort to understand. She finds that some people who listen to her speak try to make her into something exotic her, or they try to make her feel marginal. She gives an example: “Jennie, people would make the stupid mistake and ask me to repeat myself because they think my accent is so cute, but I am aware of what they are doing. I ignore their request and give them a cultural undressing every time!” This is the resistance I am used to seeing my sister employ. Chaplin-Rouse feels it is important to maintain the linguistic link to her African ancestry because, as she noted, the language has been difficult to maintain—both due to the shame some feel when speaking it and due to other people’s misconceptions of the culture (which causes the shame). For these and other reasons, she sees the use of the language changing: “The Gullah our grandparents and parents speak is not spoken greatly in South Carolina today, and it saddens me because that language, that] culture, made me who I am today. I am so proud [to be a Gullah, and I am] unshaken by people’s opinions.”³⁰² Through her everyday use of the Gullah language, Chaplin-Rouse has been personally instrumental in preserving and continuing it, especially since the old-time Gullah speech is now less frequently heard. Alphonso Brown, a native of the Lowcountry and a lecturer on the Gullah language, confirms that the old-time Gullah speech has been disappearing: “A watered-down version is still privately used among friends and acquaintances, but it is certainly not the same pure and original sound of the Southern, rural, black 1920s.”³⁰³

Commentary on the Gullah language by Chaplin-Rouse speaks to the subject of multiculturalism and causes one to consider a parallel discussion in Gloria

³⁰² Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³⁰³ Alphonso Brown, *A Gullah Guide to Charleston: Walking Through Black History*, 14.

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, particularly in its attention to vacillation between the native tongue and English. Like Anzaldúa, those who speak Gullah have been admonished for speaking their language because it is perceived as unacceptable and inferior. Unfortunately, Gullah people are still not taught to embrace the Gullah language with pride because it is seen by others to signify inferior ethnicity, race, and class. Anzaldúa discusses a similar experience in "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," indicating that she was chastised as a child for speaking Spanish when she attended school. Like the Gullahs, Anzaldúa was also made to believe that since her linguistic structure was different from others, it was inferior: "Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language.... If a person, Chicano or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me."³⁰⁴

Chaplin-Rouse's experience mirrors that of Anzaldúa in that she, too, has been told that her language is sub-par even though legitimate studies have proven differently.³⁰⁵ Moreover, like Anzaldúa, Chaplin-Rouse has chosen to maintain her heritage, as did the early Gullahs. Even though the Gullahs on the Sea Islands originally lived in forced isolation because there were no bridges to the mainland until the 1950s, they also lived in voluntary isolation because they did not want to cross cultural "borders." They realized that if they crossed certain borders, their culture—i.e. their folklore, language, customs, and traditions—would be

³⁰⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, 80

³⁰⁵ See the second chapter of this dissertation on the topic of language resistance, including references to Lorenzo Dow Turner and Patricia Jones-Jackson, who debunk myths about the Gullah language, assert the need to preserve its linguistic integrity, and render connections between the Gullah language and African languages.

compromised. Like Anzaldúa, the Gullahs have recognized that when their language is devalued, their identities have been devalued as well. Like ethnic, class, and cultural assumptions made about Anzaldúa and other Spanish-speaking people, assumptions are made about people who speak Gullah fluently, and because the Gullah people have historically been disenfranchised, the Gullah language has also been undervalued. Chaplin-Rouse, by consciously maintaining the Gullah language, challenges such assumptions and defies stereotypes that place limitations on her intellect and earning capabilities because of ethnicity and race.

Near the end of the interview, Chaplin-Rouse acknowledged that throughout her life, while she felt that she and other Gullahs are parts of the American culture and contribute to it greatly, she has been aware of the fact that many others refuse to see her independent of racial and cultural stereotypes. “Because of my refusal to disconnect from my heritage, I am aware that people do not see me as equal to them when I make inquiries in stores, museums, and other public places that other people frequent. For some reason, I know I will always be seen differently because of the way I speak.”³⁰⁶ Chaplin-Rouse felt compelled to voice her concerns, wishing that people would embrace each other as human beings instead of always ostracizing others from society based on language use, belief systems, and cultural mores. Specifically, Chaplin-Rouse indicated that the Gullah culture is still stigmatized and that people who speak the language and embrace certain traditions and values are still chastised. “That’s why it’s so important for future generations to be aware of this heritage that we have because people will not always advocate for its preservation in schools or other institutions.” Then, she sternly looked at me with one of my

³⁰⁶ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

grandaunt's stares: "That's why you must continue the work you are doing because so many people will try to sway you from your paths." Our conversation veered into the direction of property retention because she remembered how our father's family was able to pass down their customs and mores, foodways, and the language and its significance because they own much land. "It saddens me that the people who call themselves 'developers' lack total concern for the culture and history of people who made a huge mark on this country; it is pure greed!"³⁰⁷ Then, she brought up the Penn Center and its work with land advocacy. "Jennie, remember when we made day trips to the Penn Center, and people held workshops about the importance of keeping their land?" I replied that I did remember our travels as children and as young adults, especially since she was my escort during my dissertation research. With an elevated pitch, she said: "Our ancestors gave their lives in building this country. That part of American history should not be minimized or erased."³⁰⁸

