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Islands of Memory: The Sea Islands, Black Women Artists, and the Promise of Home

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Islands of Memory: The Sea Islands, Black Women Artists, and the Promise of Home

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M.A., Emory University, 2005

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An Abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
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Abstract

Islands of Memory: The Sea Islands, Black Women Artists, and the Promise of Home

By Folashadé Alao

This study examines the development and construction of the Sea Islands as a significant cultural landscape in the black imagination and historicizes the processes informing the Sea Islands' contemporary emergence as a site of memory. The coalescence of cultural and academic interests, the publication of new research materials on the Sea Islands, and the discovery and republication of old works, such as *Drums and Shadows*, during the 1970's enabled the Sea Islands to emerge in the national black imagination in new ways that black visual artists and writers would illuminate. The movement of Gullah culture into the mainstream and the elevation of the Sea Islands as a site of memory were aided particularly by literary, dramatic, musical, and visual arts and the sustained interests and creative expressions of different groups of artists.

This study focuses on the particular visualizations of the Sea Islands in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and novel *Daughters of the Dust* (1997). Specifically, I underscore the sources they draw upon to construct their visions; the voices, images, and histories they challenge; the functions they hope such a vision will hold for their readers; and their works' place within the Sea Islands Cultural Renaissance which surrounds their publication. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's works capture and respond to a transforming relationship between African Americans and their African ancestry as well as to the southern landscape, both of which resulted from the social and political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and a shift in black migratory patterns in the 1970s. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's works also reflect a renewed critical study of African American origins and genealogy, and the increasing concerns surrounding the transformations of black urban and rural life. The Sea Islands, in these works, emerge as a site of intersections, continuity, and reconnections with southern homeplaces, distant African memories, submerged oral histories, and neglected cultural traditions.

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Introduction

In the opening of her essay "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," anthropologist Paulla Ebron proclaims, "FOR THE PAST 25 YEARS the Sea Islands, off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, have become a significant site of meaning in African American cultural history."[1] Contextualizing the particular use or appearance of the Sea Islands in African American cultural production, Ebron names Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1989) and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) as artists and works that "make the Sea Islands a powerful site of 'remembered' African American community."[2] Arguing that "certain historically distinctive features" have "set the stage for contemporary imaginings," her essay situates the Sea Islands within ongoing African American cultural projects seeking to unearth "collective memory" in order to "move and mobilize the black community by portraying cultural marginalization based on gender and regional difference as powerful tools of healing and unification."[3] In this dissertation, I am not only interested in what Ebron identifies as the Sea Islands' function in cultural projects, but also in naming the social, political and artistic movements which give rise to certain cultural or memory projects. Speaking to recent artistic visualizations of the Sea Islands, Tracy Snipes contends that

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[1] Paulla Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," American Anthropologist 100.1 (1998): 94.
[2] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94.
[3] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94.

the "Sea Islands along with their people and customs, provide creative inspiration for widely acclaimed performance art which share a common theme—coming full circle or back home."[4] Beyond examining the historical, social, and intellectual phenomena which inform a "Gullah Renaissance," [5] in this project I am also concerned with providing a sense of how artists, such as Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash, individually and collectively call upon the Sea Islands as a signifier or signified landscape.[6]

Using novels, films, photography, interviews, articles, and essays, this project seeks to contribute to the growing critical analysis on black women artists' creative contributions to the Gullah Renaissance, or the cultural, academic, and artistic works which have brought increasing awareness, pride, and study of the Sea Islands in the last twenty years. In this study, I perform close readings of literature, film, and photography to provide a context for and analysis of the reappearing appearance of the Sea Islands in contemporary African American cultural production and illuminate points of comparison and sites of departure between works. This study engages folklore and anthropology, literary criticism, history, and film studies in an examination of the construction, representation, and elaboration of the Sea Islands, its people and culture in contemporary African American cultural production, particularly its designation as a critical and unique site of memory.

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[4] T. Snipe, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," The African Presence in Black America (2004) 276.

[5] Marking the significance of the last twenty years, Tracy Snipe identifies it as a Gullah Renaissance. Snipe, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," 276.

[6] While Snipes argues that the genesis of a Gullah Cultural Renaissance can not be traced to one source, she attributes several factors to its development and continued interest including links between programming and institutions, continued scholarly research, and community outreach programs. T. Snipe, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," The African Presence in Black America (Africa World Press, 2006) 276.

While Black women writers and artists, such as Naylor and Dash, who Ebron names, have drawn upon the Sea Islands to construct or reconstruct memory and history, others, such as Carrie Mae Weems, Jeanne Ashe,[7] and Paule Marshall, who are not named by Ebron, have also drawn upon the Sea Islands as a site and source of "African American cultural memories" and a location for the recollection of "community histories and myths."[8]

Although literary scholars have examined the appearances of the Sea Islands in individual works or compared two works to one another, few have examined these works as a group emerging out of a specific historical and cultural context.[9] Whereas literary criticism has failed to engage the location in extensive study, the overwhelming research on the Sea Islands which has emerged out of history, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics has overlooked the importance of artistic visualizations of the Sea Islands in favor of more conventional definitions of folkloric materials. This study seeks to bring an interdisciplinary study to the works of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash. Through a close examination, I illuminate how Marshall, Naylor, and Dash turn our attention to the specific locality of the Sea Islands as a renewed site for remaking a national black

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[7] Jean Moutoussamy Ashe's photographic collection on Daufuskie Island in the 1970's predates the visual images of Weems and Dash. Through her imagery, she situates the Gullah people on Daufuskie Island as a unique group of black Americans with a rich African derived culture. While engaging the discourses of timelessness and cultural continuity, her accompanying narrative text also draws readers' attention to change on the island. See her work J. Moutoussamy-Ashe, Daufuskie Island (University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

[8] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94.

[9] Lene Brøndum's article "The Persistence of Tradition" is the first article to my knowledge that examines the emergence of the Sea Islands as a trope in African American women's literature. In *Worrying the Line,* Cheryl Wall, like Brøndum, asserts that the history and legend of the South, particularly the history of the Sea Islands as represented in the novel *Mama Day*, operate as "alternatives to the dominant stories of segregation" (176). Lene Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," Black Imagination and the Middle Passage, ed. Maria Diedrich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Cheryl A. Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

identity and uncovering a collective past.[10] They invoke the region in their works to establish continuity and connection with Africa, illuminate rural and communal memories, and construct new meanings of community.[11]

Moreover, during the period of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's artistic production, numerous other materials emerged documenting Sea Islands culture for youth and adult audience appeared. In the last twenty five years, the Sea Islands has been the source or subject of not only novels and narrative films, such as *Daughters of the Dust*, but also numerous documentaries, children's books and television programs, such as Nickelodeon's popular *Gullah Gullah Island* series.[12] Like *Daughters of the Dust*, *Gullah Gullah Island* provided a national platform for the exploration and representation of Sea Islands culture. Although directed towards a different audience, the children's literature and television programming about the Sea Islands engages themes of return, disassociation with cultural heritage, cultural loss amongst a younger generation, and the importance of cultural preservation and pride, echoing the literature for adults. Along with children's literature and programming, various cultural institutions, such as the Penn

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[10] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94. Along with photographic and visual images, textual references to a Sea Island heritage through myth, folklore, or folk beliefs and practices can be found in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Toni Cade Bambara *Salt Eaters*.

[11] The themes that emerge in black women's literature coincide with the three themes that cultural scholar Richard Long explains have been used to frame the study of the Sea Islands. Elaborating on the three frames, Long asserts, " The first, a diasporic frame, takes into account the Gullah and the plantation societies of the Caribbean; the second, a national frame, considers the Gullah in relation to wider plantation society in the United States; a third frame is the consideration of the Gullah as an autonomous group." National Park Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement (Atlanta, GA: NPS Southeast Regional Office, 2005), 101.

[12] Not only did the *Gullah Gullah Island* series introduce children to Gullah culture, numerous other children's books were also produced during this time. Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, Been in the Storm So Long a Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales, and Children's Games from Johns Island, South Carolina, Rounder Records, Washington, D.C., 1990, Gary G. Moss, Gullah Tales, Direct Cinema, Los Angeles, Calif., 1987, Muriel Miller Branch, The Water Brought Us: The Story of the Gullah-Speaking People (New York: Cobblehill Books/Dutton, 1995), Brenda Seabrooke, The Bridges of Summer (New York: Cobblehill Books, 1992).

Center on St. Helena Island in South Carolina, host annual festivals for children and adults. The Penn Center festivals part celebration, part commemoration, and a bit of home-coming offer audiences a glimpse into Sea Islands culture and history, while advocating and informing them of contemporary realities.

Exposure to Sea Islands culture has also emerged through the publication of cookbooks, numerous festivals, like the Penn Center's Heritage Days, as well as paintings and photographic collections.[13] In 1994, Low Country artists such as Arianne King comer, Dianne Dunham, Valton Murray, James Obganna Phelps, Joseph Pinckney, Brenda Singleton, and Luther E. Vann, who explore and capture "Gullah and Afrocentric motifs," were showcased at the Penn Center Pre-Heritage Days held at the Performing Arts Center of University of South Carolina Beaufort.[14]

These multiple sources have introduced new and broader audiences to a "Sea Islands heritage," that is both factual, imagined, and, in some cases, a composite version of historical and "mythic memory."[15] The movement of Gullah into the mainstream aided by literary, dramatic, musical, and visual arts is important in not only providing a greater appreciation and understanding of the Sea Islands culture, but also aids preservation efforts by "insuring that some traditions do not fade from memory, but remain vibrant."[16] These works have also been intimately linked to discourses of cultural preservation, which have emanated out of the Sea Islands by residents and scholars.[17]

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[13] For documentaries on the Sea Islands produced in the last twenty five years, refer to Topeke's *The Language We Cry in*. Alvaro Toepke, Angel Serrano and California Newsreel (Firm), The Language You Cry In, 1 videocassette (53 min.), California Newsreel, San Francisco, CA, 1999.. including

[14] Snipe, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," 280.

[15] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 154.

[16] Snipe, "An African Cultural Renaissance on the Sea Islands," 285.

[17] While cultural preservation emerges as an important concern, Wendy Walters challenges the use of this language to describe culture and cultural products. She suggests that folklorists and linguistics have tended

The importance and emergence of the Sea Islands as a significant and central cultural region within the American South and Black American culture and cultural production in the last twenty five years represents an important and needed area of critical study. While Ebron's observations help to mark the Sea Islands emergence as a site of memory, they fall short in fully unpacking the social and political climate that makes this landscape both viable and compelling for artists and audiences.[18] By contemplating the emergence of the Sea Islands as a composite landscape[19] for revisiting black American history and charting new pathways in Black Atlantic cultural history and memory, we may gain a richer understanding not only of the texts, which feature the Sea Islands and Sea Islands heritage, but also their role in helping to map and remap the space or geography of the Sea Islands from earlier articulators and encode it with meaning for specific audiences.[20] One should see that their mapping of the Sea Islands as a site of memory and history is in conversation with the works of earlier black writers and each

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to view the Sea Islands within a "typically Western linear time framework," which presented Africanisms as "threatened, disappearing, due to the inexorable forces. Highlighting the discourses of "cultural disappearance" which have surrounded the Sea Islands, Walters argues that the use of words such as "break, lost and decline, to describe these culture patterns" serves to further and sustain "a harmful historical fallacy." She presents a view of black culture which emphasizes "process" and not "product." Wendy

[18] Pierre Nora notes that sites of memory emerge as a response to modern individuals' desire to confront "uprootedness and drift" in the absence of 'overarching narrative.' Nora argues sites of memory or *lieux de mémoire* operate "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists." Geneviève and Robert O'Meally Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 7.

[19] My use of the term composite landscape draws upon Lene Brøndum's term "composite history," which she uses to describe black women's evocation of a Sea Island heritage in their works. She proclaims that a composite history is a "nonchronological representation of history in which historical 'facts' are selected for representation according to whether they effectively reveal something about the 'essence' of a culture or a historical period, rather than according to 'objective,' historical demands for chronological accuracy." Composite landscape speaks to the erasure of the geographical particularities and individual histories of actual Sea Islands for the purpose of focusing instead on their collective significance as a geographical and cultural landscape. Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 155.

[20] One might argue that this contributes to what has been deemed the popularity of the Sea Islands as a site of "cultural tourism." P. A. Ebron, "Tourists as Pilgrims: Commercial Fashioning of Transatlantic Politics," American Ethnologist 26.4 (1999).

other, as well as a body of works about the Sea Islands that have emerged in anthropology, sociology, and linguistics over a century. Taking into account the ways in which these disciplines have "studied" Sea Island culture, the writers and artists that this dissertation analyzes take on issues of power, authority, insider and outsider status, and the politics of space or making spaces.

Furthermore, while the Sea Islands have often been invoked in describing a national black culture and more recently for making more concrete connections between the United States and other parts of the African Diaspora, I contend that Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's invocation of it during the 1970's-1990's works in the national black imagination in a new and different way because of the moment in which it is invoked.[21] I believe that this type of critical work will help to locate the Sea Islands not only as a site of memory among many, but elevate it to a central site of memory holding the same cultural and aesthetic value in the black imagination as destinations such as Harlem, Africa, and the American South.[22] Moreover, the ability for the Sea Islands to emerge as a "cultural bridge" to Africa, the Caribbean and the American South uniquely positions it within the multiple sites of memory African Americans have laid claim.[23]

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[21] Richard Long underscores the function of the Sea Islands as a representation or signifier of a larger black American culture. Long explains that "the broader African American culture is frequently characterized or represented by evidence from Gullah culture" and "[g]eneralizations about African American folklore and folk life sometimes repose primarily on Gullah evidence." Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 103.

[22] For more information on sites of memory in the black imagination see Melvin Dixon's "The Black Writer's Use of Memory." Challenging what he perceives as Nora's representation of "history as static and memory as dynamic," Dixon argues that "the presence in our culture of significant lieux de mémoire establishes the value of cultural memory and the very kind of history or historiography that is not dependant on written analysis or criticism, but rather achieves an alternate record of critical discussion through the exercise of memory." Melvin Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," History and Memory in African American Culture, ed. Genevieve and Robert O' Meally Fabre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[23] While Brøndum identifies the important link of the Sea Islands to the Caribbean and Africa, she is not alone in this observation. Melvin Dixon's discussion of black writer's use of sites of memory is helpful for contextualizing how the Sea Islands emerge as a space of memory. Identifying sites of memory in the black

Given this possibility, I find it important to revisit the question that prompted my discussion of sites of memory and the Sea Islands as a way of segueing to this broader discussion. Why in "the past 25 years" does the Sea Islands emerge as "significant site of meaning in African American cultural history" and cultural production?[24] Furthermore, why are black women artists, such as Marshall, Naylor, Dash, and Weems, drawn to this landscape? It is this question that this dissertation seeks to answer, while also describing the unique and individual ways in which artists inscribe and map the landscape of the Sea Islands for their readers.

Situating the Sea Islands within the historical and contemporary debates around African American history and culture to which artists like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes gave voice to in the 1930's, scholars question the motivations which compel black women writers and artists to turn to the rural South for "regeneration and hope," while also pondering "ways these fictions are both engaging and limited in their scope"?[25] This dissertation contemplates the very questions that Ebron puzzles over at the end of her essay: Why are black women cultural producers drawn not only to the rural

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imagination, such as the South as well as Harlem and Africa, Melvin Dixon argues that these "spaces" have been engaged by African American writers to "evoke a sense of place" and also "enlarge the frame of cultural reference for the depiction of black experiences." Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 20.

[24] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94.

[25] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 102. Ebron is not alone in challenging the representations or what has been deemed the turn to the South in contemporary African American literature. Hazel Carby in "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," analyzes Zora Neale Hurston's representation of the "folk" as urban and rural during a moment of demographic shifts in the black population. She also contemplates and critiques the "contemporary cultural process of inclusion of Hurston in the academy (29)." Carby argues that embrace of Hurston and her vision of "southerness" and "the folk" at "a moment of intense urban crisis and conflict is perhaps a sign of that displacement" (41). Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," History and Memory in African American Culture, ed. Genevieve and Robert O' Meally Fabre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Also see Madhu Dubey, Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). While I can appreciate the argument being made, I believe the critique of the imagery of the South in black literature often times fails to consider the significance of this reclamation as a social and political act.

south, but to the site of the Sea Islands? What does it offer them and their readers and why is it invoked at this moment?

While this dissertation examines elements of how and why the Sea Islands emerges and is evoked as a site of memory and history, I do not engage all the of the recent works which have contributed to the contemporary visualizations of the Sea Islands in the African American and American cultural imagination. Building upon the critical work of Paulla Ebron and Lene Brøndum, who point to black women writers' particular visualizations of the Sea Islands culture and heritage,[26] in this dissertation I seek to establish how and why a group of African American writers and artists from the 1970's to the 1990's, including Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Julie Dash, and Carrie Mae Weems, draw upon the historical and mythical landscape of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. In my examination, I look at Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) as well as Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and novel *Daughters of the Dust* (1997).

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* chronicles the journey of Avey (Avatara) Johnson, a widow of Sea Islands descent living in North White Plains, who undergoes a dramatic transformation while on a vacation cruise of the Caribbean. Beginning with sea sickness and ending with Avey's declarations to return to Tatum, a coastal area of ancestry, the novel chronicles Avey's ensuing journey to awareness of her loss and abandonment of her cultural inheritance in her striving for material success. Like *Praisesong*, Naylor's *Mama Day* situates characters within urban and rural landscapes.

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[26] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall.", Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture."

Similarly, the novel's Sea Islands geography is a fictional Sea Island called Willow Springs. Willow Springs, the ancestral home of the Day family, emerges as a landscape of powerful memories and cultural traditions. Structured as an interwoven narrative between present and past, the living and the dead, and told from the multiple perspectives of Cocoa (Ophelia), Mama Day (Cocoa's great aunt), and George (Cocoa's husband), the novel contemplates both the transformation of cultural rituals and traditions, the multiple layers of history and memory, and the "structures of feeling" to place. While *Praisesong* and *Mama Day* have contemporary settings, *Daughters of the Dust* (the film) is set at the turn of the century, and chronicles the migration of members of the Peazants, a Gullah family, from Dawtuh Island to the mainland. Told over the course of day, the film captures the conflicts between members who seek to leave the island in search of the perceived economic and social advantages of mainland life, and those who see the act of migration as one that can cause not only a break with family, but also with memory and culture. As found in *Praisesong* and *Mama Day*, *Daughters of the Dust* also features an ancestor figure, Nana Peazant, who warns against the cultural loss or abandonment that Avey in *Praisesong* laments.

Daughters of the Dust (1997) is an interesting novelization, since, unlike many novels which accompany a film, it is not an exact replica of the film, but instead is a sequel to the narrative that begins in the film. If the film contemplates what will happen to those who leave the mainland, the novel chronicles this story moving between the urban landscape of Harlem and the rural landscape of Dawtuh Island. Told from the perspective of Amelia Varnes, the granddaughter of Haagar Peazant, one of the strongest advocates in the film for out-migration, the novel chronicles Amelia's academic and

personal search for her family's roots or what she describes as an understanding of "where we came from and why we did what we did."[27] Through Amelia, a not so veiled Zora Neale Hurston character, the novel brings forth the importance of oral narratives and oral recollections for personal and cultural identity and history, critiques anthropological discourses which have often labeled and located the Sea Islands, and, like *Praisesong, Mama Day,* and the film *Daughters of the Dust,* questions the things that the characters needed to hold onto and the places must they go to reconnect or rediscover them.

With an emphasis on cultural history, cultural geography, and literary history, my study is separated from other studies of these authors and artists in several ways. First, I do not simply look at their individual works of one or two authors in relation to one another, but examine a group of artists. My study of these artists is attuned to the observations made within black feminist criticism which underscores the particular ways black women have "encoded oppression in their writing" and charted how the relationships between place and identity emerge differently in black women's writing than for black male writers.[28]

Migration, a recurrent theme in the works I examine, represents an important space for considering these generational and gendered differences in the representation of movement/mobility and particularly movement in, through, to or from specific places,

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[27] Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust (New York: Dutton, 1997) 86.

[28] M. G. Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women (1989): 24. Black feminist and literary criticism during the late 1970's and 1980's focused on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in black women's writing, their construction of alternative historiographies, and their use of orality as a means of retrieving maligned voices, experiences, and bodies. For more discussions on these themes see these works: C. A. Wall, Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women (Routledge, 1990), Mary Helen Washington, "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies," College English 43.1 (1981), M. Pryse and H. J. Spillers, Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition (Indiana University Press, 1985), Toni Cade Bambara, The Black Woman; an Anthology ([New York] New American Library, 1970).

such as the rural southern landscape. While migration, as numerous scholars have contended, represents an important feature of, and motif in, literatures of the African Diaspora, black women writers have uniquely narrated their experiences of movement by focusing on women's voices, experiences and stories; describing and analyzing family relationships; and illuminating the internal and external geographies that shape black women's lives.[29]

Each work that this dissertation examines features one or several female characters that travel or migrate from one physical geography to another. Moving between rural and urban landscapes, namely New York, and in some cases Harlem specifically, and various Sea Islands' fictional and real locales, the reader is introduced to characters such as Avey Johnson in *Praisesong*, Cocoa Day in *Mama Day,* Eula Peazant in *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Amelia Varnes in *Daughters of the Dust* (1997) who are connected to the Sea Islands through a matrilineal line and find themselves gifted with a Sea Islands heritage that they struggle to embrace, sustain, reconnect, or preserve. These works identify how migration often means that individuals, families, and communities are often separated or geographically distanced from actual or imagined homeplaces, while also contemplating the specific impact (e.g. alienation and dislocation) migrations

[29] For discussions on black women and migration turn to: Meredith Gadsby, Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History : Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature (Columbus : Ohio State University Press, 2006), Stephanie Corp Author University of Stirling Newell and Studies Centre of Commonwealth, Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora (Stirling: Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, 1996), Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity : Migrations of the Subject (London ; New York : Routledge, 1994).

have upon individual's relationship with or connection to home and variously defined or categorized communities.[30]

While the search for home and the efforts or struggles of individuals to sustain and forge connections with homeplaces function as sites of interest in these works, these artists do not define home as a stable category or geography. As such, they demonstrate how black Americans' history of physical migrations, both forced and voluntary, has meant that homeplaces, the location of cultural origins, family, and often cultural memories, have assumed multiple, divergent and at times simultaneous geographies. While "homes" are multiple and divergent, each place that an individual travels is not necessarily marked or imbued with the values or symbolism of home; some places may only represent sites of disembarkation, travel, and destination. Given the displacement of Africans and African Americans due to the transatlantic and domestic slave trade, the search for viable homes has led black writers to retrace the transatlantic slave trade, thus articulating home through connections with the rural south, the Caribbean and Africa. Numerous scholars, including Wendy Walters, have identified the search for home as a perpetual trope in black American Literature.[31]

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[30] Stack, Carol. Charles Scruggs, Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In her examination of African American return migration to the rural South, Stack explains that return home involves "reworking relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, blacks and whites-and people who never left the South and their neighbors who have come back"(v). Carole Boyce Davies examines how traditional relationships reworked due to migration emerge as a concern in black women's writing (3).Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[31] Wendy Walters, Valerie Prince, and Charles Scruggs examine the multiple and divergent ways home has been imagined in African American literature. Whereas Walters explores a diasporic context of this search, Scruggs and Prince underscore its national dimensions. Wendy W. Walters, At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), Wendy W. Walters, "Writing Diaspora in Black International Literature," Diasporic Africa: A Reader, ed. Michael Angelo Gomez (New York: New York University Press, 2006), Valerie Sweeney Prince, Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Connecting the search for home to the "written story of Diaspora" which she dates back to the eighteenth century works of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, Wendy Walters argues that black international writers use narrative practices as a means of not only narrating home but constructing a space for home in written text. In their acts of narration, however, black international writers have found themselves looking "beyond [and within] the borders of the United States, frequently towards Africa and the Caribbean."[32] Writing home through the space of Diaspora for black international writers is in "part a construction of an alternative community, part of the 'search for viable homes for viable selves' in opposition to this experience of statelessness."[33] While the language of 'home' often conjures up ideas of domestic space, these writers situate home within a broader and more expansive terrain. Home is a network of places tied to a cultural geography from which cultural identity is formed. These works suggest that readers contemplate the importance of the Sea Islands within the networks of locations that have defined and impacted black life and identity.

In the texts this dissertation examines, numerous landscapes emerge such as the Caribbean, Africa, and the New York. Some are articulated as homeplaces,[34] while others become central locations of engagement through which the central character might move to constructing a sustainable cultural identity. These locations, which on their own, have been variously defined as sites of memory, emerge within Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's

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[32] Walters, At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing 271.
[33] Walters, At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing 279.
[34] bell hooks explains that despite its "fragility" and "tenuous" nature, the construction of the homeplace for black Americans has a "radical political dimension" (42). She identifies black women's particular roles in creating and shaping the homeplace and underscores the role of homeplaces in sustaining and articulating the humanity of black Americans. hooks elaborates that "[d]espite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of dominion, one's homeplace was the one site where one can freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist"(42). Bell Hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (1990).

works as a matrix connected through the nodes of the Sea Islands. If home is indeed a shifting category, the Sea Islands function as a grounding space to reflect upon the shifting. As these artists articulate it, the Sea Islands emerge through its uniquely positioned site, historically and contemporarily as a bridging space.

While the appearance of 'home' and its construction and association with a specific geography might seem to underscore the conservative definitions of home as a "fixed, rooted, and stable making it the antithesis of travel," it is not. [35] Although home is situated or accessed by calling upon the geography of the Sea Islands, the works that I have selected suggests the ability for 'home' to be embodied and "carried in memory and by acts of imagination."[36]

Marshall, Naylor, and Dash' understanding of migration is not limited to physical movement, but includes social mobility as well. In an interview with *Essence* magazine, Marshall identifies the cultural poverty or outright rejection of one's cultural inheritance that she believes often accompanies black Americans' social mobility as a concern that her novel examines.[37] If segregation helped to produced and sustain tight-knit black communities, integration produced new challenges for black American personal and communal identities. *Praisesong's* Avey Johnson represents the generation of black Americans who witnessed, if not assisted, in bringing about newly and hard-won (although still limited) access to education, jobs, and housing. Yet upon reflecting upon her life, Avey finds herself isolated in predominately white suburbs contemplating what she exchanged or gave up for her new found material success.

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[35] Rosemary Marangoly George, The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction (New York: Cambridge University Press 1996) 2.
[36] Hamid Naficy, Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place (New York : Routledge, 1999) 5.
[37] Alexis De Veaux, Paule Marshall, "Paule Marshall: In Celebration of Our Triumph," Essence May 1980.

The works that I examine underscore the narratives of place and displacement which Elizabeth Brown Guillory argues often categorizes the writing of black women of the African Diaspora.[38] They also situate oral recollection as an important medium for the retelling of history and the disruption of hegemonic narratives of history. Engagement with various elements of folk culture is not only central in the construction of cultural memory in and outside of these works, but is also central in assisting the search or journey of many of the female characters the works chronicle.

While the works I examine are multilayered in their examination of geography, migration, history, and personal and cultural identity, they also share important similarities not only with one another, but also with black women writers throughout the African Diaspora. As Elizabeth Brown Guillory's anthology *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature* (2006) illustrates, women writers of the African Diaspora have a strong tradition of focusing on female characters' longing for home, feelings of displacement, and alienation. Naylor and Marshall's texts are among the texts studied in this anthology, and Brown-Guillory explains for the female characters featured in these critical studies, "The movement away from home engenders ambivalence and fuels feelings of alienation, loss, and separation. Characters in several studies experience a longing for the mother (land), which leaves them conflicted; there is no possibility of returning 'home' without reconciling that the reclamation of self depends upon an acceptance of competing identities."[39]

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[38]Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, "On Their Way to Becoming Whole," Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

[39]Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006) 3.

The novels and film I examine also share many of the features of what Farah Jasmine Griffin has articulated as an African American migration narrative. Not only is migration, of some sort, central to the story, but tropes such as the stranger and ancestor also emerge as pivotal components of the story informing how the characters respond and rethink their earlier and future relationships with, in the case of these works, the Sea Islands. Underscoring the function of strangers and ancestors in the African American migration narrative, Griffin, who borrows the term from Toni Morrison, contends that the ancestor present in "ritual, religion, music, food, and performance" often "provides the new migrant a cushion with which to soften the impact of urbanization." [40] Quoting the work of Karla Holloway, Griffin suggests that the ancestor figure often "serves as a recursive touchstone" while also serving as a "posture of remembrance."[41] However, strangers in these works are represented by a range of individuals from family members—in *Mama Day* this individual is reflected by Cocoa's husband George—to the protagonist—in *Praisesong* Avey herself represents the stranger—and to more conventional outsiders—such as Mr. Snead in *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Typically, represented as rational and determined, these individuals are marked by American individualism and success.

The figure of the ancestor emerges in these works in the form of a maternal elder—Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong*, Nana Peazant in *Daughters of the Dust* and the title character in *Mama Day*—who guides the protagonist or female migrant, sometimes forcefully, to an understanding of why their return journey, both physical and spiritual is necessary. The ancestor figure demonstrates that the female migrant is not only linked to

[40] Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 5.
[41] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 6.

the Sea Islands by practices of naming of familial lines, but also by their embrace and participation in oral recovery and narrativity. The invocation of the ancestor often embodied in the form of a foremother serves as a model of resilience for the characters. In *Daughters of the Dust,* Elizabeth is given the middle name of Ayodele, after the foremother of the Peazant family, taken from slavery and brought to the Sea Islands. In *Praisesong for the Widow,* Avey is named Avatara after her great aunt Cuney's grandmother, a woman who had seen the Ibos walk on water and drew from their actions a framework for approaching her life and existence. These names not only tie them symbolically to individuals and particular historical experiences, but through acts of naming, the family and the texts commemorate orally the lives of those whose lives have often gone unrecorded. The story invoked through family history becomes alternative and subversive record of the past. By naming Elizabeth Ayodele in the novel *Daughters of the Dust* the family imparts to her a position within a lineage of resilience and subjugated knowledge. The texts draw upon genealogy, history, and place to consider individuals may forge connections with memory, family and place.

In this dissertation, I am attuned to the ways in which migration is gendered, and how home, for black women, is coded both as a space of security and a place of terror due to the interstices of race and gender.[42] While the South, particularly in African American literature, has represented scenes of terror and violence, because of patriarchy the homeplace is no more a safe space or retreat for black women. Carol Boyce Davies explains that the home in black women's autobiographical writing has often been represented as a "place of alienation and displacement" with the family emerging as a

[42] For an examination on black women and migration see: Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject.

"site of oppression."[43] As such Boyce-Davies contends, "the complicated notion of home mirrors the problematizing of community/nation/identity that one finds in Black women's writing from a variety of communities."[44] In contemporary African American literature, returning home has often involved a return to the Southern landscape, and a confrontation with its geography, its histories, and its representations or designation as the site for the emergence of black American cultures.

Yet the ways in which violence marks the home space for black women and the southern landscape for black Americans is only one part of a complex and ever changing relationship between individuals and a place, a relationship which different generations of black writers have articulated in varying ways.[45] Thus, my study of the domestic space of the homeplace, the rural South, and the Sea Islands in these works acknowledges what Carol Stack has referred to as "the vexed nature of home" in her examination of return migrants to the rural south.[46] The descriptions of southern spaces, particularly the Sea Islands in the works of Marshall, Naylor and Dash, echo Alice Walker's proclamation in the "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience" that her return to the south is not a nostalgia for lost poverty, nor for the brutalization of slavery, or the humiliation and degradation of segregation, but is instead a political and social act of reclamation brought about in part due to the transformations in relationships African Americans charted with the southern landscape and ancestry during and after the Civil Rights movement.[47]

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[43] Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject 21.
[44] Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject 21.
[45] Black writers have had a complex relationship with the South. It has represented a site of violence and shame, as well as an ancestral homeplace.
[46] Carol B. Stack, Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South (New York: BasicBooks, 1996) xv.
[47] Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) 17.

Identifying the cultural impact of the movement by which her discussion of Dr. Martin Luther King stands in as synecdoche, Walker contends:

> He gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland; the dust of bones and dust of our ancestors, who may now sleep within our caring *and* our hearing. He gave us the blueness of the Georgia sky in autumn as in summer . . . Those of our relatives we used to invite for a visit we can ask to stay . . . He gave us full-time use of our own woods, and restored our memories to those of us who were forced to run away, as realities we might each day enjoy and leave for our children. He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home.[48]

Her words convey the ways in which the return to the South both in body and literature is connected to social and political mobilizations of black Americans which advocated for the opening upon of not only new landscapes for social and political participation, but old landscapes in which cultural heritage might be revisited "full-time."

My study of these works is also distinguished by a focus on intertextuality. Specifically, I highlight both the similarities and the differences in Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's visions and versions of the Sea Islands culture and geography. I contextualize their works within black women's and black artists' ongoing project of looking back to the transformative scenes and events in African Diasporic history, which include the Middle Passage and slavery.[49] Specifically, I consider how this group of writers and artists were propelled by the desire to reclaim and confront a documented and undocumented African American past, or what Ralph Ellison has referred to as "our familial past" and make it "knowable" to present audiences and why this type of

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[48] Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose 145.

[49] Gay Wilentz, ""What Is Africa to Me?": Reading the African Cultural Base of (African) American Literary History," American Literary History 15.3 (2003), Brown-Guillory, Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature. Hershini Bhana Young, Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body, Reencounters with Colonialism--New Perspectives on the Americas (Hanover, N.H. Dartmouth College Press: University Press of New England, 2005).

historiography situated in the Sea Islands was particularly important during the 1970's to the 1990's.[50]

By illuminating their articulation or retelling of these scenes and events through the space of the Sea Islands, I am concerned with how the writers not only speak to their respective audiences, but how do they speak to each other and to black vernacular and literary traditions. Part of the process of seeing how they speak to each other or "talk back" to other writers means detailing how they draw upon a specific black cultural archive and what they draw upon. In their efforts to revisit the past *and* the present of the Sea Islands, I argue they also engage in a dialectic with a multiplicity of discourses surrounding the Sea Islands and its people.[51] My focus on intertextuality is shaped by a larger concern about dialogicality, how these writers engage in a dialect with a range of discourses, texts, and traditions. In part, I argue that they draw upon elements of black vernacular and literary traditions as a way of contesting the anthropological and social scientific discourses, which have often catalogued, and represented black life and voice in the Sea Islands. Like Brøndum, I find Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's concepts of disruption and revision apt and useful paradigms for underscoring and understanding black women writers' use of the Sea Islands.[52]

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[50] This quote is taken from Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 16.

[51] In "Speaking in Tongues," Mae Henderson draws upon the work of M.M. Bakhtin, particularly his concepts of dialogism and consciousness, in order to show how black women writers "enter simultaneously into familial, or *testimonial*, and public, or *competitive* discourse-discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectations of the reader"(emphasis hers, 20). Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition."

[52] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 153-54.

Chapter Summaries

This project consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, I provide a socio-cultural overview of the Sea Islands. Specifically, I call attention to what makes this geography unique, the scholars who have studied and represented it, and why it becomes an important landscape for scholars and artists in the 1970s. By exploring these issues I provide a background for the particular engagements or visualizations of the Sea Islands by the artists and writers this dissertation explores. The remaining three chapters explore a particular artist, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash, in that order. I organize these chapters in terms of their date of publication, and their genre. Through the course of each of these chapters, I examine how the artist comes to "know" the Sea Islands by briefly surveying their previous works and their personal biography. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's engagement of the Sea Islands represents an extension of the concerns they give voice to in their earlier works. For each of these artists and writers their engagement with the Sea Islands represents their third or fourth cultural product. *Mama Day* (1988) follows Gloria Naylor's first two novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Linden Hills* (1985). Whereas Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) represents a reformation and extension of the themes and concerns that emerge her earlier works *Brown Girl, Brownstone* (1959), *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961) *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), and *Reena and Other stories* (1983), a short story collection released at the same time as *Praisesong*.

Drawn in part by questions of literary history, I engage these works in part to chart not only the tropes, themes and motifs surrounding the Sea Islands that are reflected in them, but I am also interested in naming and describing what occurs outside of the text

to inform its very formation. In charting the spaces outside of the text, I contemplate the writer's personal and artistic journey to discover the Sea Islands, its rituals, traditions, and histories. As a result, through my research I seek to provide a sense of the whole picture of their selections, their visions, and the cultural and artistic moment in which they create and produce. This approach represents a model of critical study emphasized by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory and Gay Wilentz. Brown-Guillory makes critical interventions in the study of migration and black women's writing by underscoring the importance of the writer's migratory narrative and multiple border crossings to the experiences, spaces, and landscapes they construct.[53] Wilentz also encourages a holistic approach to the study of African Diasporic cultural production. Unlike Brown-Guillory, she emphasizes not only the personal history or journey of the writer, but also the social and cultural movements in which her work is situated and responds.[54]

In my study of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash, I analyze the works with an attention to the personal and literary biography of the artists as well as the social and political moment of their cultural production. As I have alluded to earlier, I believe that these works capture and respond to a transforming relationship between African Americans and their African ancestry as well as to the southern landscape, a renewed critical study of African American origins and genealogy, and the increasing concerns surrounding the transformations of black life in urban and rural settings, all of which are occurring in the last thirty years.

Cocoa's words toward the close of *Mama Day* offer an important framework for considering both the motivations of the artists to narrative history and cultural memory

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[53] Brown-Guillory, "On Their Way to Becoming Whole."
[54] Wilentz, ""What Is Africa to Me?": Reading the African Cultural Base of (African) American Literary History," 639-40.

through the landscape of the Sea Islands and for situating how I bring to the study of their works a new perspective. Reflecting upon the passing of her husband George and their summer in Willow Springs, Cocoa proclaims: "And each time I go back over what happened, there's some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a new light."[55] In one sense, Naylor draws upon the multiplicity of voices and narrations surrounding events, experiences, and histories, yet she also points to the necessity of return in order to uncover complexity and nuance. Each return has the potential to offer a new perspective to "some forgotten corner" only if the individual returning brings to her journey or travel new perspectives or methods for seeing, reading, and narrating. It is this "forgotten" and rediscovered corner of African American life and history that these artists and writers bring forth in their works.

In my second chapter, I examine how the themes of loss and recovery emerge in Paule Marshall's third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*. By invoking these concerns, Marshall tackles the ideologies of the Black Arts Movement, wrestles with Black women writer's subsequent critiques, and contemplates the realities of a shifting political, social, and economic landscapes upon black people in a post-Civil Rights period. Using a cruise to the Caribbean as the novel's opening setting, she recovers the important links between the Sea Islands and the Caribbean, culturally and historically. While scholarship on the Sea Islands often emphasized its African connection first and Caribbean connection or links second, Marshall places the Caribbean as a central space for re-entering and re-discovering the Sea Islands.

In this chapter, I extend earlier readings of the novel by focusing not only on the appearance of Tatum, a coastal area, in the novel, but by identifying the specific ways in

[55] Gloria Naylor, Mama Day (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988) 310.

which the cultural geography of Tatum is invoked as a site of memory and medium for accessing lost, neglected, or submerged memories. Specifically, I call attention to how Tatum emerges as an imagined space, one that is invoked and recalled through memory, memories that link a network of geographies together. Moreover, in this chapter, I show that as Avey Johnson, the novel's protagonist, must move from seeing and experiencing the Caribbean as a tourist, so must the reader/audience and the novel's protagonist make a critical leap in seeing and entering the Sea Islands. In contrast to other analyses of *Praisesong for the Widow*, this chapter emphasizes Avey's journey from cultural loss to embrace and cultural pride as a metaphor for the national rediscovery of the Sea Islands by black Americans, scholars, and artists. By placing the novel in conversation with the resurgence in scholarship around the Sea Islands in the 1970s and 1980s, I demonstrate how the text both reflects and comments upon the discussion of cultural preservation, cultural tourism, and the cultural heritage of black Americans.

Like *Praisesong*, the novel *Mama Day*, situates the Sea Islands, by way of the fictional island of Willow Springs, as an important and critical landscape, which the novel's primary characters and storytellers, Cocoa and George, must traverse and/or revisit. In the novel, Gloria Naylor, as had Marshall, contemplates the experiences of black Americans in urban and northern landscapes by describing the economic and social uncertainty of their shifting but not completely altered cultural landscape, and the presence and/or lack of community. While the Caribbean and Tatum emerge as important landscapes in *Praisesong*, *Mama Day* pivots between the urban landscape of Manhattan and the rural landscape of Willow Springs, over the course of which the courtship of

Cocoa and George is recalled, the history of Willow Spring is revealed, and the future of the place and people is projected.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Naylor, by rendering the experiences of Cocoa and George for the reader, explores the importance of homeplaces and cultural memory, particularly for black Americans who find themselves removed culturally or geographically from their cultural heritage. Cocoa and George represent allusions to the range of black American cultural experiences and are in service of mirroring what is missing or can be found by examining different vantage points. If part of the task of *Praisesong* revolved around Avey's awakening, *Mama Day* also encourages an awakening or transformation for its readers and characters. While *Praisesong* situates Tatum as an imagined landscape, which Avey never actually travels to but only anticipates return, *Mama Day* grapples with concretizing people and place within a specific social and cultural history and exploring the impact and the experiences of their return. The novel's characters not only travel to Willow Springs, but the novel guides the reader in how they (the reader) and the novel's characters must "learn" to enter the space of Willow Springs. Moving beyond the excitement of anticipated cultural and historical recovery, which scholars argued the Sea Islands offered and the push by black Americans to embrace it as a new homeplace for New World cultures, the novel warns against uncritical reclamation or study, casting individuals such as Reema's boy as symbolic examples.

My reading of the novel extends earlier examinations, because I situate the novel within the three frameworks that Richard Long argues have been used to analyze the Sea Islands. I argue that Long's framing of the Sea Islands within an autonomous frame, a

diasporic frame, and a national frame is a useful paradigm for reading Naylor's evocation of the Sea Islands, its geography, history and people in *Mama Day*.[56] In the chapter, I show that Naylor draws primarily upon the national and autonomous frame in her reading of *Mama Day*, focusing upon Willow Springs as southern landscape, but one that is marked by a vastly different socio-cultural history than other regions or locations in the South. Through her engagement with these two frames, the novel calls attention to Black Americans' return to the South, beginning in the 1970s; as well as the unique experiences that Sea Islanders witnesses during the 1980s. While at first glance, Willow Springs appears ephemeral and unchanged, it like other rural areas is transforming dramatically, as such, Naylor focuses on the feelings of urgency that grow out of the 1970s surrounding the study and preservation of Sea Islands communities, and black oral history more broadly.

In my fourth chapter, I examine the visualizations of the Sea Islands in film by looking at Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. Like Marshall and Naylor, Dash uses the Sea Islands to call attention to cultural loss and emphasize the importance of embracing and preserving a rich cultural past. While the film reflects the challenges and dilemmas Gullah communities faced at the turn of the century by chronicling the out-migration of one family, the Peazants, it also serves to connect a broader audience to the histories, landscape, and people of the Sea Islands. In doing so, Dash contemplates larger transformations in African American life, the out-migration of rural communities at the turn of the century, through the perspective of a specific group. Importantly, her vision of

[56] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 101.

out migration, at the turn of the century, occurs during another moment of demographic and cultural changes for black Americans.