While still sitting in her living room, I noticed once again that Chaplin-Rouse's home is embellished with Gullah's material and visual culture. The sweetgrass baskets were inherited from our grandaunt. Gullah artwork ornaments the walls. Gullah songs are in the CD changer, songs that represent Chaplin-Rouse's spiritual, cultural, and religious belief systems. Chaplin-Rouse admits that she has always had an affinity for the baskets because of their various styles and their historical significance, and importantly, she said, they are created by "our women of the Lowcountry."³⁰⁹ According to Chaplin-Rouse:

³⁰⁷ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³⁰⁸ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³⁰⁹ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

Sweetgrass represents richness—not necessarily lots of money that people can confuse it with [but] health, love, and the Gullah people getting together to tell stories, enrich their lives.... That’s how the culture will keep going.... That is a heritage they are passing on to their younger generations. Can you imagine the stories that are being told when you see them selling their sweetgrass baskets and other products?³¹⁰

For Chaplin-Rouse, sweetgrass baskets and other Gullah objects represent the Gullahs’ unique customs and traditional belief systems and also celebrate her ancestral heritage. “The sweetgrass represents the hard work the ancestors endured,” she said, expressing her pride that they “were able to preserve for so many years.”³¹¹ Chaplin-Rouse said that she finds all of these signals of the Gullah culture both empowering and comforting. These Gullah traditions and customs, she said, especially the oral transmissions, were passed on to her by maternal figures, and they will always remain embedded in her racial and cultural identity.

At the end of the interview, I was relieved—not because I would no longer have to speak with my sister about her preservation efforts but because I was going to indulge in the culinary delights that were being prepared during our interview, or at least I thought so. To my dismay, my sister informed me that those dishes were being prepared for the bridal shower of a friend’s sister; she had volunteered to assist the friend with the meal preparation. This spoke to the sense of community that had been instilled in her by our mother and grandaunt. She assuaged my disappointment by informing me that she would prepare some of those dishes for me before my departure from Charleston. To conclude our time together, I had one last question. When I asked Chaplin-Rouse what she would like her legacy to be, she replied:

³¹⁰ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

³¹¹ Rose Chaplin-Rouse

“Well, of course I want to be remembered for my duties in this culture, but importantly, I want to be remembered as being a great sister and daughter.”³¹²

³¹² Rose Chaplin-Rouse

“If you want this culture to thrive badly enough, you will find the means to sustain and convey its importance.”

Barbara Bennett Manigault

Barbara Bennett Manigault, a fourth-generation sweetgrass artisan, grew up in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, in the 1950s and was educated in the public school system. A highly experienced artist who began creating sweetgrass products at the age of nine, she credits her professional success to her matrilineal heritage. Her entrepreneurial skills began as a child when she wanted to make clothing purchases. She admits that when she was younger, everyone created the same basket styles; however, as time evolved, she developed her own unique style. The art form of making sweetgrass products has been in the family for almost a century; her grandmother started creating sweetgrass baskets in 1928. She now preserves the culture through the proud roles of cultivator, protector of a culture, and entrepreneur. Of course, before her children became adults, she would go home after her day of selling baskets and working full-time jobs to care and cook for them and take care of the home. She was a full-time hospital employee until 1997 before selling sweetgrass products full-time.

Today, Manigault’s life is continuously busy. As someone who wants to ensure the preservation of the Gullah culture, she has served on the board of the Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Association, an organization established in 2005 to preserve the history and culture of the Gullah Geechee people. These volunteers consist of local basket makers and community leaders who combat the negative impact of economic development that has destroyed many of the fields where sweetgrass grew. As one who is intuitive and vigilant, Manigault has been and is determined to ensure the preservation and continuation of the culture because she is aware of what has

occurred and what can still occur: land developers have destroyed resources needed to make the baskets, compounding the exploitation and devaluation of Gullah people and culture over the years.

It was no surprise that during our interview, Manigault was creating sweetgrass products in her Mt. Pleasant home, which she has occupied for over 30 years. This demonstrates her love for the profession and her dedication to preserving the culture. I gazed at this preservationist as she weaved through the various materials, speaking passionately about a culture in which she and her siblings grew up. She stressed: “It gave and still gives me values, nurturing, and a sense of community.”³¹³ I marveled at the raw materials used to make sweetgrass products that lay in her living room and inquired about the difficulty she had in acquiring them because of the increased economic development along the Sea Islands. Despite economic development and the destruction of fields of sweetgrass in the process, sweetgrass makers are not deterred in their preservation efforts. They discover other rural sites where the rare sweetgrass plant grows, obtain the plant, and plant it in their yards so that the sweetgrass will grow plentifully. Manigault noted: “If you want this culture to thrive badly enough, you will find the means to sustain and convey its importance.”³¹⁴ She indicated that she travels hundreds of miles outside of South Carolina to obtain the materials needed to create her products and to preserve the culture.

Manigault also has her family engage in her sweetgrass basket enterprise. Her three sons and husband participate in the acquisition of the materials, and while

³¹³ Barbara Bennett Manigault, personal interview with author, July 9, 2015.

³¹⁴ Barbara Bennett Manigault

acquiring these materials in wooded areas, they must be cautious of encountering snakes. Manigault's husband knew of sweetgrass basketry prior to meeting her: "My husband does an excellent job at weaving the baskets. In fact, when we first met, he made it point to let me know that he knew how to weave baskets so that it could impress me."³¹⁵ Beyond making baskets, Manigault's husband also helps with the retail aspect of the business. "He also joins me when I go to the Charleston Farmers Market [in Marion Square] on Saturdays to sell the baskets," she said.³¹⁶ In other instances, she markets wares by herself, selling baskets made by both herself and her husband; therefore, she is not only preserving and continuing a culture, but she is a major provider in her household. Manigault and her husband have partnered in their economic and artistic endeavor to preserve the Gullah culture, and their contribution attests to the wholeness of the culture, the sense of community within the culture, and the intergenerational and cross-gendered way that men, women, and children are held accountable for the continuation of the culture.

Manigault has devised many ways to differentiate her sweetgrass artwork from that of others, and she credits her mother and grandmother for instilling in her a strong work ethic. When asked how she finds different ways of creating her craft, she replied in her soft, unassuming manner: "My way of preserving the sweetgrass culture is to come up with different and new styles so I can show different people what I can do. I try to embellish other things that I do with the sweetgrass, like the purses. I love it because I can create different styles. I am also trying different things with traditional rice baskets by adding the sea shells and cowrie shells to have some

³¹⁵ Barbara Bennett Manigault

³¹⁶ Barbara Bennett Manigault

something new to offer my clients.”³¹⁷ Cowrie shells were once used for trade in African countries. By using them, Manigault not only acknowledges her economic and cultural autonomy but also her ancestral connections. Although I purchased several sweetgrass products from her and recognized her ingenuity, I still hungered for more detail. What makes your sweetgrass products distinct from others? “I’ve been told that my baskets are quite unique because of the long pine needles that I place on my baskets. Some call them French knots, some call them love knots. My pine needles are very firm, so they have a distinct look.”³¹⁸ I saw this creativity extended throughout her living room as I looked at her numerous sweetgrass objects—lamps, earrings, necklaces, key rings, napkin rings, and many others.

Manigault identifies her lineage as the reason behind her artistry: “My mother and grandmother took the time to do the baskets. I take pride in knowing that my grandmother and mother taught me how to create these baskets and instilled this pride in me; they were and are able to see my work.”³¹⁹ Manigault recalled how gratified her grandmother was to witness the progression of her artwork: “Baby, we’ve done baskets, but we haven’t done anything like this.” Manigault was stirred by her grandmother’s remark because “she lived long enough to see me come full circle professionally.” She further spoke of memories of when she, her grandmother, and her mother sold their wares on Highway 17 in Mt. Pleasant, beginning when she was nine. Memories of her grandmother turned Manigault to the role of women in the Gullah culture: “Women are the backbone of the culture. In some of the homes, we remember the strong matriarchal figures that steered the families and held the

³¹⁷ Barbara Bennett Manigault

³¹⁸ Barbara Bennett Manigault

³¹⁹ Barbara Bennett Manigault

communities together, especially socially and politically.”³²⁰ She said to me, “Jennie, that’s why when I went into this room while I was at a garage sale and noticed my grandmother’s work—I could tell immediately it was her work because it had distinct features—I didn’t care how much it cost, I was going to purchase that basket because it belonged to my grandmother, and it meant that much to me. Now, I have two pieces of my grandmother’s work.”

Given her gift with sweetgrass basketry and other products, it is not surprising that Manigault is dedicated to land preservation and property retention: sweetgrass materials come from the land. In fact, Manigault is a staunch protector of the land that she inherited. She still owns land that has remained in her family for generations, and instead of selling the property to a stranger, she passed it down to her brother. In regard to properly caring for the earth, Manigault recounted her earliest experiences of visiting her grandfather’s farm: “Seeing things grow for the first time. I did not realize my grandfather was a farmer, seeing beets for the first time, people living off the land. I was quite amazed pulling beets from the ground for the first time when I was child. Farming was important because I remembered my grandfather planting peanuts, people working from the land, making things with their hands.”³²¹ Further demonstrating her humility, Manigault diverted from the importance of the sweetgrass artistry and land to the importance of other crafts in the Gullah culture, crafts made “with their hands”: “I love what contributions they have made, from the carvings to the iron works. I am happy that Mr. Simmons’s nephew is carrying on his

³²⁰ Barbara Bennett Manigault. See the chapter four on the York W. Bailey Museum referencing local leaders like Mary Smalls and the roles they played in sustaining their communities through community activism.

³²¹ Barbara Bennett Manigault

legacy and that people are able to know what national influence he had.”³²² While emphasizing the wholeness of the cultural arts, she began gathering more of the raw materials used in sweetgrass artistry from her living room floor, and I enjoyed the aroma of the sweetgrass, which prodded me to the next part of the conversation.

Since I never produced a sweetgrass product, I wanted to ask Manigault about the materials used in the process, knowing that all of them did not consist of sweetgrass. Growing up in the culture, I realized that creating any sweetgrass product was an intricate process, and the kinds of materials used depended on the artisan. Manigault pointed to each material as she named it: “The materials that I use are sweetgrass, bulrush, palm, long pine needles, and the spoon handle; of course, you got the spoon handle when you could keep up with the nail bone.”³²³ Manigault indicated that she still uses her nail bone on some occasions, and by noting this, she is referencing her cultural memory of hard work and steadfastness. Just as in many forms of art, when practices and techniques are passed down culturally, children learn not only the economic value of the product but also the spiritual and cultural importance of the craft. In fact, along with the professionalism she inherited, Manigault remarked about the significance of the transmission of oral histories during sweetgrass basket making.³²⁴

Manigault is also an advocate for the accurate perception of the sweetgrass culture; she wants people to see beyond the fibers and understand that each product is a work of art. As our interview progressed, this artist found satisfaction in

³²² Barbara Bennett Manigault. She is referencing famed blacksmith Philip Simmons. Also see the oral history on the family of Philip Simmons.