Through the course of this chapter, I show how film functions as a medium for not only restoring cultural memory, but also preserving it. My reading of *Daughters of the Dust* moves beyond earlier examinations, because I analyze the film and the novel. By looking at the film and novel together, I explore how Dash extends her narrative of the Sea Islands from one medium to another, calling attention to her specific emphases in each medium. Through her use of multiple mediums, she contemplates how image and text collectively are important for casting a new and more nuanced understanding of black life and particularly representations of the Sea Islands. The story that emerges in the film is not only one of a family that is migrating, but one that struggles to come to terms with what is necessary to preserve or cast away in the very process of migration. The novel, chronicling the family's arrival in Harlem, explores what happens when people abandon their cultural past. Central, to Dash's project in both the film and the novel, is an exploration of what mediums do we draw upon to chronicle, preserve, and interpret the important aspects of our familial and cultural experiences? In asking and exploring this question, I show how Dash engages earlier representations and interpretations of Sea Islands life and culture as a way of disrupting the earlier discourse and creating a space for new visual and textual narratives.

In this chapter, I examine the visual images of Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* The film exposed larger and more diverse audiences to the beauty, complexity, and story of Sea Islands culture, history, and people. I analyze Dash's representations of the Sea Islands within a history of black photography, particularly documentary photography and

family photographs. I focus on her representation or images of black bodies, interior spaces of black life, and sites of mourning and worship as a way of examining how the film contributes to a new vision of place, people, and history.

While individuals such as Doris LuAnn had taken photographs of Sea Islanders in 1929-1930 in her series *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, in1982 Jean Moutoussamy-Ashe would turn her photographic lens to Daufuskie Island introducing a new audience almost fifty years later to the Gullah culture.[57] Like Ashe, Dash and Carrie Mae Weems explore Gullah culture through a rarely engaged medium: photography. As Ashe had, they use photography as "a frame in which to preserve the island and to reflect its memory."[58] A record of existence, a chronicler of change, and a warning of disappearance emerges in the works of Weems and Dash. Through my reading of their works, I show that Dash was conscious of the histories, distortions and reflections of black images and subsequently histories and experiences in popular media.

[57] Moutoussamy-Ashe, Daufuskie Island 16.
[58] Moutoussamy-Ashe, Daufuskie Island 16.

Chapter One

"A Sacred Place:" Understanding the Social, Cultural and Demographic History of the Sea Islands

"The area and its people are essentially important to African Americans because we find in this sacred place physical, emotional and spiritual roots of our present-day existence"—Patricia Guthrie[59]

In their representations of the Sea Islands, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash invoke a cultural and physical geography that is historical and contemporary, diasporic and regional, as well as mythic and real. Their works introduce readers to the myths, beliefs, and culture of the Sea Islands, while contextualizing its appearance, relevance, and meaning within both a distinct Gullah experience and a broader African American experience. By exploring how and why the Sea Islands are unique, describing the critical scholarship which has arisen around the Sea Islands, and interlinking the study of the Sea Islands to the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I provide a background for the particular engagements or visualizations of the Sea Islands by the artists and writers this dissertation explores. I also believe by first underscoring the historical, cultural, and geographical uniqueness of the Sea Islands in this chapter, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash's use and vision of history, their transformation of Gullah folklore, and their belief of art as a tool for historical recovery and source of cultural memory, explored in subsequent chapters, becomes more apparent.

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[59] Patricia Guthrie, Catching Sense: African American Communities on a South Carolina Sea Island (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1996) xiii.

The beauty and uniqueness of the Sea Islands' physical geography is immediately apparent in the opening shot of Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* from her images of sand covered banks at dusk to her lush portrayal of the woody interior of Dawtuh Island, her fictional setting. Located along the coastal southeastern United States, the Sea Islands are a coastal strip of barrier islands which span 250 miles long and 40 miles wide.[60] The islands, swampy with moss-covered oak, pine and palmetto trees, and a semi-tropical climate, are separated from the mainland by a myriad of creeks, marshes and tidal rivers.[61] Although the Sea Islands have been called the "homeland of the Gullah people," the Gullah/Geechee communities extend beyond the actual islands to include the coastal plains or parts of the "Lowcountry." [62] The cultural and geographical area of the Gullah, as the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the region from Africa and the Caribbean are called in South Carolina, and Geechee, as they have come to be known in Georgia, extends from the southeastern coast near the North Carolina/South Carolina border to the tip of northeastern Florida.[63]

The Sea Islands' geography includes a number of well known and lesser known islands, a few of which are referenced directly or serve as inspiration for the fictional settings in the works of Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash. Of the numerous islands that make up the Sea Islands, Sullivan's Island near Fort Muthrie off the South

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[60] William S. Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) 4.
[61] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 1,13, Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 4.
[62] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 1.
[63] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 1. William Bascom notes that while the Gullah and Geechee are defined as different groups the term Gullah is often employed to refer to both. W. Bascom, "Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth," Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia, eds. Mary Arnold Twining and Keith E. Baird (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991) 27.

Carolina coast is particularly important. Sullivan's Island has been referred to by Julie Dash as "the Ellis Island for Africans."[64] Albeit this statement is a debated and troublesome analogy, her words underscore the significance of this island within African American history. Nearly 40 % of Black Americans can trace their roots to this central holding and transit site for enslaved Africans entering the US.[65]

Below Sullivan's Island lie James, Johns, Wadmalaw, and Edisto Islands. The islands of Kiawah and Seabrook, which are southwest of Johns, are primarily resort areas, not unlike Hilton Head Island, which also rests along coastal South Carolina close to St. Helena. St. Helena houses the Penn Center and is less of a tourist destination than its neighboring island, Hilton Head. The islands of Tybee, Skidaway, Ossabaw, St. Catherines, Sapelo, St. Simons, Jekyll, and Cumberland are situated along coastal Georgia.[66] In the novel *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor references Hilton Head to critique tourism and resort development within the Sea Islands. Hilton Head emerges as a site of cultural loss and physical displacement in the novel, while St. Helena is invoked in *Mama Day* to reflect continuing African traditions transformed and adapted for a new environment.

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[64] Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film (New York: The New Press, 1992) 6.

[65] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 19.

[66] The islands have witnessed varying degrees of isolation and incubated Gullah culture in varying degrees. In his essay "Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth," William Bascom chronicles the changing demographics and the factors, such as the construction of bridges, which led to cultural, economic, and agricultural changes on islands like St. Simons and Tybee. Describing Tybee Island, Bascom proclaims, "it preserved the least Gullah culture . . . it was important only as a bathing beach and week-end resort for the whites of Savannah" (28-29). Bascom, "Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth."

The Sea Islands have been identified by scholars such as Mary Twinings and Keith Baird as a "showcase in North America for the concept of creolization."[67] Anthropologists and linguists have noted that Gullah culture and language show greater affinities with Afro-Caribbean and African cultures than mainland or inland African American culture and language. This connection has served as a source of continuing interests for scholars and artists highlighting the development and variations of New World African derived cultures.[68] In her novel *Praisesong for the Widow,* Paule Marshall highlights a broad cultural link between Gullah and Grenadian culture as a way of reframing the history of diasporic migrations. The protagonist, Avey Johnson, finds parallels between Grenadian dances, like the Five Nations Dance, and the Ring Shout performed in the Sea Islands. The similarities Avey finds exist in the actual performance of the dance as well as the dance's function in community building, cultural affirmation, and the reassertion of ancestral connections. While historians and anthropologists have illuminated the presence of similarities, Paule Marshall highlights through Avey Johnson the importance recognizing these similarities may have upon an individual's or community's awakening, sense of self, and comprehension of personal and collective history.

In addition to dance, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have pointed to material culture such as food use and preparation, basket-weaving, woodcarving, brazing, ironwork, fishing styles, quilting, and architecture to highlight the presence or the derivation of African practices and traditions in the Sea Islands. Commonalities have also

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[67] Mary Arnold Twining and Keith E. Baird, Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991) vii.
[68] Lorenzo Dow Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage, Patricia Jones-Jackson, When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

been identified in the areas of folk and religious beliefs, folklore, funeral practices, family organization, and language.[69] The examination of Sea Islands folktales and storytelling has long been a site of interests for varying reasons.[70] Scholars have used folklore as a means to identify African retentions, examine critiques of social life, and describe cultural transformations.[71] In the works of Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash, folklore emerges as an important vehicle for representing the Sea Islands as well as communicating the story of the Sea Islands to their readers.

While fishing styles, quilting, and architecture have been used to illuminate the African origins of Gullah culture, Gullah language represents one of the most striking examples of African derivatives in the Sea Islands region. If anthropologists were indeed looking for vestiges, survivals, or reaffirmations of African cultures in the Americas, what they found in the Sea Islands Gullah was a Creole language, cousin to the Krio language of Sierra Leone and other Black Atlantic Creoles. In studies on the roots of the

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[69] Margaret Washington Creel, A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs (New York: New York University Press, 1988), Charles W. Joyner, Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community, Blacks in the New World (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), Jones-Jackson, When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands, Mason Crum, Gullah; Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940), Guion Griffis Johnson, A Social History of the Sea Islands, with Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina press, 1930), Charles W. Joyner, "Slave Folklife on the Waccamaw Neck : Antebellum Black Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry," 1977, Sally Plair and Annie Lyle Viser, Something to Shout About: Reflections on the Gullah Spiritual (Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Molasses Lane Publishers, 1972), Guthrie, Catching Sense: African American Communities on a South Carolina Sea Island, George Brown Tindall, South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952)..

[70] Carawan and Carawan, Been in the Storm So Long a Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales, and Children's Games from Johns Island, South Carolina, Ambrose Elliott Gonzales and Aesop, With Aesop Along the Black Border (Columbia, S.C.: The State company, 1924), Moss, Gullah Tales, Charles Colcock Jones, Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), Roger Pinckney, Blue Roots: African-American Folk Magic of the Gullah People, 1st ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), Priscilla Jaquith, Ed Young, Duncan Emrich, Albert Henry Stoddard and Emory University. Children's Reading Program., Bo Rabbit Smart for True: Folktales from the Gullah (New York: Philomel Books, 1981), Guy Benton Johnson, Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1930), Samuel Gaillard Stoney and Gertrude Mathews Shelby, Black Genesis; a Chronicle (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930)..

[71] Joseph E. Holloway, Africanisms in American Culture, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Betty M. Kuyk, African Voices in the African American Heritage (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

Gullah language, Sierra Leonean Krio has repeatedly been named as an important source.[72] The possible Krio roots of the Gullah language were given visual significance during several public exchanges between Sea Islanders and delegates from Sierra Leone at the Penn Center in South Carolina and in Sierra Leone. Anthropologist William Pollitzer asserts the comprehension of both groups to one another's creole language is due to the fact that within the language family Krio and Gullah are cousins.[73] It is this familial relationship that Pollitzer importantly brings to understanding the connection between African languages and Gullah language, cousins related "through a common heritage rather and direct descendants."[74]

Africans bought to the New World, in many cases, were exposed to a number of Creoles or commonly recognized English pidgins on the African coast and along their painful voyage across the Atlantic.[75] These creole languages and pidgins not only enabled Africans to communicate with one another, but also informed the development of Gullah Creole. Furthermore, the importation of slaves from the Caribbean introduced a Caribbean Creole to the Sea Island populations. As a result, the Gullah language does not have one single source, but many, reflecting the specific diversity of enslaved Africans brought to the Sea Islands.

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[72]Augusta Baker, Tim Carrier, South Carolina Educational Television Network. and California Newsreel (Firm), Family across the Sea, 1 videocassette (58 min.), California Newsreel, San Francisco, Calif., 1990, Michael Montgomery, The Crucible of Carolina: Essays in the Development of Gullah Language and Culture (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), Joseph A. Opala, The Gullah: Rice, Slavery and the Sierra Leone-American Connection (Freetown, Sierra Leone: Usis, 1987), Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, Joseph K. Adjaye, Time in the Black Experience (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), Marquetta L. Goodwine, The Legacy of Ibo Landing: Gullah Roots of African American Culture (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 1998), Mary Arnold Twining, "An Examination of African Retentions in the Folk Culture of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands," 1977, Mary Arnold Twining, Keith E. Baird and John Henrik Clarke, Sea Island Roots : African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991), Twining and Baird, Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia.

[73] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 129.

[74] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 129.

[75] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 124-25.

The need for communication, the specific composition of demography of individuals at different periods, and isolation from the white population all served as important factors enabling Gullah language and culture to form and develop. In their efforts to describe and name the different ethnic-linguistic groups, which have contributed to the formation, development, and growth of Gullah culture, and their corresponding periods of importation, scholars have drawn upon official records, census data, newspaper accounts and advertisements for runaways. As a result of this research, two major theories have emerged to describe the development of Gullah culture and language with respect to various contributing ethno-linguistic groups.

The first theory contends that Gullah culture is greatly influenced by Krio of Sierra Leone, as I mentioned earlier, while the second theory places emphasis on the role and influence of the Gold Coast, particularly Nigeria by way of imported Africans from the Caribbean and Angola.[76] While these notions or theories seem opposing, they are in fact complementary.[77] However, to understand the ways in which these theories are complementary requires an exploration of the distinct patterns of slave importation in the Sea Islands. The Sea Islands' history of slave importations is different from other areas of the South. For instance, the Chesapeake region and the Deep South are characterized by the purchase and sell of slaves between states, whereas slavery in the Lowcountry was marked by direct import from Africa or from the Caribbean.

The people and cultures of Angola, Senegambia, the Windward Coast, and the Gold Coast represent important linguistic and cultural sources of Gullah culture. Individuals from Angola dominated the first half of the eighteenth century and also

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[76]Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 126.
[77] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 126.

emerged as a dominant group in the 19th century. While the early and later importations of individuals from Angola helped to infuse Bantu words into Gullah language, some suggest that the complexities of Bantu grammar may have prevented its full adoption in the Sea Islands. The people and the cultures of Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward coasts contributed to the development of Gullah culture in the latter half of the 18th century.[78] The cultures and languages of the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, through syntax and words, a result of direct and indirect importations of individuals, greatly influenced one early substratum of Gullah.[79]

Gullah/Geechee communities thus developed a distinct culture and language. While Gullah culture possessed elements of the Native American and European cultures, most importantly, it represented a syncreticism of the languages, rituals, customs, religious beliefs, and food of the various African ethno-linguistic groups from which they came. In addition to his discussion of language families, anthropologist William Pollitzer emphasizes syncreticism as an important framework for understanding Gullah culture and the formation of the Gullah language. He argues that Gullah language and culture should not be seen simply as the product of African retentions, but more as a "mixture" or a "creative synthesis, born of memory, necessity, and improvisation in a new environment."[80]

The development of Gullah language and culture was also influenced by geographical, agricultural, and historical factors. The isolation of the islands, the numerical dominance of the black population, and the constant influx of Africans during slavery into the creolized black communities were important features for the development

[78] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 195.
[79] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 126.
[80] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 198.

of Gullah culture. While the black population in South Carolina outnumbered the white, these numbers were even more dramatic in the Lowcountry.[81] Heat, humidity, frequent outbreaks of malaria, and epidemics of smallpox and yellow fever made the region an inhospitable climate for white planters and overseers, who routinely left their plantations.

The black majority was also impacted by the continuous importation of Africans into the region. The constant importation of Africans not only impacted demographic numbers, but also contributed to the vitality of African traditions in the region. The arrival of the slave ship *The Wanderer* is an important example of the presence of Africans in the Sea Islands even after the Civil War, a fact recounted in the film *Daughters of the Dust*. Explaining the impact of the black majority and the constant influx of new groups of African slaves in the region, Brabec et. al. write:

> The result of the large black population was that European cultural influences of the plantation owners ... were tempered by the overwhelming numbers of African immigrants and their descendants in the plantation communities [which] stands in contrast to other areas of the plantation South.[82]

The constant presence of Africans in creolized communities helped sustain the African roots of Gullah culture, whereas the absence of whites enabled bondsmen to develop their culture with greater autonomy.[83] Although the absence of whites and Gullah geographic isolation were important factors, so too were differences in the slave experience. Whereas in other parts of the South plantation life was organized around gang systems, in the Sea Islands slavery was marked by the task system. A model brought to the Sea Islands by planters from Barbados, under this system enslaved

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[81] E. Brabec and S. Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," Landscape Journal 26.1 (2007): 153.
[82] Brabec and Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," 153.
[83] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 72.

Africans were given a specific task to complete. Upon completion of this task, African bondsmen possessed control of their remaining day. The absence of white planters and overseers on the Sea Islands helped to foster a sense of autonomy and ownership of land for the African descended populations.[84]

Even though Africans found themselves in a new environment in which they were seen as property, they did not, as had been a common belief articulated by scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, abandon their beliefs, languages, and social organizations or family networks. What emerged was neither a full erasure, nor an exact replica. Instead Africans and their descendants created a "synthesis of old and new in a process of social creolization."[85] As drastic as the differences were between their old and new lives, there were some things that were familiar. For individuals taken from the rice-growing coast of Africa, the Lowcountry offered some geographical similarities between the homeland and the new land.[86] The similarities between the regions are not incidental. The development of Gullah culture in the Sea Islands, anthropologist Joe Opala has argued is in part due to the emphasis on rice cultivation that dominated the plantation economy of South Carolina in the 1700's.

With the increasing demand for products came a growing demand for enslaved labor, particularly for Africans from the rice-growing regions of Senegambia, which is reflected in advertisements in Charles Town newspapers. Identified as the "crown jewel," rice dominated the Carolina colony into the mid-19th century.[87] Enslaved Africans brought to the area from Senegal and the Windward coast greatly influenced rice growing

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[84] Brabec and Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," 153.
[85] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 134.
[86] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 88-89.
[87] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 87.

in Carolina, for they "knew more about planting than their slavers" and possessed knowledge of "terrains and tides, sluice gates and soil types, rivers and rice." [88] In her novel *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash highlights Africans' role in rice cultivation and production in the Sea Islands. Dash's references to rice cultivation serve to underscore the importance this crop had in shaping the Sea Islands, while also illuminating a history remembered and recalled by Africans and their descendants.

Rice represents an important crop in Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust*; however, her film of the same name is informed by the history of indigo production in the region. Throughout the film, the color of indigo stains bodies, clothing, and memories. The production of indigo, a major staple in the region for 30 years, declined after the American Revolution. Indigo was supplanted by cotton made easier by new technologies, yet sill a labor intensive crop.[89] As they had with rice cultivation, Africans brought to the cultivation of indigo knowledge and use of dye that had been honed in their respective homelands.

Agriculture and demography were important factors influencing the early development of Gullah culture; however, one cannot overlook the importance of geography and land ownership to the persistence of cultural traditions after freedom. Isolation during and after enslavement was a key factor in sustaining the distinct culture created in this region. The isolation of Gullah communities was the result of little contact with whites during and after slavery, as well as geographical barriers between Gullahs and others on the mainland, including more acculturated black Americans. Many islands were not accessible except by boat until bridges were built beginning in the 1930's.

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[88] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 88-89.
[89] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 92.

Land ownership has been important in developing a sense of place and a connection to place for Sea Islanders. Purchase and land allotment occurring during the Port Royal Experiment were especially important to Sea Islanders' connection to place.[90] Called the "Rehearsal for Reconstruction," the Port Royal Experiment, led by General Sherman's Field order No. 15, called for land from Charleston to Florida to be reserved for settlement by former slaves. Former slaves purchased land they and their forefathers had long cultivated for someone else's profit. Land grants such as Sherman's order, auction sales, pre-exemption, settlement, and rent programs aided black landownership in the area so that by 1870, a large percentage of island land was owned by free black farmers.[91]

Landownership and low numbers of out-migrants demonstrate that while in other areas of the South, black Americans found themselves disconnected and alienated from the land of their forefathers leading to higher degrees of migration, the Sea Islands offered a different connection with the land.[92] This is not to say that Sea Islanders at different moments did not find themselves embarrassed or ashamed of their particular African heritage, but land ownership allowed them an economic and cultural independence that is unparalleled. The history of land ownership in the Sea Islands is recalled in the works of Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash. In *Mama Day*, Naylor underscores the importance of generational ownership to cultural expression and traditions. The narrator in *Mama Day* describes Willow Springs, a fictional Sea Island in the novel, by asserting that "It belongs to us . . . And it belonged to our daddies, and our

[90] Brabec and Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," 154-55.
[91] Brabec and Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," 157.
[92] Brabec and Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah," 153.

daddies before them, and them too."[93] In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey returns to the land left to her by her great aunt. While these works often highlight the Sea Islands' history of land ownership, enabling their viewers to reminisce and recall a history of tight-knit black communities, self-sufficient, and self-affirming, they also disturb the very image they invoke by illuminating the contemporary realities and changes Sea Islanders' face.

Migration and decreasing isolation have brought numerous changes to the Sea Islands. Since the 1930s, scholars like Clyde Kiser have contrasted the migration patterns between Sea Islanders and other African Americans. While many African Americans fled mainland southern cities and rural areas after WWII, the population in the Sea Islands remained both stable and predominately black.[94] The building of bridges and the purchase of land lots for resort development and tourism has led to the erosion of isolation upon which Gullah communities were formed and sustained. By 1980, black Sea Islanders' numerical dominance had waned and in places such as Hilton Head, whites outnumbered blacks 5 to 1.[95] In their exploration of the Sea Islands, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash invoke the theme of migration. In doing so, they position the Sea Islands as a site of multiple black migration, domestic and global.

Other factors have also transformed life in the Sea Islands. Military experience and travel broadened the experiences and expectations of black Islanders, with many returning with a desire to change the economic and social conditions.[96] Similarly, the

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[93] Naylor, Mama Day 5.
[94] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 189.
[95] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 190.
[96] M. A. Twining and K. E. Baird, "Sea Island Culture: Matrix of the African American Family," Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia, eds. M. A. Twining and K. E. Baird (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1991) 16.

Civil Rights movement of the 1960's increased Islanders' awareness. New and expanded economic and educational opportunities brought changes to old lifestyles. Young people who traveled outside of the islands for work and education returned with "new customs and values."[97] Scholars note, however, changes in lifestyle due to socioeconomic opportunities in the Sea Islands are not only the result of "passive acculturation" but also the result "active participation by the Islanders themselves."[98]

The Sea Islands have developed the status as a cultural archive, which has fueled and served to support concerns surrounding preservation and protection of the region. The continuous emphasis on the region as a site of necessary preservation which would benefit a number of groups, including the Gullah, the larger African American community, and Americans as a whole, is in part due to the efforts of various groups of scholars and artists along with Gullah/Geechee communities who have emphasized the significance of the Sea Islands. Moreover, the idea that the Sea Islands is "significant to people of all racial, regional, and ethnic backgrounds and is vital to telling the story of the American heritage" represents one component of a longstanding push to redefine how American culture is defined as well as a longstanding intellectual and artistic tradition amongst black Americans to chronicle, chart, and define themselves in relationship to place, history, and community.[99]

The significance of the region's designation in 2006 as a nationally protected Cultural Corridor must be understood alongside several dramatic shifts inside and outside of the academy. These shifts are in many ways mutually constitutive, because they

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[97] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 134.
[98] Twining and Baird, "Sea Island Culture: Matrix of the African American Family," 10.
[99] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 2.

represent the ways in which social and cultural movements have informed directions in scholarship and how scholarship has served to support the essential claims of such movements. Through my study of *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Mama Day*, and the film and novel *Daughters of the Dust*, I argue that Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Julie Dash were consciously or unconsciously inspired by the political and cultural movements of the 1960's and 1970's and their aftereffects. These political and cultural movements emphasized the recovery of individual, familial and group histories and brought about new studies of the Sea Islands and the reissuing of pivotal texts in the study of Sea Islands folk cultures such as *Drums and Shadows*, originally published in 1940 and republished in 1972. The impetus for re-publishing *Drums and Shadows* was due to the resurgence in scholarship and interest in the Sea Islands, which grew out of the demands for broader and more nuanced studies of black culture articulated by black students and explored in the developing black studies programs formed out of this period. The demands for "significant reevaluations of curricula, research, and pedagogy" [100] by black university students were concerns that were taken up by artists, black studies programs, scholars, and newly formed journals such as *Black Scholar*, which debuted in 1968 and the *Journal of Black Studies*. The *Journal of Black Studies*, diasporic and interdisciplinary in orientation, would also focus its attention on the Sea Islands in the June 1980 issue devoted to Sea Island culture.

The project of consciousness raising and redefining black cultural identity, a motivating and undergirding concern of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, was often articulated through the formation, representation, illustration, and rediscovery of a usable black cultural past and/or history and cultural vernacular that turned away

[100] Arthur L. Smith, "Editor's Message," Journal of Black Studies 1.1 (1970): 3.

from what were identified as Western ideologies, texts, and landscapes in lieu of a "new lexicon of prescriptive and proscriptive blackness."[101] The ideologies of the Black Power movement and its attendant artistic parallel the Black Arts Movement, while diverse and varied, generally emphasized the discovery or rediscovery of a usable black cultural past, the elevation of folk culture and orality, and the construction of a national black American culture, which stressed continuity and unity. Drawing upon a new "rhetoric and vernacular" that was impacted by a "new political and cultural urgency among African Americans," black artists and scholars during the Black Arts Movement imagined a different black community, challenged academic spaces and historiographies of black life, and called for radical and transformative scholarship which was community oriented. [102]

One of those changes occurred in the study of history, brought about by the push to study history and culture and recover a "past erased or distorted by repression and a racist historiography." What emerged were historical studies of enslavement that pushed beyond earlier understandings of plantation life and slave culture and family.[103] Studies such as Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), John Blassingames' *The Slave Community* (1972), and Sterling Stuckey's *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (1972) demonstrated a critical shift in history.[104] The push to discover one's roots and uncover the meaning of this genealogical information for cultural and personal identity, which many Americans, particularly African Americans found themselves

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[101] Cheryl Clarke, "After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2005) 2.
[102] Clarke, "After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement 2.
[103] James Edward Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 76.
[104] Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s 76.

engaging in the 1970's, emerged as both a theme within art and a motivation for scholarship.

During the 1970's and the early 1980's numerous dissertations, articles, journals and books were written about the Sea Islands, which would be the beginning of the explosion of scholarly and artists interests in the Sea Islands in the later twentieth century that continues today. "The Sea Islands as a Research Area" (1974) co-published by Juanita Jackson, Sabra Slaughter, and J. Herman Blake represents a public call for black scholars and black Americans to turn to the Sea Islands specifically as they now "look toward the American South, particularly to its rural and isolated areas where so many of the unique elements of contemporary black culture have their roots"[105] In the article, they describe the lack of black scholars studying the Sea Islands, the dearth of scholarship about the contemporary Sea Islands, and illuminate the flaws of earlier studies and research and some recent publications, often conducted by white observers who "lived among the people for a short time, gained their confidence to some degree, captured a limited portion of their lives and presented quite a distorted images of the culture."[106] The limited visualizations and misrepresentations of the Sea Islanders by earlier groups of scholars and artists prompted a new direction and voice in scholarship.

The 1970's represented a moment of great urgency surrounding the oral histories of black America and the Sea Islands in particular. As Juanita Jackson and others note, due to the fading memories of slavery among elderly blacks and the passing on of many informants, it was crucial to record these first-hand histories while they were still

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[105] Juanita C. Slaughter Sabra Blake J. Herman Jackson, "The Sea Islands as a Research Area," Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolina's and Georgia, ed. Mary and Keith Baird Twining (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991) 153.
[106] Jackson, "The Sea Islands as a Research Area," 155.

available. These oral histories offered a fuller understanding of the black experience in America, black contributions to America, and the roots of black culture in America, and represented a perspective they found missing in past studies of slavery or black history and culture.

What emerged during this period was not only a desire to move through the shame of family secrets and experiences, the shame of slavery, and confront a "racist historiography," but also a desire to revisit the stories that had long provided an alternative record of black life through an emphasis on orality and vernacular. Drawing upon the words of Ralph Ellison, Ashraf Rushdy explains that the "significant tradition of folklore and historical information" passed down orally amongst older family emerged as a supplementary or subversive text to official versions of the history.[107] "Our familial past" Ellison articulates is a "record that exists in oral form" and "constitutes the internal history of values."[108] While the artists during this period broke in many ways with earlier artists such as Ellison, what we can pull from their engagements are the ways in which personal and communal history are important means of self-discovery, even if the artistic presentation and its perceived display are vastly different.

Nowhere are the connections between personal and familial history, self-discovery, and personal and cultural identity more intertwined and representative than in Alex Haley's *Roots.* Interests in genealogy, African American history, and a rise in black consciousness, as many have argued, helped to bring about a study of not only neglected familial and national narratives, but also called new attention to neglected sites or places of study, such as the Sea Islands.

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[107] Rushdy, Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction 16.
[108] Rushdy, Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction 16.

The cultural and nationalist movements of the 1960's and early 1970's inspired a re-exploration and reevaluation of black American culture and its African origins among black Americans and among those within the academy, resulting in part from a network of scholars, artists, independent and small presses, and new scholarship which fueled one another. The coalescence of cultural and academic interests, the publication of new research materials on the Sea Islands, and the discovery and republication of old works during the 1970's enabled the Sea Islands to emerge in the national black imagination in new ways that Marshall, Weems, Dash, and Naylor would illuminate.

I turn to the ideologies and rhetoric of black scholars and artists between 1968 and 1978, because they not only influenced the direction of scholarship in the Sea Islands, but they are also particularly important for contemplating the resurgence of artistic and scholarly interests in the Sea Islands. I believe that this scholarship was not only the result of cultural and intellectual shifts during this period, but also emerged as a co-participant. If artists and scholars were searching for an "alternative black space," the Sea Islands offered that geographically, culturally, and historically. It provided a space for reconsidering the national black culture that artists stressed. The articulation of a national black culture was based on political mobilization and artistic visualization. Moreover, the emphasis on a black national culture that was rooted in the elevation and retrieval of folk practices and the folk body provided the groundwork for the popular, intellectual, and artistic recovery of the Sea Islands not only as unique space of black American culture, but as an emblem of the black American experience, a space of retrieval and return for a larger and extensive black family.

Outside of possible contributions to a national black culture, in areas such as folklore, song, and religious beliefs, the specific heritage of the Sea Islands offered an important link to Africa that black artists and the scholars of the period continued to articulate as necessary in the individual and cultural struggle of black people. Thus conceiving of a black cultural history that was positively linked to Africa through imaginings of Africa which at times conflated time and space, black artists and scholars viewed African American culture not from the viewpoint of fractures or discontinuity, but through a paradigm of continuity and unity. While the relationship black artists charted with Africa, particularly in the form of art and rhetoric was at times a simplification, this viewpoint did speak to an ongoing tradition by black American artists and intellectuals regarding the cultural and genealogical legacies of Africa, whether imagined or real. Moreover, it also underscored a radical shift in a larger cultural understanding by black Americans of the value of their African ancestry and the African origins of black southern culture, a shift that would impact not only how Gullah themselves embraced their particular connections to Africa, but also how black Americans viewed the Sea Islands as a central part of a Diasporic narrative.

In their examinations and visualizations of the Sea Islands, black scholars and artists confronted and challenged earlier representations of the geography and its people. The Sea Islands, in many ways, draws our attention to the politics of mapping spaces, because it was not only mapped differently through the construction of texts and images by various groups of cartographers, but their maps reflect the larger social, cultural, and academic discourses of their time as well as the vestiges of earlier discussions and traditions of marking space. Alternatively, if we are to think about mapping in terms of

hegemonic discourses, such as the colonial or imperial projects of national building and expansion, then in order to claim a space in which one can assert a new relationship with history and place, a new articulation of identity, one must reclaim that space from other voices. This goes beyond the aforementioned concern with mapping the space of the Sea Islands so that African Americans and others may see themselves anew. It also involves wrestling and rescuing the space from earlier mapmakers. Houston Baker discusses this in his analysis of Carrie Mae Weems' photographic installation *Sea Islands Series*. Mirroring Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's twin concepts of disruption and revision, Baker says Weems must rescue the Sea Islands from white authorial discourses, particularly those of anthropology and 19th century ethnology, while also receiving "the voice, character, resonances, and wisdom of these Gullah Islands."[109]

For more than a century, the Sea Islands have been a site of recurrent interests for social scientists and artists, who have described, represented, and chronicled the Sea Islands culture and dialect. Early images of the Sea Islands and representations of Gullah dialect in text appeared in recovered and published journals and diaries, like those of Laura Towne and Charlotte Forten, and in newspaper articles and in folkloric collections, such as A.M.H Christensen, C.C. Jones, Ambrose Gonzales, Samuel Stoney.[110] Novels

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[109] Carrie Mae Weems, In These Islands: South Carolina and Georgia (Tuscaloosa, AL: Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, 1995) 15.

[110] Abigail M. H. Christensen, Afro-American Folk Lore; Told Round Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina (Boston, J.G. Cupples Co., 1892), Charlotte L. Forten, Life on the Sea Islands (1864), Charlotte L. Corp Author Port Royal Relief Committee Forten, Merrihew and Thompson, First Annual Report of the Port Royal Relief Committee. : Presented at a Public Meeting in Concert Hall, Chestnut St., Philadelphia, March 26th, 1683 [I.E. 1863]. Uniform Title: Annual Report. 1863 (Philadelphia: : Merrihew & Thompson, Printers, Lodge St., corner of Kenton Place., 1863), Charlotte L. Corp Author Ohio Library and Information Network Forten, Life and Writings ([S. l.] : [Published by Anna J. Cooper], 1951), Laura Matilda Towne and Rupert Sargent Holland, Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne Written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862-1884, Printed at the Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass.,, 1912. Charles Colcock Jones, Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast, Told in the Vernacular (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin, 1888). Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, The Black Border; Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast: (with a Glossary) (Columbia, S.C. : The State Company, 1922), Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, The Captain; Stories of the Black

and short stories by Dubose Heyward and Julia Peterkin also provided renderings of black speech, life, and folklore about the Sea Islands with varying degrees of success.[111] Heyward's work provided the basis for Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, set in the Lowcountry.[112] These renderings of black life and culture in the Sea Islands were often at odds with how African Americans and Gullahs, especially, saw themselves and would later write and represent their voice and experiences. Speaking to the disjuncture between African American experiences and white representations, Langston Hughes proclaims in his protest poem:

> You've taken my blues and gone—
> You sing' em on Broadway
> …And you fixed'em
> So they don't sound like me.[113]

These sentiments were expressed by black artists, writers, and scholars who in the 1970s sought to give new vision and voice to the Sea Islands culture mined by scholars and lay researchers for more than a century.

Folklorists and anthropologists are among the broader group of scholars along with lay researchers and artists who have mined Sea Islands culture for oral, material, behavioral, and visual examples of difference. These representations of Gullah culture

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Border (Columbia, S.C., State Co., 1924), Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, Laguerre : A Gascon of the Black Border (Columbia, S.C. : State Co., 1924), Ambrose Elliott Aesop Gonzales, With Aesop Along the Black Border (Columbia, S.C., State Co., 1924).

[111] DuBose Heyward, Porgy (New York, George H. Doran Co., 1925), DuBose Heyward, Mamba's Daughters (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Doran, Edition: [1st ed.]. 1929), DuBose Flack Marjorie Heyward and illus, The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes, as Told to Jenifer (Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939). Julia Mood Peterkin, Scarlet Sister Mary (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1928), Julia Mood Peterkin, Black April: A Novel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1927), Julia Mood Peterkin, Bright Skin (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1932), Julia Mood Ulmann Doris Peterkin and d, Roll, Jordan, Roll (New York, R.O. Ballou, 1933), Julia Mood Peterkin, A Plantation Christmas (Boston ; New York : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934).

[112] George Heyward DuBose Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, Porgy and Bess. Uniform Title: Porgy and Bess. Vocal Score (New York, Gershwin Pub. Corp. [sole selling agent: Chappell, 1935)..

[113] Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road (New York, NY : HarperPerennial, Edition: 1st HarperPerennial ed., 1996) viii.

ranged from nuanced and insightful to deeply prejudiced, and ideological. Moreover, most of the early studies of the Sea Islands were collections of Gullah folktales that in many ways served to illuminate and confirm folklorists' and their readers' pre-existing ideas of the quaint, rural, comical and simplistic ways of life in the Sea Islands. Early folklorists often situated their collections within an overarching definition of black life that dominated academic study and public discourse at the time.

As a result, the efforts of early ethnographic and folkloric collectors who traveled to the Sea Islands, generally white men with the exception of a few white women, were often "stymied by preconceptions of black character and by the reticence of blacks to lower their guard before such strangers."[114] If rural black culture was seen as peculiar, backward, and comical by white collectors and the black and white readership who would subsequently read their collections, the Sea Islands, with its vestiges of the task system of plantation slavery and its Creole language, represented the extreme case. Gullah people were seen as an exception to African-Americans, but an exception based on their perceived inability to acculturate into American society, which was seen as a positive and the norm.

Interestingly, black intellectuals, particularly during the 1920's and 1930's—who saw art as a means of transforming race relations—worried that folktales would reinforce negative stereotypes of black character and affirm the cultural evolutionary discourses that emphasized blacks as "primitive" along an evolutionary ladder of groups. Through their individual and collaborative work anthropologists such as Franz Boas and historian, sociologist, and cultural scholar W.E.B. Dubois sought to combat this prevailing belief

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[114] Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (New York : Perennial Library, Edition: 1st Perennial Library ed., 1990) xviii.

about evolutionary hierarchies by emphasizing cultural relativism. They also challenged the dominant perceptions of the period, endorsed by scholars such as sociologists Robert E. Park and E. Franklin Frazier, that black Americans had no or little cultural connection to Africa.

This dominant perception also pervades early studies of the Sea Islands. Gullah language, in particular, was viewed as simplified talk, an imperfect derivative of British peasant speech which held very little of anything African.[115] In assessments of Sea Islands culture by individuals like Ambrose Gonzales and Guy Johnson, early scholars often pointed to white sources for speech, folklore and folk beliefs, and music. The work of Elsie Parsons and Zora Neal Hurston, both students of Franz Boas, were multi-sited in their examination of New World Black cultures. Both conducted field work in the Sea Islands and the Caribbean.[116] Parsons, however, was more reluctant than Hurston to make inferences about the particular connections between the Sea Islands and the Caribbean.[117]

Focusing on expressions of religious worship, Hurston recorded films in 1939 at the Church of the Living God in Beaufort, S.C. The films were part of a body of work Hurston produced under the auspices of the Federal Work Projects Administration about folklore from the "Gulf States." Hurston brings to her study a perspective on black rural culture that is both outsider and insider. Her view of black rural culture was at odds with

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[115] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 108.

[116] Zora Neale Hurston, Jane Belo, Norman Chalfin, Julia Jones, Henry Moore, George William Washington, Carrie Washington, Hugh Washington, May Belle Washington and Chalfin (Norman and Ethel) Collection (Library of Congress), [South Carolina, May 1940, Commandment Keeper Church, Beaufort--Field Recording], sound recording . 1940, Zora Neale Hurston, Jane Belo, George William Washington, Julia Jones, Izora Robinson, Henry Moore, Hugh Washington, Carrie Washington, Reuben Stephenson, Norman Chalfin, Mead (Margaret) Collection (Library of Congress) and Chalfin (Norman and Ethel) Collection (Library of Congress), "[South Carolina, May 1940, Commandment Keeper Church, Beaufort--Field Footage]," (1940), vol.

[117] Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes / Corp Author(S): Georgia Writers' Project.; Savannah Unit, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986) xviii.

many of the architects of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly Alain Locke, yet would be more in line with the perceptions of "low" and "high" art that were voiced by black artists and scholars during the 1970's. Hurston was at odds with the dominant modes of representation, urban and cosmopolitan, that dominated the Harlem scene and the renderings of black southern culture that prevailed in anthropology. Commenting upon the image and analysis of black life that surfaced in the works of Guy Johnson and Howard Odom in correspondences to her mentor Franz Boas, Hurston asserts that they were "presumptuous in their confidence that they understood fully the folk material."[118]

Black women artists' efforts to map a space is in part a response to the muting or ventriloquism of black life and black voice, which extends not only to the study of black life, but also to the study of earlier artists and scholars who have reflected upon black life and its richness, yet because of gender or/and race have found their work at the margins, discredited, or undervalued. Mapping a space serves not only to reclaim voices and texts, but also defines a tradition in which contemporary artists can locate their own works.[119] Zora Neale Hurston represents one of the most notable reclaimed foremothers, and serves as an artistic and critical model for uncovering, describing and writing black life, particularly for writers and artists like Julie Dash and Gloria Naylor.

Yet Hurston would not be alone in casting a new eye to black life, particularly black life in the Sea Islands. The works of anthropologist Melville Herskovits and linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner would be pivotal in challenging the Eurocentric perspective of Sea Island culture towards one that focused on and highlighted African sources.

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[118] Hurston, Mules and Men xviii.

[119] Instead of calling upon the term of mapping to describe black women's literary engagements, Cheryl Wall uses the trope of "extending the line" to examine how black women writers engage in repetition with difference. Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 16.

Herskovits, another student of Boas, emphasized in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) concepts of syncretism, reinterpretation and survivals among and between various New World Black communities after conducting fieldwork in the Caribbean, Brazil, and West Africa. The work of the African American linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner was also an important breakthrough in recognizing the African heritage of the Gullah language. Turner, unlike earlier scholars, did not view Gullah as a bastardization of English, but instead catalogued its particular African heritage, citing the specific language and language families that contributed to the morphology, syntax, sounds and intonations that represented Gullah.[120] His work would be seen as foundational, because it transformed how people thought about black speech in the Sea Islands and the linguistic heritage of Black Americans as a whole.[121]

If scholars and artists were returning in the 1970's to the groundbreaking works of Turner and Herskovits, they also revisited *Drums and Shadows* (1940), published by the Savannah Unit of the Federal Writer's Project. In interviews, Paule Marshall recalls the importance and impact of the references to the Flying Africans she read in *Drums and Shadows* to the development of *Praisesong for the Widow*. Proceeding *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) and *Africanisms in Gullah Dialect* (1949) in its publication date, *Drums and Shadows,* while faulty in some areas, was a pioneering effort, due in part to the participation of individuals such as Lorenzo Turner, Melville Herskovits, and Sterling Brown, who were involved in the project. *Drums and Shadows* not only challenged the visual images of black southern life sentimentalized by whites in films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and the virulently racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915) but by focusing on

[120] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 109.
[121] Pollitzer, The Gullah People and Their African Heritage 109.