³²³ Barbara Bennett Manigault

³²⁴ Also, see Chaplin-Rouse’s oral history when she also references the richness of these traditional stories that are passed down during the weaving of the baskets and other sweetgrass products.

completing a clock frame made of sweetgrass. I noticed that it had those tightly woven knots that she had mentioned earlier in the interview and that the same knots were on the products that I purchased. While she was picking up other materials to start another project, I asked her to talk about some of the misperceptions of the culture. She sighed heavily and then said, “I wish people would look at us as people like them, [see] that we really have organs like they do and that we do belong in the same places where we travel.”³²⁵ Manigault was also clearly aware that people devalue the labor and the art of sweetgrass basketry. She discussed the devaluation of the art and the fact that many people have *tried* to exploit her, but she makes it very clear to them that they must “move on to the next aisle if they’re not willing to pay what the sweetgrass object is worth.... While I see myself as a businessperson, they don’t always see me as a businessperson.” Yet, she demands a fair price.

Manigault also finds that people do not understand the process involved in producing sweetgrass products and therefore do not understand its worth: “People insist on negotiating our prices; however, they don’t go into department stores and try to negotiate their prices. If they cannot afford the prices in the store, they walk away.” Furthermore, Manigault asserted that the price is not only about economics; her identity is linked to those sweetgrass products: “I just think about Africans from Sierre Leone—kidnapped.... It is a craft they passed to us.”³²⁶ However, racial and class-based prejudices are evident to Manigault when she works at some of her business booths. For instance, some tourists or consumers assume that Gullah women do not have an education; they will try to tell the artists the worth of their art and try

³²⁵ Barbara Bennett Manigault.

³²⁶ Barbara Bennett Manigault

to rob them of their negotiating power. Manigault's advice to her fellow artists is concise: "Don't undersell your craft. Respect your craft and yourself, or have the consumer move on."

When I asked her if she thought there any factors affecting the Gullah culture in a negative way, Manigault quickly replied, "Yes, I want this art to continue, and one way is for more of the younger generation to do it on a full- or part-time basis; instead, I see retirees are getting back into sweetgrass making as an extra income." Although some young people are doing the sweetgrass baskets, she wishes that even more of them would learn the craft. I also asked: "What would you like people outside the culture to know about us? She responded, "We are smart, unique folks who triumphed a lot throughout history and even today; we want the best for ourselves and our children." Manigault stressed that the Gullahs are wonderful people, people of resilience and pride.

To conclude our interview, I queried this seasoned artist about what she would like her legacy to be, and she related her desired legacy to the unwavering work ethic and the spiritual embodiment of the Gullah culture conveyed by a gospel hymn: "May the work I've done speak for me.' That's why I take my time to do my work; someone can walk into room and say that's a piece of Barbara Manigault's work."³²⁷ Manigault takes pride in the long hours and years of training that go into her work; this is the art her grandmother and mother passed down to her.

³²⁷ Barbara Bennett Manigault

“When that work goes out that shop, that’s you going out that shop.”
-Philip Simmons (1912-2009), cited by Lillian Simmons Gilliam

Descendants of Philip Simmons: Joseph “Ronnie” Pringle (cousin), Lillian Simmons Gilliam (daughter), and Carlton Simmons (nephew)

The last of the oral histories had finally come, and I could not be more excited to greet Mr. Joseph Pringle (who is known by and will be referred to in this interview by his *nickname*, “Ronnie”) and Mrs. Lillian Simmons Gilliam. When Mr. Pringle walked in the Philip Simmons House (now a Museum House where the interview took place), it was one of the most nervous moments of my life. I was gathering information about an icon in a community who contributed to the history and the same culture that educated me! I wanted to make my community very proud of me with the information that I was gathering to place in my book. What’s more, I was about to speak to one of the creators, preservers, and protectors of the culture—a master blacksmith in his own right who learned from one of the country’s greatest. Pringle was born in Charleston County and had practiced his artistry for over 40 years.

My nervousness got the best of me at the beginning of the interview because I did not know if my knowledge could measure up to Mr. Pringle’s cultural expertise and regal presence. However, he assuaged my nervousness with his gentle, assuring voice and embracing smile, and after our greetings, he asked me to proceed with my questions. Then my voice returned and the questions started flowing: How did you become interested in blacksmithing? Why is the Gullah culture important to you? Pringle responded immediately. “I like to make things with my hands,”³²⁸ he said. He then began to reflect on a childhood spent helping his cousin, nationally known

³²⁸ Joseph “Ronnie” Pringle, personal interview with author, July 1, 2015.

master blacksmith Philip Simmons, and on how his cousin's activities developed the creative interests of Pringle and the other boys. It was common for older relatives to make sure that children were not idle by discovering tasks for them to accomplish. "I remember the many days assisting my neighbors by pulling weeds and running errands as a child,"³²⁹ I exchanged to Mr. Pringle. Such acts aided community cohesion, cultural preservation, and family involvement. Pringle reminisced about him and his younger relatives learning the blacksmithing art from his cousin.³³⁰ When some children watched television on Saturdays or basked in the thought of a leisurely weekend, Pringle and his other male relatives were in an apprenticeship: "I started learning blacksmithing by cleaning the scrolls, sanding the scrolls, paint[ing] them."³³¹ According to Pringle, he thought of it as something to do as a child to occupy himself and to provide assistance to his uncle, as well as keeping his mind and his time occupied.

As he recollected, Pringle's cousin, Lillian Simmons Gilliam, was sitting next to him. Also a protector of the culture, she was wearing a necklace and earrings that were miniature replicas of her father's designs. When Pringle spoke of his early encounters with Simmons's artwork, Mrs. Gilliam chimed in, noting that after her father "made the designs, they [the boys] would sand them and clean them. It was something to show the boys something to do."³³² Both Pringle and Gilliam piqued my interest. I wanted to know more about Pringle's personal connection to

³²⁹ Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle.

³³⁰ See chapter four of "Welcum, Oona" on the historical cultural significance of these blacksmithing objects. The photograph and the artifacts housed in the York W. Bailey Museum also suggest the cultural continuity that Pringle elucidates.

³³¹ Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle

³³² Lillian Simmons Gilliam and Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle, personal interview with author, July 1, 2015.

blacksmithing. As someone who was not really skilled with tools or with my hands, I became more and more intellectually and culturally curious. Although this was part of the culture in which I had been reared, I found myself being educated and re-educated about this evolving component of the American cultural fabric. Now, my nervousness left; I was at home.

I asked Gilliam and Pringle how blacksmithing related to one's cultural and personal identity. I was curious about why many people (especially Charlestonians) immediately associate blacksmithing with the Simmons family. Pringle and Gilliam explained, calmly and kindly noting that "he [Philip Simmons] had his particular way of making the blacksmithing objects."³³³ Mr. Simmons did, indeed, have "his particular way" of doing things because his signature designs can be identified by a certain way the scroll is enclosed. Gilliam agreed about how distinct her father's pieces are: "Dad would say that each piece is different, and they look similar but they are not."³³⁴ Philip Simmons passed this sense of distinction on to his relatives. I then asked Pringle what he found remarkable about the Gullah culture, and he indicated that "[t]he Gullah culture has come a long way.... We took something out of a little and made a lot."³³⁵ Here, Pringle referenced the humble beginnings of his culture, making me think of the pooling of resources in the community, the cultural survival of intergenerational changes, and the years of resistance by Gullah people. Pringle further asserted: "If you take something, you can make a success out of it."³³⁶

³³³ Lillian Simmons Gilliam and Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle, personal interview with author, July 1, 2015.

³³⁴ Lillian Simmons Gilliam.

³³⁵ Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle

³³⁶ Joseph "Ronnie" Pringle

When asked to talk about intergenerational changes in the culture, Mrs. Gilliam spoke of how she wished that the newer generation would pick up the blacksmithing craft. “To me,” she said, “they don’t have the passion for the kind of work that Ronnie [Joseph] and Dad did.”³³⁷ She and Pringle remarked on the significance of making blacksmithing objects and of learning the creative process, and Pringle commented that his cousin’s energy was passed down to him and that he has taken the same pride in his profession that his cousin had. I asked Pringle how he would advise the younger generation to do blacksmithing or any other craft, and he replied, “You must develop the occupation yourself.”³³⁸ Pringle’s statement attests to both cultural autonomy and cultural cohesion within the Gullah community.

The conversation then returned to the art and process of blacksmithing, and Gilliam discussed the ingenuity and the many phases involved in designing objects: “When they start out, they don’t know the end. They can start out one way, but it can go another way. They start out sketching one thing, but when they finish it, it would have changed four or five times. While they are sketching, the brains are going. He’s thinking that he needs to go back and change something.”³³⁹ In describing this process, Gilliam indicated the collaborative effort involved in the craft, and she implied the patience and persistence that it took Pringle (and others) to master his craft. In my naïveté, I asked if one piece can take one day to construct. Pringle laughed and suggested that he wished one piece would take only one day to create: “One piece can take up to 2-3 weeks.” Gilliam added, “Some of the blacksmiths use machine, whereas Daddy and Ronnie [Joseph] never used machines. Everything is

³³⁷ Lillian Simmons Gilliam

³³⁸ Joseph “Ronnie” Pringle

³³⁹ Lillian Simmons Gilliam

done by hand. Ronnie and Carlton use their hands. This was done using six main tools.”³⁴⁰

Gilliam continued, comparing a machine-made object to a handmade blacksmithing object, such as an ironwork object in her father’s home, and asserting that one can see the difference in the artistry. The difference in the process is also evident: “Ronnie and Carlton have to sketch when they create their work. We had a time with that pineapple, remember?” Gilliam said and looked over at Pringle. “They kept changing the work up until the time that pineapple was finally made.... When they make something, it is a part of them....”³⁴¹ In the vein of the Gullah culture, we shifted to speaking about another subject matter, such as the detailing of the sweetgrass products. Gilliam remarked on the spoon handle that is used in the process: “Even the needle is handmade,” she pointed out. Then, we started back to our conversation about blacksmithing. “They think and sketch.” According to Gilliam, the design of the pineapple kept changing until the end, until they needed the pineapple. “When they take their time,” Gilliam added, “you can see the time.” Gilliam went on to reference the intricate details in the handmade pieces: “The details will be different.... It is personal. The attention is personal when it is handmade.” She also discussed the process, which she had learned from watching her dad through the many years.