African survivals instead of black acculturation it also challenged prevailing academic notions of the time. It was also at odds with the vision in the national office.[122] The Savannah Unit was also set apart by a literary orientation, the result of Sterling Brown's influence. Brown insisted that "half truth is not enough, however picturesque" thus urging fieldworkers to draw back the curtain that had long framed black life and "avoid taking white southern opinions as the arbiter of authenticity in black southern folklore."[123] Drawing upon the images and texts in works like *Drums and Shadows*, while recognizing the limits of these projects, black artists and scholars during the 1970's and subsequent periods have sought to challenge the muting of black voice in textual and visual representations of black life. In doing so, they have had to speculate given the absences and distortions in some accounts, such as Works Project's Administration (WPA) narrative, on what might have been experienced. Black visual and literary artists have also underscored the relevance of the reclamation of historical narratives and geographical spaces to the formation of cultural memory and personal identity.

Literary and cultural scholar Richard Long has argued that the "visualization of Gullah culture" has been a "continuing project beginning in the 1920's with the portrait sketches undertaken by Winold Reiss on St. Helena Island" and extending to recent examples such as Carrie Mae Weems' *Sea Island Series* (1992) and Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).[124] Long's evocation of project is particularly important for thinking about why different groups of artists and scholars have visited the Sea Islands,

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[122] Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes / Corp Author(S): Georgia Writers' Project.; Savannah Unit, xiii.
[123] Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes / Corp Author(S): Georgia Writers' Project.; Savannah Unit, xxiii.
[124] Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 103.

because it places emphasis not only on how they imagine or locate the geography, but also the function it serves within an intellectual, aesthetic, or cultural project. If the Sea Islands function as a site of continuous visualizations, then the ways in which people visualize it, construct its boundaries, allocate meaning, and instruct their audience in how to read the landscape emerges differently.

Black women writers and artists are often propelled by the desire to reclaim and confront a documented and undocumented African American past, or "our familial past," and make it "knowable" to stimulate audiences to engage in acts of recovery, "disruption," and "revision." In their efforts to revisit the past *and* the present of the Sea Islands, they engage in a dialectic with numerous discourses surrounding the Sea Islands and its people, including anthropology and folklore. As Paule Marshall, Julie Dash, and Gloria Naylor engage the Sea Islands in their works, they contemplate and challenge the histories of representation that surround the Sea Islands and Gullah culture, on one level, and the lives and experiences of black people on another, particularly black women. Their use of the Sea Islands' history and culture also invokes the larger concerns of black women writers during the 1970's and 1980's by contemplating how and where black women artists rescue the voices, experiences, and histories of historically marginalized people. To put it differently, "where does the search for the mother's garden" that Alice Walker articulates occur? What types of discursive acts must be involved in the recovery of voice, experiences, histories, and texts by black women and people that have been "abandoned" or "distorted, misrepresented, or lost?" [125]

These most recent visualizations have not only served to convey factual information about the Sea Islands to an academic audience, but also sought to inform and

[125] Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose 13.

alert a non-academic audience, predominately an African American reading and buying public, to the importance of the Sea Islands in the articulation of cultural memory and history. Demonstrating the important role of artists in the community building project literary scholar Chiji Akoma turns to Roy Heath who proclaims, "It is to our creative artists, our writers, painter, sculptors, and musicians that [sic] we must look to rebuild a shattered tradition, intended to serve the aspirations of the Guyanese as *a whole*."[126] While speaking to the potential role of artists in Guyanese society, Heath's words also express a perception of the role of art and artists in community building projects held by black artists in North America, a sentiment embraced by the artists this dissertation examines. In the essay, "Shaping My World of Art," Paule Marshall expresses her specific understanding of the artist's continued role in culture building.[127] For Marshall, the black writer's "task is two-fold: On one hand to make use of the rich body of folk and historical material that is there; and on the other to interpret that past in heroic terms."[128]

Marshall, Naylor and Dash engage a rich body of folk and historical materials surrounding the Sea Islands. In doing so, they call attention to the disappearance of cultural traditions and physical spaces for performing and transmitting cultural traditions, while proffering the novel, film, and photography as new realms and mediums for communication and transmission. They offer their art as an extension of a long-standing folk and oral tradition within African American culture and literature.

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[126] Chiji Akoma, Folklore in New World Black Fiction: Writing and the Oral Traditional Aesthetics (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007) 24.
[127] Wendy Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," MELUS 22.3 (1997): 22.
[128] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 22.

Through this study, I intend to show that the images produced, histories invoked, and traditions extended in the works of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash are just as powerful as those conveyed in folkloric collections. Wendy Walters and Chiji Akoma offer important insights for studying Afro-Diaspora literature, particularly the works I have chosen, because they challenge the separation placed between folklore and literature. Noting that folklore is a "central constituent in the African diasporic narrative traditions," Chiji Akoma contends in *Folklore in New World Black Fiction* (2007) that works by authors, such as Toni Morrison and Roy Heath, represent both extensions of folkloric history and examples of folkloric performances. Analyzing Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and its representation and revision of Sea Islands mythology in the novel through references to the myth of the Flying Africans, Wendy Walters critiques the boundaries traditional folkloric scholarship has defined between literature and folklore.[129]

Akoma and Walters specify a unique interplay between orality and written forms, which provides an important framework for rethinking not only the appearance of folkloric materials in black texts, but their very integration into the narrative structure or as the basis of the narrative.[130] Explaining this relationship, Akoma proclaims that novels such as *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) "do not contain folklore materials; they *are* folklore, constituted by the intersections of oral narrative aesthetics."[131] Speaking specifically about this interplay in black women's writing, Walters contends that, "the novel form, as used by black women writers, constitutes an alternate realm of transmission and transformation for the canonical tales of black

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[129] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 7.
[130] Akoma, Folklore in New World Black Fiction: Writing and the Oral Traditional Aesthetics 20.
[131] Akoma, Folklore in New World Black Fiction: Writing and the Oral Traditional Aesthetics 20. his emphasis.

communities."[132] It is this understanding of the legacies of black artistic expression, the interplay of oral and written texts, and the function and use of folklore I bring to my reading of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash. Their works serve as mechanisms for initiating talk, conveying historical memories, as well as perpetuating and transmitting oral and written narratives to various listening audiences. By conveying this information, the listener might be compelled to take particular actions to maintain that history after understanding its importance.

[132] Walters, "“One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air”: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 4.

Chapter 2

Paule Marshall's Search for Home(s): Return Migration in *Praisesong for the Widow*

"Going to New York is a disadvantage and an advantage. To live I think it's a disadvantage. Some things are lacking here, but the children have a home." —Mr. William Saunders[133]

"The old songs, the old stories, the old talk and the old tales seemed strikingly new and fresh. The old traditions had a power to move a generation, a power to call you to the task of achieving democracy"—Charles Joyner[134]

In this chapter, I begin my analysis of how and why African American women writers and artists turn to the Sea Islands as an important cultural landscape from the 1980s-1990s by examining Paule Marshall's vision of the Sea Islands in her 1983 novel *Praisesong to the Widow*. *Praisesong* depicts the journey of Avey (Avatara) Johnson, a middle-age widower, whose travel to the Caribbean and into the past enable her to not only identify cultural connections between the Sea Islands and the Caribbean, but also find new value in and understanding of the Gullah heritage she abandoned as an adult. Throughout her novels, Marshall has repeatedly returns to questions of migration, return, and reconnection for her Caribbean American and African American characters.

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[133] Guy and Candie Carawan, Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina-Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs/Recorded and Edited by Guy and Candie Carawan; Photographs by Robert Yellin (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 165.

[134] Carawan, Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina-Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs/Recorded and Edited by Guy and Candie Carawan; Photographs by Robert Yellin x.

Guiding Marshall's texts is a concern and interest in depicting the physical, spiritual, and cultural toll migration has had on people of African descent. In her exploration of Black Atlantic migrations, she draws upon the myths, stories, and beliefs which historically sustained, encouraged, or empowered black people in oppressive environments. Places, events, and people in her novels often assist Marshall's protagonists in their journeys toward cultural recovery and reconnection. With return and journeying as recurring motifs in her work, Marshall has expressed that her task as a writer is to "initiate readers to the challenges this journey entails."[135] In a 1980 interview for *Essence* magazine, she explains how the motif of journeying emerges in her work. Discussing the novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), she posits while the novel reflects a "trip back" it is a "psychological and spiritual journey back in order to move forward."[136] *Praisesong* reflects Marshall's continuing interests in Black women's physical, psychological and spiritual journeys, her examination of the African origins of New World cultures, and her focus on characters for who travel initiates or mediates a reassessment of the past.

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[135] Maria del Mar Gallego, "Going Back Home:Homelands and Futurelands in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," Evolving Origins, Transplanting Cultures:Literary Legacies of the New Americas, ed. Gallo Alonso, Laura and Dominguez Miguela, Antionia (Huelva, Spain: Universidad de Huelva, 2002) 67. Considering the challenges of Avey's journey, Maria del Mar Gallego uses the frameworks of liminality and "rites of passage" to explore Avey's journey toward shaping a Diasporic identity and reconciling disparate worldviews. Highlighting the in-between spaces of the self, Gallego uses Van Gennep's definition of rites of passage to demonstrate the types of movement and ritual that occur in the novel. Gallego explains that rites of passage incorporate three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation, which she classifies respectively as preliminal, liminal, and postliminal (Gallego 146). Maria del Mar Gallego, "The Borders of the Self: Identity and Community in Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine and Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands, eds. Benito Sánchez and Jesús Manzanas Calvo Ana Ma, Rodopi Perspectives on Modern Literature: 28 (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002).

[136] De Veaux, "Paule Marshall: In Celebration of Our Triumph," 128.

"The road home leads out to the world and back," anthropologist Carol Stack posits in her ethnography of African American return migration to rural locations.[137] Return, in *Praisesong,* is made possible only through the protagonist's movement and reevaluation of past and present landscapes which include: Tatem, South Carolina, Halsey Street in Brooklyn, New York, North White Plains, New York and Carriacou. Divided into four sections "Runagate," "Sleeper's Wake," "Lavé Tête," and "Beg Pardon," novel begins with Avey on vacationing with friends in the Caribbean.

Marion, the youngest of her three children, questions Avey's choice to "go on some meaningless cruise"[138] instead of accompanying Marion to Brazil or Ghana, places Marion presumes offer meaningful, historical, cultural and intimate relationships for both women. Through Marion, Marshall echoes Jamaica Kincaid's critique of tourism in *A Small Place* (1988). Criticizing tourists, including Black Americans, for being self-indulgent and self-absorbed, Kincaid argues that tourism in the Caribbean represents a new form of colonialism.[139] Pinpointing the lack of historical or cultural connections the *Bianca Pride* fosters, Marion also illuminates how tourists, including her mother, divorce or distance themselves from the historical narratives which encircle the places they travel and the impact they have on local economies and political institutions. Marion's protests and Avey's doubts about her trip selection vanish when she sees the *Bianca Pride*. Her response to the boat's grandeur and the excessive amount of clothes she packs and suitcase she brings underscore the value she places in material possessions at the beginning of the book.

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[137] Stack, Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South 16.
[138] Paule Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow (New York: Putnam, 1983) 13.
[139] Jamaica Kincaid, A Small Place (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988) 86.

Although she appears to be a woman secure in her middle class life and choices, the reader quickly discovers that this security is an illusion. Avey's growing dissatisfaction with her formality, control, and distance manifest in severe physical discomfort, bloating, and abdominal pain coupled with a disturbing recurring dream involving her deceased Great-aunt Cuney. Describing Avey's mental state the narrator explains, "Her mind in a way wasn't even in her body, or for that matter, in the room."[140] In her dreams, Great Aunt Cuney, her father's aunt, coaxes, pleads, and later demands Avey's return to Tatem, South Carolina and Ibo Landing, places she visited during the summer as a girl and later as a young married woman. Refusing to return to Tatem or Ibo Landing, Avey tussles with her aunt, resolute in her decision to return to New York. Unsettled by these events, especially the dream, she decides to return to North White Plains in order to escape her haunting dreams and hallucinations. After departing the cruise ship, she arrives in Grenada, only to miss her flight to New York.

The timing of her arrival in Grenada is fortuitous. She arrives in Grenada during the annual ritual return migration called the Excursion by Out-islanders, Carriacou residents living in Grenada. While migrating to Grenada for employment, the Out-Islanders represent a model of individual and communal connections with cultural traditions, heritage, and homeplaces. Missing her plane, Avey stays in a hotel in Grenada. There she recalls her life in Brooklyn and her move to North White Plains. More importantly, she reflects on the loss of private rituals and cultural traditions, as well as the loss of intimacy and passion in her married life with Jay (Jerome) Johnson.

Disoriented by the flood of memories, she leaves the hotel and decides to walk on the beach where she encounters an elderly Carriacou resident and shopkeeper named

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[140] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 10.

Lebert Joseph. After conversation and rum, she reluctantly decides to join Lebert on the boat ride from Grenada to Carriacou and subsequently takes part in the Excursion activities. While participating in the Excursion, Avey makes connections between Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions and languages and what she observed and heard as child in South Carolina. The voyage to Carriacou and her participation in activities, like the Beg Pardon and the Five Nations Dance, aid her in reconsidering the role ritual, tradition, myth, and the homeplace, Tatem, will play in her life and should play in the lives of her grandchildren.

While scholars have commented on the importance of travel to the Caribbean for Avey's cultural awakening, in my reading of the novel I argue that the Sea Islands, as invoked in Avey's memories and dreams, is equally important to her awakening and represents the final destination of the protagonist's journey. Given this, the novel can be read as a narrative of anticipated return migration to the South and an individual's awakening to the Sea Islands as a cultural resource. Journeying, in the novel, reflects both internal and external states of movement. Avey's movement begins as tourist travel, transforms into a journey of self and memory, and ends as a return migration. At the beginning of her vacation, Avey embraces her status as traveler, denying any connection or knowledge of the Caribbean people she encounters. Arriving in Grenada, she is frustrated and defensive when a crowd of Carriacou natives fail to recognize her tourist status, which she notes as a difference in dress, language, and behavior. Although she faintly recognizes the Patois the crowd speaks, she is not able to comprehend how and why this speech is similar to words spoken by the Gullah community of Tatem. This occurs only when she begins to confront the memories and geographies of her past.

Her journey into self and the past occurs in alternating states of consciousness and unconsciousness. While the novel features movement and travel in the present, a large part of the novel describes Avey's recollections of people, places, and events in the form of memory, dream, and hallucination. In her reassessment of the past, she recalls incidents of physical travel from her return trips during the summer to her father's homeplace to her family's move from the city to the suburbs. Marshall's emphasis on Avey's return to the past underscores the powerful and continuing influence of the past on the present and the need to confront it as a means of moving forward. Travel, journey and return are interconnected in the novel, and reflect different stages of interior and exterior movement. Marshall demonstrates not only how these types of movements are interconnected, but also that the presence of one movement allows for another movement to occur. Revisiting the landscapes of the past, enable Avey to reassess her connection to the Sea Islands and prompt her to not only revisit this location, but share its history and stories. The theme of awakening in the novel not only reflects discovering or rediscovering the landscape of the Sea Islands, but it also represents a recognition of the Sea Islands' function as a cultural and historical bridge to various geographies.

While many literary scholars have examined the motifs of travel and journey in *Praisesong for the Widow*, few have identified the novel as a migration narrative, specifically a migration narrative which leads Avey to anticipate return migration to the Sea Islands not the Caribbean. Farah Jasmine Griffin has argued that "[t]hrough migration narratives—musical, visual, literary—African American artists and intellectuals attempt to come to terms with the massive dislocation of black peoples

following migration."[141] She explains that migration narratives "portray the movement of a major character of the text itself form a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area."[142] While these works are "marked by an exploration of urbanism," in some instances they are also marked by a return South.[143]

Within the construct of the migration narrative, as articulated by Griffin, *Praisesong* represents a unique configuration. Avey is not a return migrant in the traditional sense; her voyage begins as a cruise to the Caribbean, not a deliberate or pre-planned journey back to the Southern United States. Yet, at the end of the novel it is Tatem Island, a fictional Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, where she decides she will ultimately relocate when she retires. Reading the novel as a journey of return migration and cultural awakening, I argue that Avey's journey serves as a metaphor for a broader national re-discovery of the Sea Islands and a re-valuation of the importance of a Sea Islands heritage to modern black identities and political struggles. With an attention to landscapes, sites of departure and sites of return, Marshall rereads the Great Migration, its disappointment and losses, and the Great Return Migration, its hopes and anticipation.

Since slavery, migration has been one of the powerful tools African American have utilized to transform their lives and challenge their conditions. The Great Migration reflects the mass movement of African Americans out of the rural South to North, Midwest, and West. Occurring in 1880s-1920s and also in 1930s-1940s, the Great Migration was fueled not only the desire for economic opportunity made available by war-time industries, but was also propelled by African Americans rejection of white

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[141] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 3.
[142] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 3.
[143] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 3-4.

Southern violence and disenfranchisement. In the black popular imagination, the North, Midwest, and West offered migrants greater possibilities for material success, personal security, and community development than might be attained in the segregated South. However, many migrants instead encountered overcrowded public housing, urban violence, informal segregation, and discriminatory hiring and housing practices. Through Avey's husband, Jay, Marshall illustrates hiring discrimination in the North. Jay's attempts to obtain an account license through his GI benefits are repeatedly thwarted and met with "a standard set of litanies."[144] Other migrants, including Avey, found themselves distanced from the people, places, and practices that had been integral to their lives and identities. Avey's and Jay's abandonment of cultural rituals and traditions is not only propelled by a desire for material success, but also by the fear of poverty. Marshall's examination of black migration to the city and suburb in the novel echoes the assessment of John's Island, South Carolina resident William Saunders in the epigraph of this chapter—migration is both a disadvantage and an advantage, the North was not always a home for migrants, and material success does not equate to happiness or wholeness.

As had been the case for the Great Migration, the experiences, motivations, and desires of new black migrants and returnees to the South after the 1960s were reflected in African American autobiography, memoir, and fiction. The Great Return Migration represented a dramatic change in black migration patterns. After more than half a century of out-migration from the South to the West, North, and Midwest, from rural areas to urban areas, African Americans beginning in the early seventies, started to return to the South in numbers that eclipsed those leaving. The numbers of the migrants returning each decade is telling of the transformations occurring within black migration patterns;

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[144] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 114.

ultimately they speak to changing relationships between African Americans and Southern "homeplaces." The reasons for the return of African American were as varied as their Southern destinations. The illusory nature of the "Northern Promised Land" was illuminated by deteriorating economic, physical, and social conditions of many inner cities in the North and West, while African Americans found greater political and social freedoms as well as economic opportunities in some parts of the South following the Civil Rights Movement.

Marshall's representation of the Sea Islands' geography and culture illustrates the paths and landscapes migrants travel in their journey away from homeplaces, draws attention to how African Americans may connect and reconnect with a cultural legacy rooted in the Sea Islands, and importantly identifies folklore and folk culture as medium for reconnection. By situating the Sea Islands as a central landscape in the novel, I am not overlooking the importance of the Caribbean in the novel. It is by going to the Caribbean that Avey begins to "see" the Sea Islands, understand, and reconnect to Sea Islands folk culture with a new and greater appreciation. Marshall's invocation of the geography of Carriacou in the novel serves not only as a space for rethinking black historical and contemporary migrations and responses to by black people over time, but also as a space for re-accessing the Sea Islands' connections within the African Diaspora.

Marshall envisions the Sea Islands as a bridging space not only to Africa, as many scholars and artists have stressed or reflected, but also the Caribbean. My focus on Marshall's image of the Sea Islands in the novel not only examines the connections she illuminates between the Sea Islands and Caribbean or the Sea Islands and the urban North, but also draws attention to how the novel emerges from and reflects two concurrent

artistic and scholarly movements, the African American literary re-migration South of the 1970s and 1980s and the Sea Islands Cultural Renaissance.

During the 1970s-80s, African American writers and critics engaged in a "reconsideration of the South and of black folk culture" [145] emphasizing the South as a site of cultural origins and ancestry instead of a location marked solely by terror and violence against African Americans.[146] The representation of the South as a site of African American culture and history following the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements represents an extension of earlier African American writing and art, which has envisioned the Southern landscape as a site and incubator of African and African American history and culture. While black writers and artists reimagined the South, black scholars, like Herman Blake, urged black scholars to write and recover a black history in the South, which recovered black voices and experiences with attention to region. Blake's article "The Sea Islands as a Cultural Resource" not only urged black scholars to study southern landscapes, but also drew attention to the Sea Islands as an important resource.

Praisesong reflects a vision of the South emerging in Post-Civil Rights migration narratives and epitomized in the works of Toni Morrison. The novel also complicates the economic motives typically cited as driving African-American return migration in the 1970s and 1980s. Echoing the observations of anthropologist Carol Stack, Marshall emphasizes the need for cultural reconnection as another factor informing return migration. Avey has no economic incentive to return to her father's birthplace, Tatem, but chooses to do so. It is this choice that underscores the type of return she seeks by the novel's end, a return that affirms a Sea Islands cultural history, preserves the importance

[145] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 146.
[146] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 11.

of place and experience, and instills an appreciation for a Sea Islands cultural legacy in future generations. In its depiction of the Southern landscape and its anticipation of possible return for Avey, *Praisesong*, like other artistic migration narratives of return, does not illuminate the presence of continued racism in the South. In this respect, literary migrations of return differ from migrants' actual accounts.[147]

Marshall's vision of Tatum reflects an image of the South dominant in contemporary artistic narratives of return. It is not only a site of "home" and ancestors, but also a site of cultural traditions. The evocation of the Sea Islands in *Praisesong* represents an important addition to migration narratives of return, because the Sea Islands serve as an emblem for continuation of African traditions in North America. Echoing the sentiments of scholars, like Herman Blake, Marshall identifies the Sea Islands as a cultural resource and issues a call to her readers to awaken to a new vision and connection with the Southern landscape and the African Diaspora, mediated through the Sea Islands.

The Sea Islands are illuminated in the novel through Marshall's use of ancestors. I find Farah Jasmine Griffin's discussion of ancestors useful for interpreting how Marshall constructs the Sea Islands. Ancestors and strangers are prominent paradigms of African American migration narratives. Extending a concept articulated by Toni Morrison, Griffin argues that ancestors can be identified within the form or content of the text. Living or dead, they may appear through ritual, religion, music, food, and performance. The ancestor's appearance helps the migrant negotiate the Northern landscape and at times demands or facilitates her return. Although the migrant may reject the ancestor's presence, this rejection as Avey demonstrates can lead to "further

[147] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 182.

alienation, exile, the status of stranger, or sometimes death."[148] The significance or influence of the ancestor in the migrant's life; however, depends upon how the South is situated in the novel.

The concept of the ancestor is represented in *Praisesong* by individuals and places. Embodied by Great-Aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph, critics have noted that ancestors in the novel help Avey to awaken to her past, re-establish connections with rituals and histories, and forge threads and cultural bridges across geographies. Moreover, ancestors in *Praisesong* play a pivotal role in directing and altering the types of migration that occur in the novel and the success of these journeys. Great Aunt Cuney helps to awaken Avey's social and cultural consciousness, and establishes a link between Avey and generations past. Great Grandmother Avatara's personal testimony and narrative of Ibo Landing offers Avey survival skills for confronting alienation and exile. Lebert Joseph aids in Avey's cleansing and purging, while also providing a space for cultural reconnection through the Big Drum and Five Nations dance. Aunt Cuney and Lebert not only lead Avey physically and spiritually back to a homeplace, but also emphasize the traditions and rituals which defined the experiences of the community, individual, or family in that location. Citing Stuart Hall, Cheryl Wall notes that the ancestors in the novel serve "restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric for the past."[149] Cuney's role as an ancestor is particularly important in the novel and to Avey's journey. Appearing in Avey's dreams she intrudes upon Avey's psyche and demands her return. Aunt Cuney calls the displaced migrant home. In a 1990 interview for *Ebony* magazine Maya Angelou describing African American return migration

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[148] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 8.
[149] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 194.

illuminates the connection between African Americans and the Southern landscape. She proclaims that the South:

> sings a siren song to all Black Americans. The melody may be ignored, despised or ridiculed, but we all hear it. After generations of separation and decades of forgetfulness, the very name brings back to our memories ancient years of pain and pleasure.[150]

Cuney's call to home represents a siren song, Avey has ignored and at time despised. However, she can not deny it.

In her call to Avey, Aunt Cuney demands Avey's return to specific places, Tatem and Ibo Landing. Great-Aunt Cuney provides the catalyst for Avey to recover lost memories and experiences, she reminds Avey of the importance of the homeplaces, Tatem and Ibo landing, and awakens Avey from her space of loss or displacement. She also directs the action in the novel southward.[151] While Griffin argues that a pivotal moment of African American migration narratives is an event that drives the action northward, in *Praisesong* two differences occur.[152] First, the action in the novel is driven not north, but southward into the Caribbean and the Southern United States. Secondly, it is not only an event that informs the action in the novel, but a person and a place.

The ancestor figure or elder has been a recurring character in Marshall's work inspired by her grandmother and an African American hairdresser, named Mrs. Jackson, who Marshall has referred to as her "spiritual mother."[153] In interviews, Marshall

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[150] Maya Angelou, "Why Are Blacks Returning to Their Southern Roots," Ebony April 1990: 44.
[151] Stack, Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South. Carol Stack uses the term homeplaces to reflect places of origin for African Americans who return to the rural South. The concept of homeplaces evokes a physical, cultural and spiritual home. Multiple and individual, homeplaces are both specific and general.
[152] Although she marks this as the first moment in the African American migration narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin also explains that the moments may occur in any order. Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 3.
[153] Melody Graulich and Lisa Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," NWSA Journal 4.3 (1992): 286.

identifies Mrs. Jackson as the ancestral model for Aunt Cuney.[154] Although working in Brooklyn, Mrs. Jackson was from the "deep south" and "would tell [Marshall] stories about growing up in the South."[155] On one occasion, Marshall recalls Mrs. Jackson invited Marshall and her sister to a Sunday matinee show at the famed Harlem Apollo Theater. Recalling her excitement at heading to "the city," which she explains meant "Harlem," Marshall recounts "traveling there on the A train made famous by the Duke."[156] Under Mrs. Jackson's direction, she navigates a physical and cultural landscape that she as a Barbadian-American may also lay claim. Contemplating how and why Mrs. Jackson emerged as her guide, Marshall suggests:

> she had taken it upon herself to put me in closer touch with the Afro-American culture that was also my birthright. She was as much a teacher as my mother, the Bajan "mout'-king" and kitchen poet, who flooded my childhood with the customs and rites and brilliant dialect of her native Barbados. My mother claimed me in the name of Afro-West Indian culture, Miss Jackson in the name of the Apollo and all it represented.[157]

Like Mrs. Jackson of Marshall's youth, Great Aunt Cuney lays claim to Avey connecting her to a Sea Islands cultural heritage through stories, and walking tours of the Tatem landscape. She also provides Avey with access to cultural performances and traditions central to the Sea Island community of Tatum.

Responding to the out-migration of her nephew, Avey's father, to New York, Great-Aunt Cuney tries to maintain links to Tatem for Avey through physical travel, storytelling, and naming. Through a ritualized event, not unlike the Excursion of Carriacou residents, Great-Aunt Cuney "ordered her father to bring and deposit her every

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[154] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 287.
[155] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 286-87.
[156] How the City Shapes Its Writers: Gone to Heaven at the Apollo, April 28 1985, New York Times, Available: http:proquest.umi.com, August 8, 2006.
[157] How the City Shapes Its Writers: Gone to Heaven at the Apollo.

August in Tatem."[158] With outrage or indignation, Avey recalls how Aunt-Cuney had "laid claim"[159] not only to her summers "but has saddled her with the name of someone people has sworn was crazy."[160] Underscoring Gullah beliefs surrounding the links between the living and the dead, Aunt Cuney's grandmother "had come to her in a dream with the news" of Avey's birth expressing: "It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl."[161] Both the name and the story of Avatara (the grandmother) provide a bridge between a living individual and the traditions, beliefs or concerns of an earlier generation.

Noting the etymological roots of Avatara, critics have explored how the name symbolizes and underscores the novel's themes. Derived from Sanskrit, Cheryl Wall argues that Avatara means "passing down or passing over,"[162] while Susan Rodgers stresses another meaning of the word which emphasizes "the manifestation of a deity or the embodiment of concept."[163] Avatara, Great-Aunt Cuney's grandmother after whom Avey is named, emerges in the novel as "the character who passes down the ancestral knowledge that Aunt Cuney bequeathed before she passed over."[164] By passing on the story of Ibo Landing and giving Avey the full name of Avatara, a name Avey abandons as an adult, Great-Aunt Cuney seeks to instill the young girl with a sense of her place in history, her connection to a legacy of resistance, and her role in passing that legacy on. Underscoring the importance of Ibo Landing and Avey's name, the narrator explains that by "instilling the story of Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with

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[158] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[159] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[160] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[161] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[162] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 187.
[163] Susan Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," African American Review 34.1 (2000): 90.
[164] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 187.

a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill."[165] While Great-Aunt Cuney sees the story of Ibo landing as a mission which was to be entrusted to the next generation, for the child whose birth had been foretold, Avey, it as a duty that she had "taken years to rid herself of the notion" that this was her job to fulfill.[166]

Through Avey's recollections of Great-Aunt Cuney and her memories of childhood visits to Tatem Island, Marshall reconstructs the cultural and physical landscape of the fictional Sea Islands community, located "across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater."[167] In these scenes not only does Aunt Cuney emerge as an ancestor, but so do the Sea Islands. Drawing upon the image of the South as a site of rituals and traditions, Paule Marshall calls attention to a site of African American culture marked uniquely by geography, history, and demography.

Given the geographical description she provides, more than likely Marshall, like Julie Dash and Gloria Naylor, bases her fictional Sea Islands off of St. Helena. Described by "Edenic," and "lushly vegetated," Marshall's vision of Tatem as "a world elsewhere"[168] draws similarities to Gloria Naylor's description of Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. Within *Praisesong* the rituals, traditions, and physical landscape of the Sea Islands are illuminated through Avey's and Great-Aunt Cuney's biweekly walks to Ibo Landing.

In preparation for those walks, Great Aunt Cuney would engage in a dress ritual marking the first stage of their journey to the landing. Removing her field hat from its place on the door, she would place her hat over her headtie and braids and adorn herself

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[165] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[166] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 42.
[167] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 32.
[168] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 187.

with two belts that "she and other women her age in Tatem always put on when going out."[169] The first belt, Avey recalls was worn at the waist of their long skirts to hold up the skirt. The other belt was worn lower around the hip, which served to protect the wearer spiritually. Aunt Cuney's attire is not only reflective of traditional Sea Islands dress, but also a practice of dressing the body and spirit found in the Caribbean. By explaining the importance of this ritual of dress for Cuney, Marshall underscores an alternative explanation for the second belt, "a belief that it gave them extra strength."[170] The preparations made for their weekly journeys emphasize the importance of dressing the physical and spiritual body.

From Aunt Cuney's ceremonial dress, Pharo Harris' yard work, the practice of the Ring Shout to the story of Ibo Landing, Marshall draws upon historical materials to illuminate the rich cultural landscape of the Sea Islands, while constructing a bridge upon which the reader may understand the links existing between the Sea Islands and broader Black American culture as well as the Sea Islands and the Caribbean. Sea Islands rituals in the novel "exists as a vestige"[171] carried by enslaved Africans to America and practiced by the "handful of elderly men and women still left, and who still held to the old ways."[172] Yet, as Avey demonstrates these traditions are dormant in the memory and lives of a younger generation.

Through Marshall's descriptions of Avey's abandonment of her personal rituals in the course of her migrations and her dormant knowledge of Sea Islands cultural traditions,

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[169] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 32.
[170] While Sea Islands women wore belts to "hoist their skirts as they worked in low-lying fields," Marshall's second description is "reminiscent of the bandolier worn by Congo Jane, the co-leader of a slave revolt in *Daughters*"(186).Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition.
[171] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 189.
[172] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 34.

Marshall engages concerns vocalized in the 1970s and 1980s surrounding the preservation and potential loss of communal and individual memories of rural Sea Island life. The dormant nature of these rituals in Avey's mind and life is disrupted when she recalls her walks with her Aunt Cuney and retraces significant places like the Island's church, where she witnessed the Ring Shout, and the Ibo Landing. Identifying the importance of walking to Avey's introduction to the land and its ritual and cultural traditions, Cheryl Wall argues that by walking with Cuney "Avey is able to lay her own claim to the land" and is introduced to "rituals which preserve the island's cultural inheritance."[173]

Their journey to Ibo Landing consisted of several legs taking them past the homes of neighbors like Shad Dawson, Benitha Grant, and Golla Mack, past the church where Aunt Cuney accidently crosses her feet and finally to Ibo Landing. Golla Mack, not only is a play on the term Gullah as Wall suggests, but also underscores the connections between the Sea Islands and Angola.[174] Moreover, his apparent "immunity" to time underscores a sense of continuity which surrounds images of the Sea Islands. The sites and stories, Aunt Cuney introduces to Avey provide different life lessons and underscore a tradition of resilience and resistance, while also providing "a context for the context for the journeys that follow."[175]

The first leg of the journey to Ibo Landing, Avey and Aunt Cuney pass Shad Dawson's property. Dawson represented the loss of land occurring in the Sea Islands

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[173] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 187.
[174] References in newspapers would often describe runaways using descriptions that included ethnicity or country of origin. Gola emerged as a description for individuals who came from the Angola region. This region contributed significantly to the cultural and linguistic development of Gullah culture in the Sea Islands.
[175] Marie Foster Gnage, "Reconfiguring the Self: A Matter of Place in Selected Novels by Paule Marshall," Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature, ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006) 104.

during the period the novel was published. He losses his property after a white man whom he entrusted to pay taxes fails to do so. In Avey's dream, Aunt Cuney stands on the road beside Dawson's woods waiting for Avey. Within the novel, Dawson functions as a cautionary example of how land, an important site of cultural connection and development, was lost. It also alludes to the changing face of the Sea Islands, marked by white ownerships of what were formerly black properties. In her autobiography, Bessie Jones highlights the link between property ownership and cultural legacy, while revealing the challenges to contemporary land ownership in the Sea Islands. She recalls that while black families owned a large amount of property on St. Simons Island, GA in the "passing years the children leave, and sell their legacy mostly."[176]

On their journey to Ibo Landing, Avey and Cuney pass the church. While performing the Ring Shout, Cuney crosses her feet and is ordered out of the circle. The Ring Shout, a form of religious worship developing among enslaved communities, emerges as an important historical practice in the novel and helps to underscore the importance of the Sea Islands as a geography that maintained and fostered African inspired practices in the Americas. In coastal areas of the Southeast, the Ring Shout is characterized by counterclockwise movement as well as "complex cross-rhythms, subtle dance maneuvers, and antiphonal songs."[177]

Marshall's description of the Ring Shout in the novel echo the scenes folklorists John and Alan Lomax witnessed in their travels south documenting this practice. [178]

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[176] Bessie Jones and John Stewart, For the Ancestors: Autobiographical Memories (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 122.
[177] Jonathan C. David, Together Let Us Sweetly Live: The Singing and Praying Bands, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) 9.
[178] David, Together Let Us Sweetly Live: The Singing and Praying Bands 7.

Illustrating the circular movement of the body into a "dazzling syncopated rhythm," the participants "gliding shuffle," and their "atonal voices," Marshall writes:

> Arms shot up, hands arched back like wings "*Got your life in my hands/Well well well . . .*" Singing in quivering atonal voices as they glided and stamped one behind the other within the large circle of their shadows cast by the lamplight on the wall. Even when the Spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planed firm.[179]

Shuffling and grounding the feet are central features of both the Ring Shout and the dance Avey witnesses in Carriacou.[180] The novel underscores the importance of this element of the practice in a scene when Cuney "had been caught 'crossing her feet'" and was "ordered out of the circle."[181] Although banned for only one night, after that incident Cuney refuses to return to the Ring Shout or the church and instead as the townspeople proclaimed "made Ibo Landing her religion after that."[182] During Avey's visits, Aunt Cuney takes her past the church, sometimes stopping so that Avey too could see the Ring Shout, before heading to Ibo Landing. Although watching from afar, Avey recalls in Carriacou her wish to "give her great aunt the slip and join those across the road."[183]

There is an interesting contrast between the church and Ibo Landing. Ibo Landing is marked by mobility and freedom of movement. It is by a process of stepping or walking uninhibited that allows the Ibos to return to their homes. However, movement in the church is both free and restricted. The participants are required to keep their feet firmly grounded, and consequences occur for those who do not follow this dictum. Secondly, the Ring Shout and the story of Ibo Landing illuminate how Avey's cultural

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[179] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 34.
[180] Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 89.
[181] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 33.
[182] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 34.
[183] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 248.

knowledge of the Sea Islands emerges from different sources. Susan Rodgers notes that the church elders provide Avey with "knowledge of the ritual dance and a sense of groundedness and community."[184] Moreover, her desire to join the people in the church underscores the importance of group participation in the formation and reaffirmation of communal bonds. The Ring Shout in the novel appears as a thread to community, to ancestors, to Africa, and to the African Diaspora. Moreover, the practice of it on Tatem Island underscores a location from which this thread extends. Threads connecting people and geographies emerge as a recurring theme in the novel. They illuminate the connections between individuals and a group, underscore "tangible symbols of ancestral connections, and illuminate the formation of new relationships.[185]

Scholars have turned to Sterling Stuckey's seminal work *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987) to analyze *Praisesong's* representation of the Ring Shout. In his effort to describe and interpret slave rituals, Sterling Stuckey notes that enslaved Africans responded to the cultural challenges and their new environments by invoking an African nationalism, which "consisted of values that bound slaves together and sustained them under brutal conditions of oppression."[186] Noting the importance of the circle to "all African ceremonies," Stuckey explains that the "majority of Africans brought to North America" came from central and western areas of African such as Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone where "an integral part of religion and culture was movement in a ring."[187]

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[184] Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 90.
[185] Shanna Greene Benjamin, "Weaving the Web of Reintegration: Locating Aunt Nancy in Praisesong for the Widow," MELUSJO - MELUS (2005): 60.
[186] Sterling Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) ix.
[187] Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America 10-11.

Underscoring the importance of the Ring Shout to "the business of community building,"[188] Sterling Stuckey argues, "The ring in which African danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America."[189]

Marshall maps the landscape of Tatem through her descriptions of rituals such as the Ring Shout, people, and places. Cheryl Wall notes that individuals and places in the novel emerge as "tangible markers of local history."[190] Walking through Tatem under Cuney's guidance, Avey is given the tools to possess the land and navigate its cultural and physical landscape. The final destination of their ritual journey is Ibo Landing. While Avey resists her initial return to the Tatem and Ibo landing, her subconscious and her deceased aunt compel her to revisit this location. Ibo Landing or as the locals of Tatem called it "the Landing," Cuney explains to Avey is the location where Cuney's grandmother witnessed Ibo men, women, and children resist enslavement by collectively walking on water and returning to their African homeland. Gifted with the power to see into the future, Cuney recounting her grandmother's words explains that the Ibo "sizing up the place real good" witnessed "everything that was to happen" from "the slavery time and the war" to "the 'emancipation and everything after that right up to the hard times today."[191] Although shackled in iron around their ankles, wrists, and necks, they "kept walking right on out over the river."[192] Speaking to the power of their journey, Cuney notes the Ibos where:

> Stepping. And when they got to where the ship was gonna take 'em wherever they was going that day. And they was singing by them, so my

[188] Jason Young, "Through the Prism of Slave Art: History, Literature, Memory, and the Work of P. Sterling Stuckey," Journal of African American History 91.4 (2006): 391.
[189] Stuckey, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America 12.
[190] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 187.
[191] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 38.
[192] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 38.

> gran' said. When they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving 'em no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing.[193]

Movement functions as a central aspect of this story. The Ibos "just walked past it," Cuney declares of their physical bondage and geographical separation. The Ibos' movement reflects the belief that "there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving 'em no trouble."[194] This perception underscores the belief that even when the distance between the locations an individual finds himself and his homeplace seem insurmountable, it can be reconciled. It can be bridged. It also underscores the possibilities of return from exile. Physically exiled from their homelands, the story of Ibo Landing emphasizes the ability to return and reconnect after some time away and apart from one's community.

Cuney's account of Ibo Landing to Avey demonstrates Marshall's mining and reconfiguration of traditional folklore.[195] Through her use of the folktale, Marshall underscores the importance of the novel as a site of cultural dialogue and connection and highlights its function as a medium for preserving folk culture. In her use of folktale, myth, and historical documentation, Marshall connects herself to writers, like Shirley Anne Williams and Toni Morrison, who have similarly drawn upon historical materials and events. Explaining this connection, she attests, "we've discovered this rich vein of material that was not considered worthy and we're mining it."[196]

Praisesong, Marshall explains, began with the mining of *Drums and Shadows*, a collection of interviews of coastal Georgia natives in the 1930s by the Works Projects

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[193] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 39.
[194] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 39.
[195] Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 21.
[196] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 293.

Administration (WPA). Originally published in 1940, *Drums and Shadows* was republished in 1972 due to increasing interests in the Sea Islands and the demand for more extensive scholarship. During her reading, Marshall recounts how she "came across a placed called Ibo Landing."[197] Referring to the frequency of its appearance in the text and its influence on the development of the novel, Marshall explains:

> Nearly everyone spoke of a placed on one of the islands called Ibo Landing. According to a story handed down over the years, a group of Ibo slaves decided they didn't like the looks of America as soon as they were brought ashore and turned around and walked back home across the Atlantic Ocean. That's how *Praisesong* began, with that folktale.[198]

The story of Ibo Landing is a variant of the legend of the Flying Africans which is recounted through the Diaspora from the coastal areas of the United States, the Caribbean, and part of Latin America.[199] The legend of the flying Africans emerges as a counter-discursive narrative of enslavement,[200] underscoring the importance of personal testimony and folklore as sites for uncovering beliefs, values, and experiences of the enslaved. It serves as a demonstration of continued African cultural ties to an African homeland, while also standing as a symbol of resistance to slavery and transcendence of the spirit.

Although many versions of the legend exist, two dominant versions of the narrative have emerged. Prevalent in African American and African Diasporic folklore, the legend has also been appeared in African American literature from Virginia

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[197] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 292.
[198] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 293.
[199] Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature " MELUS 16.1 (Spring 1989-1990): 22.
[200] Examining Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison's use of the legend, Wendy Walters argues that their transformation of the legend "articulate[s] a counter discursive historiography of slavery" and their novels "function as sites for contextualizing this legend, and for questioning pervious versions of the legend as they existed in cultural memory and in recorded folklore histories." Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 4.

Hamilton's collection of folklore *The People Who Could Fly* (1985), Ralph Ellison's short story "Flying Home (1967)," Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1975), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) to Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow.*[201] The first version of the legend, which Marshall draws upon in *Praisesong*, recounts a groups of newly arrived Ibos who fly back to Africa. Accounts of this version of the story appear repeatedly throughout the folkloric collection *Drums and Shadows*. The second rendition of the story, recounts an African shaman who allows himself to be captured and enslaved in order to discover the location of disappearing members of his community. Locating them on plantations in the United States, he teaches them to fly again, a skill forgotten in the Americas. Collectively, they fly back to Africa.[202]

The story of Ibo Landing not only draws upon the legend of the Flying Africans, but concretizes a place in which this event occurred. While the story of Ibo Landing, also spelled as Ebo Landing, does not contain flight as a means of return, it shares with the legend of the Flying Africans an emphasis on Africans who resist slavery and return to Africa through "'super human' means."[203] Throughout the Sea Islands numerous locations have been identified as the site of this event. Julie Dash has underscored the prevalence of this story throughout the Sea Islands. She notes in her research for the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) "almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area

[201] For an examination of the appearance of this legend in African American literature please see Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness.", Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature ".
[202] Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature ": 23.
[203] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 19.

where the people say, 'This is Ibo Landing.'"[204] *Drums and Shadow* includes a version of the story, which recounts:

> A group of slaves from the Ibo tribe refused to submit to slavery. Led by their chief and singing tribal songs, they walked into the water and were drowned at a point on Dunbar Creek later named Ebo (Ibo) Landing.[205]

Michael Gomez explains that the march of the Ibos at Dunbar Creek located on St. Simons Islands, Georgia may have occurred in 1803 when a group of Igbos was taken from Savannah to St. Simmons. Recounting this event in *Drums and Shadows*, informants have offered various readings of Ibo Landing, which are confronted and explored in African American women's writings about the Sea Islands. Highlighting this difference Gomez notes that while Priscilla McCullough explained that the enslaved Africans formed a ring and then took flight, Floyd White counters by saying that the Ibos had not marched to their homeland, but had committed collective suicide and drowned.[206]

Marshall's use of the folk tales also highlights distinctions between history and personal memory, and underscores the power of women as bearers of cultural narratives. Perhaps noting differing interpretations of the event, Marshall confronts the believability[207] of the story in a scene where Avey challenges the ability of the Ibos to walk on water. However, Avey is not alone in questioning the story, in her dreams she recalls how "other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that [Avatara] was crazy."[208]

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[204] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 30.
[205] Quoted in Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 20.
[206] Michael A. Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 118-19.
[207] Walters argues that the "veracity" and "believability" of the story is challenged, because "flying and walking on water are not recognized as humanly possible in the western scientific framework, assertions of their occurrence are met with disbelief. Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 21.
[208] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 39.

Through Cuney's response, Marshall calls attention to how and why we interpret some stories as fictional and others as "real." Responding with "disappointment and sadness" Cuney proclaims to the inquisitive ten year old Avey, "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went talking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?"[209] Cuney's response requires that we consider what beliefs systems are drawn upon to interpret stories as fact, historical, or believable. By drawing parallels between Ibo Landing and the Bible, she also asserts the story of Ibo Landing not only as a "spiritually empowering legend," but one that may "serve as a companion discourse to the canonical stories of Christianity."[210] The story of Ibo Landing within the novel emerges as a metaphor for self-possession, freedom, and the continued connection with home. The components of the story not only give us a sense of how people responded to the harsh conditions of slavery, but also how generations interpreted and contextualized those responses. Michael Gomez notes:

> For the Igbo, then, suicide was perhaps the ultimate form of resistance, as it contained within it the seed for regeneration and renewal. The story of Ebo Landing is an attempt to convey this message, that something more profound than simple suicide had taken place.[211]

Marshall conveys not only the canonical story of resistance transmitted by women. Cuney's narration of the event underscores the importance of personal testimony as its own source of history. Throughout her narration, she makes repeated reference to what "her gran said" and Avatara's position as an eyewitness to the event. Avatara's recollection of Ibo Landing is not merely storytelling, but personal testimony. Avatara's

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[209] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 40.
[210] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 21.
[211] Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South 120.

testimony emerges as a thread linking generations of women to an event which symbolized Africans' possession of their bodies and spirits. Passed through generations of women, their telling of the story gives it meaning in relation to their own experiences, and recalls the experiences and voices of earlier articulators of the narrative. Through her retelling of Ibo Landing, Cuney also underscores the power of storytelling as an additional record of black life, beliefs, and values. Similar to the African ring ceremonies, which commemorated the dead, the story of Ibo Landing emerges as a space for contextualizing and challenging events and histories, and as a means for affirming the connections between generations living and dead.

In order to understand the empowering message and history of Ibo Landing and reconnect with her Sea Islands cultural heritage, Avey not only returns to childhood memories of Tatum and its physical and cultural landscape, but also revisits and reexamines the geographies of Harlem, Brooklyn, and North White Plains. In Grenada, while waiting for a flight to take her back to New York, she recalls her life with husband Jay, particularly the early years of the marriage spent in their Halsey Street apartment in Brooklyn. Through the geographic and cultural space of Halsey Street, Marshall examines the space and experience of the Great Migration, pinpointing the social pressures impacting life in the city. She also highlights the loss of cultural traditions and identity of northern migrants and their families, and indicates possible paths to individual and cultural reclamation or recovery.

The section "Sleeper's Wake," represents Avey's introspection about her life on Halsey Street in Brooklyn and in North White Plains. In a Grenadian hotel awaiting her

departure back to North White Plains, she recalls the happiness and intimacy of her early married years, and identifies the factors that led to the deterioration of her marriage. Corresponding to Avey's mental state, this section represents her awakening and ensuing awareness. Reflecting upon her and Jay's individual and collective struggles, she describes what she once valued, illustrates the events and circumstances that led her to abandon and discard her personal and cultural traditions, and identifies how and why they should have approached their relationship and life differently. Her emotions, anger, sadness, and regret, illuminate another definition of the term wake—a process of mourning. Reflecting upon her married life, Avey realizes that she is mourning the passing of Jay who's "death has taken place long before Jerome Johnson."[212] She was mourning the man he had discarded and the woman she had "banished along with her feelings and passions to some far-off place."[213]

In the private space of their home, Avey and Jay enjoyed the blues, jazz, gospel, and poetry. These cultural products do not serve simply as entertainment for the couple, but as sustenance. Overworked and underappreciated by the outside world, his white boss and co-workers at the department store, Jay transformed when he entered their home. With closed eyes, the music of Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and Ella would work "their special mojo on him."[214] Other days, the blues was an important element for easing away the frustrations of the day. The self Jay had been protected, covered, and hidden while at work and in the streets was unveiled in the presence of the blues and jazz at home. Avey's recollections of Halsey Street recall moments of intimacy and joy between the couple as they entertained each other with private dances. Not only did Avey feel "her

[212] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 135.
[213] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 141.
[214] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 94.

body . . . restored to its proper axis" but the reverberation of African American culture in their home felt like a "nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn to for sustenance."[215]

Avey's reference to the nurturing ground is a reference not to the physical space of Halsey Street, but the rich African American expressive traditions that were embraced within that space. From the jazz music of Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, The Count, The Duke, to the spirituals exalted by the Fisk Jubilee Choir, The Five Blind Boys of Atlanta, Georgia and the poetic words of Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, Marshall draws upon an extensive range of African American cultural production. Marshall's references to African American expressive traditions from the spirituals, blues, and jazz speak not only to the migration and movement of black people, but also the ways in which African American expressive culture transformed to reflect new experiences and traditions.

Avey and Jay's embrace of African American expressive traditions reflect one of the shields the couple drew upon in their early years. During these years, they possessed spiritual and physical shields in the form of rituals and traditions. The spiritual shield came in the form of the music with which Jay and Avey would armor themselves. The physical shield came in the form of Jay's mustache. Also a sign of vanity, a representation of his individuality, Jay's mustache "subtly drew attention away from the intelligence of his gaze and the assertive, even somewhat arrogant arch of his nostrils, thus protecting him."[216] Similar to the double belts that Aunt Cuney wore, the rituals Avey and Jay practiced and the mustache Jay wore represented a form of protection.

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[215] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 12.
[216] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 93.

Through her representations of different geographies, Marshall not only suggests how New York can be seen as a place of cultural production, but also illustrates the threads connecting the Sea Islands to New York. The couple's embrace of these small rituals, from the poetry recitations to the musical interludes underscores "an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible."[217] Marshall uses the concept of "silken threads" to describe the connections between Avey and the various people, traditions and rituals of African descent. Silken threads represent the individual links connecting Avey with people of African descent regardless of region, nationality, time, geography, or cultural variations.

Recalling the threads she felt waiting with family for their boat rides up the Hudson among a growing crowd, Avey remembered feeling "the same strange sensation" standing outside the Tatem church watching the elderly perform the Ring Shout with her Great Aunt.[218] Recalling this sensation Avey remembers experiencing:

> slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And the threads went out not only to people she recognizes from the neighborhood but to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomer just up from the South, the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk and who it was said were as passionate about their rice as her father.[219]

Through Avey's threads, Marshall names and illustrates the multiple threads which exist between blacks from the urban north, the South, and those from the Caribbean. Shanna Benjamin contends that "Marshall acknowledges the need for black Americans to make connections globally, form relationships locally, and acknowledge

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[217] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 137.
[218] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 190.
[219] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 190.

intra-cultural diversity."[220] The threads she describes where thin and silken, yet strong "as the lifelines of woven hemp."[221] Marshall's use of woven hemp illustrates a linkage between Africa and the Americas, particularly the Sea Islands and Sierra Leone in the form of cultural production, the production of sea baskets. These baskets often woven by women represented a tradition preserved and passed down over generations—a point of cultural connection across the sea.

Cultural products in the novel emerge as a thread of cultural connection and whose links serve to archive and preserve African derived cultural memory. The fragments of Langston Hughes' poetry, "I've known rivers/Ancient dusky rivers,"[222] echoed by Jay, and recalled by Avey in her memories of their life in Brooklyn also underscore that cultural links and cultural memory can exist across geographical boundaries. By reciting this work, Jay asserts a pre-enslaved past, rich and resolute, in the present. His invocation of Hughes and others, such as James Weldon Johnson, is informed not only by cultural pride and appreciation, but a desire to be grounded in a cultural past that inspires and sustains.

Marshall demonstrates connections or threads can be sustained not only through shared cultural production, but also through exposure to and participation in shared cultural practices. In their early married life, Avey and Jay took yearly trips to the South during the summer, staying in the house left to her by Aunt Cuney. Visiting Ibo Landing, they celebrated it as both a personal event and as an important cultural memory for

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[220] While Benjamin points to Black Americans, I believe that Marshall's assertion surrounding the importance of acknowledging different types of links extends to various groups of the African Diaspora as her other novels indicate. Benjamin, "Weaving the Web of Reintegration: Locating Aunt Nancy in Praisesong for the Widow," 60.
[221] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 191.
[222] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 125.

African Americans. When asked what he thought of the place, Jay responded, “I’m with your aunt Cuney and the old woman you were named for. I believe it, Avey. Every word.” [223]

However, the feelings of connective threads and more specifically Avey and Jay’s trips to Ibo landing and personal rituals end abruptly one Tuesday night in their living room. The Tuesday night fight is an important passage in the novel, because it illustrates the social and personal stress of life in the city, the impact of poverty on families, the responses of individuals to social and economic stress, and the absence of support systems. It also signals a dramatic shift in the Johnsons’ interactions with one another, their perceptions about the importance of their cultural inheritance, and their beliefs about the cost of success.

On the Tuesday night in question, Avey and Jay’s continued fights about his possible infidelity prompt Avey to threaten to leave with the children. That Tuesday night, Avey’s confinement in the space of the home, her concerns about her husband’s fidelity, and her frustration with her latest pregnancy ballooned. Carol Boyce Davies examines this scene as an important aspect of Avey’s journey into self. The journey motif in women’s writing often emphasizes the personal and emotional, as well as more abstract concepts such as womanhood and motherhood.[224] Davies argues that the dual nature of mothering as pain and joy is central to Avey’s examination of her romantic relationship with Jay and its destruction. I would add that it is also important in the examination of migrant family relationships. Recalling her feelings of isolation and her physical distance from family and friends in Brooklyn, Avey recalls it was in the “City,” not Brooklyn,

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[223] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 115.
[224] Carole Boyce Davies, "Black Woman's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society 1.1 (1987): 26.

where everyone she knew lived, including her mother.[225] While this is said in the course of an argument with Jay, it has important implications for how she perceives her experience in Brooklyn.

Avey feels a lack of autonomy and mobility while living in Brooklyn. With two small children and pregnant with a third, Avey finds herself confined in small apartment to spend "the better part of each evening wandering from one room to the other."[226] Aware of her immobility and what she perceives as Jay's mobility, Avey becomes increasingly frustrated by her daily wandering and changes in her appearance. The use of the term wandering is an important metaphor for Avey's sense that she is drifting from her true self to someone who is unrecognizable at first. Glancing at herself in the mirror, Avey does not recognize who she is seeing. On the day of the fight, Marshall asks of Avey, "Who—*who*—was this untidy swollen woman with the murderous look? What man wouldn't avert his gaze or try to shut out the sight of her in someone else's flesh?"[227] She has been transformed into someone else, the "crazed" woman down the street who always fought with her husband, but not Avey's true self. This is an important feature in indicating how city life and disconnection from life-sustaining activities and behaviors may enable the self to become the stranger.

Avey's feeling of immobility echoes Darlene Clark Hine's historical study of black women's migration to the urban Midwest. In particular, she focuses on differences in motivations for migration, employment, and travel. Hine explains that while many women's motivations echoed that of men's, there were also added factors which influenced women's decisions. These included the desire to escape sexual exploitation

[225] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 103-04.
[226] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 99.
[227] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 100.

and abuse at the hands of black and white men, and the desire for personal autonomy. Like the women that Hine describes, Marshall's depiction of Jay and Avey draws a strong connection between feelings of autonomy and physical mobility, and illuminates how the different forms of mobility available to black men and women produced different experiences in their destination sites.

As Jay and Avey's experiences differ and their fighting heightens, they find themselves mirroring a couple on Halsey Street whose public fights the Johnsons find embarrassing and frightening. During the fight in 47,' which leads to their eventual move to White Plains, New York, Jay and Avey were dismayed to see the "scene they witnessed almost every weekend so vivid . . .become them."[228] Avey had transformed into the "half crazed woman . . . scouring the bars and beer gardens in her nightgown, and Jay was the derelict husband taking the wild swings at her under the streetlamps."[229] Rebuking any similarity between them, they move as far away from the image of the couple and the physical space they inhabit. From that day forward, Jay put on blinders, at the expense of everything, in-order to secure a future for his family that was vastly from the realities of the fighting couple.

Avey and Jay's struggle for success in the face of discrimination and isolation leads them to give up the rituals they had held most dear, yet it also enables them to provide opportunities for their children. Susan Rogers has noted that Marshall's description of the Johnsons is not a condemnation of material advancement by itself, but "rather when it exists at the expense of cultural identity."[230] The couple's responses and abandon of their small rituals is also "fueled by fear, fear of conforming to racist and

[228] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 110.
[229] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 110.
[230] Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 84.

sexist stereotypes," which is epitomized by the couple whose fighting the Johnsons detests and fear emulating.[231]

Weeks before their actual move to North White Plains, Avey contemplates not what lies ahead, but instead "the early years back on Halsey Street, of the small rituals and private pleasures."[232] While she initially understands these thoughts as "an act of betrayal" because of Jay's personal sacrifice and "marathon effort," from the space of her hotel room she begins to understand "the betrayal" differently. [233] Marshall not only emphasizes the loss of self, but also examines the preventability of loss. Where had the threads gone, Avey asks herself. Why hadn't she been able to feel them for a long time? If the threads had not disappeared, the rituals which made them apparent certainly did. It is in the space of Avey and Jay's home that they embrace a cultural heritage, and gently love one another. However, this space is disrupted by the outside, the pressures to succeed and the disappointment of discrimination.

Marshall's representation of Avey's material success at the costs of her happiness, health, marriage, and connection to a rich cultural legacy underscores the sentiment of William Saunders, who reflects upon the advantages and disadvantages of migration for Sea Islands residents. Avey's life demonstrates that migration was both a disadvantage and an advantage, the North was not always a home for migrants, and material success did not equate to happiness or wholeness. In the black popular imagination, the North, Midwest, and West offered migrants greater possibilities for material success, personal security, and community development than might be attained in the segregated South. However, many migrants instead encountered overcrowded public housing, urban

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[231] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 196.
[232] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 122.
[233] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 122.

violence, informal segregation in the North, and discriminatory hiring practices which prevented them from occupying positions in management or other upper level positions. Others, including Avey, found themselves distanced from the people, places, and practices that had been integral to their lives and identities. Banishing her feelings, including her rage, Avey distances herself from the social movements and protests of sixties and seventies, which her daughter Marion becomes involved.

Avey's emerging awareness and reconciliation with the events, places, and choices of her past are important steps in her journey and help her re-evaluate the significance of the Sea Islands and Ibo Landing. Realizing the loss of the "most valuable part of themselves"[234] and their cultural tradition was not a necessary step toward social mobility and material success, Avey articulates awareness, vigilance, strength and distance as central principles that may have helped them balance their ambition with the continued embrace of their traditions.

Marshall's representations of and reflections on the importance and role of black expressive culture to black people has been shaped by a number of sources. In her often-cited essay "From the Poets Kitchen Poets," she echoes sentiments also expressed by Alice Walker in her collection of essay *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984). Walker makes an important revelation surrounding the importance of earlier black women's oral and creative expressions to the development of a subsequent generation of women artists by providing models and examples of how language, both story and forms of talk, and materials, such as quilting and cooking, were and could be given alternative functions to convey black women's reality and voices. Like Walker, Marshall challenges and expands conventional definitions of art and artists, including as a primary source for

[234] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 139.

her literary voice, the kitchen poets, like her mother, whose voices accompanied her childhood.

Similar in function to Avey and Jay's personal rituals and the living room they were performed in, the space of the kitchen and the medium of talk gave the kitchen poets of Marshall's youth a way to give witness to their own reality and experiences, affirm their worth, and sustain and retain a "unique Black identity."[235] Avey's journey underscores Marshall's continuing desire as an artist to reflect or create "a cultural base"[236] which underscores "those qualities which Black people possess no matter where you find them in the hemisphere-and which . . .make of us one people."[237] Drawing upon Ralph Ellison's articulation in *Shadow and Act* (1964), in *Praisesong*, Marshall conveys and reflects a history and experience of black people who have created and used to art to reflect their experiences, sustain their spirits, and at times transcend their conditions. Echoing the call for black artists to construct a usable black past, recover and incorporate black folk traditions in their art, and underscore the centrality of Africa to contemporary black identities, Marshall's concerns and themes in the trilogy of works *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) and *Praisesong for the Widow* reflect the ideologies of the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

In their analysis of works from this trilogy, critics have drawn attention to the themes, motifs, and concerns emerging in and between *Praisesong* and *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Both works feature female protagonists, Avey Johnson and Merle Kinbona, who experience a journey into self, memory, and the past. They illuminate a

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[235] Paule Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," New Letters 40.1 (1973): 104.
[236] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 108.
[237] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 104.

Caribbean landscape, Carriacou and Bourne Island, which prompt characters to confront the past. They also underscore themes of connection and resistance through ritual and myth, the Big Drum and Five Nations Dance in *Praisesong* and Carnival and the story of Cuffe Ned's rebellion in *Chosen Place*. Given the goals they share, the experiences they reflect, and the geographies they cover, I believe it is important to revisit briefly Marshall's construction of the Caribbean in *Chosen Place* in order to show how she uses the space and culture of the Caribbean to construct a pathway to the Sea Islands for Avey in *Praisesong*. The landscape of the Caribbean and the particular histories of resistance and cultural continuity Marshall invokes not only aid transformations of the protagonists in these novels "from colonized objects of their own self-hatred to active subjects of their own creation" but also functions as "an analog for their community's healing as well."[238]

Hortense Spillers has astutely noted the difficulty of summarizing *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*.[239] The novel, set on a small fictional eastern Caribbean Island called Bourne Island, underscores the interactions between various sets of actors from the colonial governments of newly independent Third World Nations and their people to the historical and contemporary interactions between the Third World and the West. Although scholars have pointed to Barbados, the homeland of Marshall's parents, as a model for Bourne Island, the fictional Island also takes into account the social and political history of Grenada. During the 1960s, Paule Marshall spent a year in Grenada

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[238] Jane Olmstead, "The Pull to Memory and the Language of Place in Paule Marshall's the Chosen Place, the Timeless People and Praisesong for the Widow," African American Review 31.2 (1997): 265.

[239] Spillers offers a paradigm of four concentric circles as a useful medium for reading the novel. These circles center on myth, history, ritual, and ontology. Hortense J. Spillers, "Chosen Place, Timeless People: Some Figurations on the New World," Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 152.

researching *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow* funded through a Guggenheim Foundation grant.

With its Marxist critique of technology and power, Marshall conceived the novel as a "microcosm" of the challenges, problems, and conflicts faced by oppressed people worldwide. Despised and ridiculed by the elite of the Island, the residents of the Bournehills reject outside efforts to "improve" their life, including the most recent attempts by a group of American researchers lead by an anthropologist Saul Armon. Although economically impoverished, the residents of Bournehills, descendants of "rebel slaves," [240] posses a knowledge of their cultural past and connection to Africa. Through their embrace of myths and rituals, particularly their annual re-enactment of a slave uprising lead by Cuffe Ned, the Bournehills residents emerge as witnesses to their own history which roots them in the past and the present.[241] The uprising of Cuffe Ned and the establishment of a maroon community in the Bournehills provide the residents with a revolutionary spirit and a belief that only full independence is acceptable, not the superficial changes proposed by colonial government or agencies. For them the changes suggested by the Western agencies are "stopgap" measures that represent a corruption of their traditions and values.

In its examination of the historical and social implications of slavery and colonialism upon the present, Marshall continues to underscore the importance of confronting the past in "personal and historical terms"[242] through the experiences and life of Merle Hodge. Merle, a landlady and voice for the island residents, represents "a cultural broker" because she "negotiates between all the cultures and classes of

[240] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 111.
[241] De Veaux, "Paule Marshall: In Celebration of Our Triumph," 124.
[242] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 111.

Bournehills."[243] Struggling with the death of her mother, the rejection by her white father and the loss of her husband and child, Merle must move through the scenes and pains of her past in order to triumph. In *Praisesong,* Marshall emphasizes the paths Avey must take in order to see, understand, and interpret the cultural resources available in the Sea Islands and the pasts she must reconcile with in order to embrace and reclaim her Sea Islands' heritage.

In *Chosen Place* and *Praisesong,* the setting of the Caribbean is important to the characters' examination of an individual and collective past and Marshall's exploration of a black heritage which spans and unites the African Diaspora. *Chosen Place* and *Praisesong* also express Marshall's Pan-African perspective. Political and cultural in dimension, Marshall's Pan-Africanist framework is shaped by her mother's and other kitchen poets' embrace of Garveyism. Influential not only to her understanding of the African Diaspora but also the themes of her work, she explains "their dedication to Garvey said that they saw themselves not just as Black Afro-Americans or Afro-Caribbeans living in this hemisphere, but they saw themselves as part of a that larger world[of black people]."[244]

Through Avey's awakening in *Praisesong* from cultural loss to cultural awareness and cultural embrace in the Caribbean, Marshall gives visibility to the Sea Islands as a new location for examining the complex and overlapping histories of the African Diaspora. Seeing the rituals and traditions of the Sea Islands reflecting through the rituals

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[243] De Veaux, "Paule Marshall: In Celebration of Our Triumph," 124.
[244] Sabine Bröck, "Talk as a Form of Action: An Interview with Paule Marshall," History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture, ed. Günter H. Lenz (New York: Campus, 1984) 197.

and traditions of Carriacou, Avey, like Marshall's mother, begins to see herself "in terms of the larger world of darker people."[245]

In the third and fourth section of *Praisesong* "Lavé Tête" and "Beg Pardon," Avey continues her awakening by purging the errors of the past, realizing the links between the Sea Islands and the African Diaspora through the space of the Caribbean, and understanding the importance of sustaining connections with ancestors and homeplaces. "Lavé Tête," meaning to wash clean, represents the reawakening of Avey from the persona of Avey Johnson. Like the contents of her purse emptied onto her hotel room floor, Avey's mind is "emptied of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had awakened with it like a slate that had been wiped clean."[246] Leaving the hotel, she wanders towards the deserted beaches and surveys the bare landscape around her with new curiosity. She felt "the caul over her mind lifting."[247] Like the dis-ease that Merle and Avey both share due to the resurfacing of un-reconciled histories, the motif of the zombie also continues in *Praisesong* through Avey's sombulism.
After walking a substantial distance down the shoreline away from the hotel, an exhausted and sun beaten Avey wanders into a rickety building for rest and shade. After several moments, Lebert Joseph, the shopkeeper and owner of the rum shop, emerges from a back room, informing Avey that he is closed for the excursion.

Like Ibo Landing, the Carriacou Excursion in the novel represents an important example of return migration for Avey, because it offers an example of a group that has embodied and applied the principles— awareness, vigilance, strength, will, and distance—she comes to realize are important to preserving, safeguarding, and treasuring

[245] Bröck, "Talk as a Form of Action: An Interview with Paule Marshall," 197.
[246] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 151.
[247] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 154.

traditions and rituals. Out-islanders make return an important aspect of communal life and celebration.[248] While integrated into Grenada society, they maintain a sense of community, as well as cultural rituals and traditions which reflect how they "remain Carriacou people."[249]

After departing the *Bianca Pride,* Avey gets her first exposure to the Excursion on the wharf when she sees crowds of people lined up waiting to board a "floating city of decrepit craft."[250] Although she perceives "a familiarity, almost an intimacy, to their gestures" she is frustrated none gathered recognized her as a "stranger, visitor, or tourist" and develops a sense of panic.[251] Throughout this section of the book, Avey is repeatedly mistaken for a native of Carriacou underscoring that while she may deny her connections to the "larger world of black people"[252] others notice it. Her understanding and subsequent participation in the Excursion enable her to regain a sense of the connecting threads, Marshall's metaphor in the novel for diasporic connections, Avey felt on her trips up the Hudson and in Tatem. Initially reluctant, Avey realizes how those threads extend through movement, dance, and story from Carriacou to the Sea Islands. As result, Marshall attempts to move beyond a sense of an African Diaspora based on a shared color, but one that underscores an a collective ethos, which underscores qualities "from the emotional core at the deep center of black life, and which perhaps has its source in our archetypal African memory."[253]

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[248] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 139.
[249] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 164.
[250] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 66.
[251] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 69.
[252] Bröck, "Talk as a Form of Action: An Interview with Paule Marshall," 197.
[253] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 104.

Avey first learns of the Excursion from the cab driver who takes her to the luxury hotel where she stays after missing her flight. Through the cab driver's dialogue, Marshall underscores the biculturality of Carriacou people. Even though the cab driver describes the Carriacou as integrated into Grenada society, pointing to their ability to speak English perfectly, their success in business, as well as their material success, he also acknowledges their sense of community, their preservation of language, Patois, and cultural traditions, Big Drum and Five Nations Dance. He explains to Avey when Excursion time comes it is "only Patois crossing their lips."[254]

Marshall uses the practices of the Carriacou to demonstrate cultural continuity and the preservation of African cultural forms in language, dance, and ritual as well as the syncretism of African cultures in the Americas. Carriacou and Tatem are positioned as places where unique formations of African cultural expression developed and persisted. Marshall draws parallels between African Americans from the Sea Islands and Out-islanders from Carriacou. Standing on the wharf amid a "flood of unintelligible words and the peculiar cadence and lilt of . . . Patois,"[255] Avey recalls not only the landscape of the French speaking Martinique, but also Tatem. Moreover, "she had heard it that night from out of nowhere her great-aunt had stood waiting in her sleep."[256] Like Patois, Gullah represents a Creole language with decreasing numbers of practitioners. The cab driver explains that many Grenadian residents, with the exceptions of out-islanders, had abandoned the use of Patois. Marshall's emphasis on Gullah and Patois as creoles represents one of the ways in which she narrates the history, experiences, and formations

[254] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 76.
[255] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 67.
[256] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 67.

of Diaspora through language. Language helps to forge a community and reaffirm its bonds and connections.

Like Aunt Cuney, Lebert Joseph emerges as an ancestor and a guide underscoring and affirming Avey's Diasporic bonds and connections. Cheryl Wall explains while Cuney accompanies the solo part of Avey's journey, Lebert accompanies and encourages the communal part of Avey's journey.[257] Many critics have noted that Lebert represents the African trickster figure of Esu-Elegbara, known by different names throughout the Diaspora. [258] In the novel, Lebert emphasizes the importance of the Excursion to Carriacou people, the physical and spiritual absence of family members and friends, and function of the ritual in connecting generations. Highlighting the importance of kin networks and the connection to place, Lebert explains his connection to Josephs living in Carriacou and Grenada and his understanding of home. Remarking, "Just because we live over this side don' mean we's from this place, you know. Even when we's born here we remain Carriacou people," Lebert underscores not only the connection of individuals to land, but also the ways in which culture and cultural traditions are rooted and sustained in places.[259] To return home, he explains, is to relax and enjoy; reconnecting with ancestors, elders, family, friends, and traditions; and to remember, practice, and keep cultural memories intact through the Big Drum ceremony, the Five Nations Dance, and the Beg Pardon.

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[257] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 200.
[258] Carole Boyce Davies underscores the connection scholars have made between Lebert and Esu-elegba. Highlighting the work of Eugenia Collier, Davies writes that Lebert represents the incarnation of Lebga who symbolizes both the trickster and guardian of crosswords. Davies, "Black Woman's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 25.
[259] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 164.

Marshall's research in Grenada and Carriacou in the 1960s provides the foundation for her descriptions of the Big Drum and Five Nations dance in the novel as well as the sea-sickness Avey feels travelling with Lebert to Carriacou for the ceremony. In Carriacou unlike most tourists, Marshall with the help of friends is given permission to witness the Big Drum dance. In *Praisesong*, Marshall grapples with the complex social landscape she witnessed in her travels to Carriacou from the dire physical conditions of individuals which caused many to leave to endurance of individuals "so ill-treated because of the politics in place."[260] The inclusion of the Big Drum ritual in the novel underscores African cultural expression and survivals, but also emphasizes how Africans and their descendants "remain[ed] responsive, creative beings whose ability to transform our suffering into art . . . attests to the fact that we have kept our humanity intact."[261]

Dating back to the 1700s, Big Drum ceremonies were often convened and organized for weddings, funerals, celebrations of prosperity (such procuring a new house), or due to the appearance of a deceased ancestor in a dream, such as the one Avey has of Aunt Cuney.[262] Like the Ring Shout, the Big Drum derives from African ring ceremonies and involves music, dance, and song. Over the last three centuries three groups of Big Drum dances have developed—Nation dances, Creole, and frivolous, all of which are featured in the novel. [263] Originating in the 18th century, Nation dances highlighted the nine West African groups brought to Carriacou during slavery, their contributions, and legacies. These groups included the Cromanti, Igbo, Manding, Chamba, Temné, Banda,

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[260] Gwendolyn Glenn, "Home Time and Island Time," Black Issues Book Review 6.2 (2004): 32.
[261] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 106.
[262] Rebecca Miller, Ethnomusicology 44.1 (2000): 172.
[263]Lorna McDaniel, "Musical Thoughts on Unresolved Questions and Recent Findings in Big Drum Research," Black Music Research Journal 22.1 (2002): 130.

Arada, Moko, and Kongo.[264] Highlighting the inclusivity of various African groups within the ritual celebration into a "multinational African congress," ethnomusicologist Lorna McDaniel asserts, "the Big Drum consolidated Diaspora national cohesiveness, spiritual outreach, and the retention of ancestral communication."[265] McDaniel explains that her introduction to the Big Drum and Carriacou, "a society mysteriously unified in memorializing the past"[266] came from reading Marshall's *Praisesong*. Memorializing the past emerges as a central concern in the novel. During the course of the Big Drum ritual Avey witnesses, participants remember, appease, and beg the Long Time People or Old People (as Lebert references the elders in the community) for forgiveness through the Beg Pardon, invocations.

In *Praisesong*, Marshall emphasizes the devotional nature of Big Drum dances, illuminates lineage patterns, and highlights cultural memories of ethnic inheritance through dance and song. After highlighting his cultural lineage as Chamba and Manding, Lebert asks Avey to define her national identification. She instead asserts her tourist or visitor identification claiming, "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone from around here, or from one of the other islands. . . I'm from the States. New York."[267] Unable to disentangle her national identification from her ethnic legacy, Avey represents a person not only alienated from her self, but also her cultural heritage. She is unable to identify her nation and perform the dances that Lebert lists, the Bongo, the Dama, or the Juba.

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[264] McDaniel discusses the historical and political factors which influenced the formation of the Five Nations dance. She suggests that the Big Drum was most likely established by the Cromanti, however, as other groups were brought to Carriacou they impacted its dance, songs, rhythm and pantheon. The Cromanti represent a mixture of various Akan groups, including Fanti, Asanti, and Akwapin. McDaniel, "Musical Thoughts on Unresolved Questions and Recent Findings in Big Drum Research," 129.
[265] McDaniel, "Musical Thoughts on Unresolved Questions and Recent Findings in Big Drum Research," 138.
[266] McDaniel, "Musical Thoughts on Unresolved Questions and Recent Findings in Big Drum Research," 127.
[267] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 168.

The Juba, which she faintly remembers hearing or reading about, she explains to Lebert was something that "no one dances . . . anymore."[268]

Marshall uses the dialogue between Lebert and Avey to demonstrate the alienation or disconnection from cultural heritage subsequent generations have due to out-migration and decreolization. Offering his grandchildren and great grandchildren as examples, Lebert proclaims that these family members had never been to the Excursion, or participated in the Big Drum and the Nation dances.[269] His grandchildren and Avey have much in common, both live far from their ancestral homelands. As a result of this distance, they are less likely to know and practice the traditions which emerge or where brought to these places. Highlighting this phenomenon, Lebert explains that many are unable to identify their nation and it is for them that he performs the Beg Pardon.

Fulfilling the role of ancestor, Lebert Joseph represents an important guide for Avey's journey and return migration. Not only does he possess ways of knowing and seeing, a trait identified with pure Africans, but he also embodies a guide for her travel and participation. Accepting Lebert's invitation, Avey boards the *Emmanuel C* with trepidation and physical discomfort. Velma Pollard underscores the importance of this water voyage to re-establishing Avey's cultural connections, highlighting two moments as especially important to this part of the journey.[270] The first is the acceptance of Avey by a group of older women, women who reminded her of the presiding mothers of Mount Olive Baptist church. Avey's acceptance by the older women on the boat represents "the

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[268] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 178.
[269] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 168.
[270] Velma Pollard, "Cultural Connections in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," World Literature Written in English 25.2 (1985): 293.

acceptance of the backslider by the redeemed."[271] Secondly, Avey's vomiting on the boat represents an important symbol of purging and the beginning of her physical and spiritual rebirth, a rebirth that is aided by the community of women around her. As she vomits violently, the female elders hold her. Explaining their role, Marshall writes:

> Their lips close to her ears they spoke to her, soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve what was happening.[272]

Avey's travel to Carriacou from Grenada and sea-sickness is modeled after Marshall's experience. Boarding a schooner Marshall experienced sea-sickness or what the islanders called "kick-em-ginny" a point in the journey across where the convergence of three bodies of water form a "boat rocking" [273] experience that leaves travelers feeling unable to complete the tumultuous journey. Marshall recalls, "the sea misbehaved grandly and I wanted to slide over the side."[274]

Critics have described Avey's voyage from Grenada to Carriacou on the *Emmanuel C* as a reverse Middle Passage. Marshall's goals in the trilogy of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People,* and *Praisesong for the Widow* has been to "describe[e], in reverse, the slave trade's triangular route back to the motherland, the source."[275] On the *Emmanuel*, Avey is struck by a sense of horror as:

> her mind flickered on briefly the bodies lying crowded with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each raise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon one filling her head.[276]

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[271] Velma Pollard, "Cultural Connections in Paule Marshall's Praise Song for the Widow," World Literature Written in English 25.2 (1985): 294.
[272] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 205.
[273] Glenn, "Home Time and Island Time," 31.
[274] Glenn, "Home Time and Island Time," 32.
[275] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 107.
[276] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 209.

Avey's awakening involves recovering not only her personal memories, but the collective memory of the Middle Passage. Examining her voyage through this context, Carole Boyce Davies describes the journey as a "rite[s] of passage," which engages Avey in the consciousness and experience of the Middle Passage as well as purges the "residue of Western pollution."[277] Avey's processes of purging and cleansing are aided by a community of women. When she arrives in Carriacou, she is taken to the home of Lebert's daughter Rosalie Parvay and given a proper "wash-down."[278] The washing enables a full awakening of Avey's body and mind to take place. During the wash-down, she recalls again memories of her Great Aunt and Tatem.

Following her cleansing, a baptism for a soul reborn, Avey is able to participate and appreciate the Big Drum ceremony, which begins with the Beg Pardon. Witnessing the Big Drum, she recognizes that the importance lies not only in dance or song, but also in its symbolism, its essence. Marshall explains the importance of cultural connections, asserting:

> All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so song, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burn out ends. And they cling to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself.[279]

This essence, she insists remains even when people can't remember the nations from which they came, the names of the dances that were once practiced, or the languages that were once spoken. It is this essence of those things that can and should be

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[277] Davies, "Black Woman's Journey into Self: A Womanist Reading of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 25.
[278] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 217.
[279] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 240.

remembered. The transition from Nation dances to Creole dances symbolizes the transformations in African cultures in the Atlantic world. Yet, even as the dances transform, their connections remain. Throughout each, Marshall emphasizes a "theme of separation and loss," while also possessing a spiritual and cultural connection.[280] Standing amidst a group of women performing the Carriacou Tramp, Avey participates in the circle movement, which she comes to realize is kin to the Ring Shout in Tatem. Performing the Carriacou Tramp "as good as somebody been doing it all their life," Avey re-establishes the silken threads she had once felt, and crosses the gap between her Aunt Cuney and the Shouters of Tatem.[281] As she performs, she holds true to the rule, keeping her soles on the ground.

As Avey continues her movement, Lebert moves towards her and bows before as he had done before the Old People. To her amazement other elders in the group follow, recognizing her as an ancestor. Identifying herself as "Bercita Edwards of Smooth Water Bay, Carriacou," an older woman in the crowd bows before Avey and asks, "And who you is."[282] Remembering her Aunt Cuney's admonition and understanding the meaning of her name and accepting her mission, Avey responds, "Avey, short for Avatara."[283]

Having reclaimed her name and her mission, Avey begins her journey home carrying in her pocketbook letters to the children and grandchildren of Rosalie and Lebert. However, the location of home for Avey has changed as had the meaning of her movement. In its narration of a reverse Middle Passage, Abena Busia argues that the novel "reverses the location of the promised land, which now, rather than being in the

[280] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 245.
[281] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 249.
[282] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 251.
[283] Marshall, Praisesong for the Widow 251.

United States . . .becomes Africa as represented by Carriacou."[284] As I have stated earlier, while I believe the Caribbean is an important space for Avey's awakening, my reading of the novel echoes Susan Rodgers' assertion the "novel does not a propose a literal return to Africa, but rather a return to America with a renewed awareness of African origins."[285]

Through her descriptions of Tatem and its role in Avey's memory, Marshall constructs a portrait of the Sea Islands as a space for visualizing connections, historical, contemporary and geographical. Echoing the sentiments of scholars, like Herman Blake, who in the 1970s not only drew attention to the Sea Islands as an important resource, but also issued a call to black scholars to study it, in *Praisesong* Marshall identifies the Sea Islands as a cultural resource not only for her protagonist but also for her readers. Marshall grapples with the very components that must emerge for any cultural landscape to be recognized, an awakening on the part of the individual to its importance. Through Avey's introspection, Marshall describes how fear and shame of the past as well as pursuit of material success can lead individuals to abandon the qualities and beliefs that have "enabled us, no matter where we found ourselves, to keep on keeping on."[286]

Illuminating this concern Civil Rights and Sea Islands activist Esau Jenkins proclaims, "If we hide those sweet songs and try to get away from what we came from, what will we tell our children about the achievement we have made and the distance we have come?"[287] At the novel's end, Avey does have story to tell her children and grandchildren, the story of Ibo Landing, recounted to her during summer visits to see her

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[284] Cited in Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 91.
[285] Rodgers, "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," 91.
[286] Marshall, "Shaping My World of Art," 106.
[287] Carawan, Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina-Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs/Recorded and Edited by Guy and Candie Carawan; Photographs by Robert Yellin xvi.

Great Aunt Cuney. Her ability to tell the story occurs only through an act of awakening, it is the result of not only her "trip back" into the places and people of her past but her new found understanding that the pursuit of material success does not mean one must abandon her cultural identity or traditions.

As a result of her cultural awakening, Avey's journey becomes a return migration to Tatem, a return that she will seek for others as well, including her grandchildren. Although the home in Tatem her aunt left her would be a vacation house at first, Avey also proposes other roles for the home. Although the novel, underscores the difficulty of Carriacou natives forced to move to Grenada for employment, Marshall does not describe how those same difficulties exist for black native Sea Islanders. Moreover, Avey's middle-class position and security make return possible for her. She can afford not just to go back, but to retire in the Sea Islands. Moreover, since her land was deeded to her by her aunt, she has not suffered the same experiences epitomized by Johnnie Rivers. Rivers, 75, was born on the South Carolina land purchased by his great-grandfather in 1883 and it was on this land where he hoped to die. However, he along with other family members lost their land, because there was not a clear legal title, a common challenge for many black families in coastal islands. The absence of this reality, which Gloria Naylor explores in *Mama Day*, could cause *Praisesong* to teeter on nostalgia, yet I caution against this conclusion. The absence of a contemporary Sea Islands reality must be contextualized against Marshall's beliefs about what her works are supposed to do for the reader. In an interview, she explains, "People get impatient with me because they say I

end my books at the beginning. And in a sense that's true. I'm a writer of fiction. I don't offer solutions. Rather, I suggest, I imply, the possibility of action."[288]

[288] Graulich and Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," 296.

Chapter 3

"More than a family . . . a history:" The Sea Islands as a cultural landscape in Mama *Day*

New Orleans. Tampa. Miami. None of those cities seemed like the real South. Nothing like the place you came from . . . To be born in a grandmother's house, to be able to walk and see where a great grandfather and even great great grandfather was born. You had more than a family, you had a history.[289]

In this chapter, I continue to examine how black women artists and writers crafted their own visions of the Sea Islands by turning my attention to Gloria Naylor's vision of the Sea Islands in *Mama Day*. Evoked through rituals and practices such as the Ring Shout,[290] symbolic and sacred geographies such as graveyards,[291] or recalled and recreated through folklore and myth such as the story of Ibo Landing,[292] the Sea Islands in the novels of Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor emerge as a distinct *lieux de mémoire*, a significant site of memory and history. In its role as a site of memory, a place in which memory and history are made palpable through rituals and storytelling, the Sea Islands envisioned by black women artists is made accessible not only to individuals who have

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[289] Naylor, Mama Day 129-30.
[290] A description of Ring Shout is provided in the previous chapter.
[291] In the works, film, photography, or literature that I examine, graveyards emerge as significant locations. See Anissa Wardi's work for a discussion of the importance of graveyards in African American culture. Anissa Wardi, "Inscriptions in the Dust: A Gathering of Old Men and Beloved as Ancestral Requiems," African American Review 36.1 (2002).
[292] The story of Ibo Landing is intimately tied to the Sea Islands geography, not only because of the prevalence of the myth in this region, but also because various islands proclaim to be the actual site of this story. Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness.", Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature ", Nada Elia, ""Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen": Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?," Callaloo 26.1 (2003).

close familial ties there, but to all of who would partake in a shared black national culture emergent from a regional location.