According to her cousin, Pringle, Gilliam has developed an eye for when something does not look good. “She can tell Carlton [her cousin],” Pringle said, “when a blacksmithing object needs to be smoothed out some more.... It’s gotta be

³⁴⁰ Lillian Simmons Gilliam

³⁴¹ Lillian Simmons Gilliam

neat.... You have to take the time.”³⁴² I told Mrs. Gilliam about the sketch pad I saw in Carlton Simmons’s [her cousin] blacksmithing production space. She commented: “Dad’s later work was with the three of them; they were apprentices for several years before doing it by themselves. Everything you have, you put into that shop.”³⁴³ She noted the significance of handmade blacksmithing objects: “Some people would come and would not want machine-made items, they would want Carlton to make them.” Pringle spoke of how the following: “If a gate or anything was not right, he [Mr. Simmons] would make me tear it down and start all over again.” He is speaking to the difference in the generational shifts and how the younger generation should take more time with their crafts, and he stated: “They don’t have the patience.” As I ended the interview, I asked Joseph Pringle what he would like his legacy to be as a master blacksmith? He said with such confidence and calm: “I want to be remembered as a hard worker, despite a heavy workload.”³⁴⁴ I asked him if he had any advice for me as I continued my journey in my studies, and he told me to keep on doing what I am doing. He encouraged the younger generation to take their time to do their work.

I was also elated to speak with the other preserver and protector of the culture, Carlton Simmons, who has been an artisan for about 40 years. I could tell that he was immersed in his work, so the portion of the interview would not be protracted. However, when I told him that my dissertation involved the preservation of the Gullah culture, the conversation continued longer than I expected. I also asked him

³⁴² Lillian Simmons Gilliam

³⁴³ Lillian Simmons Gilliam

³⁴⁴ Joseph “Ronnie” Pringle

why was it important to continue blacksmithing? He stated: “It is a necessity.”³⁴⁵ While Simmons notes of this need and desire of employment, he also speaks to the cultural autonomy that blacksmithing has provided for him and his family members. Simmons also spoke to some of the generational concerns of continuing this component of the culture, as well, when I inquired what do you think about the younger generation picking up the art? He responded: “They can do pretty good, but they’re school tough. They wanna pick up a machine.”³⁴⁶ He does not believe in using a machine to produce these objects because the use of his hands yields authenticity. Confidently, he stated: “I can do it just as good by hands as they do it by the machine.”³⁴⁷ You can see the dents and the hammering when you do it by hand.” You can see every mark by the hammer.”³⁴⁸ Carlton Simmons explains his level of professional integrity when completing the orders he receives: “I am not going to rush so that I could be paid by Friday. I gotta be able to explain to them [my customers] that I took my time to do it.”³⁴⁹ Again, I sought the sage advice of the elders on what I should do with my own work: He chided: “Make sure you talk to the right people because everyone who says he is a blacksmith is not a blacksmith. Make sure when you do a job, do the best you can.”³⁵⁰ When I asked him if he had any additional comments about the Gullah culture, he replied: “you have a lot of people jumping on the Gullah culture now. One time, the Gullah culture was a joke. Now people see how the people take their time to weave the baskets and make the iron

³⁴⁵ Carlton Simmons, personal interview with author, July 1, 2015.

³⁴⁶ Carlton Simmons

³⁴⁷ Carlton Simmons

³⁴⁸ Carlton Simmons

³⁴⁹ Carlton Simmons

³⁵⁰ Carlton Simmons

works. What you do in the Gullah culture is time consuming. Anything done by the real Gullah culture takes time and uses their hands.”³⁵¹ Simmons asserts to the devaluation that the culture has received over the years. Additionally, as Simmons notes, some are not aware of the historical and cultural significance that exist. Through his lens of about forty years, he has seen the rapid intergenerational changes and the adaptability of the Gullah communities. The words that echo from Simmons interview also resound from these final keystrokes: “Be proud of your heritage and anything done by the real Gullah culture takes time.”³⁵² My, this labor of love, called the dissertation, has taken time. And so, I smile.

These narratives have examined how various people in the communities preserve the culture through their interpretive lens. Importantly, they passed on charges for future generations to continue these precious gems, while also lending some historical accounts on how and why the food, blacksmithing, language, and fiber artistry continue to “weigh” in on the conversational components of our lives.

³⁵¹ Carlton Simmons

³⁵² Carlton Simmons

Epilogue: Continuing the Tradition, the Research, and the Conversation

I have attempted to reframe Gullah history and culture, to reevaluate the Penn Center, to reread Gullah material objects, and to record Gullah voices. I have done so to show the manner in which Gullah history, culture, institutions, objects, and people disrupt mainstream narratives and convey notions of Gullah cultural identity. Here, I seek to assess the success of this work by discussing its contributions and its limitations, and I round out my narrative with treatment of the importance of preserving Gullah culture and with areas of future research.

Contributions of the Study

This project not only has drawn from but also has furthered discourses and theories in various fields of study. This dissertation has contributed to the fields of Gullah Studies and African American Studies by revealing critical ways to interpret Gullah history and culture while also instigating increased awareness of and appreciation for this culture. It has the potential to enhance awareness both in the broader national arena and even among the younger generation within the Gullah community. It was my goal—through analysis of a museum installation and its concomitant material artifacts—to add additional insight into the diverse “voices” within the Gullah e community and the various ways such voices “speak”—whether through objects or into a tape recorders.