The Sea Islands, cultural scholar Richard Long has noted, has always been central in understanding and representing black American culture. Through the creation of a fictional Sea Islands, Willow Springs, and her use of a "storytelling paradigm,"[293] Naylor trains the modern reader to understand and interpret its histories, hear its stories, comprehend its rituals and traditions, and read its landscapes. According to Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, in *Mama Day* Naylor not only engages in "practices of listening and telling" central to African American expressive culture, but also frames a narrative which will serve as a model of these acts for her readers. [294] In this chapter, I explore the terrain that Naylor attempts to use to direct our understanding, the cultural landscape of the Sea Islands, and the methods, storytelling, mapping and bridging, she uses to frame the reader's interpretation.

My goal in my analysis of *Mama Day*, however, is to underscore the sources Naylor draws upon to construct this vision; the voices, images, and histories she challenges; the functions she hopes such a vision will hold for her readers; and the novel's place within the Sea Island Cultural Renaissance which surrounds its publication. Naylor's vision of the Sea Islands reflects a southern aesthetic and landscape embraced by a number of African American writers at the time. Scholars have cited different reasons for the return to the South in contemporary African American literature during

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[293] Donlon draws upon the concept of a "storytelling paradigm" from the work of Robert Stepto. She explains that Stepto uses this concept to illuminate 'a storytelling interpretive community' in African American literature "where readers—in spite of the inescapable fact that they are reading—are asked to become 'hearers'" (19). Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, "Hearing Is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Story-Listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith," Twentieth Century Literature 41.1 (1995): 19.

[294] Donlon, "Hearing Is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Story-Listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith," 17,19.

the 1970s and 1980s. Farah Jasmine Griffin points to changes in "a sense of history, history, and values embodied" in the South, resulting from the Civil Rights Movement, as well as "rising crime and cost of living in Northern cities."[295] Like Paule Marshall's construction of Tatem in *Praisesong*, in *Mama Day* Naylor identifies Willow Springs as a unique site of African American history, cultural values or beliefs, and traditions. While the Southern landscape and Southern black culture have emerged in all of Naylor's works, *Mama Day* represents the first novel to be primarily set in the South. Naylor's vision of urban black life and her construction of Willow Springs as a site of origins and ancestors coincide with other black artistic narratives of return migration south emerging in the 1980s.

My examination of *Mama Day* suggests that while Griffin's reading of black artistic narratives of return migration may apply to Naylor's deployment of the Southern landscape, the novel and her vision of the Sea Islands also reflect a larger campaign aided through the collective efforts of artists, community activists, cultural institutions, and academics to bring national attention to the Sea Islands, to emphasize it distinctiveness and cultural importance, and to advocate for the self-determination of residents of the region. Family gatherings, such as family reunions, have been central in bringing together family members by re-introducing them not only to one other but to the traditions and places many had moved away from due to lack of employment in the area.

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[295] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 145. Madhu Dubey, with a more critical tone, argues that the use or return to the southern landscape in contemporary African American literature represents a "retreat from a century long history of urbanization" and serves to "disavow the dream of full national integration" by "imaginatively recover[ing] the coherent black community that seems increasingly inaccessible in a postmodern urban present"(145).Dubey, Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism.

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s cultural and music festivals, such as the Daufuskie Day, the Penn Center's Heritage Days and the Beaufort Gullah Festival emerged throughout the Sea Islands and have since flourished attracting local, national, and international participants.[296] In the tradition of the family reunion, festivals bring together individuals who have left the island and those who remain to commemorate Gullah food, music, and beliefs.[297] The Penn Center's festival not only represents the larger scale of festivals, but also how festival organizers have connected celebrations with the study and promotion of Gullah culture. Ranging in size, scale, and content, festivals have been important in introducing Gullah culture to broader African American audiences. From the food served, the songs of the folk or spiritual singers who accompany some events, and the display of crafts such as sweetgrass baskets, Gullah culture is made visible for audiences through exhibitions and cultural performances. Participants are invited to participate and learn. These collective and often collaborative efforts, from festivals to the research and cultural programming at Research Institutes, have served to reinforce the Sea Islands as an important cultural heritage for its native residents. They also emphasized the Sea Islands importance to a broader base of black Americans as a cultural landscape and heritage to be claimed, embraced, and protected.

In my reading of the novel, I argue that Naylor's portrayal of the Sea Islands in *Mama Day* reflects and engages several artistic, cultural, and academic movements emerging in the 1970s. *Mama Day* reflects an impulse, which grew out of the cultural movements of the 1970s, to reclaim a maligned and buried black Southern history and

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[296] In 1976, residents of Daufuskie Island established Daufuskie Day, an annual celebration each June. The Penn Center's Heritage Day was established in 1982, while the Beaufort Gullah Festival was established in 1985. Wilbur Cross, Gullah Culture in America (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008) 189.
[297] Cross, Gullah Culture in America 189.

heritage and construct historical black experience as not only relevant but central to contemporary black audiences. In revisiting the Southern landscape, Naylor also re-establishes the Sea Islands and Gullah people as central to understanding black American culture and its African origins. Naylor's vision of the Sea Islands, however, is not solely cast to its historical importance, but underscores the contemporary realities and challenges of black life in the Sea Islands.

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars began to record the contemporary challenges facing Black Sea Islands' residents brought by resort development, unemployment, and out-migration. The Sea Islands relative isolation until the mid 20th century meant the challenges of modernization other communities faced where relatively new challenges for many, but not all black Sea Islanders. Until the 1930s and the 1950s most islands were only accessible by boat, which controlled or slowed the level of change brought to the islands. In her ethnography *When Roots Die* of Sea Islands life on St. Helena published in 1987, anthropologist Patricia Jones-Jackson emphasizes the impact of new industries, loss of land, in-migration and demographic changes upon Gullah traditions and practices. Highlighting the importance of performance and continuity of "traditional roots" to cultural survival, she asserts "[a]s long as these roots remain viable, the Sea Islands people will maintain their cultural integrity; only when such traditional roots due will their culture die." [298]

Jones-Jackson's observations enumerate concerns held not only by academics, but also Sea Islands residents. The fear of cultural, loss, decline, and break, Jones-Jackson illuminates has inspired cultural preservation, revitalization, and nativism movements throughout Sea Islands communities in the form of festivals, education programs, and

[298] Jones-Jackson, When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands 31.

historic and cultural preservation groups. [299]As scholars, community activists, and artists were laying the foundations for the legislation which would name the Sea Islands a national heritage corridor and allocate money for community groups, dramatic shifts were also occurring in the area of landscape preservation. These shifts were brought about by legislation, the creation of friends groups and citizen's commissions, and challenges raised by African American, Chicano, and other ethnic scholars. Groups such as the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society and the Daufuskie Island Historical Foundation drew attention to important local heritage sites, lobbied for their inclusion in national historic registers, and organized restoration efforts. Their attention to particular sites of African American history coincides with the challenges raised by African American scholars. During the 1970s, African American scholars called attention to the politics of preservation by questioning how landscapes where documented, preserved, and interpreted and others were omitted, dismissed or cleansed, particularly of a history of enslavement or oppression.

The impetus to uncover, resurrect, and convey submerged black histories was propelled by the energies of the Civil Rights Movement, the declarations of the Black Power Movement, and the artistic representations of Black artists who engaged this theme in a number of different ways and geographies. Concerns with historizing the black experience did not begin at this moment in history, but were reflected decades earlier in the writings of authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison and historians such as Carter G. Woodson and John Henrik Clarke.

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[299] Cultural preservation of indigenous or native cultures is not a new idea, but one that had been a concern of anthropologists, like Franz Boas, in the 1930s. Events such as the Ghost Dance in the 19th century represent one example of cultural revitalization efforts by Native American groups. Service, Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement, 93.

As African American artists began to think about African American past(s) in the 1970s, black women artists, in particular, underscored the importance of uncovering communal and women's histories, and highlighted the importance or oral narratives in such endeavors. The confluences of these movements, I argue also informs the particular vision of the Sea Islands Naylor constructs in her physical and cultural description of Willow Springs and its inhabitants. Moreover, the challenges facing contemporary Sea Islands raised by Sea Island community activists; the importance of documenting, commemorating and providing interpretation for ethnic landscapes; and the importance uncovering of black histories and memories for modern audiences find their voice in Naylor's articulation of Willow Springs as a distinct cultural landscape. Like Marshall, in *Mama Day* Naylor portrays characters who wrestle with personal and collective pasts in geographies which initiate or propel their journey into individual and collective memories.

In the essay, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: Bridging Roots and Routes," Daphne Lamothe draws upon the work of Pierre Nora to articulate the presence and function of the Sea Islands as "both a site *and* an environment of memory."[300] *Mama Day*, she explains, not only embraces but also challenges Nora's vision through an "intricate exploration of history and memory."[301] Contemplating the challenges and changes in societal articulations and relationships with the past and the decreasing access to places where memory is embodied in pre-industrial and industrial societies, Nora posits:

> Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secrets itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a historical point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical

[300] Daphne Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes " African American Review 39.1/2 (2005): 155.
[301] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 155.

> continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are not longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.[302]

Nora's distinction between sites of memory and environments of memory, Lamothe explains, is informed by his emphasis on the "power of the written state-sanctioned history to overdetermine understanding of the past."[303] This becomes an overwhelming force upon "pre-industrial traditional societies" who "typically produced living memories that counter such hegemonic discourses."[304]

Lamothe is not alone in her invocation of Nora's concept as a means of contemplating the representation and articulation of cultural memory in African American literature. Using a more critical tone, Melvin Dixon challenges Nora's representations of history and memory, arguing that Nora sees the former being static and analytic and the latter being dynamic and psychological.[305] Although invoking Nora's criteria for the recovery of the past, he pushes its limits explaining that the presence of sites of memory in African American culture "establishes a value of cultural memory and history or historiography" not "dependant on written analysis of criticism but rather achieves an alternative record of critical discussion through the exercise of memory."[306]

In my examination of *Mama Day*, I draw and build upon Dixon's and Lamothe's readings, critiques, and expansions of Nora's concept. I believe that the concept of a cultural landscape offers a means of reconciling the limits of Nora's initial vision of *lieux de mémoire* by identifying how cultural memory can be preserved or evoked through access to and experience in physical environments. Places elicit different interpretations,

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[302] Quoted in Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 155.
[303] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 155.
[304] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 155.
[305] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18.
[306] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18.

meanings, histories, and responses from various groups of people. A sense of place or geographical meaning is the result of a confluence of history, memory and story woven around places. This web brings forth complementary and competing notions that not only inform the meanings places have, the values they are given, but also the resources individuals use to evoke meaning and value in place. Naylor draws upon written and oral sources, as representations of historical knowledge, in order to create a sense of Willow Springs, its people, and history for the reader. Storytelling emerges as one of several different ways in which the community narrates and preserves its history.

In his 1977 classic, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan focuses on how an individual's understanding of place is based on what he defines as an experiential perspective. Defining experience as "various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality," he explains that these modes include sense of taste, smell, touch, and sight.[307] Places represent a center of value, which individuals learn and recognize based on their identification of significant and particular features. Distinguishing and recognizing features for a city such as San Francisco include "its unique setting, topography, skyline, odors, and street noised."[308] Underscoring how impressions of places are formed, attachments are made, and knowledge of place is constructed, Tuan argues, "An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind."[309] Naylor makes the fictional Willow Springs and the broader Sea Islands visible and real to the reader through her

[307] Yi-fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 8.
[308] Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience 18.
[309] Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience 18.

identification of distinguishing physical and cultural features as well as through the experiential perspective provided by her characters.

The concept of cultural landscape calls attention to the environment, the particular physical spaces, private and public, urban and rural, in which memory and history is recalled by Naylor's characters and made palpable to a contemporary audience. While cultural landscapes are varied and defined in numerous ways, I draw upon the definition offered by the National Park Service, which categorizes cultural landscapes as "a geographic area . . . associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural and aesthetic values."[310] Of the four types of cultural landscapes the National Park Service has constructed, two types, the historic vernacular landscape and the ethnographic landscape, best describe the ways Naylor imagines the Sea Islands in *Mama Day*. While the historic vernacular landscape emphasizes the shaping of a landscape through the "activities and occupancy" of a people, the ethnographic landscape underscores how a landscape possesses "a variety of natural and cultural resources that associated with people define as heritage resources."[311]

Naylor's Willow Springs emerges as a distinct southern landscape uniquely shaped by its inhabitants, their beliefs and traditions. Through interactions, rituals, and traditions, Willow Springs offers "natural and cultural resources" not only for the inhabitants, but for all visitors if they know how to "listen" and interpret those resources. The emphasis on listening in the novel underscores Naylor's desire to provide public

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[310] Quoted in Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Melnick, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America, Center Books on Contemporary Landscape Design (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 8.
[311] Alanen and Melnick, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America 8.

interpretation or what Dolores Hayden calls the creation of a "context for the viewer to understand what is being preserved and why."[312]

In her 1988 novel *Mama Day*, Naylor creates a stunning lyrical portrait of Black Sea Island life off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina in the 1980s-1990s. The novel is primarily narrated by Miranda (Mama) Day, Cocoa (Ophelia) Day, George Andrews, and the collective voice of a fictional Sea Island, mirrors a series of conversations, internal and external, between various characters as well as one initiated with the reader. Broken into two major parts, *Mama Day* chronicles the courtship and marriage between Cocoa and George. Naylor highlights their differing perspectives regarding their various interactions from their first date in New York to George's death in Willow Springs. Through their reflections, the reader realizes that Cocoa and George not only come from vastly different backgrounds and geographies, but also possess "divergent sensibilities and philosophies."[313]

These divergent sensibilities and philosophies are tested when George travels with Cocoa one summer to her ancestral and childhood home of Willow Springs. Willow Springs is a fictional island off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, whose residents like the Gullah have continued over generations traditions and rituals recreated and practiced by their enslaved and later freed African ancestry. George's struggle to understand the customs and history of the Willow Springs are frustrated when Cocoa becomes ill, the result of malicious acts of a jealous neighbor, Ruby. Priding himself on being a self-sufficient man and a scientific thinker, George can not bring himself to

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[312] Dolores Hayden, "Foreword: In Search of the American Cultural Landscape," Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America, ed. Arnold R. and Robert Melnick Alanen (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) xviii.
[313] Charles E. Wilson, Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion, Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001) 87.

believe or recognize the origins of Cocoa's illness. He also fails to recognize that Cocoa's healing requires his acknowledgement of their individual and collective connection to a larger community. Understanding this difficulty, Mama Day, Cocoa's great aunt, and a central figure in Willow Springs, sends George on a testing journey to find what he lacks—a belief in something or someone other than himself. Unable or unwilling to extend his hand to Mama Day, George suffers a heart attack and dies. Recovering from her illness, Cocoa decides to relocate to Charleston, South Carolina where she remarries. The connection George struggles to development with Willow Springs is cemented in death. Buried on the island, his life is commemorated in story, through visits, and in the Cocoa's youngest son, Little George. Through the course of the novel, Naylor not only alternates between various points of view, but also moves back and forth between geographical spaces and time periods. What emerges in Naylor's works, particularly *Mama Day*, is not only a narrative of the southern landscape, but a dialectic between southern history and northern experiences and a re-articulation and re-evaluation of black folk culture from a regional perspective.

Time, space, knowledge, and belief are constituted by various people and groups differently. Not only does Naylor present differing awareness or understandings of time, space, magic, and rationality, she also describes how individual's constructions inform how they read, interpret, or experience the physical, social, and cultural environments she encounters. The past and the present are intertwined and the living and the dead communicate, a fact made most clearly by George's posthumous participation in a call-and-response dialogue with Cocoa.[314] Citing the work of Lindsey Tucker and Susan

[314] Kathryn M. Paterson, "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*," Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration

Meisenhelder, Kathryn Paterson suggests that the novel's setting in 1999, rather than in 1988 when it is written demonstrates how Naylor "stitches past, present, and future."[315] Indeed, Cheryl Wall notes that the while characters "remember and honor the past," the vision of the novel "has more to do with the present and future."[316] Time in the novel not only provides a "dynamic structure . . . to unfold the narratives of George and Cocoa together,"[317] but also offers the reader a frame for reading the subsequent physical and cultural descriptions surrounding Willow Springs, its histories, its inhabitants and its visitors.

The novel offers readers lessons on how to negotiate "the demands of fast paced, heterogeneous urban societies" by drawing lessons "from a fictive agrarian past."[318] The publication date of the novel 1988 puts it squarely within one of the most dramatic changes in African American demographic patterns since the Great Migration, African American return migration to the South, a recurring theme. Ophelia returns each summer for annual trips to Willow Springs from New York and subsequently chooses to reside in Charleston, South Carolina following George's death. While Naylor draws upon this important demographic shift as a backdrop for the novel, her approach to return migration in the novel parallels the works of writers such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, who understood the return movement in terms of political and spiritual reclamation of

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and Identity in Black Women's Literature, ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (Columbus: Ohio State Ohio State University Press, 2006) 76.

[315] Paterson, "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*," 77.

[316] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 180.

[317] Paterson, "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*," 77.

[318] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 180.

homeland.[319] A major distinction, however, emerges in Naylor's identification of a southern homeplace existing within the landscape of the Sea Islands.

The novel's setting in 1998 increases a sense of urgency and bridges readers in 1988 to a vision of what may happen to Sea Island communities in ten years if appropriate action is not taken. Naylor acknowledges the concerns of cultural loss or decline in traditions and language surrounding Gullah culture in the 1980s. However, she also presents a picture of Gullah culture which underscores its dynamism despite the modernization of the physical environment in which it was formed.

The novel emphasizes an awareness of place held by different characters in order to illuminate the construction of place knowledge. Naylor makes Willow Springs a visible site of personal and public significance through intimate experiences with place. Yi-Fu Tuan theorizes that an attachment to homeland and a concern for the preservation of its landmarks, and traditions arises through "a familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time."[320] Through the experiences of minor and central characters, Naylor proposes that if visitors open themselves up to new models of listening and telling as well as belief, they will be able to read, understand, and interpret the Sea Islands landscape as a personal and communal.

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[319] Trudier Harris notes that African American women writers have been at the forefront of this literary reclamation, naming Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*(1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) as examples (53). Harris notes that through these works African American women writers have created "healthy images of black people on southern soil," very much in the tradition of literary foremother, folklorist and author, Zora Neale Hurston. Trudier Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan, Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures ; No. 39 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

[320] Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience 159.

Geography and social landscapes have been particularly important in the Naylor's work. Shirley Stave notes that Naylor "prioritizes setting" by illustrating how geographies are shaped by and shape people.[321] In *Mama Day,* Naylor continues this thematic concern by demonstrating how Cocoa and George both "suffer displacement"[322] and chronicles how they become "active listeners."[323] Storytelling, an important feature of the novel, provides a way of not only conveying facts about black life and culture, but also preserving the cultural components being described.[324] What sets Naylor's works apart, like Marshall's, from earlier visualizations of the Sea Islands is her attention to race, gender, and power. She also directs images and stories of and about the Sea Islands to a national black readership. In conveying these stories and this geography, Naylor faces challenges of intra-racial communication and "the anxieties that accompany unfamiliarity."[325] George's experiences illuminate that for some African Americans the rituals, language, and histories of the Sea Islands are not only unfamiliar, but may also appear strange. By presenting models of listening and telling in the novel, Naylor transforms the reading experience from one marked by unfamiliarity and discomfort to one that underscores familiarity and understanding.

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[321] Shirley A. Stave, Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001) 10.

[322] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 161. Lamothe observes that while most critics have tended to view Cocoa as rooted and George as the representation of rootlessness, they both suffer varying degrees of displacement. She identifies Cocoa's displacement as the result of her resistance to norms on the island surrounding marriage and motherhood.

[323] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 179.

[324] Wendy Walter writes, "the novel form, as used by black women writers, constitutes an alternative realm of transmission and transformation of the canonical tales of black communities"(4). Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness."

[325] Donlon, "Hearing Is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Story-Listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith," 18.

She transforms the reading experience through her use of dialogue between characters as well as between the text and its audience. Critics argue this feature of the novel make it a "speakerly text." [326] Henry Louis Gates defines speakerly text as the oscillation in African American writing between written and oral discourse as well as first and third person**.** These texts, he argues, "privileges the speaking black voice."[327] Naylor's emphasis on listening and telling presents guidelines for the reader's entry into the space of the text as well as the space of the Sea Islands.

On the first page of text in the novel, the narrator contextualizes the "conjure" or magic of Sapphira Wade. Described as a woman who "could walk through a lightening storm," Sapphira Wade, the foremother of the Day family, the reader is told poisons her slave-owner, Bascombe Wade, after getting him to deed to all his slaves "every inch of land in Willow Springs."[328] The story of Sapphira Wade, and subsequently Willow Springs, the narrator explains must be framed not through paradigms of "right or wrong, truth or lies" but through "a whole new meaning to both them words."[329] Naylor not only challenges the dichotomous paradigms with which the reader may approach the novel, but also the very places she may identify within the novel as sites of history and memory.

Concluding the introductory section of the novel, the narrator identifies the routes individuals may take to obtain spatial and cultural knowledge about Willow Springs.

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[326] Dorothy Thompson argues that the speakerly text invokes oral African tradition by allowing the reader to become "a participant in a discourse community"(93). Dorothy Perry Thompson, "Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day and Bailey's Cafe," Gloria Naylor's Early Novels, ed. Margot Anne Kelley (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999). For other discussions of *Mama Day* as a speakerly text refer to: J. R. Andreas Sr, "Signifying on the *Tempest* in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," Shakespeare and Appropriation, eds. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999).
[327] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 22,112.
[328] Naylor, Mama Day 3.
[329] Naylor, Mama Day 3.

Cultural knowledge can be discerned, the novel suggests, by accessing physical locations, which in Willow Springs means travelling "from that yellow house to that silver trailer to that graveyard."[330] While physical places emerge as sites of memory, accessing them often requires interpreters or storytellers to understand the web of meaning in which they are located. When individuals with this knowledge die, it becomes increasingly difficult, but not impossible to understand not only the significance of places, but also how they fit into individual and communal stories of the past. Confirming this point, the narrator identifies the difficulties an anthropology student, a native son of Willow Springs, now faces travelling the route from the yellow house to the silver trailer. It was "too late for him to go that route now" the narrator informs the reader "since it was, since Miss Abigail's been dead for over nine years."[331]

Interests in oral history grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This growth was the result of significant changes in American life and the demands by African Americans, Mexican Americans, and other groups for equitable representation. Ingrid Scobie writes that the demands for research on family and community history reflected:

> The crisis between parents and children, student rebellions on campuses, the activist stand of blacks, women, and Mexican Americans, widespread doubt about the survival of the family as an institution—all these led to the push towards 'history from the bottom up.[332]

For African Americans, the study and use of oral history provides a resource to supplement, challenge or expand written documentation of black life. In *Mama Day*, Naylor underscores the important and historical role oral expression has held African

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[330] Naylor, Mama Day 10.
[331] Naylor, Mama Day 10.
[332] Ingrid Winther Scobie, "Family and Community History through Oral History," The Public Historian 1.4 (1979): 31.

American communities. In interviews, she has explained the denial of literacy to enslaved Africans meant "there was only the oral."[333] By pointing to her mother's inability to use public libraries in Mississippi during Segregation, Naylor frames the historical factors prohibiting African American literacy and factors influencing the continued role of oral expressions to include a Post-bellum period. Oral tradition, she insists "was vital; it became functional, if you will, because you had to pass on the culture and pass on knowledge, pass on training of children through world of mouth."[334]

In his 1972 address to the Seventh Annual Colloquium on Oral History, Alex Haley underscores "talk" or storytelling as an important source of historical documentation, highlights the spaces where talk occurs, and contextualizes the significance of storytelling in the comprehension of black life. He recalls:

> Every summer that I can remember growing up there in Henning, my grandmother would have, as visitors, members of family who were always women, always of her general age range, the late forties, early fifties. . . And every evening, after the supper dishes were washed, they would go out on the front porch and sit in cane bottomed rocking chairs. And every single evening of those summers, unless there was some particularly hot gossip that would overrule it, they would talk about otherwise the self same thing. It was bits and pieces and patches of what I would later learn was a long narrative history of the family which had been passed down literally across generations.[335]

Naylor not only invokes African American oral traditions in the novel, but also physical spaces, like the porch, which represent symbolic discursive geographies in the black imagination. The porch is an important symbolic space in southern culture, particularly for black Americans. The porch provided entertainment, information, and instruction. As

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[333] Kay Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," Conversations with Gloria Naylor, eds. Gloria Naylor and Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 57.
[334] Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," 57.
[335] Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," The Oral History Review 1 (1973): 1.

Haley recalls the porch was a space for reflecting upon daily experiences and narrating across generations "a long narrative history of the family"[336] or what Ralph Ellison has referred to as "our familial past." [337]

Naylor's narrative strategy for constructing Willow Springs as an important cultural landscape involves creating a level of intimacy and familiarity with this location, and the broader Sea Islands. Intimacy and familiarity emerge through the novel's narration, particularly its use of a first person plural voice described as the voice of the island, a collective voice represented by the use of "we" and "us" in scenes when the voice describes the community. The voice not only "creates kinship to the audience,"[338] but also "shares an interactive role with the audience and a nurturing and proprietary relationship to characters and events within the text."[339] Examining how Naylor draws upon African American folk traditions in the novel, Trudier Harris explains that Naylor and other African American novelists "have written with specific, southern African American audiences in mind and have indeed built features of their audiences into the interactive and silent spaces of their texts."[340]

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[336] Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," 1.
[337] This quote is taken from Ashraf Rushdy's "Remembering Generations." Rushdy, Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction 16.
[338] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 60.
[339] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 68.
[340] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 54. While I agree mostly with Harris' assessment of Naylor's audience, I would add that not only is she crafting a narrator with an African American southern audience in mind, but also one who can respond to a northern African American audience.

The island voice not only reflects a strategy for bringing the audience into the story through "camaraderie and validation," but it also represents the ways Naylor crafts a teller to her story, one who may respond to a specific audience.[341]

The collective voice of Willow Springs, introduced to the reader in the first eight pages of the novel, "establishes the porch connection that serves as the interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners."[342] The porch in *Mama Day* is a figurative illusion and a real geography. Through the porch, characters, such as Cocoa and Miranda, contemplate memory and space. They offer "bits and pieces and patches"[343] of family and personal history. Marking the dividing line between the home and the outside world, while on the porch Abigail notices changes in Cocoa who "is deeper in color and rounder in her face and hips."[344] In this scene, the porch offers a space for analyzing the changes in Cocoa before she returns and adjust herself to the world she left behind. In another scene, while standing on the porch Cocoa ruminates on the distance between Willow Springs and New York.

While the porch is associated with memories, some memories, particularly the death of Miranda and Abigail's sister Peace, are avoided. Their mother sat in the porch rocker moving frantically unable to reconcile herself with the grief of her daughter's death. As a result, Abigail was terrified of the rocker as a child. Even as elderly women, Miranda and Abigail are anxious and uncomfortable when a neighbor gives them a rocker as a gift. The rocker has too many associations with a painful family history.

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[341] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 54.
[342] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 57.
[343] Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," 1.
[344] Naylor, Mama Day 52.

The porch is invoked not only as a medium for conjuring memories of characters, but also memories for the reader. Like the quilt which emerges as a tactile source for recalling memories and events, the porch in *Mama Day* emerges as a physical symbol of engaging memories, telling stories, and recalling individual and communal histories. Invoking the porch as a unique space of communication, Naylor not only constructs images of physical porches in the southern landscape, but configures the Sea Islands through Willow Springs as a symbolic porch space. Willow Springs emerges as unique and distinct porch space for Naylor to collect and communicate stories. The metaphor of porch or the construction of the Sea Islands as a porch space underscores the identification of the Sea Islands, in art and scholarship, as a place where traditions remain.

In this respect, Naylor not only draws upon the continuation of African derived religious beliefs, but traditions of black oral expressions. Given Toni Morrison's observations regarding the disappearance of spaces of communication for urban African Americans, Naylor identifies the Sea Islands on one hand as an existing space for reading and narrating individual and communal past. The fact that everyone in the island knows the story of Sapphira Wade demonstrates communal knowledge is accessed through the continuation of oral expressive traditions.

Naylor and Marshall have recalled the importance of talk, particularly black women's talk in shaping their understanding and connection to their parents' homeplaces, Mississippi and Barbados as well as providing a foundation for their artistic voice and aesthetic. Naylor is the oldest daughter of sharecropping parents, Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin, who migrated from Mississippi to New York before Naylor's birth.[345] While

[345] Naylor recalls that her birth in New York was not an accidental occurrence, but a strategic maneuver on the part of her mother, Alberta McAlpin. McAlpin's decision for her children to be born outside of the

her parents protested through migration the conditions of African Americans in the South, they did not abandon their southern heritage. Naylor recalls that she and her sisters "were raised in a very Southern home, with our foods and our language and a certain code of behavior." [346] Storytelling was important activity in Naylor's home. Her understanding of southern geography, culture, and life also emerged, like Haley, by listening to her parents' and family members' recollections. Through *Mama Day* and in interviews, Naylor suggests that listening requires silence, awareness, and presence on the part of the listener. Silence creates a gateway for accessing stories of and about homeplaces as well as an empowering worldview.

As the excitement for research in the family and community histories grew, academics, in particular, contemplated and proposed methodologies for the study of oral history. In his 1977 article, "Oral History as Communicative Event," Charles Joyner argues that oral history, mirroring the field of folklore fifty years, has often failed to "comprehend the life of the 'folk' and while oral historians often "interpreted their subject only in terms of their own customs and interests."[347] The route to accessing cultural and spatial knowledge, Naylor emphasizes in the beginning of *Mama Day*, also means knowing or learning how to listen. The reader's entry into the porch space is symbolized by their acceptance of specific ways of hearing story. Unlike the anthropologist, who did not know how to listen, the reader has heard the story "the way

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South represented not the reactionary account of black migration early historians often detailed, but instead a conscious and deliberate decision, a form of protest, in which Naylor's mother declared her children's lives to the best of her ability would not be circumscribed by race, class, and geography.

[346] Donna Perry, "Gloria Naylor," Conversations with Gloria Naylor, eds. Gloria Naylor and Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 77.

[347] Charles W. Joyner, "Oral History as Communicative Event: A Folklorist Perspective," The Oral History Review 7 (1979): 48.

we [Willow Springs' residents] know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas."[348] These introductory pages frame the novel and underscore that the reader must adapt specific listening methods if they want to hear or access the story which unveils in the next hundred or so pages. In its presentation of listening methodologies, *Mama Day* highlights how various characters listen as well as sites such as the graveyard where scenes of listening occur.

The quietest of the three Naylor sisters, Gloria Naylor would sit in the corner of her family's kitchen and listen as her parents reminisced about Mississippi. Paule Marshall in her essay "From the Kitchen Poets" also identifies the kitchen space as an important source for her artistic voice, vision, and cultural knowledge. Marshall explains that "sitting over in the corner, being seen but not heard" enabled her to observe not only the content of the women's talk "but the way they put things-their style." [349] By being the quietest of the three sisters, Naylor heard a range of stories which recounted the fullness of black southern life from "fishing and going to the woods and picking berries" as well as stories "the woman who worked with roots and the herbs, the guy who ran the church, and the man who was always drunk."[350] These stories not only represented a microcosm of black southern life, but also reflected a sense of community and a sense of place. Echoing Hurston's impulse to reflect the richness of black life, Naylor's use of southern stories and southern landscapes underscore her belief that the South is foundational to the values and identities of black people. In her works, the South or Southern culture emerges

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[348] Naylor, Mama Day 10.
[349] Paule Marshall, "From the Poets in the Kitchen," Callaloo 18 (1983): 632.
[350] Angels Carabi, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," Conversations with Gloria Naylor, eds. Gloria Naylor and Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 111.

as a resource to characters. Storytelling in *Mama Day* links people to places and events, while also reaffirming the links or bonds individuals already previously formed.

Naylor's opportunity to hear stories of southern life occurred not only as a result of her southern family members' visits to her childhood homes in Harlem and Queens and her parents' sessions reminiscing about Mississippi, but also occurred during the "weekend mecca"[351] to her maternal grandparents' Harlem apartment or the annual summer trips South to visit her paternal aunts and other family members.[352] One might suspect Naylor's car trips South with family members may have provided inspiration for Cocoa's annuals trips each August to Willow Springs.

In *Mama Day,* Miranda demonstrates a similar understanding of the importance of silence, presence and awareness in landscape when she walks through the woods and to the family's plot. Throughout the novel, there are numerous ambulatory scenes in which either Miranda or Cocoa walk alone or with George. Through acts of walking, Naylor moves the reader through the natural and physical landscape of the island from the East Woods to the West Woods. Acts of walking in the novel enable the reader to ascertain spatial relations in the novel and thus develop spatial knowledge of Willow Springs. The history of Willow Spring is imprinted in its landscape. Naylor also uses walking scenes to navigate between built structures and undistributed natural surroundings asking the reader to evaluate both the histories associated with these sites and pinpointing the requirements for accessing those histories. Taking George on a strenuous walk, Miranda decides to

[351] Wilson, Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion 5.
[352] Wilson, Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion 11.

direct him towards one set of woods "a bit wilder" with "stray creepers to tangle up his foot," because as she explains "there were more lessons to be learned in these."[353]

Walking engages the full senses of the walker and the reader. Readers in the novel are not only advised to listen carefully to the inhabitants of Willow Springs, but also "to noises made by wind, water, birds, and denizens of the woods that define the landscape."[354] Listening to wind, water, and birds evokes a sense memory of place. Like Naylor listening in her parents' kitchen to their stories of Mississippi, Miranda stands in the woods silent and still in order to hear stories and sounds from a number of sources.[355] Not only does she hear the "approaching of storms," the whispering of the ocean breeze, and "movement of history," she also hears the voices of the "denizens of the woods," the ancestors.[356]

Approaching the family plot with Cocoa, they are greeted by Miranda's deceased father John Paul. Walking makes the physical spaces visible as well as the memories attached to them. Identifying the novel as "history concretized,"[357] Naylor has reflected upon the connections between memory and space she observed while conducting research for the novel in Charleston. She recalls of Charleston "you walk around the city that has been contained architecturally and therefore you get a time warp."[358] Walking in Charleston, she remembered was a sensation of not only "walking on history," but also

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[353] Naylor, Mama Day 205.
[354] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 178.
[355] Cheryl Wall offers a reading of the multiple ways "sound" is defined in the novel. She explains, "Sounding is a necessary interpretative strategy. As a verb, 'sound' means to measure or try the depth of, or more broadly, to examine or investigate, seek to fathom or ascertain. Readers are invited, then, to 'sound' the world of Willow Springs." Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 178-79.
[356] Quoted in Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 178.
[357] Mickey Pearlman and Katherine Usher, "Gloria Naylor," Conversations with Gloria Naylor, eds. Gloria Naylor and Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 72.
[358] Pearlman and Usher, "Gloria Naylor," 72.

"talking to history." [359] Walking and talking to history materializes in the novel in a number of spaces, one of which includes the graveyard. John Paul not only guides Miranda and Cocoa into the space, but also begins to narrate the family history here. John-Paul is quickly followed by a succession of family members. Strikingly, this scene further serves to reflect the two groups of story-listeners that the novel constructs. John Paul's direct discourse story is told not only to Miranda and Cocoa, but also the reader.

By bringing the reader into the physical landscape, particularly the space of graveyards, Naylor crafts land in the novel as a speaking ancestor through which the reader may hear a particular sound. The construction of sound and sites of sound linked to landscape emerges in the novel as an "interpretive strategy."[360] Through the voices of Day family members spoken in the gravesite, Naylor constructs the cemetery as an "ancestral geography"[361] which chronicles the Day family line, with the absences of two family members, Sapphira and Peace, one woman left " by wind" and another "by water."[362] Naylor's examination of graveyards as a space for uncovering African American traditions, culture, and histories echoes Toni Morrison's and Ernest Gaines' construction of graveyards as physical and symbolic spaces, and broadly echoes their renderings of the southern landscape. In her reading of Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), Anissa Wardi provides insights about African American graveyards that can be useful in understanding *Mama Day* and the particular ways Naylor casts the graveyard within a cultural landscape. Describing images in the novel surrounding burial and recognition of the dead, she argues that Gaines' image of "the ancestral ground

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[359] Pearlman and Usher, "Gloria Naylor," 72.
[360] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 179.
[361] Wardi, "Inscriptions in the Dust: A Gathering of Old Men and Beloved as Ancestral Requiems," 39.
[362] Naylor, Mama Day 263.

inscribes the earth as a visible textualization of African American history." [363] Like Gaines, Naylor inscribes the earth and renders the soil within the Sea Islands as a visual textualization of African American history and a basis for cultural memory.

Naylor's representations of the natural and physical landscape, the wind, the water, and burial spaces are not meant as George initially expresses to cast the Sea Islands as a paradise. While she invokes a sense of timelessness, she balances it with repeated references to changes in Willow Springs and surrounding Sea Islands. Naylor's complex construction of the site of Willow Springs situates it as a space of emancipation and bondage, independence and suffering, an intact heritage, and fragmentation.[364]

From the beginning of the novel, the voice of the island offers the reader models of listening and telling to stories, land, and people. It also brings to the reader's attention individuals, like Reema's boy, who despite some familiarity do not possess cultural comprehension. Reema's boy is an anthropologist who returns to Willow Springs to conduct ethnographic research and "put Willow Springs on the map."[365] His name is never provided, thus his identity in the novel is based on his familial affiliations. He is the son a community member, Reema, who is polite but "a little addle-brained—so you couldn't blame the boy" for his misreading of communal rituals and beliefs.[366] The introduction of Reema's boy follows observations about island and mainland interactions. Naylor crystallizes changes or threats to island life and culture. Noticing the impact of resort development throughout the Sea Islands, Willow Springs' residents refuse to

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[363] Wardi, "Inscriptions in the Dust: A Gathering of Old Men and Beloved as Ancestral Requiems," 39.
[364] Anissa Wardi, "Divergent Paths to the South: Echoes of Cane in Mama Day," Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth, ed. Shirley Stave (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001) 44.
[365] Naylor, Mama Day 7.
[366] Naylor, Mama Day 7.

completely sell their land and "learned that anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful."[367] Reema's boy epitomizes a generation of young islanders who leave due to lack of employment in the Sea Islands or for educational opportunities and fail to development or maintain cultural competency. He does not have cultural or spatial knowledge. Like the folklorists critiqued by Charles Joyner in his essay "Oral History as Communicative Event," Reema's boy represents those "content to interview and transcribe, making little effort to comprehend more than the literal referential meaning of the words."[368]

Trudier Harris argues that he "sacrifices folk traditions, his ability to see without seeing, and hear without hearing, for an alien version of his culture's reality."[369] Trained in the discourses of cultural relativism, he provides an erroneous interpretation of 18 & 23. In the novel, 18 &23 represents a way of seeing the world that informs the residents' responses to various events. Although he "celebrates resistance to colonialism," he also serves to "reproduce colonial ideology."[370] Robin Blyn locates the novel within the anthropological and post-colonial debates of the 1980s surrounding "ethnographic authority" occurring during the novel's publication.[371] While critics have often commented on the importance of Reema's boy for framing the theme of listening in the novel, Reema's boy, not only represents a cautionary tale to the audience about listening, but also engage the histories of mappings which have charted the territory in particular

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[367] Naylor, Mama Day 7.
[368] Joyner, "Oral History as Communicative Event: A Folklorist Perspective," 48.
[369] Harris, The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan 66.
[370] Robin Blyn explains "His thesis proceeds apparently unaware that the cultural relativism it offers as a cure for stereotypes of racial inferiority has reproduced the same imperialist symptoms inherent in the original racist discourse. Robin Blyn, "The Ethnographer's Story: Mama Day and the Specter of Relativism," Twentieth Century Literature: a scholarly and critical journal 48.3 (2002): 247.
[371] Blyn, "The Ethnographer's Story: Mama Day and the Specter of Relativism," 240.

ways through presentations of island life that islanders often found did not reflect their voices, experiences, or histories.

Through her critique of anthropological discourses, embodied by Reema's boy, Naylor contemplates how meaning and significance is mapped onto place, particularly African American landscapes. In his introduction to *Keep Your Head to the Sky* (1998), Grey Gundaker discusses challenges in understanding, interpreting and preserving what he calls "the African American homeground."[372] Noting how "African Americans have invested actual and symbolic landscapes with significance,"[373] Gundaker calls attention to how African American authors, like James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston, have drawn upon landscape, or homeground, for its "instructive potentials," and to offer "a frame of reference that ties a story to its moorings and directs interpretations of the story down certain paths, and not others."[374] Gundaker, however, notes the interpretative challenges that arise for artists drawing the African American homeground, or cultural landscape as a frame of reference, explaining that the book was propelled in part by questions of "What would we need to know in order to understand . . .?"[375] In *Mama Day*, Naylor not only takes up issues of understanding and interpretation, but also knowing and representation, which Gundaker brings forth in his discussion of African American home grounds.

Mapping in the novel emerges as a strategy Naylor uses to bring forth the autoethnography of Willow Springs, to call the reader's attention to an alternative historiography, and to create a frame of reference that undergirds the reader's

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[372] Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan, Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998) 3.
[373] Gundaker and Cowan, Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground 3.
[374] Gundaker and Cowan, Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground 4,5.
[375] Gundaker and Cowan, Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground 22.

interpretations of place, people, and events. Through acts of mapping, Naylor confronts views of places, upsets traditional means of viewing place, and contemplates the relationships between spaces, particularly Willow Springs and other Sea Islands as well as Willow Springs and New York.

Mapping in the novel and the re-evaluation of landscape is established through the voice of the island, who provides the reader with a contextual history of Willow Springs, its histories and traditions, drawing a portrait of Willow Springs that emerges from the people.[376] Not only does Naylor use a voice to map place, but she also draws upon and revises conventional tools of mapping by offering a visual map at the beginning of the novel to help the reader "see" Willow Springs. Hélène Christol argues that forms of maps and acts of mapping by African American women writers, like Gloria Naylor, demonstrate "contemporary revisioning and rethinking of roles, contexts, recording, and creating spaces graphically and metaphorically."[377]

The map, a physical image placed at the beginning of the novel, shapes the existence of Willow Springs in the mind of the reader. First, it offers a response to George's claim that Willow Springs was "nowhere" by affirming and confirming its existence on a map and its proximity to locations that are "real," South Carolina and Georgia. Reflecting upon his preparations for travel to Willow Springs and his experience

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[376] Naylor's construction of the southern colloquial island voice of Willow Springs is informed by her parents' southern heritage expressed and present in her childhood home and shaped by earlier black writers' examination of black folk life and culture. It serves to not only reflect and emphasize black folk values in place, but to confront recent visualizations of the Sea Islands, particularly Pat Conroy's bestselling novel and film *The River is Wide* (1972) and *Conrack* (1985). The rendition of life on Daufuskie Island in Conroy's film and novel made many islanders upset and represented for scholar Herman Blake and others a prime example of why black scholars, in particular, needed to turn their attention to the Sea Islands in order to create a more accurate picture of life.

[377] Hélène Christol, "Mapping Diasporic Sites: The Island and the World," Complexions of Race: The African Atlantic, ed. Fritz (ed. and preface); Hamilton Gysin, Cynthia S. (ed., preface, and introd.), Forecaast: Forum for European Contributions to African American Studies 15 (Münster, Germany: Lit, 2005) 12.

once there, George recalled asking "Where was Willow Springs?" Scouring roadmaps of South Carolina and Georgia and searching "among all those islands that dotting the coastline" George's concludes that Willow Springs was "[n]owhere." George's uncertainty surrounding Willow Springs' geographical location echoes the broader lack knowledge that African Americans held of the Sea Islands. While individuals in the adjacent mainland communities of South Carolina and North Carolina had heard of the Sea Islands, many of whom may have even had family members who migrated from these Islands; African Americans outside of these areas often lacked general knowledge of the Sea Islands. In the 1980s, festivals, television programs, and cookbooks were important mediums for mapping the Sea Islands in the minds of many black Americans.

What Naylor reveals through George's initial impressions of Willow Springs, his perplexity surrounding its "odd customs," and his difficulty in situating it within orthodox historical frameworks or maps are the potential challenges that Naylor's readers may also face in moving into a geography, which is both southern yet also "elsewhere."[378] Not only does Willow Springs appear on a map, it is one that is given to the reader immediately as an essential component for the journey she will take going over the bridge from the places she knows and has seen mapped, Georgia and South Carolina, to a place that has not been mapped Willow Springs.

Like the introductory section, the map functions in the novel as a framing device. The map of the island, a black and white drawing, affirms Willow Springs' existence by providing validity through its proximity to actual places, such as Georgia and South Carolina. The drawing is the first way in which the reader begins to "see" Willow Springs. The map of the island is partially framed by ferns, flowers and a fence. The map of

[378] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 162.

Willow Springs illustrates its territorial relationship to South Carolina and Georgia. Although connected by a bridge, Willow Springs stands as an independent entity. Moreover, inside the map South Carolina and Georgia are not drawn as complete territories, but concaved and abbreviated with no distinguishing place names or markers. Over-shadowing South Carolina and Georgia, the scale of Willow Springs in the map underscores the history of independence and self–rule the voice of the island conveys in the pages following the map. The map of the island also frames locations in Willow Springs in terms of intimate and familiar places listing the Other Place, Abigail's house, and Mama Day's trailer as significant landmarks. Christol argues the map "prepare[s] the reader for the drama of the following narration," but it also "balances frames within frames, connected by contrasts, tensions, echoes that open dialogues between real and the imagined spaces."[379]

Naylor reminds the reader through her own map of a place that is deemed as both "elsewhere" and "nowhere" of the politics of mapping and legitimizing places, people, and histories. In identifying or illustrating the proximity between Willow Springs and South Carolina, and later detailing the histories of relations between these locations, Naylor asks or rather prompts her readers to contemplate what makes some places and histories real and others fiction. Her selection or creation of a fictional Sea Island speaks to a number of concerns that Naylor explores throughout the novel, not only surrounding questions of mapping spaces that had not been mapped at all or by the inhabitants, but it also reflects her desire to map a new way of thinking or seeing African American places and histories.

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[379] Christol, "Mapping Diasporic Sites: The Island and the World," 15.

Mapping, the act of making Willow Springs visible, occurs not only through Naylor's inclusion of a physical map at the beginning of the novel, but also emerges through character's experiential recollections. A sense of place emerges as various characters recall the physical, social, and cultural landscape of Willow Springs. By highlighting experiential perspectives of place, Naylor underscores how knowledge of place is formed, values of place emerge, and connection to place occur.[380]

Cocoa, George, Miranda and the collective voice of the island's reflections of Willow Springs represent complimentary and contradictory images. While differences in each representation of Willow Springs provide fascinating and important readings of how Willow Springs is constructed in the novel, for the purposes of this chapter I will concentrate on George's recollections solely. George's impressions are important to shaping the reader's understandings of place in the novel for several reasons. He represents the most radical transformation of an individual's connection to the physical and cultural landscape of Willow Springs in the novel. Like the reader, he enters Willow Springs as an outsider, a visitor, with little knowledge of the customs or traditions of the inhabitants; however, by the end of the novel he moves from being a visitor and stranger to being literally apart of Willow Springs. Buried in the soil of the island, he adds to the chorus of ancestors who speak from the graveyard.

George's impressions of the Willow Springs underscore its distinctive and other-worldliness. This view of place emerges through his sensory descriptions. He recalls

[380] My discussion of experiential perspective is informed by the work of Yi- Fu Tuan. Experiential perspective, he explains, derives from the various senses people employ to organize and give meaning to place. Through the sense of smell, taste, and touch individuals construct knowledge of place. Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience 8.

"entering another world. Where even the word *paradise* failed." [381] His view of Willow Springs as otherworldly is based on what he can and can not describe surrounding its physical landscape. While he is able to identify storefronts, trees, and bushes as distinguishing factors, he is also struck by defining characteristics of Willow Springs that can not be seen, like air so thick "that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in it?"[382] His descriptions of Willow Springs underscore not only a sense of touch and sight, but also smell. Willow Springs possess a "fragrance from the whispering of palmettos" which "smelled like forever."[383]

George's impressions underscore the sentiments of many travelling into the Sea Islands in the 1980s and earlier. Anthropologist Patricia Guthrie travelled to Beaufort, South Carolina and later St. Helena in the 1970s for anthropological research. She recalls the images and expectations she held of the Sea Islands. Guthrie writes:

> Those expectations included tall trees with their hanging moss, the dirt roads, the warmth of the people, and the physical, cultural, and social manifestations of the slave experiences that were everywhere present.[384]

The descriptions of Sea Islands as "another world" underscore a perception that these islands held a way of life that no longer existed in most parts of the country. Through access or travel, one could gain a sense of community, traditions and ritual that could be recovered.

George's captivation with the way of life he encounters borders on sentimentalism and nostalgia for a lost southern agricultural existence. Ironically, he is longing for an existence, rural life, which in the 1980s was radically being transformed.

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[381] Naylor, Mama Day 175.
[382] Naylor, Mama Day 175.
[383] Naylor, Mama Day 175.
[384] Guthrie, Catching Sense: African American Communities on a South Carolina Sea Island 4.

Walking with Ambrose through the fields Ambrose owns and will later pass on to his son, George is in awe of Ambrose's connection to the land, recalling that to watch him was to "watch the hand of a virtuoso stroke the instrument of his craft."[385] George expresses a similar amazement when he walks with Cocoa through her family graveyard. Questioning how she could have ever left Willow Springs, George remarks how unique and different her experience growing up in Willow Springs is. Cocoa not only could map out and read her family tree in the physical space of the graveyard, but her family "actually *owned* this land."[386]

Land ownership is an integral component of Willow Springs' past and present. Willow Springs' uniqueness is marked by "the inordinate amount of agency held by its inhabitants, who not only absorb the normalizing forces of mainland culture, but also actively resist being torn apart by them or relinquishing their rights of ownership."[387] The islanders' conviction to maintain ownership over one's body, land, and community along with their emphasis on cooperative action and self-reliance direct the residents to fight against their inclusion within the state boundaries of Georgia and South Carolina, turn away developers in the 1980s, whose construction of vacation resorts had transformed other island communities. Land ownership, coupled with isolation enables Willow Springs' residents to maintain and continue their distinct cultural traditions and folk culture represented by rituals such as Candle Walk. Hélène Christol notes, "Reminiscent of the Gullahs, the freed slaves who . . . kept their distinctive dialect and culture, the

[385] Naylor, Mama Day 200.
[386] Naylor, Mama Day 219.
[387] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 157.

people of Willow Springs have in fact colonized and invested their own territory."[388] Enslaved Africans in mainland areas did not retain cultural traditions to the same degree due to greater intermingling between Africans and Europeans, the lack of isolation, greater regulation upon practices of tradition. Due to the isolation, Sea Islanders developed a different sense of ownership for the land they worked, which after the Civil War translated into actual legal ownership. Through Willow Springs, Naylor evokes a history of landownership in the region and the contemporary threats to it.

For Cocoa and Ambrose, the land communicates "possibilities I [George] couldn't begin to understand"[389] and a historical or familial history he does not possess. With Ambrose as his model, George wants the couple to move to Willow Springs. His descriptions of how he would sustain their new life underscore a lack of understanding of the economic realities of the Sea Islands during the 1980s. These realities are present in the novel and voiced by Cocoa and Mama Day. Challenging George's perception of Sea Islands life as "a dream," Cocoa contends that "Ambush isn't playing, he works hard"[390] while George had *thought* hard all his life. Cocoa's observations between working hard and thinking underscore a disjuncture between image and actuality as well as myth and truth the novel continuously revisits. While the relationship between myth and truth initially appears to be concerned with the tensions between oral history and written history, I believe it also engages the myth of the Sea Islands as an undisturbed paradise held by individuals such as George with the truth or actuality of the Sea Islands as a landscape that was being radically transformed in the 1980s.

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[388] Hélène Christol, "Reconstructing American History: Land and Genealogy in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day," The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor, eds. Sharon Felton and Michelle Carbone Loris, Critical Responses in Arts and Letters, No. 29 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997) 160.
[389] Naylor, Mama Day 200.
[390] Naylor, Mama Day 220.

Mama Day reflects the tension between representing the Sea Islands as a site of memory while also conveying its contemporary realities. The Sea Islands emerges as a site of memory, because of its identification as a site of African survivals in America. Not only does it exist as a site of African survivals, in the forms of language and beliefs, but it also underscores the concept of survival in a different way. The Sea Islands stands as an enduring example of African American tight-knit communities where family is first and members of the community are protected and supported. The construction of Willow Springs reflects Naylor's desire to highlight both the lack of a geographical center for urban African Americans and the possibilities or need for one. Unlike Cocoa, George does not possess the same geographic center. Commenting on this absence of a geographical center, Naylor contends:

> Not to have a center somewhere—I mean a geographical center somewhere in this country where there is a history for you, I think definitely wrecks memory . . . We have no surviving relatives in the South. That becomes my memory, my spiritual center, because of what we were speaking about before: the oral tradition, a passing on of culture.[391]

Concerned less with the move from "to the urban-area from a land based setting to a service economy," Naylor's emphasis surrounds the lack of a "spiritual land" and the loss of communal and spiritual ties.[392] Willow Springs emerges as a spiritual land in the novel where history and communal memory exist. Despite positioning Willow Springs as a geography possessing communal and spiritual ties for various characters, Naylor also shows strains upon these ties.

By interweaving observations of change not only on islands such as Hilton Head and Daufuskie, but also in Willow Springs, Naylor attempts to disrupt nostalgic longing.

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[391] Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," 45.
[392] Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," 45.

Miranda's recollections are also important for shaping the reader's understanding of Willow Springs and underscoring its present challenges. Miranda's reflections offer the reader intimate knowledge of Willow Springs' cultural life and traditions in the present as well as the past. Moreover, her cultural and spatial knowledge are central to framing Willow Springs as a historic vernacular landscape, a landscape which is shaped by the activities and occupancy of its people.

Willow Springs emerges as a place located within a broader southern landscape, but embodying distinct traditions. The description of Willow Springs balances familiar southern scenes with activities, rituals, and histories with a distinct and uniquely alternative southern experience, one tied to geography. The narrator celebrates the fact that they are different and spells out the ways within the context of southern plantation history, Reconstruction history, and contemporary black life in the Sea Islands, while also emphasizing the community's southerness in its voice and narrative structure.

However, since Willow Springs is a fictional location and not an actual Sea Island like St. Simons, Daufuskie or Hilton Head, I cautiously agree with Madhu Dubey's assessment that *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* "guard against a literal reading of their literary images of the rural South" by placing an emphasis on "imaginative transcendence" instead of mimetic realism."[393] While "mimetic realism" is not Naylor's goal, the concept of "imaginative transcendence" does not convey the ways in which she uses history, language, culture, and the physical space of the Sea Islands as the foundation for the cultural landscape she constructs in the novel.

Naylor draws out the cultural landscape of Willow Springs by demonstrating "a landscape that evolved through use by the people whose activities and occupancy shaped

[393] Dubey, Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism 165.

that landscape."[394] Willow Springs is a unique geography made so by the practices of its community, the acts of its founder, Sapphira Wade, and its history of independence, self-rule, mutual support, and land ownership. Sapphira Wade, the foremother of the Day family, secures the deeds and freedom of the inhabitants from Bascombe Wade, a Norwegian slave owner. She serves as the foundation for the community's myth of origins and traditions, like Candle Walk.

Noting that the "histories as well as legends of the South inform Naylor's novel"[395] Cheryl Wall explains that Naylor's representation of rituals such as Candle Walk and the depiction of Little Caesar's funeral proceeding present "contrasting worldviews" and "define the characters of the fictive [community] more completely."[396] The act of "standing forth" at Little Caesar's funeral, an act which calls each member of community forth to give testimony to the life of the deceased child "invokes the old/African Sea Islands belief in the survival of the spirit."[397] Candle Walk represents "a radical revision of the most canonical of all texts, the Bible," and underscores change and hybridization in communal rituals and brings forth histories of mutual support.[398] Observed on December 22, Candle Walk is celebrated on the island instead of Christmas. By marking the day Sapphira took her freedom it "replaces the Christian day of celebration."[399]

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[394] Alanen and Melnick, Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America 8.
[395] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 176.
[396] Wall, Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition 168, 69.
[397] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 159.
[398] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 158.
[399] Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall," 158.

Naylor emphasizes the dynamic nature of cultural practices through the character Miranda, because she is identified as a person "more wise than wicked"[400] and one who through access to story and her ability to hear ancestral voices is able to chronicle and interpret the presence and meaning of change in the community. Changes in Candle Walk are bemoaned by older residents of Willow Springs who believe the practice has transformed "with the young folks having more money and working beyond the bridge."[401] Signaling the end of harvest, Candle Walk is a ritual of cooperative support which represented a "way of getting help without being obliged."[402] While residents would exchange "a bushel of potatoes and a cured side of meat," in recent years people "started buying fancy gadgets from catalogues."[403] The symbol of the bridge re-emerges in discussions of Candle Walk, particularly changes to the practice. Like Reema's boy, the young residents return from the other side of the bridge with a different set of values that some believe might "spell the death of Candle Walk."[404] Instead of emphasizing mutual support, they underscore consumerism and individuality in their choices of "new hats, bolts of cloth, even electric toasters."[405] While changes brought from across the bridge are bemoaned, the narrator explains, "You can't keep 'em from going across the bridge"[406] and contextualizes the contemporary changes within a longer history of the ritual transformations. In Miranda's youth, Candle Walk encompassed different features, which differed from the ritual features her father remembered. Miranda's reassurance that Candle Walk won't die out, at least not now, serves as a metaphor for reconsidering the

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[400] Naylor, Mama Day 111.
[401] Naylor, Mama Day 111.
[402] Naylor, Mama Day 110.
[403] Naylor, Mama Day 110-11.
[404] Naylor, Mama Day 111.
[405] Naylor, Mama Day 108.
[406] Naylor, Mama Day 111.

survival of cultural traditions in the Sea Islands in the midst of demographic, social, and economic changes. Miranda notes, "It'll take generations . . . for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. And more generations again to stop talking about the time 'when there used to be some kinda 18 & 23 going on-near December twenty-second."[407] Miranda understands that Candle Walk and subsequently culture is not fixed. Focusing less on the specifics of cultural performances, she draws attention to the function of rituals to affirm communal bonds and the function of cultural memory to inform the construction of personal and cultural identity.

Like storytelling and mapping, Naylor uses bridging as a strategy for conveying links, entanglement, and disengagement between people, places, and events. The bridge emerges as a major theme and symbol in the novel. One of the most prominent and early images in the novel is the image of the bridge that separates Willow Springs from the mainland. While the bridge increases the mobility of residents, it also threatens or affects activities such as Candle Walk, which emerged in isolation. Naylor's examination of the bridge in the novel serves to not only to discuss what is coming over the bridge, but also what's leaving across the bridge, particularly a generation. Willow Springs' population, like other Sea Islands, is witness to new numbers of out-migration that are displacing the numbers of return migrants. Like many rural places, particularly Sea Islands locations, out-migration has been seen as a challenge to the very existence of community.

However, Naylor's discussion of bridges is not meant to convey cultural purity prior to the existence of the bridge. Instead, she emphasizes a dynamic Sea Islands community and culture through her portrayal of Willow Springs. Through her description of the bridge that connects and serves to reshape the geography of Willow Springs,

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[407] Naylor, Mama Day 111.

Naylor underscores the larger history of bridging in the Sea Islands. By presenting a long history of encounter, cultural exchange, and hybridization, Naylor disrupts critiques of artistic literary re-migrations to the South. Willow Springs is not an idyllic southern space.

Rebuilt after every big storm, the islanders' connection to an impermanent bridge proves to be a source of frustration for George when Cocoa falls ill. Not only is George unable to cross over a bridge from disbelief into belief in order to become fully cognizant of what has caused Cocoa's illness, he is also unable to understand that the bridge which will lead to her healing cannot be built with the tools he acquires. Noting that much of the action in *Mama Day* "revolves around the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction" of the bridge between Willow Springs and the mainland, Robin Blyn observes that the impermanence or destruction of the bridge offers a way of monitoring the "traffic of cross-cultural exchange."[408] The bridge must be rebuilt; however, it is rebuilt according to "materials sanctioned by the location community."[409] As a result, Blyn argues that the bridge "aptly figures the lived tension . . . between entanglement and separatism, between hybrid identification and an indigenous one."[410]

What emerges in *Mama Day* is not only a narrative of the southern landscape based on a re-articulation and re-evaluation of black folk culture from a regional black perspective, but also dialectic between people and places, the southern homeplaces, or home ground and northern migrants. As Hélène Christol observes the "novel explores and tries to bridge the two worlds of Willow Springs and New York."[411] Through the dual migrations of George and Cocoa, Naylor not only contemplates how characters

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[408] Blyn, "The Ethnographer's Story: Mama Day and the Specter of Relativism," 257.
[409] Blyn, "The Ethnographer's Story: Mama Day and the Specter of Relativism," 257.
[410] Blyn, "The Ethnographer's Story: Mama Day and the Specter of Relativism," 257.
[411] Christol, "Mapping Diasporic Sites: The Island and the World," 12.

suffer alienation and displacement in different geographies, but also prompts the reader to examine the skills they develop which enable them to listen, understand, and connect to landscape and stories in new ways. The call and response structure of Cocoa and George's conversation helps to structurally juxtaposed Cocoa's and George's journeys.

Described by the Willow Springs residents as "city boy—a big-time railroad man," George, an orphan, is raised in New York at the Wallace P. Andrews boy's home. While at the home he learns, embraces and adopts from the shelter's director Mrs. Jackson the motto "Only the present has potential" as his personal mantra.[412] With the exception of his belief in football, he identifies himself as a rational man, instead of a dreamer. He is a person who has no need for such things as rabbit's feet, crucifixes or lottery tickets.[413] His experience in Willow Springs; however, will put him in direct conflict with the scientific, individualist, and rational world view he has held. While Cocoa and Miranda assist George in learning to re-read the history and landscape of Willow Springs, George also assists Cocoa in "seeing" his New York. Moreover, he helps her to re-evaluate her connections to Willow Springs. Similar to Miranda and Cocoa's approach, George uses walking tours to assist Cocoa in seeing *his* city. His observations show that Cocoa lacks cultural and spatial knowledge surrounding New York. She was moving *through* the city without knowing how to live *in* it.[414] Cocoa has to re-evaluate New York in the same way that George must re-evaluate Willow Springs.

In contrast to George, Cocoa is raised in Willow Springs by her grandmother, Abigail Day and great-aunt, Miranda (Mama) Day amidst a rich Gullah "values system,

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[412] Naylor, Mama Day 26.
[413] Naylor, Mama Day 27.
[414] Naylor, Mama Day 61.

history, and traditions" that fortitude" in the form of cool that is "formidable."[415] As a Day, a descendant of Sapphira Wade, Cocoa has what George does not possess "a heritage intact and solid."[416] Unlike George, Cocoa claims a rich cultural heritage; however, she is not always able to access the narratives of her familial past. Walking with George through the family graveyard, Cocoa had done her best to avoid hearing the whispers. Although recognizing the challenge she faces, Miranda asserts Cocoa will one day hear the voices and have the knowledge to interpret their whispers. Miranda explains, "she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge."[417] Through George, she gains access to stories she was not privy to before.

Cocoa is both insider and outsider within Willow Springs, because she is "distanced from the everyday lives of the people" and "not fully integrated into the island culture."[418] While some scholars have defined George as "rootless" and Cocoa as "rooted," in doing so they fail to recognize the ways in which Cocoa and George "awaken Otherness within each other, but instead of paralyzing that Otherness within the Self and inhibiting integration, Naylor enables full integration."[419] By bridging the locations of Willow Springs and New York, through George and Cocoa, Naylor does not privilege "one location over another" but instead "localizes strength in characters—Cocoa—best adapt to both environments."[420] Drawing upon Gary Storhoff's important assessment that "Manhattan is not the antithesis of Willow Springs but its complement,"

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[415] While Lamothe describes the value systems, history, and traditions, Cocoa draws upon as African American, I use the term Gullah to speak to particular traditions within African American culture Naylor draws upon. Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 159.
[416] Naylor, Mama Day 219.
[417] Naylor, Mama Day 308.
[418] Paterson, "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*," 84,85.
[419] Paterson, "Gloria Naylor's North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*," 84.
[420] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 163.

Lamothe notes that this view of "city and village" as "complementary rather than competing" reflects "how both spaces are "subject to mythification by newcomers and strangers and also stand for a history of colonial domination."[421]

Naylor employs the Sea Islands as an important landscape within the novel. She uses this landscape to reflect the dynamic relationships between individuals and place as well as place and memory. As a sea island, Willow Springs illuminates an important geography in the African American imagination as well as conveys a "state of mind" or a "metaphysical situation."[422] Naylor created Willow Springs as a sea island, because these islands represented places that were "part of the United Sates but not quite a part of it,"[423] and because they are symbolically and physically required a bridge for entry. The bridge emerges as an important symbol in *Mama Day* for multiple reasons.

The bridge represents inaccessibility, difference, transition and change, particularly for the young Willow Springs residents who bring values and items back from their jobs across the bridge. It also serves as a source and site of connection for those who understand how to claim it as such. Through its emphasis on storytelling, mapping, and bridging, the novel challenges the reader to re-evaluate her connections to places like Willow Springs, her understanding and interpretation of the histories of place, and the value she ascribes to places. Naylor positions Willow Springs as a cultural landscape through which the reader may gain access to the distinct and unique cultural heritage of the Sea Islands. The novel introduces readers to the Sea Islands geography, while also showing them how to read, interpret and value the cultural and physical landscape.

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[421] Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's Mama Day: Bridging Roots and Routes ": 163.
[422] Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," 58.
[423] Bonetti, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," 58.

Naylor's visualization of the Sea Islands does not deny or overlook the modern experience of northern black Americans, instead she contemplates how southern places are continuously relevant to all black Americans as a source for necessary spiritual, cultural, and communal ties. Naylor draws upon the southern landscape not only to "reestablish the primacy of the southern place in African American identity,"[424] but to offer an alternative southern landscape, such as the Sea Islands, as equally and uniquely foundational.

[424] Wilson, Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion 11.

Chapter 4

"We are as two people in one body:" Migration(s) and Recollection in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*

This chapter consists of three large sections: Geography, Migration, and Memory. I begin the first section "Geography" by examining Dash's historical and mythic landscape, the Sea Islands. After shaping the geographical and historical setting, I provide a context for Dash's artistic production using concepts from Henry Louis Gates' 1998 book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro- American Literary Criticism*. I turn to two of Gates' concepts. The first is "tropological revision," the repetition of tropes and images from other black texts with a difference or revision in trope, theme or narrative strategy. The second is Gates' concept of "talking texts," the manner in which black writers announce, challenge, and refer to the works of other black writers.[425] Afterwards, I articulate my concept of a Sea Islands cultural archive. I believe that in their use of the Sea Islands Gullah culture, artists such as Julie Dash envision the Sea Islands as a rich and vibrant geography that storehouses memories of the African and black Southern past. Moreover, the Sea Islands stand for these artists as a reference point for discussing not only the continuance of African beliefs, traditions, and worldviews in America, but also making spatial claims about the origins of black American culture in the New World.

[425] Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism 217.

I demonstrate how the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) through its use of dialogue, themes and tropes talks to works like Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Collectively these works demonstrate intertextuality surrounding the narrative and thematic use of the Sea Islands. Individually they illuminate literary revision in the black vernacular tradition and "rhetorical self-definition."[426] The Sea Islands, Lene Brøndum has written emerges as a trope, which black artists and writers employ and revise in their artistic productions.

In the second section "Migration," I move from discussing the cultural and literary geography of the Sea Islands to examining the meanings of migration within this specific location. The Sea Islands allows writers and artists to investigate a new location for black migration while also offering new symbols and experiences. In this section, I highlight the regional diversity of the Sea Islands as presented in the film, and explore why characters, such as the maternal grandmother Nana Peazant, emphasize the cultural bond between Sea Islanders and Africans as "something to take North with all your great big dreams."[427] I critique what migration to the North meant for this bond or connection. My examination of Dash's representation of the South as a site of origins and home takes into account the critiques surrounding African American artists continued examination and representation of the South, or specifically the southern rural origins of black Americans. Lastly, I situate two migratory movements, the forced migration of the Middle Passage and the voluntary migration of the Great Migration, as central to the film.

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[426] Gates charts the many examples where black writers "read and critique" the texts of other black writers as an important relationship and pattern in the black literary and vernacular traditions and a black aesthetic model. The relationship of "Signifying," "repeating received tropes and narrative strategies with a difference" defines these relationships and occurs at the level of theme and rhetorical strategy. Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism 217.

[427] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film.96.

Associated with two images, respectively the sea and the land, these two migrations produced primal scenes, or critical moments for individual and communal re-evaluation, in the film. I explore the primal scenes associated with these migrations and the recollections, which archive particular experiences and memories.

The film proposes and seeks to answer a series of questions surrounding the location and interpretation of African American cultural past: How do we remember the past? What past(s) do we remember? More importantly, in what places or geographies do those memories exist given the role of migration(s) in the lives of people of the African Diaspora? One might take this line of questioning one step farther and propose, how and where does memory intersect with migration? In the last section, "Memory," I examine these questions through the concepts of primal scenes, recollection, and lieux de mémoire.

In literature and visual arts, African American and Afro-Caribbean women writers and artists have engaged the past. Their representations and explorations of the past offer readers a new look at the legacies of the dispersals of black people from the Middle Passage and slavery to more recent migrations. Through their explorations, particularly into memory, these artists and writers unearth hidden or maligned events and narratives, such as Ibo Landing and the myth of the Flying Africans.[428] These new narratives of a

[428] My idea of the Diasporic past is drawn from the works of Paul Gilroy and P. Sterling Stuckey. For examples see: Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). Gilroy challenges essentialist notions of the black Diaspora, asserting that Africans have not only a shared history of New World slavery, but also a counter-discourse to modernity. Through the concept of the African Diasporic past, I argue that the past African American and Caribbean writers, such as Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor, construct in their novels does not only identify a singular destination, the United States or Barbados, in the migration and history of black peoples, but also seeks to examine multiple destinations. Through their use of multiple destinations, they emphasize the multiple articulations of black culture throughout the Americas, point to sites of cultural overlap or intersection as well as spaces of difference and disjuncture. The spaces of disjuncture are of particular concern to Brent Edwards and Paul Gilroy. I use the term Diasporic past to capture the multiple historical and narrative spaces that these writers are incorporating in their texts, and the spaces that traverse the Black Atlantic. Within this dissertation, I argue that writers draw upon the space of the Sea Islands to illuminate

remembered black past function not only as corrective history. They serve to assist readers in constructing new definitions of self constituted by a new relationship with their cultural past. In their explorations of cultural and familial past, black artists, such as Julie Dash, use primal scenes, a meaningful event for an individual or community that causes re-evaluation of its member's life and identity, as well as their relationship to people and places.[429] Literary scholar Ashraf Rushdy draws upon the Freudian concept of primal scenes as a means of exploring the context, function, and appearance of memory within the works of Toni Morrison. Rushdy departs from the concepts of primal scenes put forth by Sigmund Freud or Ned Lukacher. Ashraf redefines primal scenes as:

> the critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled.[430]

He adds that memory does not have to be sexual as Freud asserted. Instead, the primal scene must be viewed as a distinctly important event or episode as to be remembered or recalled at a subsequent moment of reflection and re-evaluation for the individual. The primal scene functions and exists as "an opportunity and affective agency for self-discovery through memory."[431] Transatlantic Slavery has produced primal scenes throughout the African Diaspora, and the Middle Passage functions as a dominant one.[432]

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the African Diasporic past, the intersection and meeting of cultures, languages and traditions, and sites of multiple migrations.

[429] My use of the term primal scene is taken from Ashraf Rushdy's discussion of the Freudian concept in "Rememory:" Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels (1990).

[430] Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," Contemporary Literature 31.3 (1990): 303.

[431] Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 303.

[432] For a discussion of how this symbol emerges in African American works, refer to: Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall.", Maria Diedrich, Carl Pedersen, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., Black Imagination and the Middle Passage (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Gay Wilentz, "Towards a Spiritual Middle Passage Back: Paule Marshall's Diasporic Vision in Praisesong for the Widow," Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review 5.3 (1990).

In the film *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash presents primal scenes and their subsequent recollections. Primal scenes, specific episodes, emerge as the subject of individual and communal recollection. An example of a significant primal scene in the film occurs when Nana Peazant, the matriarch of the Peazant family, recalls the moment when her mother was sold away from her. Before being sold, Nana's mother cut a piece of her hair and gave it to Nana. While Nana's memory is personal and individual, hers is a memory that is shared by others and underscores the threats to black familial bonds and connections during enslavement. This episode is remembered at another significant moment in Nana's life, the day of her family's departure from the island. The remembered past through Nana's primal scene is instructive for the family members who hear it. It narrates a particular history of slavery, one emerging from the view of the enslaved, while providing a context for Nana's desire for the family to hold onto to one another as they leave their home in the Sea Islands. Dash stages the Sea Islands not as the geography in which the episodes, which later transform into primal scenes occur, but also as the geography in which memory is activated, recalled, and imprinted. Toni Morrison's description of physical memory in *Beloved* (1987) best illuminates the connections between place and memory Dash visualizes through the film. Talking with her daughter, Denver, Sethe expresses:

> I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.[433]

The Sea Islands function in the film as a medium for unlocking a not so distant enslaved past, and a not so forgotten African past— "half-remembered, half forgotten"—yet

[433] Cited in Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 303.

persistent.[434] It reflects one of the places "still there" that Sethe referenced, a location where the viewer can access pictures and images that were not longer available or accessible in other geographies. In this respect, Dash draws upon a view of the Sea Islands as "a significant site in African American culture history" and constructs scenes within the physical space of the Sea Islands to reflect and support this view.[435] Through recollections of various characters in the film, Dash conveys a sense of the Sea Islands as a site for locating oral recollections of remembered black past and reconstructing African American histories.

Within the film, the event which initiates or activates memory is the impending migration of members of the Peazant family. Through her dual focus on migration and memory in the film, Dash examines the transmission of memory across geographies and people. By showing how primal scenes can become interpersonal, remembered as significant transformative moments or events by an individual who did not experience the event directly, Dash shows how memory "exists as a communal property of friends, family, of a people."[436]

Daughters of the Dust represents a strikingly different vision of black life from the voices and experiences of black women which anchor the film to the film's setting in the Sea Islands at the turn of the century. Through a multigenerational and multivocal narrative the film *Daughters of the Dust* follows a Gullah family, the Peazants, living on the fictionalized Dawtuh Island as members of the family prepare to migrate to the

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[434] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 80.
[435] Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture," 94.
[436] Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 321.

mainland then eventually travel North.[437] Set on a single day in 1902, the film follows various individuals as they prepare for a festive dinner which will commemorate their departure from the island. Through a montage of images and scenes which layer upon one another, the film chronicles the differing responses individuals have towards the impending migration. Neither the motivations for migration nor the responses to the possible impact migration will have on those left behind and those departing are uniform.

The film establishes individuals as markers of knowledge and tradition, transition and change, denial and denigration, cultural refinement and spiritual salvation, and new black identities and possibilities. Haagar, a daughter-in-law of the family's matriarch, Nana Peazant, perceives Gullah culture and beliefs, represented by Nana, as out-dated and primitive. For her, migration to the mainland means that she and her daughters, Myown, and Iona, will be able to participate in what she sees as the dawn of the new day. Myown who is involved with St. Julian Last Child, one of the last Cherokees living on the island, must decide whether to leave the island with her mother, sister, and cousins or to remain with her grandmother and lover. Eli and Eula, a married couple, although more reluctant than others to depart, feel that they must leave the space where Eula was raped. At least for Eli, Nana Peazant's grandson, the island represents not a homeland, but a site of violation. Unlike Haagar, Eula recognizes the power of cultural memory and embraces the African heritage of the Gullah. She represents the individual most likely to continue the family's traditions following her arrival in the North.

[437] The film was shot on St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina. St. Helena is one of the larger islands and continues to hold a large Gullah population. While the Sea Islands in Gloria Naylor's novel are fictional, Dawtuh Island is a real location. Locals from the islands were used in the film for greater authenticity.

Viola and Yellow Mary, cousins who had already migrated to the mainland, return to Dawtuh Island to commemorate the family's departure. Viola and Haagar represent individuals who derive their definitions of culture from American and Western society. Viola, a devote Baptist, commissions a photographer, Mr. Snead, to capture the festive events. In their deportment, attitude, and dress, Mr. Snead and Voila represent the New World. Yellow Mary, a prostitute returning from Cuba, with her partner, Trula, is a source of fear and derision from family members. Her presence causes the family to confront the violations and assaults against black womanhood. While Yellow Mary mocks the islanders' lack of sophistication, she also yearns for a greater connection to her family and the culture which has rooted her great grandmother.

While Viola and Haagar struggle with their connections to Gullah culture, Elizabeth, the Unborn Child of Eli and Eula, and Nana Peazant, the family's matriarch, invoke and embrace connections to the past. Elizabeth, the Unborn Child, whose spirit appears in the film embodied in the form of a little girl, is one of the film's co-narrators. The Unborn Child, like Nana, functions as a bridge between the past, the present, and the future, as well as the living and the dead.

Nana, the family griot and elder, celebrates the ancestors by visiting their gravesites regularly and practicing the old ways. She places glass bottles outside of the family compound to protect its members from evil and regularly bathes in the salt water inlets. More importantly, for Nana, it is the land, the memories its holds, and the traditions it gave root to that offers a connection for the islanders to a distant African homeland. While Nana recognizes the eventuality of the family's departure from the

islanders, she believes that out-migration does not have to result in the severing or abandonment of cultural traditions.

Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) was released in the early 1990s a period of cinema often referred to as the New Jack Era. In its 1991 debut *Daughters of the Dust* was accompanied by the release of twelve other films by African American directors. The explosion of black films at this particular moment harkens back to an earlier explosion in the 1970s and raised questions surrounding the politics of representation, the intentions and realities of Black filmmakers, and the ability for contemporary films to challenge existing Hollywood conventions. The majority of the films debuting with *Daughters of the Dust* were released by Hollywood studios and major independents to mainstreams audience, contemporary in scope, and urban in their geographic setting and stylistic orientation.[438] Only three films scheduled for wide release, *A Rage in Harlem* (1991), *The Five Heartbeats* (1991), and *True Identity* (1991), did not focus on the contemporary urban landscape.

Categorizing this period as "the new homeboy cinema,"[439] film scholar Jackie Jones notes films, such as *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), invoked Hollywood's fascination with the deteriorating urban ghettos through the exploration of a heroic male character's individual or personal journey. In their formation of heroic male figures, these films not only marginalized black female characters, but also failed to provide black female characters with personal histories which existed outside of their relationships with black men.

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[438] Jacquie Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," Wide Angle 13.3 & 4 (1991): 32.
[439] Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," 33.

Dash's particular vision of black women's experiences, voices, and histories presented in the film *Daughters of the Dust* is informed by the themes, images, and texts of African American women's literature and black independent cinema. Within her corpus of films, *Daughters of the Dust* represents the continuation of the themes of black women's visibility and audibility examined in earlier films such as *Four Women* (1975), *Diary of an African Nun* (1977) and *Illusions* (1983). Dash's exposure, particularly to black women's literature, occurred while in college in the 1970s. Unlike her literary predecessors, such as Paule Marshall, Dash represented the first generation of black women artists to access to the works of black women in a classroom setting. The exposure to the works of Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, and Toni Cade Bambara would be profound for the artist. In Bambara's work, Dash found an artistic representation of black expressive vernacular. Bambara's ability to "captur[e] a thought, weav[e] it for many paragraphs and then brin[g] it back around, it was just like regular conversation,"[440] Dash recalls. "It was the way your mother used to talk to you, the way your grandparents would speak to you." she adds. [441] Bambara's expression of black vernacular, Dash explains, had an influence on the narrative structure of *Daughters of the Dust*.

In interviews, Dash repeatedly underscores her desire to tell the story of the Peazant family in a culturally specific way. Like Bambara, she underscores the structure of African storytelling techniques and the aural sounds of black speech. The narrative structure of *Daughters of the Dust* reflects the patterns of an African griot expanding outward and inward at different moments. The centrality of storytelling emerges at the very beginning of the film through the voice-over of an unknown woman, who expresses

[440] Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Not without My Daughters," Transition 57 (1992): 150-51.
[441] Baker, "Not without My Daughters," 151.

the multiple interweaving stories and experiences that will unfold upon the screen subsequently. She proclaims to the viewer, "I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one." The emergence of this voice places oral tradition at the center of the film and marks black women as the bearers of the story. Dash gives black women narrative authority, which in cinema has often been reserved for white men. The voice-over establishes the subject position of the narrator and the community by "invoking its history through her speech."[442] Film scholar Geetha Ramanthan explains the griot's relationship to and within the narrative. She argues, "as a griot she does not use the third-person, but the first, enmeshing herself in the history, and naming herself as a griot."[443]

The film's aesthetic is shaped by the manner in which the story is told and the way the story sounds. Dash captures the sound of the Gullah language in the film. The first 10 minutes of the film features the Gullah language, which tapers off into the Gullah dialect for the rest of the film. Dash's use of language functions as a way of historically grounding the film in a particular place, the Sea Islands. The absence of subtitles throughout the entire film positions sound as central means or mechanism for interpretation. The sound of Gullah in the film shapes the viewer's experience by underscoring that not only are they seeing something different, but they are also hearing something different as well. The viewer is forced to attune their ears to the particularities of Gullah speech and listen. The sound of Gullah contributes to the "auditory rhythm" of the film.[444] While the script for the film was written in English, it is translated into Gullah

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[442] Geetha Ramanathan, Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006) 82.
[443] Ramanathan, Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films 82.
[444] Ramanathan, Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films 15.

by Ronald Daise, a local Sea Islands author, activist, and dialect coach. Daise reviewed the lines with each cast member to ensure that they pronounced works with a Gullah accent. The Gullah language represents an important marker of African American regional identity and a cultural link between the Americas and Africa.[445]

Dash is not only influenced by the works of African American literature, but she also draws upon the texts of black women writers and artists. In 1975, she directed and produced a short film, *Four Women* (1975), based on Nina Simone's 1966 song.[446] In *Four Women*, Dash coupled the song text with stylized movement in order to express the "the metamorphosis of the black woman from Africa to her struggle for survival in America."[447] Immediately following *Four Women*, in 1977 she produced Alice Walker's *Diary of an African Nun* (1970), which originally ran in *The Black Woman: Anthology* (1970). The film follows the story of an African nun who is consumed with fear, doubt, and anguish over her decision to take her vows. As the nun, lies in bed in anguish about her impending decision she hears the drums of her village beckoning her. Dash's concerns and themes in *Four Women*, *Diary of an African Nun*, and later *Daughters of the Dust* reflect the thematic concerns of black filmmakers in the 1970s, such as Haile

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[445] Black English Vernacular (BEV) is a variation of standard English. It is marked by morphological, phonological, and syntactic differences. Gullah incorporates those differences and additional ones. To a greater degree than Black English Vernacular, Gullah represents a Creole language.

[446] *Four Women* was recorded on Nina Simone's *Wild is the Wind*. Dash describes her 1977 interpretation of the song as " an experimental dance film that employs the use of stylized movements and dress to express the spirit of black womanhood from an embryonic stage in Africa, through a struggle she wages to survive in America"(taken from Julie Dash's website http://geechee.tv/julieinfo/filmo.html#. While Simone traces black women's experiences in America, Dash is more diasporic in view.

[447] Gloria Gibson-Hudson, "African American Literary Criticism as a Model for the Analysis of Films by African American Women," Wide Angle 13.3&4 (1991): 50.

Gerima and Charles Burnett, who turned their attention to the black Diaspora, folklore, family, and history.[448]

During the late 1960s's through the 1970s, black filmmakers at UCLA's graduate school of film organized and challenged Hollywood's depiction of Black people and culture. Their efforts would later be known as the LA Rebellion.[449] Their perspective on film was informed by the political and cultural movements in the United States as well as in Africa and the Caribbean.[450] The rebellion consisted of filmmakers from two periods. The first group consisted of Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark and Ben Caldwell. The second wave of filmmakers is represented by Bill Woodberry, Julie Dash and Allie Sharon Larkin. Foluke Ogunleye argues the members of the LA off campus groups "exhibit[ed] a unity of purposed and vision."[451] Toni Cade Bambara argues *Daughters of the Dust* is grounded in the discourse of black committed black cinema, which is reflected in the film's themes of folklore and religious and spiritual continuum as well as Dash's use of actors who have worked in independent cinema. [452]

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[448] Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," Black American Cinema, ed. Manthia Diawara (London: Routledge, 1993) 120.

[449] Foluke Ogunleye writes, "The term L.A. Rebellion was coined by Clyde Taylor to describe a school of African and African American cineastes-in-training at UCLA's graduate film production program between 1967 and 1978. The school, according to Jacqueline Stewart, was 'organized to produce politically and 'aesthetically' rebellious films' which were principally aimed at challenging negative Hollywood presentations of Black character and culture" (159). Foluke Ogunleye, "Transcending the 'Dust': African American Filmmakers Preserving the 'Glimpse of the Eternal'," College Literature 34.1 (2007).

[450] Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," 119.