This dissertation has advanced Gullah Studies by filling a gap in extant scholarship and contributed to Gullah Studies through original archival research. At the same time, this dissertation has contributed to the field of American Studies through its focus on the areas of museum studies, material culture, and historic

preservation, specifically by demonstrating how these areas in the field can be used to uncover the competing voices that are reflected within cultural objects, museum spaces, and landscapes. Likewise, this dissertation uncovered some Africanisms some of the within the Gullah culture—particularly as these are seen in museums and objects. By applying African diasporic discourses on cultural identity and double consciousness to objects and spaces, this study has expanded application of discourses within the fields of African American and Cultural Studies.

Limitations of the Study

I wish to focus on more subtle limitations of this study, one's involving self-ethnography and the politics involved in representing a people. One of the limitations or “danger[s]” of [conveying] “a single story,”³⁵³ as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains, is that it is possible for that one story to become definitive.³⁵⁴ This is one of the concerns also with using self-ethnography—the politics of representation. This portrait suggests both one of the strengths and one of the vulnerabilities of this study—my position and perspective as an insider within the culture. As the adage goes, one reader will get “a story, not *the story*.” This adage suggests that each reader brings his or her own perspective to the action of interpretation, creating a prejudicial view of a text rather than a fully objective vision of the piece. But is there such a thing as a fully objective vision? Does “*the story*” exist? I would suggest that there is no unbiased perspective and would add that people can ever receive the full picture of any culture, incident, or text.

³⁵³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.” October 2009. Accessed, August 23, 2016.

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story_transcript?language=

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

I love the Gullah culture and think it should be preserved because its people possess intelligence, determination, resilience, and wisdom. This is “a story” of the Gullah people. However, there other poignant stories of the Gullahs, and these are found in other scholarly works that narrate this crucial part of American history and culture, doing so through various lenses. Although the Gullah culture was present in my life before language—creating for me a spiritual and sacred element of the present study that manifests in my need to honor the ancestors—my initial experience of the Gullah culture would also later become enmeshed in the perspective of the broader culture, creating the double consciousness of which DuBois speaks.³⁵⁵ I have been committed, both as a Gullah and as a scholar, to convey the information presented in this study through my own interpretive lens, creating “a story, not *the story*.”

In fact, I hope I have not conveyed that “*the story*” even exists—neither by suggesting that my perspective represents that all Gullahs nor by suggesting that all Gullahs are one monolith. This dissertation has not sought to write *for* the Gullahs (there is no need for me to write on behalf of all Gullahs) but has sought, rather, to explore and celebrate the dynamism of the Gullah people and the variety within and across Gullah communities. As the oral history above indicates, Gullahs are certainly capable of speaking for themselves, and as the larger dissertation indicates, Gullahs do just this very thing through their own speech, through the production of material culture, through scholarly works, through documents such as the Management Plan

³⁵⁵ This application of W.E.B DuBois’s “double consciousness” references a “twoness,” always seeing one’s self through the lens of the dominant culture, while still being American. W.E.B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 5. First published 1903 by A.C. McClurg and Company.

for the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, and through everyday cultural practices.

While I have been forthcoming about my personal, cultural experiences in this discussion, some academics have undertaken similar positions in their scholarship. For instance, Psyche Williams-Forson³⁵⁶ examines her experiences through the importance of “[f]ood, gender, and identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household.”³⁵⁷ Food culture, envelopes bountiful dialogue, both academically and personally. Those personal experiences should drive us to write more compelling stories about our communities and our society. At the same time, however, this method enables the writer to be self-reflexive, while exploring other cultural differences.

Reasons to Preserve the Gullah Culture

The underlying premise of this dissertation—the unspoken reason for its import—is that the Gullah culture is valuable and should be preserved. Before concluding this study, then, it is relevant to examine this premise and make the reasons for it explicit. Cultural critic Ben Highmore illuminates some reasons why we study the everyday, and among these reasons he notes that “[if] cultural differences, such as gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and so on, are going to be useful for the understanding of everyday life (and I assume that they would be) then their usefulness cannot be just presumed or taken for granted.”³⁵⁸ Given the

³⁵⁶ Psyche Williams-Forson. “Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household.” In *Taking Food Public: Redefining Foodways in a Changing World*, eds Psyche Williams-Forson and Carole Counihan. New York: Routledge, 2012, 138-154.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ben Highmore, ed. *The Everyday Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002)

importance of everyday life and the study of it, it follows that the people who live and experience the everyday are also important and that their lives should also be illuminated. Therefore, no individuals should question their sense of belonging in their place or in the geographic regions where they have established roots. The rich and unique everyday cultural practices of the Gullah people are one reason that the culture should be preserved. They also suggest that Gullah people should never be made to feel alienated in or disenfranchised within the American socio-cultural fabric.

Another reason to preserve the Gullah culture is gleaned through an analogy between this culture and that of New Orleans and through comparison between the displacement of Gullahs due to economic development and the displacement that took place after Hurricane Katrina. In his eloquently written “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues,” Clyde Woods³⁵⁹ offers an examination of people being culturally, economically, and emotionally displaced from New Orleans after establishing roots in the city, cultivating the city, and becoming historically and culturally connected to the city through the food, land, and music. Now, because of gentrification, people are displaced from their original homes in the 9th Ward or displaced from New Orleans forever. For all of the reasons indicated by Woods, this sequence of events is tragic, particularly in its undercutting of the culture of New Orleans and in its undervaluing of the people who live that culture.