[451] Ogunleye notes not only did the filmmakers form study groups and view socially conscious cinema, but they also worked as crew members on each other's film. Ogunleye, "Transcending the 'Dust': African American Filmmakers Preserving the 'Glimpse of the Eternal'," 159. Dash explains that when selecting actors for the film, she consciously picked actors and actresses who worked on other independent films. Cora Lee Day, who plays Nana Peazant appeared in Haile Gerima's *Bush Women*. Kayee Moore, the actress who pays Haagar Peazant appeared in both Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* and Billy Woodbury's *Bless Their Little Hearts*. Yellow Mary, played by Barbara O, appeared in Dash's film *Diary of an African Nun*. Zeinabu irene Davis, "An Interview with Julie Dash," Wide Angle 13.3 & 4 (1991): 113.

[452] Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," 121.

In the 1970s, independent black filmmakers were not the only ones to focus on themes of family, history, women, and folklore.[453] African American women writers also drew upon these themes in their works. Although differences exist in their form, structure, and thematic development, Gloria J. Hudson argues literature and film created by black women artists "function as communicative art forms voicing similar issues and concerns germane to black women's experiences in America." [454] Moreover, in her films Dash has drawn upon both African American literature and film as sources of influence and inspiration. Dash "signifies" upon African American women's literature by "rewriting the received textual tradition" within the space of film.[455] Through signification, she creates a space and audience in and through film for black women's works. Dash draws not only upon the themes and tropes of black women's cultural production from earlier periods, but also actual dialogue.[456] Through her use of these texts and others, Dash "articulates in concrete and poetic form the urge to commit black cultural tradition to film, to keep it from being forgotten or destroyed."[457]

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[453] Toni Cade Bambara argues family, women, history, and folklore were central themes of focus for filmmakers of the LA rebellion. Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," 120.

[454] Gibson-Hudson, "African American Literary Criticism as a Model for the Analysis of Films by African American Women," 46.

[455] Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism 124. Joel Brouwer argues that *Daughters* signifies upon Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through its "line of demarcation between the living and the dead"(10). There are several other examples that can be drawn between *Daughters* and other African American women's literature. For instance, a strong connection can be seen with Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* surrounding the myth of the Flying Africans. Joel R. Brouwer, "Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust," African American Review 29.1 (1995): 19.

[456] Starting as a 30 page script, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts enables her to turn the short script of *Daughters* into a film short. In 1981, a Guggenheim Foundation for Research grant enables Dash to write and produce a series of films on black women. This grant enables Dash to produce the short film *Illusions* (1983) and allows her conduct extensive research for the *Daughters* film. Davis, Zeinabu, "An Interview with Julie Dash, *Wide Angle*, 13 (3/4): 112. Dash, Julie, *"Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film"* New York: New Press (1992): 4-5.

[457] Janet Cutler identifies the political and social importance and function of documentaries about artists. Given the role many black artists assume as truth tellers, displaying their works and lives on film helps to illuminate the complexities of the black experience they represent in their selected medium. In the section of the chapter called "Media and Memory: Women Artists and the Transmission of Culture," she

Interestingly, African American writers have incorporated folklore into their written works for the same reasons—to keep it from being forgotten or destroyed. Through an oral-written interplay in these works, the space of the novel emerges as a vehicle for communicating folklore and as a source of folklore.[458] In their use and transformation of folklore, Wendy Walters contends, "the novel form, as used by black women writers, constitutes an alternative realm of transmission and transformation of the canonical tales of black communities."[459] Wendy Waters points to Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* as an example of the interplay between oral and written in black women's writing as well as the incorporation of a diasporic folkloric history within the medium of the novel.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash again turns to the text of African American women writers as a source material for visualizing the black experience by incorporating a passage from Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. The particular passage Dash excerpts from *Praisesong for the Widow* recounts the story of Ibo Landing. The story of Ibo Landing is a variant of the myth of the Flying Africans. Both the story of the Flying Africans and Ibo Landing underscore enslaved Africans' possession of spirit and body and eventual return to Africa. Paule Marshall encounters references to the canonical story of Flying Africans and Ibo Landing while reading the 1940 collection of narratives from the Georgia Sea Islands, *Drums and Shadows*.

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demonstrates the ways in which women documentarians, in particular, and the works they produce illuminate women's roles as keepers of culture and transmitters of tradition. Through their material selection, women documentarians not only pay homage to the artists who inspire them, but also commit these works to film ensuring that they exist and are encoded in another aspect of black cultural production. Janet Cutler, "Rewritten on Film: Documenting the Artist," Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video, eds. Phyllis Rauch Klotman and Cutler Janet K. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 174.

[458] Akoma, Folklore in New World Black Fiction: Writing and the Oral Traditional Aesthetics.

[459] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 4.

Dash incorporates Marshall's description of Ibo Landing in the film *Daughters of the Dust*. Contrary to what some scholars have written, Dash argues that portions of the screenplay were written prior to reading Marshall not after. She explains:

> I had written something already for my character to say while she was standing at the banks of Ibo Landing, and then I came upon Paule Marshall. I read it and said: 'This is Ibo Landing, this is glorious the way she's written it.' So we got in touch with her.[460]

Dash's use of Marshall's passage represents an interesting interplay of oral-written-and visual. Her incorporation of the folktale, as envisioned by Marshall, offers the viewer multiple references points for accessing the myth. Her use of the Marshall's text within the film serves not only to prevent the folktale from being forgotten, but Marshall's text as well. Dash pulls upon the folktale or myth of Ibo Landing as a source of revision and a means of intertextual connection with African American literary and vernacular traditions.

Daughters of the Dust and *Praisesong for the Widow* share important parallels surrounding the invocations of Ibo Landing and the contemplation of Diasporic migration. In both works, Ibo Landing reflects an important and scared geographical site characters travel. Early in the film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash identifies Ibo Landing as an important geographic marker by presenting text on screen naming it. The camera scans across an expansive areal shot of sand and water and fades into a scene of trees in a dusky light. The two images are striking. The first landscape is filled with golden tones, while the second landscape is saturated by grays. After the fade in from one landscape to the other, text appears on screen:

Ibo Landing
The Sea Islands of the South

[460] Baker, "Not without My Daughters," 164.

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The incorporation of text reflects one visual strategy Dash uses to identify Ibo Landing as an important place and a site of reference throughout the film. *Daughters of the Dust* resonates with *Praisesong for the Widow* not only through its use of dialogue, but also through its themes and tropes. If the experiences of black Americans have been epitomized by double consciousness, *Daughters of the Dust* and *Praisesong for the Widow* highlight cultural reconnections and wholeness through the discovery and appreciation of rural cultural traditions located within the Sea Islands. They emphasize the importance of cultural connections and traditions as a means of healing physical and cultural loss. They also position women as bearers of the story. In *Daughters of the Dust*, Eula narrates the story of Ibo Landing to her Unborn Child, who emerges as a griot in the film. Like Marshall, Dash highlights in *Daughters of the Dust* the distinctions between history and memory by presenting two versions of the myth. The first version retold by Eula recounts how the Ibos walked on water. The second version told by Bilal Muhammed explains that the Ibos did not walk on water, but instead drowned. While Dash brings forth both accounts, in the film she is most interested in understanding not the truth or veracity of the myth, but the power of it.

In 1992, a year following the release of the film, Dash publishes the screenplay to the film. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Women's Film* includes the screenplay for the film with Dash's citations in the margins. It also features interviews with Dash as well as her personal reflections surrounding the research for and production of the film. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Women's Film* stands as its own reference point and site of meaning making by offering

interviews and essays to contextualize and frame the film. In an interview with bell hooks, Dash reflects upon her interpretation of myth and history as well as her historical research on the Sea Islands and discovery of Ibo Landing.

In her research for the film, she recalls coming across references to Ibo Landing for different Sea Islands. She explains, "I found that almost every Sea Islands has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, 'This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened.'"[461] The story's prevalence throughout the Sea Islands prompted her to consider why the story resonated across time and space. For Dash, the story of Ibo Landing represents an enduring tradition of resistance and demonstrates that "myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future."[462]

Dash draws upon African American folklore and oral history in order to resurrect African and African American cultural memories and experiences for contemporary audiences. Dash not only mines African American folk culture for materials, she also delves into her family's history for stories of migration. Her family's stories of migration from the South to the North inspired the idea for the film and informed the development of some of her characters.[463] The family's history not only provides the basis for thinking about the themes of migration and memory, but also inspired her to select the Sea Islands as the setting to stage these concerns. Dash's father, a native of South Carolina, is of Gullah descendent.[464] Dash names her production company Geechee Girl Productions as

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[461] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 30.
[462] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 30.
[463] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 5.
[464] The term Gullah is often used to identify the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the coastal areas of South Carolina, while the term Geechee is often use to talk about those descendants who reside in coastal Georgia. On many occasions, the term Gullah is used to describe both groups.

a way of not only embracing her Gullah heritage, but also redefining the connotation of the term Geechee. Dash takes the term Geechee, which was often a derogatory term, and transforms it into a heritage reclaimed. The film *Daughters of the Dust* represents Dash's continued interest in redefining "our [Black] images, and redefine[ing] how we see ourselves and positions ourselves in the world."[465]

In *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash creates new images of black women and evokes new symbols to represent black experiences. The film calls attention to the beauty of black women, particularly dark skinned-black women whose faces are the subject of numerous close-up shots, and whose stories are central to the plot. The newness of images Dash underscores in the film also pertains to the representation of slavery. Enslaved Africans brought to this region were selected for their knowledge of rice cultivation and production. They also cultivated indigo and cotton, poisonous and laborious crops. A flashback to an indigo plantation reveals early Peazant members processing indigo in large vats. The Unborn Child, who watches the women work, offers a reading of history, slavery, and resistance. Dash's recurrent use of indigo throughout the film symbolizes the specific history of slavery in the Sea Islands, while also serving as a new metaphor and image for visualizing the experiences and marks of slavery more generally. The scars of slavery mark characters' hands and clothing with a blue indigo dye.

Dash also draws upon the Sea Islands as a new cultural reference for exploring African American migrations and the formation of diasporic identities. She challenges the

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[465] Rahdi Taylor, Daughter of the Diaspora: An Interview with Filmmaker Julie Dash, December 31, 1993, Available: http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/pqdweb?did=494398581&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=1917&RQT=309&VName=PQD, November 28, 2008.

dominance that landscapes such as Mississippi and Alabama have as the sole origins of black southern migrations and identities. The film engages in a process of re-exploring the African American migratory past by moving beyond conventional locations and underscoring regional and cultural diversity among the African American population. Tangible connections in language, religious beliefs, and social organization with African antecedents represent important features of the Sea Islands' regional identity, which Dash emphasizes in the film. Relative social isolation and the constant reinvigoration of the enslaved population during the antebellum period enabled a rich and distinct African derived culture to develop within the Sea Islands, known as the Gullah in South Carolina and Geechee in Georgia.[466]

Through its representation of the Sea Islands, the central geography of the film, *Daughters of the Dust* evokes the South as a site of origins and home, an image reflected in African American literary return migration narratives of the period. While Dash evokes this representation of the South, she also distinguishes the Sea Islands as a unique southern homeplace. By highlighting the presence of African survivals and retentions in the Sea Islands, Dash positions the Sea Islands as a site of palpable connections with Africa embodied in rituals and memories. From the music to the material culture featured, Dash creates visual and auditory remnants or reminders of Africa in the Sea Islands.

The historical and social context for the Sea Islands' regional identity and cultural syncretism is presented in the film's opening frames and reiterated throughout the film through language, hairstyles, gestures, and narrative. The women's hairstyles in the film were carefully selected to reflect West African braiding designs. Dash asks Pamela

[466] Geechee, often used to refer to the African American Sea Islanders off the coast of Georgia, historically had a negative connotation. In recent years, individuals, such as Julie Dash, have signified upon the word.

Ferrell to create African hairstyles for various cast members based on their age, facial features, and place in the society. Farrell, who studied West African hair designs, composes styles which invoke African ethnic diversity that was a feature of Sea Island life.[467] The film invokes other visual reminders of Africa through images of sweetgrass baskets and the bottle tree outside the family's compound.

The appearance of bottle tree and the family graveyard in the film reflects African beliefs surrounding the connection between the living and the dead epitomized by the Nana Peazant. The graves are decorated with seashells, bottles, pots, pans, and personal affects of the deceased. Although the physical site Dash selected to shoot the film actually held ancient African graves, she and her design team create Kikongo style graves pulling on photographs and examples of graves found in the Sea Islands.

Underscoring into the continued importance of African informed religious beliefs and practices in Gullah culture, Dash uses classical Yoruba cosmologies to inform the development and motivations of the principle characters.[468] Nana Peazant is the embodiment of Obatala, the god of the white cloth and the creator of human beings. Yellow Mary represents Yemayá, mother of the sea and keeper of dreams and secrets. While the Unborn Child represents Elegba/Eshu, protector of the crossroad and the trickster.[469]

Dash is careful to chart traditions and features that are specific to Sea Islands culture—fishing, planting and harvesting of indigo, Gullah language, religious practices, the weaving of sea grass—challenging the viewer to think about the sites and degrees of

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[467] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 52-53.
[468] Dash sent background sheets for each character to the cast and records in the screenplay the corresponding deities and characters the characters represent.
[469] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 75-76.

cultural transmission and preservation in the United States, and particularly in the Sea Islands. Her visual and aural presentation underscore Africa remembered in language, material culture, and patterns of beliefs.

Susan Stanford Friedman has described *Daughters of the Dust* as a "filmic recovery of roots, a rewitnessing of past migration routes" which emerges through a communal and personal story of root/routes.[470] Instead of underscoring African roots in the Americas as pure, stable, or fixed, the film highlights the interplay between roots and routes through its emphasis on cultural syncretism. Dash situates the Sea Islands as a critical space of African cultural survivals as well as cultural syncretism in the New World. The concern for cultural syncretism emerges both in the design aesthetic of the film, the religious practices of characters, and the cultural traditions. As Dash explains:

> Everything you see in terms of the product design is a syncretism of the two worlds, very much like we are trying to show the syncretism of religion, we are trying to show the syncretism of tradition and culture and how things persist, how culture and language and mode of habits and all those things, cuisine, well persist over the years.[471]

The syncretism of culture is apparent in the characters' dress. Although the hairstyles are African inspired, the clothing worn by the cast is distinctly European. It is also featured in the religious practices of various characters. The character of Bilal Muhammad, an enslaved Muslim brought to the Sea Islands, underscores the diversity of religious beliefs not only brought by African captives to the Sea Islands, but also within the Sea Islands. Through the film, Dash highlights the ways traditions evolve in the hands of subsequent generations, the persistence of particular traditions, and the ways in which

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[470] Susan Stanford Friedman, Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998) 158.
[471] Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust, 1 videocassette (113 min.), Kino on Video, New York, NY, 1991.

traditions are interpreted and given new or revised meaning and purpose by each generation.

It is in this space of identifying a new site of linking African origins in the New World and charting black Southern origins that Dash reconsiders the very essence of how African cultures traveled not only to the New World, but specifically to North America and what this "migration" meant at the turn of the century and what it means today. Identifying new and diverse sites of "origins" occurs in part by identifying varied migration routes, and re-examining the locations that people are moving away from. Like Marshall and Naylor, Dash believes the past is instructive for contemporary audiences and identifies black women as significant characters and narrators of cultural memory. In an interview with Rahdi Taylor, Dash explains the particular significance of looking back in the 1990s to the turn of the century.

Through her historical setting for the film, Dash wants black women to look at what their counterparts were doing and the choices they faced a century ago. Noting "we mirror one another," she sees parallels between her contemporary audience and their foremothers reflected on screen as members of the Peazant family.[472] The setting of the Sea Islands at the turn of the century offers a unique and important site to examine the clashes that erupt between worlds, ideals, and beliefs as an African American family, the Peazants, decide what they will carry with them, figuratively and literally, from the Sea Islands to the mainland. However, Dash calls attention in the film not only to conflicts surrounding differing values and migration decisions, but also the role of memory and traditions for subsequent generations. The film's focus on migration serves as a venue for understanding physical movements and cultural transformations within particular

[472] Taylor, Daughter of the Diaspora: An Interview with Filmmaker Julie Dash.

historical contexts. The impact of various migrations, forced and voluntary, not only looms over the plot, but also influences the very production of the film, its political and social significance, and the delivery of its message.

Dash's representations of migration to and from the Sea Islands are historical and contemporary, individual and collective, domestic and international. The ability to ground traditions and family in a locale becomes an important endeavor, given the types of cultural disruptions and alienation that have characterized the African American experience in the Americas. The film illuminates two tales of immigration, which are told through flashbacks, and visual references to places, rituals, and traditions. The first involves the forced migration of Africans to the New World, while the second involves the migration of African Americans from the South to the North, the formation of a "New Negro" who sought full incorporation into American society. While James Gibbs locates the tale of immigration within the space of the Middle Passage and the initial arrival of Africans in the Americas, underscoring Dash's comments that the "Sea Islands is the Ellis Island for black Americans," I think that the second migration, the impending migration of the family to the North also constitutes an equally important immigrant's tale because of the concerns between new and old worlds; the struggle over loss of language, culture, and identity; and the movement to a different and radically altered new space, political, and economic systems.

The film interrogates the transition of African Americans from agrarian to urban life. bell hooks proclaims that it highlights the richness of the rural agrarian experience and the psychic loss which resulted from out-migration. [473] Nana's on-screen voice interjects regarding the dominance of the North in the minds of Sea Islanders. The

[473] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 42.

intrusion of this location represents a specific disruption to the continuance of cultural traditions and its preservation in the Sea Islands. While out-migration poses a danger to the continuance of cultural traditions, Dash questions its inevitability. If cultures/people can travel, so can cultures and traditions; however, the persistence of cultural traditions in new locations must be desired on the part of the migrant, something that Dash questions with the Sea Islands migrants at the turn of the century she describes. Importantly, in the film the exact destination in the North is not verbalized; it is mythic and imaginary. Yet, Nana seeks to concretize the actual reality of black migrants in the northern landscape by exclaiming that it was not a place of milk and honey.

The unborn child of Eula and Eli, the family's "child of the future" helps the viewer revisit the possibility, excitement, and opportunity the turn of the century held not only for America, in terms of industrialization, but also for African Americans. Looking through a stereoscope, the Unborn Child sees moving black and white images of European immigrants in crowded Northern urban cities. The images reflect the belief that the city space at the turn of the century represented a site of possibility available for all Americans. African Americans are absent from the visual scenes of immigrants or migrants in the city. The absence of African Americans from these scenes disrupts the perception that economic, political and social possibility was available to all groups. In another scene, when one man mentions homesteading in Florida as an option and migratory destination, Daddy Mac, Nana's eldest son, challenges whether the possibilities and landscapes open to whites are equally available to blacks. In the next scene, the Peazant children play with wish books. Coupling together these two scenes in particular, *Daughters of the Dust* weighs the dreams and wishes of the Peazants with the

harsh realities of blacks in the urban cities of the South, North, and Midwest at the turn of the century.

The film engages not only the issue of becoming—becoming Gullah, becoming African-American, a hyphenated person, —but also the desire for a generation once removed from slavery to become "American." What did this claim for civic and economic participation entail? What would it require of its participants? How would this desire impend upon the "scraps of memory" some of them still carried? What would this type of migration mean to the memories, rituals and traditions brought from Africa, created in the Sea Islands, and passed down to various descendants Dash puzzles. The concern for the double alienation and double consciousness of African Americans is voiced by Nana Peazant. Nana attempts to convey to her children and grandchildren the importance of remembering. In the film, people and places represent bridges between various historical moments, geographical locations, and different migrations, including—Ibo Landing, Slavery, Emancipation, and the Great Migration. Although both can function as witnesses to critical historical moments and the cultural and social impact of migration, forced and voluntary; I would point out that every character does not bear witness to history or bear witness equally. Some, like Haagar, deny "primal memory."

The Sea Islands emerges in the film as a *lieux de mémoire,* because of its ability to not only bridge Diaspora, but to also reflect the very conditions and challenges that Diaspora creates from dislocation and fragmentation to the reconstitution of cultural connections and bonds. I have drawn upon Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* to frame my discussion of Marshall and Naylor's work and find it again useful for contemplating Dash's film.

Drawing upon French historian Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, Geneviève Fabre and Robert O' Meally examine how the American and African American past is viewed and narrated and identify where history intersects with memory.[474] Although relationships between contemporary individuals and societies and the past have changed, often resulting in "uprootedness and drift," an interest in retrieving the past endures.[475] This desire is accompanied by the creation of "new mooring and props" which reactivate and in some cases activate processes of remembering.[476] Nora's concept exists in this moment of activation, the construction of *lieux de mémoire*.[477] As individually or collectively selected landmarks of the past, *lieux de mémoire*, are "spurred by a will to remember," and invested with historical and political significance.[478] Explaining Nora's concept, Fabre and O'Meally assert that *lieux de mémoire* may be "historical or legendary event of figure, a book or an era, a place or an idea; it can be 'simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial . . . Nonetheless it is 'material, symbolic, and functional."[479] Embodied in many forms, these landmarks of the past are people and places; real and imagined; and public and private.

Within the context of African American culture, *lieux de mémoire* are utilized to "reconstitute wholeness" and have been mapped onto geographic locations such as the American South and Africa.[480] Melvin Dixon suggests that the presence of sites of

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[474] Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture.
[475] Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. 7.
[476] Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. 7.
[477] Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as: "Where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of embodiment of memory in certain sites where as sense of historical continuity persist." Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. 7.
[478] Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. 7.
[479] Fabre, ed., History and Memory in African American Culture. 7.
[480] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18.

memory represent not only the valuing of cultural memory, but a "history or historiography that is not dependant on written analysis or criticism" instead it represents an alternative record achieved through memory.[481] The geographical nature of *lieux de mémoire* that Dixon describes is particularly relevant to my discussion of the film. Dash portrays the Sea Islands as a site for retrieving memories of a distinct African American past as well as reconstituting memory of Africa for African Americans.

Dash's visual presentation of the Sea Islands in *Daughters of the Dust* is central to framing the Sea Islands as a particular site of memory and an important cultural reference for the depiction of black culture. Through Dash's camera, the Sea Islands emerge as a diversely rich landscape, physically and culturally. Presenting the variance of the Sea Islands' environments, Dash's camera scans the marshlands, dunes, flat sands and ocean. Describing the film as a tableau of images, through her camera shots across the multiple spaces of the Dawtuh Island, Dash constructs individual portraits of a place and its people. Her visual strategy is inspired by James Van der Zee's photographic techniques of multiple imagining. A renowned Harlem photographer, Van der Zee created multiple images by superimposing one photograph onto another often by double printing. While Dash draws upon this technique in the composition of the film, her use of the technique is most apparent in the film's opening.[482] Calling her version of the technique "layered dissolve," Jacqueline Bobo argues that Dash's composition and editing of individual shots in the film's opening enables these scenes to become "iconic portraits" which "resonate beyond their duration on the screen."[483]

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[481] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18.
[482] Jacqueline Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 134.
[483] Bobo, Black Women as Cultural Readers 134.

Of the iconic portraits, which initiate the film's beginning and the viewer's entry into the Sea Islands, one in particular helps to frame a particular connection between the Peazants and the land. A young woman, who is identified later in the film as Nana Peazant, holds her hands up to the camera. She holds brown dirt in her hands, which slowly falls through her hands. This scene is saturated by brown from the color of Nana's hands and the dirt to the tint of the light. Aurally the scene is framed by the sounds of drumming and the haunting sounds of wind blowing. The image of the dirt is Dash's not so subtle way of illustrating the link between people and land. The family's name emerges as another way of creating a link between people and land. Although Dash explains that Peazant was a name she remembered hearing as a child, the name Peazant also emerges in the film as a reference to the family's agrarian past.[484]

While the family's name reflects their closeness to the land and the agricultural roots of American Americans, Dash also underscores the harshness and at times futility of the land. She returns to the opening image through a flashback sequence. In the scene immediately before the flashback, the tension which had been mounting all day surrounding the family's out-migration erupts. This tension, however, does not only surround whether family members will or need to continue cultural traditions on the mainland, but rather speaks to the very interpretation, continuation, and realization of the histories they carry.

Yellow Mary pleads with the family to understand and embrace her as one of their own. Yellow Mary is an outcast from the family and viewed as an outsider, because she is a prostitute and considered "ruint," or absent of purity. Eula, raped by an unknown white assailant, challenges the family to embrace Yellow Mary as part of them or deny

[484] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 34.

Eula. By forcing the family to see her and Yellow Mary as the same, Eula challenges the categories of purity and pure woman. Through Eula's outcry, Dash demonstrates how the invocation of terms such as purity and the deployment of religion for characters, like Voila, serves to protect or hide them from the shame of slavery. Explaining that they can not run way from these legacies, Eula employs her family to reframe how they understand all the parts of their histories and link their multiple stories not only to one another, but to the very items that Nana carries in her tin can, her "scraps of memories." Representing a rich rural experience and culture does not mean evoking nostalgia of the past or the folk as Hazel Carby has warned against in "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston."[485]

In "The Politics of Fiction," Hazel Carby expresses her concern with what she sees as the privileging of the rural and the folk. She argues, "Afro-American cultural and literary history should not create and glorify a limited vision, a vision which in its romantic evocation of the rural and of the folk avoids some of the most crucial and urgent claims of cultural struggle."[486] In their analysis of the film, some scholars have argued that film's emphasis on ancestor awareness, ritual and traditions embodied in the Sea Islands' landscape, and the privileging of Nana's voice over dissenting voices of family members, such as Haagar, represents the romanticism of the South as a "African American homeland" and "Northern migration as a mistake."[487]

I believe a closer look at the relationships between characters, the visual and oral pairing of stories and experiences offer a different conclusion. Dash, like the other

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[485] Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston."
[486] Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 175.
[487] Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative.

authors in this dissertation, does not romanticize the rural and the folk or omit the urban experience, but identifies the interplay between the two experiences in the lives of African Americans. In her narration of the Peazant's impending migration, Dash emphasizes both the rural and the urban as sites of terror, the present and the past, rooted and uprooted, stasis and mobility, and the interplay between Africa and the Americas. By constructing balancing relationships, although, I would add that they do not exist always in opposition to one another or in harmony, Dash demonstrates that people inhabit multiple spaces and places simultaneously, and that this is what the modern experience of migration means, understanding how "we are as two people in one body."[488] While the film does construct the Sea Islands as an African American homeland, vis a vis, its presence as a *lieux de mémoire*, it does not present a South devoid of its history of slavery and Reconstruction. The sexual exploitation of black women, the threats of physical violence upon black bodies looms in the background of the film. If the South, in general, and the Sea Islands, in particular, is the site of physical and emotional scars, what do they take with them from this place?

As Eula, Nana, and Yellow Mary embrace one another, the camera focuses on Nana looking away in the distance. The scene transitions into a flashback sequence. It is at this moment, Dash provides the viewer with the full scene from which the earlier image of Nana's hands is excerpted. The camera follows a young Nana running through a wooded area wearing an indigo colored dress. Kneeling to the ground, she picks up the dirt and asks her husband about the sustainability of the land. The dirt she pick up turns to dust in her hands as a result the couple wonders will anything grow in the dirt they not only worked, but importantly now owned. Shad, Nana's husband explains that they must

[488] Dash, Daughters of the Dust.

plant each and year or they are finished. Planting, the physical interaction between person and land, represents a metaphor for maintaining traditions in spite of disparate and hostile environments—maintaining hope. The dust like nature of the dirt has a special significance in the film and is a reference to the film's title. For Dash, dust "implies the past and something that grown old and crumbling."[489] The film's title *Daughters of the Dust* paraphrases a passage in the bible found in Ezekiel which states, "O ye sons of the dust."[490] The land becomes intimately apart of telling the story of the Sea Islands and the Peazants. The soil, the inhospitable red clay earth, represents the legacy of survival, resilience, and persistence.

If one believes that "planting," a dominant image in the film, serves to preserve cultural traditions and culture preserved in land, then migration might represent a disruption to communal bonds, values, and traditions. Barbara Christian posits, "Setting, then, is organic to the character's view of themselves. And a change in place drastically alters the traditional values that gives their life coherence."[491] Subsequently, a break with one's homeland represents a break with one's ancestors, a break with one's culture, and ultimately, a break with one's self. Like Morrison, Dash ponders this belief, this particular connection, through the character of Nana without privileging it unequally as some scholars have suggested. Instead of asserting the persistence of traditions solely in the southern rural landscape, the film weighs the possibility of traditions traveling in different times and spaces. Dash puzzles this equation, the link between homeland and tradition, individual and memory by demonstrating for enslaved Africans the break with

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[489] Davis, "An Interview with Julie Dash," 111.
[490] Davis, "An Interview with Julie Dash," 111.
[491] Barbara Christian, Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) 48.

their homeland did not equal a break with perceptions of identity, community, and tradition.

Given that the land is central to the telling the story of the Sea Islands in the film *Daughters of the Dust*, film scholar Manthia Diawara argues that the film underscores spatial narration. His discussion of spatial narration in the film is instructive for analyzing Dash's construction of the Sea Islands and Gullah people as sites of memory. Diawara argues, "Julie Dash emphasizes spatial narration as a conduit to Black self-expressivity, a storytelling device which interrogates identity, memory, and Black ways of life."[492] Dash's spatial narration underscores a view of space, and particularly the space of the Sea Islands as a storehouse of memories.

Tying identity to memory and articulating the interconnectedness of personal, collective and social memories within urban landscapes, Dolores Hayden offers a reading of place as "storehouses of social memories," and a site for uncovering and interrogating public histories.[493] Similarly Barbara Christian reads Toni Morrison's works, she examines how place produces and is produced by social relations. Christian astutely observes that places in Morrison's novels are as important as human actors.[494] Not only does land emerge as a central focus and symbol, it dually functions as a dwelling site and the basis of the community's value system. Individuals are not only from land, they are a part of land, and memories are tied to their experiences in it.[495]

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[492] Manthia Diawara, ed., Black American Cinema (London: Routledge, 1993) 14.
[493] Hayden's project is not only to uncover public histories in urban landscapes, but to uncover the histories of marginalized groups. Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) 9.
[494] Christian, Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers 48.
[495] Christian, Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers 51.

I argue there is a dialogic relationship between *lieux de mémoire* and recollections in Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*. They feed one another and it is through this process that they seek the "reconstitution of wholeness." At the beginning of the film, Dash introduces text informing the viewer that "Gullah communities recalled, remembered, and recollected much of what their ancestors brought with them from Africa." This text underscores how Dash positions the Sea Islands and Gullah people as sites of memory. Moreover, Dash places memory at the center of the reconstitution of African cultures in the New World. Memory, however, does not exist undisturbed, but as fragments or "scraps of memories." This representation of memory echoes Marshall's metaphor of the burnt out ends in *Praisesong.* Through the film, Dash retrieves memory through the recollections of characters. Memory is activated and preserved by recollections or what people recalled and remembered. Dash draws upon orality as an important medium for constituting knowledge of the Sea Islands for her viewers. Through her use of memory, Dash evokes a sense of the Sea Islands as a physical and cultural geography while also "enlarge[ing] the frame of cultural reference for the depiction of black experiences by anchoring that experience in memory—a memory that ultimately rewrites history."[496]

Recollections emerge in the film as an important medium for constituting knowledge about the Sea Islands and family history for characters and for the viewer. Recollection serves not only to bridge descendants of slaves to one another, but also to link them to a pre-enslaved past. Nana "*recollects*" to her children and grandchildren how they lived in slavery times. In her recollections, she underscores the importance of griots and oral memories in African American culture. She explains the griot remembered all

[496] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 20.

the births, deaths, marriages, and sales within a particular community. In her recollections of Ibo Landing, Eula underscores the power of cultural memory to construct an alternative memory of black responses to enslavement. Bilal's memory of Ibo Landing is first hand and "what he *remembers*" he tells Mr. Snead in the language he learned to speak in the Sea Islands. Recollection functions as a way of not only transmitting traditions, but also highlighting the symbolic importance of lived reality. The Unborn Child, a griot in the novel, remembers her great-great grandmother's call across the space separating the living and the dead. Not only does she revisit the events which ushered framed her birth, but she also recounts the moment of their departure.

Recollections, like bodies, travel. It is in the space of movement that Dash examines the factors that affect, influence, alter, or destroy the role particular recollections have in the lives of individuals. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe offers an important definition of rememory, proclaiming, "if a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory but out there." [497] Nana's "recollection" is a variation of Morrison's re-memory. It is another way of identifying as Edwidge Danticat has proclaimed that "the past is more like flesh than air."[498] At the beginning of the film, Nana expresses her intent to give her children and grandchildren something concrete to take with them to North. Recollections represent the oral components of her plan, her stories, and her reflections of individual and collective primal scenes. She announces the power of recollection and connection, when Eli demands to know why didn't she or couldn't she protect him and his wife. She responds:

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[497] Toni Morrison, Beloved: A Novel, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1987) 35-36.
[498]Edwidge Danticat, The Farming of Bones: A Novel (New York, NY: Soho Press, 1998) 281.

> There's a thought . . . a recollection . . . something somebody remembers. We carry these memories inside of us. Do you believe that hundreds and hundreds of Africans brought here on this other side would forget everything they once knew? WE don't know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them. But we carry these memories inside of us.[499]

Recollections function as sites of knowledge, ways of archiving and organizing cultural memory and individual experience. They also serve as venues in which images and symbols, events and dialogues are transformed from loose symbols to referential texts; translated from one space to another; and transmitted from one individual to another. Dash examines not the disappearance of recollection, rather the ability or inability for it to be transmitted to certain individuals.

Dash's recollection, which is influenced by Morrison's "rememory," offers a space for preserving and passing primal scenes in Sea Islands society. Primal scenes are significant and transformative remembered events, which cause an individual or community to re-evaluate its members' life and identity. Primal scenes are depicted in recollection. The space between the primal scene is the space between "recollection and reconstruction."[500] Recollections function as a way of storing and processing primal scenes; they also increate and recreate them. Like Morrison, Dash develops the concepts of primal scenes and recollection in the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Although several characters have individual and personal primal scenes—Nana's mother gives her a locket of her hair before she is sold away, which she keeps as "scraps of memory." Yellow Mary must "fix the titty" to end her sexual exploitation and abuse while working for a white family in Cuba, an experience she locks in her "jewelry case." Eli's primal

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[499] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 96.
[500] Rushdy, "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 304.

scene surrounds the sexual violation of his wife Eula, an experience that challenges his belief system and forces him to question the presence and power of the elders and ancestors. Each of these scenes is embodied in the participants' recollection. These events transformed into primal scenes impact the identities, and the relationships to people and Gullah culture for various characters. Moreover, it shapes their behaviors, responses and interpretation of events.

Through flashback sequences, Nana recalls a primal scene in her youth. One recollection of this scene occurs after the family is gathered by Mr. Snead, the photographer Viola commissions, to take series of photographs of various family members and a group portrait. Watching Mr. Snead organize individuals into different groups to be photographed, Nana works steadily on crafting a "hand," a stitched piece of cloth used in Gullah spiritual practices. Nana's primal scene becomes a recollection iterated throughout the film and passed onto other family members and transformed into a primal event, Sunday celebration when she wraps into the hand that she asks her children to kiss. The ritual nature of the Sunday celebration enables it to function as a Last Supper of sorts, one that will be remembered and carried with various members. The notion of recollection and how it travels it connected to the Christian ritual of taking the Eucharist. Each member is asked not only to carry the recollection, but to carry Nana within them, to let her become part of them.

While Nana offers family members access to the past and cultural memory through her oral recollections, Mr. Snead invokes photography as a new science of memory. As a photographer, Mr. Snead is chronicling a particular historical and cultural moment in the family's life. Viola's decision to hire a photographer is important. As

individuals moved from rural areas to urban ones, they often recorded images of themselves at studios to send home to friends and families. Dressed in their best attire, through these images migrants sought to demonstrate their success in the city, actual, imagined or desired. Instead of photographing the family in the new landscape of the urban North, Viola has them photographed within the rural landscape of the South. For Viola, these photographs will function as a point of reference in the future, highlighting the strides the family has made or will make socially, economically, and culturally.

Yet, one must note that the intentions of Viola and the actual perspective of Mr. Snead begin to differ as the movie progresses. Like Viola, Mr. Snead, who is initially described as a "Philadelphia Negro," represents the notions of rationality, empirical science, and modernity. However, he increasingly becomes interested in the life and stories of residents on Dawtuh Island, particularly seeking out an enslaved African, Bilal Muhammad (based on the real Belali Mohomet), who was brought to the island on the slave ship the *Wanderer*.[501] Joining the family picnic at the end of the film, he decides to kiss Nana's amulet when Viola initially rejects the practice as idolatry.

Snead's interest in cultural history is decidedly different from the hair braider and Haagar, who ridicule Nana's tin, her traditions and her knowledge at the picnic site. The Hair braider seated next to Haagar discounts Nana's earlier assertion to Eli to look to the old ways. Supporting the hair braider's claim, Haagar argues that Nana is "too much a part of the past." A woman holding a baby pipes in and says that Nana, like Bilal, "does strange things." The women in this group deny the importance of Nana's recollections, her cultural and personal memory, and her desire to pass them to future generations. For

[501] Nadia Elia provides an important discussion of the representation of Muslims and Islam in novels by African American and Afro-Caribbean women writers. Elia, ""Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen": Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?."

them, migration represents a welcome break from the past, the movement to a place where "there'll be no need for an old woman's magic."[502]

Snead's ability to see the value in this culture is evidenced by his ability to see the physical presence of the Unborn Child through his camera lens. However, this visibility is fleeting when he steps away from the camera, as her image disappears. Although felt by various characters, the physical presence of the Unborn Child is only actually seen and acknowledged by Nana, Mr. Snead, and the viewer. We don't just know she's there because of her interactions with others, but we see it for ourselves. Dash's photographic intrusion through the body of Mr. Snead's camera and lens enables the viewer to obtain access to the family, their dialogues, and their emotions.

Through Mr. Snead and Nana Peazant, Dash interrogates the multiple ways memories and histories are recorded, encoded, and the venues upon which primal scenes are accessed and recollected. Like Dash, Nana Peazant is somewhat skeptical of the camera's ability to capture all points of memory, primal scenes, and recollections, for she has relied on "scraps of memory." Within her "scraps of memories," placed in a tin can, Nana carries a locket of her mother's hair, a material symbol of a foundational experience in her life and in the movie, an experience she shares with her children and grandchildren before they leave the island.

Nana's scrap of memory, a poignant scene in her life, historically represents a communal history for all black Americans, the separation of black families due to the domestic and internal slave trade and the desire to reconstruct missing genealogical links. Through Nana's primal scene and particularly through the venue of film, Dash not only evokes a historical reality of slavery, but also its emotional costs and scars. Explaining

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[502] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 149.

the desire to invoke sentiment into history, person into event, Dash observes the spaces that have often separated event, experience, and individual, proclaiming:

> Yes, you can read that women cut locks of their hair, so that their child would remember them after they were sold away, but what did that look like?[503]

Bridging images and orality; connecting symbol, the cutting of one's hair, and recollection, the memory and vocalization of primal scene, the viewer sees in flashback this pivotal moment in Nana's life.

Dash considers how emotions produced from this type of event may not only be personal, but interpersonal and intergenerational, thus affecting subsequent generations beyond those who were directly impacted. Even though she reflects personal and cultural loss, she also emphasizes agency, showing the personhood of enslaved Africans, their actions of mothering, and the limitations to their ability to stabilize familial relations due to the invasive actions of the institution of slavery. Dash's desire to show "what it really meant to lose a child," is a part of a larger reconstruction and presentation of the ways particular moments and experiences of slavery function as primal scenes in the black imagination, while also introducing new primal scenes within the space of narrative film.[504]

A group of island children crowds around Viola's mother who conveys to them the few African words she remembers from her childhood. As she calls out the English words, they respond with the African translation. Water is Deloe. Fire is Diffy. However, the game ends quickly, symbolizing the limits to her knowledge of her mother's or grandmother's language. The camera cuts to an image of Nana, wearing an indigo

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[503] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 33.
[504] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 33.

colored dress and seated on a chair weaving a sea grass basket. The camera moves in on her hands weaving, as her on screen voice announces:

> I'm the last of the old and the first of the new. The older I get, the closer I get to the ground. This was the worst place to have been born during slavery.[505]

Her reference to slavery produces a flashback image of women working fabrics in large vats of indigo. Although the flashback ends, Nana continues to discuss the impact of indigo and plantation culture on black life. The camera moves to a scene of elder island men, with blue stained hands, at the picnic site playing the African game of "Wari." These images lead up to a close up of Nana's tin canister. For a moment, the camera casts all the images with an intense blue, Nana's hands, the lock of hair she holds, the canister which held the hair. After pulling a lock of hair from the canister, she examines it carefully, caressing it and explaining, "I was an elder. And, many years ago, as I lay in my mother's arms, I saw Africa in her face."[506] Through this montage of images, Dash shows links with the African past. The connection with Africa is seen in the board game that people continued to play; the words, if only a few, they remembered and passed on, and a lock of hair. Africa is also found in the memory of a face, that linked an individual with communities, places, and people they would never know personally. Through these images, Dash seeks to reconstruct the "bond . . . a connection" and show how the "memories inside of us" represent our legacy and our link to Africa.[507]

Illuminating this link Nana returns to her primal scene. During the first iteration of the primal scene, she sat alone considering "her" location within the historical and cultural moment as the last of the old and the first of the new. Dash's second iteration of

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[505] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 105.
[506] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 106.
[507] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 151.

Nana's primal scene has her surrounded by a community of people. Again, she removes her mother's lock from the canister this time explaining the context which it was given. Nan recalls how her mother cut her hair before she was sold away. Nana adds her own hair to her mother's hair, kissing them both she places them to the hand. She cries:

> Now I'm adding my own hair. There must be a bond… a connection, between those that going North, and those who across the sea. A connection! We are as two people in one body. The last of the old, and the first of the new. We will always live this double life, you know, because we're from the sea. We came here in chains, and we must survive.[508]

The "bond" is how people kept families ties before slavery, during slavery, and as Nana and Daddy Mac explain after slavery. Through her return to primal scenes in the form of recollections, Nana shows individuals like Eli and Haagar what her "magic" is truly about and why it is relevant in whatever landscape they traverse, but particularly the North. Nana's "magic" is the lesson of survival, of perseverance, of keeping hold to family members even when the person is no longer accessible, finding a way to tap into memory. The "magic" of the bottle tree lies not only in protecting the family from evil, but as Nana informs Haagar it is a connection between the living and the dead, Africans and their American born descendants.

Toni Morrison's discussion about the power of literacy, the desire for ex-slaves not only to write their history but to write themselves into history and humanity in "The Site of Memory" reveals the important project of unveiling interior elements of black life, and the enslaved past through geographical and interventions.[509] Morrison's identifies

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[508] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 151.