³⁵⁹ See Clyde Woods’s “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues.” *American Quarterly*, 57.4 (2005): 1005-1015. In this essay, he calls the tragic events surrounding Hurricane Katrina “blues” moment. The title is taken from a song; also, Woods is elucidating the importance of space, place, and geography and the impact on the American cultural landscape.

A similar process is happening to the people of the Gullah community and their culture, and it is tragic for the same reasons. Also members of a hybrid culture, the Gullahs have cultivated their land, mores, livelihoods, traditions, and other cultural practices for centuries. Unlike the great migration that happened during the 1930s and 1940s, when Gullah communities nevertheless remained on or returned to the geographic locations on which they were established, recent economic development has been wiping out entire communities like a hurricane-born flood. The Gullahs face the challenge to sustain their land ownership, which is the root of their foodways, language, and material culture. This culture should be preserved for same reasons that the culture of New Orleans should be preserved.

Other reasons the Gullah culture should be preserved—among these, its uniqueness and its importance—are gleaned in a review of the establishment of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Concerned about the possibility of the extinction of the Gullah Geechee culture because of coastal development, legislators (among others) sought a solution that would allow the preservation and continuation of this culture. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor was designated by an act of Congress in 2006 that recognized the importance of the culture and of protecting this unique heritage. According to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act, the purpose of the Corridor is to

recognize the important contributions made to American culture and history by African Americans known as the Gullah/Geechee³⁶⁰ ... [and] to interpret the story of the Gullah/Geechee and preserve Gullah/Geechee folklore, arts, crafts, and music, assist in identifying

³⁶⁰ See chapter one of the study for my explanation on why I used Gullah instead of Gullah Geechee. The Gullah Geechee culture demonstrates diversity and complexity. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of the research to study the various components within the Corridor. Hence, the dissertation is limited to particular region (s) in South Carolina, where the term is used.

and preserving sites, historical data, artifacts, and objects associated with the Gullah/Geechee for the benefit and education of the public.³⁶¹

Here, “the important contributions made to American culture and history” by the Gullahs are being recognized by a national governing body.

The Corridor—managed by a 15-member Federal Commission that works in conjunction with the National Park Service and state historic preservation offices of Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina—is comprised of over 1,000 sites and garnered financial and technical assistance from the United States Department of the Interior for the development of its Management Plan, which outlines implementation of projects and programs. The significance of this Corridor stems from the fact it is one of 49 National Heritage Areas that supports the *living* culture of African Americans. Reasons to preserve the culture, then, have already been recognized on the national level. In fact, acknowledging the need to preserve this culture, Congressman James E. Clyburn, sponsor of the Corridor Act, stated the following in a speech to the South Carolina Black Legislative Caucus: “The Gullah/Geechee culture is the last vestige of fusion of African and European languages and traditions brought to these coastal areas. I cannot sit idly by and watch an entire culture disappear that represents my heritage and the heritage of those who look like me.”³⁶²

Finally, one additional reason to preserve the culture must be noted. Preservation of the Gullah culture also speaks to the contemporary national push for multiculturalism. In the American Studies field and in everyday life, we speak about

³⁶¹ *Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Management Plan*. Published 2012. Prepared and Published by the National Park Service.

³⁶² Congressman James E. Clyburn’s (SC-06) Press Release, 2005

multiculturalism or about the significance of securing various identities in our American society and securing them as equally valid. The Gullah culture is part of this multiculturalism and includes many voices that have gone unheard in mainstream society. For this and the other reasons noted above, preserving the Gullah is of the utmost importance.

Areas for Future Research

Despite its importance, the Gullah culture has gone largely understudied, leaving a great deal of room for additional research. As it relates to the contours of my dissertation project, it is relevant to note that my research focused solely on the Penn Center, which is but one of many sites along the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. Comparative analysis of other sites along the Corridor—particularly sites from the various states included in the Corridor—could better excavate differences and nuances within the Gullah Geechee culture—differences related to foodways, language, spiritual beliefs, and so on.

In addition, other theoretical frameworks can be applied in future research to further map the complexities of Gullah culture and cultural identity, these ranging from the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to Henry Louis Gates Jr. Moreover, additional archival work remains to be done at the Penn Center's papers located at the University of North Carolina as well as in other collections. Indeed, there remains a need to further uncover a wide range of aspects of the Gullah culture—for example, the role of the oral tradition in identity formation, the unsettling of gender binaries by traditional roles played by women within the Gullah culture, and the impact of spiritual beliefs and medicinal practices on Gullah resistance. Such directions for

future scholarship are all potentially fruitful but indicate only a few of the avenues for further research.

The Future of the Gullah Culture

The younger generations within the Gullah community are growing up, and the older people are retiring or transitioning, so it is crucial for the younger generations to be well-versed in this constantly changing and adaptive culture. While recently presenting a conference paper on the Penn Center's role in the Gullah culture, I was asked by a young woman of Gullah descent what role she could play in preserving the culture. This query not only informed me of the next generation's zeal to continue this endangered component of the American cultural fabric, but it also conveyed to me their zeal to watch it thrive.

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