[509] Morrison points to Equiano and Jacobs, in particular, to demonstrate how slave narratives concealed or omitted certain experiences, particularly those surrounding sexual abuse. Explaining that the particular phase of Slavery was kept veiled, she identifies the role of contemporary writers as unveiling the past. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," Inventing the Truth:The Art and Craft of Memoir, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 91.

ripping the veil from "proceedings too terrible to relate" as a critical and necessary exercise for any writer or artists who is black or belongs to marginalized category.[510] Identifying the project she engages with fiction, the process upon which the interior life of blacks is unveiled and emerges from image into text, Morrison explains:

> I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left—to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard—then the approach that's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from image to the text. Not from the text to the image.[511]

In the film, *Daughters of the Dust* Dash is lifting several veils, literal and figurative, through her use of recollection, her representation and selection of images, and her engagement with oral narrative and written texts. The physical image of the veil appears in the film, cloaking the face of Yellow Mary as she returns on a barge to Dawtuh Island to witness the migration of family members. Yellow Mary's veil is a reference to how islanders unable to rip the veil of their own making see her as "ruined" and "yellow wasted," an outsider whose body signifies their fears and desires of freedom and independence. It also implies self perception, her understanding of herself as estranged from the one place she seeks to call home. She is in conflict with the "primitive culture" she seeks to embrace; able to "hear the drums," but not aware to know that they call for her as well.[512]

Like the veil that Yellow Mary slowly and steadily pulls back in the film, Dash pulls back the veil of history to reveal—nuanced and new images and symbols—the legacy of the Middle Passage and slavery; the diversity of African American culture through Gullah culture; the function of the Sea Islands as a site of memory and culture;

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[510] Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 91.
[511] Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 94.
[512] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 116.

and early black migration as an important historical and narrative moment. While Morrison emphasizes taking recollections of images and placing them in text, Dash's recollections move in various directions. Her recollections move from image to image (image of Sea Islands to their representation in film); from text to image, she utilizes passages from *Praisesong for the Widow* and the adaptation of text into the film dialogue, and from image to text (narrative of family migration articulated in film and continued in the novel. Looking into the interior lives of a black family, Dash asks the audience to consider the choices of their own families and the impact those choices have made upon subsequent generations. She calls into question the diminishing role of "recollections" during the migrations of Africans from the South to the North. Explaining how silences or absences in her family's narrative of migration motivated her narrative film, Dash proclaims:

> I knew then that the images I wanted to show, the story I wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched my family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family. It had to take them back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories.[513]

In *Daughters of the Dust* recollections operate at various levels, individual and collective, contemporary and historical, oral and textual. As a process of accessing memory, mythic and historical, they also imbue places with political and cultural meanings transforming them into sites of memory. The Sea Islands and Ibo Landing, in particular function as sites of memory within the film, specifically, but also to a larger extent African American culture.

Daughters of the Dust functions as a space for not only revisiting cultural memory about the Sea Islands, but also about our own families, the motivations, the fears, and

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[513] Dash, Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film 5.

desires of black migrants. It is also a reference point for understanding the uniqueness and diversity that is African American culture. The film functions as a “hand,” skillfully woven together by Dash. It is Dash’s version of the tin can Nana carries, preserving and holding together “scraps of memories” of the African American past. Dash invokes the geographical, material and cultural space of the Sea Islands to bridge shared concerns surrounding African American retentions and survivals in the United States, social and cultural alienation as a modern experience of Black Americans, and awareness of ancestors and rural traditions as a mechanism for personal and cultural rehabilitation and healing.

Chapter 5

"I want to know what *it* is:" Folk Narratives, Flying Africans and Folk Beliefs in *Daughters of the Dust* (1997)

So writer, filmmaker, comic strip artist, choreographer—each finds his or her own ways to evoke a sense of what the objects of the narrative look like. Each medium has its own properties, for better and worse usage, and intelligent film viewing and criticism, like intelligent reading, needs to understand and respect both the limitations these create and also the triumphs they invite—Seymour Chatman[514]

In 1997, seven years after the release of her film *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash publishes a novel based on the film. Five years earlier, in 1992, Dash published *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Women's Film* the screenplay to the film. In the screenplay published a year after the film's release, Dash provides both dialogue from the film as well as contextual essays by bell hooks, Toni Cade Bambara, and Julie Dash. Why does Dash write a novel to continue her exploration of migration, memory and the Sea Islands? What does she gain by engaging in the process of "novelization"? In this chapter, I examine Dash's novelization of the film *Daughters of the Dust*. The novel, *Daughters of the Dust* (1997), should be viewed as a new work of art, inspired by the film, yet possessing its own narrative structure and thematic concerns.

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[514] Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," Critical Inquiry 7.1 (1980): 140.

In her film, screenplay, and novel, Dash calls attention to recollection and identifies the Sea Islands as a significant geography of cultural memory. The film underscores recollection through primal scenes and highlights the visual and aural as a means of invoking memory of an African and African American pasts. The screenplay draws attention to the black vernacular traditions Dash bases her representations of recollections in the film upon. The novel, I argue focuses not only on the contents of recollection in the form of primal scenes as the film does, but interrogates the forms or mediums employed to express and convey cultural memory. While primal scenes represent a source of recollection in the film, in the novel, folk tales, or lie-stories represent a form of recollection. Julie Dash focuses on folktales and folk narratives as critical resources for re-examining the African American past, chronicling individual and communal primal scenes, and situating the Sea Islands as an archive of Diasporic myths and legends.[515]

The novel is an important medium for Dash, and offers different possibilities for the representation of narrative form and content. Descriptive passages in the film often surround primal scenes and events, and underscore the object of the story: Nana's memory of her separation from her mother, and her recollections of the time before freedom. While Nana sits on a chair describing the scene of her mother's separation, the camera flashes backward to that moment. The visual representations of her flash

[515] In "Genre," Trudier Harris posits that genre, the basis for classification and contestation within folkloric studies, has provided "a system of classification as well as a conceptual framework for articulating characteristics of the individual components or units within that classification"(511). Folksongs and folk literature represent two importance folk genres. Folksongs can be broadly divided into two divisions: sacred and secular. The sacred division includes hymns, spirituals and gospel, while the secular division includes blues, and jazz to name only two. Folk narratives, also known as folktales or folk literature, are often divided into myths, legends, folktales, and fairy tales. The subgenre of folktales can be further subdivided into "animal tales, fables, tall tales, jokes, anecdotes" (513). Trudier Harris, "Genre," Journal of American Folklore 108.430 (1995).

backward place emphasis on the scene, the event, because we see it through her eyes, the colors, sounds, and people which marked the moment as pivotal. In their analysis of the film, scholars have often commented on the evocative power of the visual images. [516]

The novel, *Daughters of the Dust*, places emphasis first on the story form, the speaker, and then the story. I do not want to suggest that Dash does not emphasize both the object of the story and the form in both the film and the novel, only that she alternates which one she privileges, first depending on the medium in which it is articulated. The film privileges primal scenes first, while the novel places its emphasis on recollection. If we consider that films and novels articulate narrative differently based on their articulation of description and point of view, then Dash's specific representation of primal scene or recollection is determined by the medium in which it is placed. Film scholar Seymour Chatman explains for novels and films, point of view and description represent two important differences impacting the actualization of narrative form and content.[517] One of the major differences between novels and films involves the representation of visual details; for instance films are often defined as presentational not assertive.[518] Noting that cinematic devices such as establishing shots, introductory shots at the beginning of a scene to establish context, freeze frames or close-ups might be seen as descriptive, Seymour Chatman contends:

> The dominant mode is presentational, not assertive. A film doesn't say, 'This *is* the state of affairs,' it merely shows you that state of affairs. Of course, there could be a character or a voice-over commentator asserting a property or relation; but then the film would be using its sound track in much the same way as fiction uses assertive syntax. It is not cinematic

[516] James Gibbs notes the plot or narrative "is not the strongest feature of the film." James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., "Daughters of the Dust," African Arts 26.1 (1993): 82.
[517] Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," 123.
[518] Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," 128.

> description but merely description by literary assertion transferred to film.[519]

In this passage, Chatman rightly contends that the filmmaker's strategy for representing narrative description is to present or "depict, in the original etymological sense" meaning "rend [ered] in pictorial form."[520]

The novel represents a necessary step in Dash's exploration of oral recollection. I believe that since the ability and the necessity for oral recollections to travel through different people and mediums is an important component of her work and storyline, then the construction or revelation of recollections within the genre of the novel is an appropriate medium given the novel's ability to capture speech acts of various levels and illuminate various diverse and often time interrelated point of view and speech through heteroglossia.[521] Dash's use of multiple mediums, be it film or novel, underscore that the task of recollection can not be accomplished solely by one medium, but requires multiple sites of exploration and interrogation.

More commonly, the process of transference, the movement of narrative from one medium to another, often moves from novel to film not from film to novel. Within the African American literary tradition, novels and films such as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1971), *The Color Purple* (1982), and *Beloved* (1987) represent examples of the transference of novels into films.[522] Dash moves her artistry in the other direction, where the film provides inspiration, events, and characters from which actions in the

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[519] Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," 128.
[520] Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," 128.
[521] M. M. Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, University of Texas Press Slavic Series No. 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 321.
[522] The transference of a novel into a film is often met with many criticisms. When it was released the film, *The Color Purple*, was interrogated by many audiences: African American men, African American literary scholars, and African American women. See these articles for more details on responses to the films noted.

novel are drawn. Her "novelization" of the film *Daughters of the Dust* is similar to Michael Thelwell's 1980 *The Harder They Come: A Novel*, a novelization of the Perry Henzell's and Trevor Rone's film of the same name. Like the film *Daughters of the Dust*, the 1972 film *The Harder They Come* in its images, themes, point of view, and use of working class Jamaican speech was groundbreaking in Jamaican cinema.[523] The film, starring reggae singer Jimmy Cliff, used events from the life of Ivanhoe "Rhygin" Martin, a petty criminal, whose exploits in the 1940s captured the Jamaican imagination and propelled him to the status of a folk hero. Michael Thelwell's interpretation of the characters, settings, and events of the 1972 film *The Harder They Come* in his novel *The Harder They Come* is not a traditional novelization where narrative chunks and description are added to the film's dialogue. [524] Thelwell creates a broader new work. Although inspired by the vision of the film, he explains in the novel that he:

> created characters and situations, as well as personal and social history for the hero, in such a way, one hopes, as to preserve, and indeed deepen, the essential character and vision of the film while expanding its historical and cultural range.[525]

Like Thelwell's novelization of the Perry Henzell and Trevor Rone's film *The Harder They Come*, Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust* is not a traditional novelization. The novel *Daughters of the Dust* is not an adaptation of the visual image of the film into textual form, but instead it exists as a new form, a new work of art, inspired by the film.

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[523] Michael Thelwell, The Harder They Come: From Film to Novel, 1991, Available: http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=9603211906&site=ehost-liveNovember 28, 2008.

[524] Michael Thelwell and Perry Henzell, The Harder They Come: A Novel, 1st Evergreen ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1980) 7.

[525] Thelwell and Henzell, The Harder They Come: A Novel 7.

The novel is a continuation and an expansion of the themes, symbols, characters, and geographical sites introduced to audiences in the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). It also includes new situations and encounters for new and old characters centered on a new set of actions or plot.

In the film *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash chronicles the story of a Gullah family at the eve of the family's migration to the mainland in 1902. The film captures the anguish of the family's matriarch Nana Peazant as she struggles to emphasize the importance of the family's cultural traditions to her family departing the island for opportunities in the city. It follows the conflict between Eli and Eula, who struggle to reconcile with Eula's rape by an unknown white assailant. Unlike Eula who embraces Nana's religious beliefs and traditions, Haagar Peazant sees the migration as a welcome change and an opportunity to leave behind the past. The individual conflicts of various individuals erupt during the family's picnic commemorating the out-migration. The film ends with a sense of uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the migrants.

Primarily set in the 1920s, the novel, *Daughters of the Dust*, expands the story of the Peazants by examining their lives after the migration of 1902. The novel is largely divided into sections marked by geographical locations and times: Dawtuh Island, 1912, Ibo Landing, Dawtuh Island, September 1926, and Harlem September 1926 for example. In doing so, Dash pulls upon two important geographical sites in the African American cultural imagination: Harlem and the American South, more specifically the Sea Islands. The novel focuses on the next generation of Peazant women, represented by Elizabeth, the Unborn Child in the film, and Amelia Varnes, the granddaughter of Haagar Peazant.

Through their parallel stories, Dash illustrates what happened to the Peazant members who went North and those who remained South. Amelia, an anthropology student at Brooklyn College, travels to Dawtuh Island to conduct ethnographic research on Gullah culture for her senior thesis. Born and raised in Harlem by her maternal grandmother Haagar and mother Myown, Amelia knows little of Gullah cultural heritage outside of the memories her mother has occasionally shared. Her research project offers an opportunity not only to underscore Sea Island cultural traditions, but also uncover her family history. Although guided on the island by her cousin, Elizabeth, Amelia is met by suspicion from family members and Islanders who initially rebuff her attempts to interview them for her thesis. Amelia, transformed by the stories she collects of the islanders and her family, has concerns about the potential impact of her ethnography of the islanders. The stories Amelia collects convey Gullah myths as well as individual and collective experiences. Through the collection of various lie-stories, Amelia begins to decipher these perspectives and how they inform various individuals' behaviors, particularly her grandmother Haagar. Through Amelia, Dash critiques the discipline of anthropology while also employing it methodologies for identifying cultural signs and symbols through observation. Identifying "the whole picture of islanders lives" represents a central concern not only for Amelia, but also the novel. Folklore represents one way of arriving at this picture. Amelia's experience on the island and her new understanding of the choices and experiences of her mother and grandmother propel her to return with her mother to the island at the end of the novel.

Several important differences emerge between the film and the novel. Unlike the film which captures the Peazant family during a spectacular moment in their lives, a

Sunday feast honoring the out migration of various members; the novel does not record a snapshot in the life of a family, instead it examines mundane and everyday moments: Sunday worship, family gatherings, children enjoying storytelling sessions, etc. The novel also features more geographies than the film. Elizabeth, a school teacher, travels back and forth between Charleston and Dawtuh Island. Amelia travels back and forth between Harlem and Dawtuh Island. Harlem, the unnamed destination of the Peazants in the film, emerges an in important landscape in the novel. In her representation of Dawtuh Island in the novel, Dash disrupts the utopian space of the Sea Islands space and life by connecting the actual experiences of Islanders with those of the characters she depicts. Even though the threat of lynching is ever present and black women's bodies are vulnerable in the film, the presence of white people and systems of power is distant. Particularly in its examination of segregated education, the novel shows the impact of white supremacy on black life.

In the film and the novel, Dash draws upon storytelling as a narrative strategy. While the film uses vignettes or tableaux of images to create a collage of stories and images, the novel uses lie-stories or folktales to frame the novel. Folktales, or lie-stories, also represent a category which divides sections of the novel. Events are framed under the title of various lie-stories, which specify the immediate storyteller, the individual who "authors" the story to Amelia, and the story's name. The narrative structure of the novel is informed by various forms of oral recollections—field notes, lie-story and letters. Dash purposefully uses the field notes of Amelia and the lie-stories of various family members she interviews to piece together what happened after the family departed at the film's end. By identifying the lie-story and more extensively oral vernacular as an important and

critical form for recovering family and cultural history, she asserts the historical merit and value of oral culture.

Through folk tales, which the novel classifies as lie-stories, a subgenre of folk narratives, Dash draws upon a wealth of African American oral mythology and recorded oral histories from the Sea Islands. While numerous folkloric collections record coastal South Carolinian and Georgian black folklore, these collections often do not place folk narratives within the context of daily life, personal reflection and creation. Nor do they examine the events or moment which surround their and the social context of transmission.[526] Dash is among a number of African American authors, including Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara, who have drawn upon the Sea Islands, as a unique and distinctive site for an African derived folk heritage within the United States.[527] Drawing upon written and oral traditions of black expressions, through the novel Dash highlights folk communities in the Sea Islands, describes canonical folk narratives, and emphasizes the importance of preserving folk heritage in the midst of out migration.

Dash uses the novel to make two major points. It is important for individuals to have knowledge of their individual and cultural past. If the film was a look back at the Peazant family and the choices they are presented with on the eve of their migration, the novel is an examination of the choices characters, such as Haagar, make and the impact of those choices upon subsequent generations of Peazant women, particularly her

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[526] For collections of folklore about the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina refer to: Joyner, "Slave Folklife on the Waccamaw Neck : Antebellum Black Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry.", Stoney and Shelby, Black Genesis; a Chronicle, Abigail M. H. Christensen, Afro-American Folk Lore; Told Round Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), Elsie Worthington Clews Parsons, Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina (Chicago: Afro-Am Press, 1969).
[527] Lene Brøndum discusses the use of the Sea Islands as a symbolic geography in Naylor's, Dash's, and Marshall's novels. Brøndum, "The Persistence of Tradition: The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall."

granddaughter Amelia. Dash's representation of the Sea Islands as the site of an important African derived folk heritage instructive for contemporary audiences and her critique of the urban landscape in the novel as a site of cultural dislocation and alienation are not new images or concerns expressed by black women artists. Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall explore these themes in their works at times more effectively. The power or rather importance of the story Dash presents in the novel is in part the result of its connection to the film and the film's success at conveying the story of the Peazants.

The film's extraordinary success demonstrated that the story resonated with many audiences interested in not only seeing new images of black women, but also new stories of black life. However, the film was not without its critics. In their desire to illuminate the historical uniqueness of Gullahs, researchers and authors have often situated them as unchanged figures, negating the contemporary realities of Sea Island life in order to underscore historical uniqueness and difference. Criticized for invoking pastoral representations of Gullah life in the film, Dash uses the novel as a space to extend her earlier evocations of Sea Island life. The novel, as it had for Michael Thelwell in *The Harder They Come*, presents Julie Dash with an opportunity to revisit a story of the Peazants and offer greater historical and social range as well as a greater social history for individual characters impacting not only how the reader understands their choices in the novel, but also the film.

In his article, "Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*," Joel Brouwer notes in the film Dash places Gullah culture at its center and her narrative approach to history in the film "reassembles fragments which connect African

Americans with their African heritage."[528] He adds, "One of the strongest motifs of *Daughters of the Dust* is the motif of connectedness, particularly of the past, present, and unborn."[529] While the novel also places Gullah culture at its center, it instead highlights the motif of cultural disconnection as a means of illuminating the importance of preserving folk traditions, particularly oral recollections in the form of lie-stories or folk narratives. Dash presents individuals, like Amelia, who have no knowledge of their family's cultural traditions and Elizabeth, who has lost knowledge of her birth and her pre-birth journey. Lie-stories and folk narratives represent an important source of knowledge and individual and communal memory, an alternative history of individuals and communities told in their own voices.

Lie-stories, or folk narratives, are importantly intertwined in the novel with migration, because they preserve memories for individuals who move from one place to another, and provide guidance for how individuals might deal with various experiences in new geographies. Lie-stories, a site of recollection, offer a means of not only looking back, but provide critical knowledge to interpret the present. Migration often means that individuals are physically disconnected from land, family, and often culture as it is practiced. Lie-stories and storytelling create a space for remembering and celebrating landscapes, and recreating cultural practices. It enables speakers and audiences to commemorate the importance of individuals, recalling their lives, and reflecting upon the circumstances of their deaths. While cousins, Amelia and Elizabeth illuminate different types of disconnection in the novel, through their personal discovery and recovery of

[528] Brouwer, "Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust," 6.
[529] Brouwer, "Repositioning: Center and Margin in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust," 9.

submerged family histories they demonstrate knowledge of familial and communal past can promote a revised sense of self and purpose.

Folk narratives or lie-stories, tracing familial and cultural lineages over time and space, provide Elizabeth and Amelia, who often feel like outsiders, with a way of identifying, defining, and affirming relationships with the Sea Islands as a cultural and geographical space and the Sea Islands as a social community. While lie-stories may be employed to promote group identification and affirmation, the ability for all individuals, particularly Amelia, to access story is questioned by various Islanders. Their silence to Amelia's request for stories illuminates their beliefs surrounding who is and who is not a member of a community or rather are blood lines enough to qualify one's entry into a group. What happens to the status of one's group membership when she or her family moves away from the group?

The griot provides for the community access to practices, beliefs, and stories which pre-date the enslaved experience or re-tell it, this time through the perspective of the enslaved. Asserting the important of family bonds, griots offer a space in their retelling or narration for communities to access their past and affirm their connection to a particular lineage or genealogy. While the novel emphasizes that everyone has a story to tell, it marks two individuals, Amelia and Elizabeth, not only bearers of story, but also bearers of culture.

When Amelia arrives on the island, she quickly discovers pursuing her research is more difficult than she expected. Islanders, suspicious of this "red-bone" city girl, cling to the amulets around their necks in her presence and instead of responding to her questions continuously refer her to other individuals to talk with. The reactions of

Islanders to Amelia's questions and her presence illuminate her position as an insider/outsider and speak to the cultural weariness Islanders constantly feel being identified as research "subjects." Amelia's irritation with their responses barely masks her pain. Even family members could not understand why anyone would come to study kinfolk and "how they do things."[530] Although Eula and Eli are initially reticent about sharing their stories, their daughter Lucy vocally challenges the validity of Amelia's research and its implicit "othering" of Gullahs, proclaiming, "You de one different! We just de way we are!"[531] Lucy's comment suggests to the observer/researcher that they must reorient their understanding surrounding the nature of difference. It lays in the perception of the viewer.

However, as Amelia reveals it is this very point that she seeks to uncover in her research, to understand "where we came from and why we did what we did."[532] Her research is motivated not only by a desire to understand the uniqueness of Gullah culture, but also its permutations in the family life of out-migrants in the city. Lucy's objection is a challenge to Amelia's inclusion within the communal space of "we," affirming "we," Sea Islands residents are the same, it is you, *out migrants* or *mainlanders*, who are different.

While Eula simultaneously quiets and challenges her daughter's outburst by proclaiming she was talking to family, her words do not challenge Lucy's assertion of difference. They do; however, suggest that family bonds bridge this difference in certain circumstances. This exchange underscores the tensions between Islanders and African Americans on the mainland, which permeates the novel and is represented in the strained

[530] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 76.
[531] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 77.
[532] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 86.

interactions between Amelia and Lucy. Moreover, it speaks to another tension, what it means to "study" ourselves and to reveal "folks' bizness" or family talk which "aint for other people" to an outside world.[533] Through her outburst, Lucy questions the venues or spaces in which stories are told and the audiences who hear them.

Lucy's desire to prevent Amelia from accessing "family bizness" or individual's stories demonstrates the complexity of identity politics and group politics surrounding belonging. Lucy also embodies the contemporary fatigue felt by Islanders whose culture has been the subject of study by anthropologists, sociologists, and folklorists for more than a century.

Although Gullah culture has been celebrated in recent years, the object of festivals, museums, television programs, and novels, historically this group of African Americans was constantly classified as "primitive" and "backwards" by whites and mainland blacks. The "Africanness" now embraced as something to be preserved in film and literature by African American writers was once denigrated in society and folkloric and anthropological studies as a representation of inferiority. Sallie Lee, a woman from mainland South Carolina living on the Island, represents a black mainland perspective of Islanders, explaining "You could always tell them that just come over off the Islands," because "their clothes hang funny, the hair look rough."[534] Islanders were identifiably different expressed Sallie, a city girl who proclaimed there was nothing country about her.

Sallie's identification of difference is based on class and negative perceptions of cultural retentions and traditions. Sallie, like Haagar, casts Sea Islanders as pre-modern subjects and envisions modernity through the lens of "progress," which they mark by

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[533] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 76-77.
[534] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 132.

accessibility to technology and science as well as self-reliance instead of interdependence. Throughout the novel, Dash examines how individuals define, connect, or dissociate from various landscapes, particularly the geographies of the Sea Islands and Africa. Dash uses folk narratives to examine the associative values geographies are given. Lie-stories in the novel connect individuals with two primary landscapes, the Sea Islands and Africa; however, these connections are not welcomed by everyone as Sallie Lee demonstrates.

Elizabeth symbolizes the pulls that residents feel between home and elsewhere. Although Elizabeth is reared on the Island by Eula and Eli and tutored by Nana and Miz Emma Julia in root working and handicrafts, she leaves the Island for schooling on the mainland. She attends Avery Normal School and later Fort Valley College. When we meet her in the novel, she is a quiet and restless school teacher, who is repairing the dilapidated homestead of her grandmother. The homestead was abandoned after Nana's death "[only] a neck of a blue bottled had remained from the days when Nana had lived here."[535] If the bottles as Nana explained to Haagar represented a connection between the living and the dead and an acknowledgement of the dead's existence and experience on earth, then the destruction of those bottles, the material embodiment of recollection, through negligence symbolizes the disconnection between the present and the past, the living and the dead. It is fitting that only a fragment of a blue bottle remains of the tree, "a scrap of memory." Elizabeth's act of restoring the tree represents a "renewal of the old ways" and for her mother "it was only right that her oldest daughter would be the one to bring them back."[536] It is not surprising that Elizabeth is marked as a culture bearer in the novel, one who preserves and continues cultural traditions through practice. She is the

[535] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 23.
[536] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 23.

ghostly Unborn Child in the film, guided into the New World by Nana and the old souls.[537] Her mother, Eula, identified by others as "crazy like Nana" also assumed this role in the film—placing a glass of water under her head to communicate with her deceased mother, recalling the story of Ibo Landing, and enjoining the family to remember the old ways, yet to shed the personal and cultural wounds which bind them to a particular pain. Eula, the closet to Nana in beliefs and practice, is one of the few Peazants not to migrate to the mainland.

Yet, Elizabeth's relationship with the Island and Islanders is complicated by her schooling, which had opened her:

> eyes and mind to things that were simply not a part of her world, this world. What good did it do her to read about places she had never seen and people she would never meet? What difference did her speaking French make if all those around her struggled with English.[538]

Elizabeth is not alone in understanding the transformative power of education; her parents also see a difference**.** As the one individual to actively carry on Nana's tradition of root working, and to physically live in the family's homestead after Nana dies, what does it mean that *she* feels both connected and estranged from the Island? Dash uses Elizabeth's dilemma to underscore that while educational opportunities found off Island may render more economic opportunities for the migrant, it comes with a cost. In saying this she is not suggesting that the migrant remain on the Island, but that she remains vigilant about the transformations that occur, culturally and socially.

Through her job as a schoolteacher, Elizabeth also illuminates the often tense relationship Islanders feel with being the subject of research and being continuously

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[537] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 80.
[538] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 79.

linked to Africa. Elizabeth returns to the Island to teach in the school only to discover the cultural disconnect felt by school children who refer to the old folks as salt water Negroes" who "do things de ol ways."[539] For these children and many of their parents, Africa is not a significant location in their cultural memory. One student proclaims to her, "I ain't came from no place but heah."[540] In this moment, Dash challenges the notion that disconnectedness and amnesia are only induced by mobility and that all individuals embrace the connections to the African landscape embraced or affirmed in particular lie-stories. For people, who presumably have not left the Island and would seem more connected with its African derived culture that culture is identified by some as something originating and existing over there not here. Elizabeth who remembered "the stories from her childhood of the captive whose souls flew away to freedom" hoped that through her instruction she could encourage the children to dream of a "great world beyond their Island."[541] The folk narratives Elizabeth recalls from her childhood, she explains, taught her to dream of possibility beyond the confinement of particular geographies: "teaching someone to read required patience and diligence, but teaching someone to dream required the exploration of a soul."[542]

Having traveled back and forth between the Island and the mainland (Beaufort and Charleston), Elizabeth recalls the actions of Sea Island migrants who sought to distance themselves from their family members on the island. She had personally "felt the ridicule and knew the contempt of the mainland colored who sought to distance

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[539] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 42.
[540] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 42.
[541] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 40.
[542] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 40-41.

themselves from their island cousins."[543] If we place the school children's behavior within this context a different reading follows. They and their family members are responding to social and academic discourses which labeled Gullah culture as "backwards" and "primitive." Dash complicates both individual's relationships with story and place. If Africa represents for some a site of ancestry and an extended home place, for others it represents a distant and far off location to which they hold no affinity. The same is the case for the Sea Islands as a site of memory or disrememory. She not only questions why people embrace particular landscapes, but also why others push away from them.

The novel seeks geographically to locate the scars of the past by narrating the events which produced them through lie-stories. Holding together myth and reality, it provides listeners with contextual references for understanding and appreciating specific experiences, choices, and decisions within the black experience. If as Eula proclaims "We carry to many scars from the past," in the film Dash alludes to how individuals and communities might disown their scars, not their cultural, familial, and geographical ties. The trauma repressed partially in the film is voiced fully in the novel. Eula's initial repression of her rape impacts Elizabeth's sense of self and history.

Frustrated with a marginal education system on the Island, restless and feeling isolated, Elizabeth, Eula's oldest daughter, decides to go to Paris to pursue business endeavors much to her father's dismay. Unaware of the true meaning of the lie-story of the "Unborn Chile," which recalls the events of her mother's rape, Elizabeth is unable to comprehend her father's response to her impending departure. Throughout the novel, Dash describes Elizabeth's struggle with her cultural inheritance and her longing for a

[543] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 59.

place where she can belong. Elizabeth's conscious knowledge surrounding her pre-born experience is lost. She does not remember the journey magically recounted in the film. As a result she does not know that the "Story of De Unborn Chile" is more than a fable, it is her own history. By situating the story solely within the context of a fable, it de-emphasizes the important historical and personal record it provides both of Eula's rape and Elizabeth's birth. Although Eula does not reveal the details of her violation in the final scenes of the film, she does in the last section of the novel. Eula's "telling" of the story serves to help Elizabeth understand her father and the events surrounding her birth; and record and archive her own experience within black vernacular culture. Elizabeth comes to realize through hearing the full story of the *Unborn Chile* that embracing or acknowledging one's cultural heritage does mean that she must stay on the Island.

The novel emphasizes the importance of "telling" or "retelling" in the form of the lie-story and considers the impact when "telling" is not used as a survival strategy. Speaking" and "telling" become a central means for dealing with exile, trauma, and haunting, and the scars which mark black women's bodies and psyche. As the unearthing of Haagar's story and the unearthing of the bones of African captives demonstrate, silence or the silencing of particular utterances does not mean that those utterances or the stories they are shaped into go unacknowledged, instead they are "passed on" in other ways.

Amelia's childhood is marked by the struggle raging between her mother and grandmother. Haunted by the past and the Island, both women respond in vastly different ways to Harlem and Dawtuh Island. Their tensions not only reflect how individuals respond to the past, but illuminate the contrasting sites of memory African Americans

possess as individuals, families, and as an extensive and diverse community. Haagar and Myown represent individuals with strikingly different relationships to the geography of the Sea Islands. Storytelling connects Myown with Dawtuh Island while in Harlem such that Amelia notices a physical difference in her mother's condition when she recalls to her in story form her experiences on the island. Amelia's recollections "brought forth Myown's memories, and the color and insight that Myown brought exhilarated both of them."[544] Recalling the striking distance between her mother and grandmother, Amelia states:

> Her grandmother would never talk about the past except to say that they were much better off, and her father claimed his past ended when he left Arkansas at thirteen years old. Myown would share bits and pieces until Haagar interrupted.[545]

For Haagar and Amelia's father, both southern out-migrants, migration means escaping a past that was better left behind and should have no bearing on the present. Through Amelia's family branch, Dash demonstrates that relationships with home places are not always positive, nor are they reflected upon fondly by all migrants. Amelia's father had gladly left Arkansas, and without a wistful glance back her grandmother "had been determined to rid herself of all country ties."[546] Migration means fashioning a new self. The connections Myown and Haagar forge with the past or particular geographies serve to illuminate not only who they are now, but also who they believe they are not. Through her research Amelia seeks to understand her mother's and grandmother's relationships with Dawtuh Island and construct her own.

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[544] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 277.
[545] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 68.
[546] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 28.

With Madame CJ Walker as her model, Haagar is determined to fashion herself, her children and her grandchildren into "somebodys," this comes; however, with a brutal awareness of color and class. Featuring articles on appearance and decorum, magazines like *Half Century*, published by black women, often detailed how southern black migrants should remake themselves within their new urban environments. Fashioning a new self for African Americans, Haagar determines is only possible through access to modernity and migration away from a pastoral or rural existence.

"Determined to wash the Geechee stain from herself and her children" she migrates with her children to Harlem.[547] Harlem, with its self made black population represented for her a chance to "rid herself of 'de look of de saltwater Negro' and dem ol ignorant ways' and to find 'de better way of living."[548] What is striking about this passage is its use of dialect, despite Haagar's desire to rid herself of the "Geechee stain," she at times expresses herself in this form and employs the protection of Gullah spiritual beliefs to ward evil from her home.

Dash describes 1920s Harlem as a landscape filled with Caribbean immigrants and black Southerners searching for economic and political opportunities; and European immigrants who have access to economic and political opportunities denied to blacks. She also portrays a northern Black bourgeois who distain and distance themselves from southern black populace, often denying their entry into exclusive social organizations.[549]

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[547] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 32.
[548] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 32.
[549] For a more in depth discussion of African American life in Harlem and its impact on black literary expression refer to: David L. Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1981), Herb Boyd, The Harlem Reader: A Celebration of New York's Most Famous Neighborhood, from the Renaissance Years to the Twenty-First Century, 1st ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), Laban Carrick Hill, Harlem Stomp!: A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance, 1st ed. (New York: Little, Brown, 2003), John L. Jackson, Harlem World : Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Michelle Ann Stephens, Black Empire: The

Haagar's perception of the possibilities of the city bespeak what Sidney Bremer has described as "an alternative stream of imagery" emerging from African American artists and writers who unlike their white counterparts, such as Henry James, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, often argued that the city/urban landscape represented a place of possibility, hope, and the expression of a full black subjectivity, which was restricted and restrained in the pastoral.[550] Having given up on Myown after arranging her marriage to mixed race man, Haagar centers her energies on Amelia. Haagar attempts to enroll her in a finishing school for young African American women and warns Amelia to end a friendship with a young dark skinned Jamaican girl.

Harlem, for Myown, is a lonely space where migrants are disconnected from family and friends. Harlem is neither a literal or symbolic home, nor is it life giving and nurturing. While some African American writers of the time sought to show how organic Harlem was in opposition to the mechanical city, Dash stresses the harsh living and work conditions of many African Americans symbolized in Myown's perpetual cough which dissipates only when she returns to Dawtuh Island. Although Myown defers her own dreams to work in the family's successful funeral home, she actively conspires with Amelia to realize hers. Unlike Haagar who casts the possibility for material success within the urban/industrial landscape of Harlem, Myown and Amelia see possibility for spiritual and cultural well-being in the pastoral/rural landscape of the Dawtuh Island. Rethinking the contrasting life-styles and landscapes of Dawtuh Island and Harlem, Amelia ponders African Americans' relationships to two dominant home places and

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Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962, New Americanists (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[550] Sidney Bremer, "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers," PMLA 105.1 (1990): 48.

landscapes within the African American cultural imagination: Harlem and the American South:

> When I first came here and saw how hard folks lived and what little they had, I thought to myself, 'Lord, slavery is not that far gone.' But now I'm wondering who's living in slavery, folks down here working their own land, or folks up North working to pay that rent and keep the lights on, too. I saw Lucy stop in the middle of her weeding the garden, grab a fistful of dirt, and smell it. You know that look she can get on her face. I wish I could feel that way about something.[551]

Literary scholar Melvin Dixon provides an important context for considering Dash's use of central landscapes such as Africa, Harlem and the American South within the novel. In "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," Dixon contends that the presence of *lieux de mémoire* in African American literature such as Harlem and the American South:

> establishes the value of cultural memory and the very kind of history or historiography that is not dependent on written analysis or criticism but rather achieves an alternative record of critical discussion through the exercise of memory. Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself.[552]

It is not simply memory, but memory of particular places Dixon adds noting Harlem, Africa, and the American South, which function as "important sites of memory in the construction of a viable African American culture."[553] Like Naylor in *Mama Day*, in her examination of urban and rural landscapes, Dash draws upon a real geography, in Harlem, and a fictional geography, in her use of Dawtuh Island. I believe her motivation for invoking Harlem is historical and imaginative. In the 1920s, Harlem represented an important destination for real Sea Islands migrants from St. Helena. Dash attempts to lend historical accuracy to her representation of migration and the particular sites

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[551] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 271.
[552] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18-19.
[553] Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," 18.

migrants sought. She creates Dawtuh Island as a fictional space to again draw upon the Sea Islands as a broader cultural landscape.

By illuminating two primary geographical locations, Harlem, New York and Dawtuh Island, South Carolina, the novel situates itself between two experiences, the Peazants who stayed on the Island, Nana, Eula, Eli, and Iona; and those who migrated, Haagar, Myown, Daddy Mac, and Yellow Mary. Harlem not only represents the destination for Haagar and her daughter Myown, but the actual destination of many St. Helena migrants during the 1920s. Casting a critical light on the spiritual happiness of out-migrants in the city, the novel offers return as a possible solution to cultural amnesia and disconnection.

Although Harlem functions, particularly at this time, as an imaginary and physical homeplace for African Americans, the destination for many St. Heleners during the Great Migration, the novel does not situate it in this way for many characters, particularly Amelia's mother, who longs to return to the Sea Islands. It is not Harlem, but the Sea Islands whose culture and traditions are literally sprinkled like salt into the corners or her Harlem home and evoked in the broom that stands by the door. The novel makes no direct references to the cultural renaissance, social movements, and mass migrations taking place amongst artists and writers in Harlem, instead it turns southward to find a black vibrant culture among ordinary people, the "folk."

David Levering Lewis explains that the Harlem Renaissance was not "all inclusive of early twentieth century African American urban experience," instead he argues that it represented a narrow ideological and aesthetic vision of African American culture and arts. This vision served as a vehicle for civic change and social

transformation.[554] For architects of this vision and movement, like Alain Locke, the Harlem Renaissance was different and at times diametrically opposed to simultaneous movements such as the mass social and cultural movement of Garvey's UNIA, the institutional ethos and ideological vision of the Black Church, and the blues productions of Bessie Smith and Clara Walker. Dash uses the words and voices of Islanders to re-envision an African American past and reclaim and important vernacular aesthetic, telling the lie. Yet, these stories are not extrapolated from the landscape in which they are told, Dawtuh Island. Even when Amelia introduces her own story, the second to last in the novel, it is located both within Dawtuh Island and Harlem and signals the return of her and her mother:

> Myown had given her a gift by sending her away to learn about her family. Amelia wanted to share with her mother all that she had learned in this place where she had learned it.[555]

As Amelia collects stories of her family and the community of Dawtuh Island, she discovers not only what people forget, but why they want to forget. Speaking with Carrie Mae, a childhood friend of Elizabeth, Amelia is given contextualization information to understand the experiences and landscapes that influenced her grandmother, Haagar. She recalls:

> If half of what Carrie Mae said was true, Amelia understood both her mother's desire to recall only the things that brought her peace and Haagar's determination to leave stories untold.[556]

The understanding Amelia achieves is situated within her ability to access information through the lie-story. She begins to understand her grandmother's behavior and choices

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[554] Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue xiv.
[555] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 293-94.
[556] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 122.

after listening to "Yellow Mary's Tale" as told by Carrie Mae and going to Hog Alley, the place where her grandmother was born. Her desire to understand "what was in this house that made her turn the way she did" prompts Amelia to physically confront the memories that haunts Haagar and her kin, in order to understand her grandmother.[557]

Dash makes an important assertion regarding the intergenerational transmission of story in the novel by demonstrating how lie-stories may assist in helping individuals respond to silences, imposed or self-imposed. Even though, Haagar had decided that hers was not a story to "pass on," she inevitably passes it on in the form of psychological distance from one's homeland. In the final pages of the novel, *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison considers the consequences of forgetting, oral and textual; the traumas of remembering for individuals and communities; and the impact of the historical erasure of black people's experiences within black vernacular culture. Dash shares Morrison's concerns for unearthing and revising a "history both spoken and written, felt and submerged."[558]

It is not incidental that Dash constructs her protagonist as an anthropology student who travels south to examine black folk culture under the direction of a white mentor, Dr. Colby and an unnamed benefactor, who funds Amelia's research. Amelia is a direct allusion to Zora Neale Hurston. Dr. Colby and the benefactor are allusions to Franz Boaz and Charlotte Mason. The subject of Amelia's research and her field notes echo the content, concerns, and vernacular forms emphasized in Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). The novel is a tribute to *Mules and Men*. It presents Amelia as a native anthropologist who not only tells the story, but discovers how she is also apart of the story she records.

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[557] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 153.
[558] Karla Holloway, "Beloved: A Spiritual," Callaloo 13.3 (1990): 516.

Dash's use of the ethnographer to frame the story in *Daughters* seemed a natural development given her interest in the film with photography as a technology for documenting culture and the position and perspective the outsider offers.

In interviews for the DVD *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash explains she turned to Zora Neale Hurston's visual recordings of the Sea Islands and the rural South in the 1940s. She studied Hurston's footage to gain a sense of the texture of black life. In the novel, she draws upon the textual representation of black cultural sensibilities evoked in Hurston's work. By creating a Hurston-esque character, Dash periodizes the novel, situating the story within 1920s academic debates surrounding African American retentions as well as African American literary struggles surrounding the artistic representation of black experiences, particularly the rural folk (Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston). Her allusions to Hurston also situate the novel within a particular lineage of black women writers who invoke black spoken and written discourses within their art forms. At times however, Dash's allusion to Hurston and her use of dialect or transliteration represent a weakness of the novel.

Notably, the stories that Elizabeth, Eli, and Ben tell Amelia feature human actors, not animals ones. This is one of the novel's major interventions in the representation of black folklore, given the dominance of animal tales and fables have had as representations of black folklore. In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston faced a range of criticisms regarding her representation of folklore and black folk life.[559] Criticisms of her

[559] In a review for the 1937 issue of *Folklore*, Father Williams asserts that Hurston's representation of black folk-lore is a mis-characterization of the form. Part of his critique surrounds the connection she makes between non-traditionally identified forms such as lie-stories and African storytelling forms. He also argues that her analysis represented poor scholarship, which was in part the result, he argues, of her being a native anthropologist. In his review, Williams purports, "There is practically nothing to remind us of African origins." Melville J. Herskovits, "Mules and Men," Folklore 48.2 (1937): 219.

text demonstrate the ways in which white interpretations of black life and folk art forms have informed subsequent representations and interpretations of these forms. Texts, such as Uncle Remus tales, arranged by Joel Chandler Harris, have located black folkloric forms and Africanisms only within animal stories.[560]

In their novelization of the films *The Harder They Come* and *Daughters of the Dust*, Michael Thelwell and Julie Dash not only face the challenge of expanding the vision and storyline of popular films, they must also recreate the idioms of the film, Jamaican Creole and Gullah, into a literary dialect. Sumner Ives explains that literary dialects reflect:

> an author's attempt to represent in writing speech that is restricted regionally, socially, or both. His representation may consist merely in the use of an occasional spelling change, like FATHUH rather than father, or the use of a word like *servigrous*; or he may attempt to approach scientific accuracy by representing all the grammatical, lexical and phonetic peculiarities that he has observed.[561]

Literary dialect not only serves to represent language, but give authenticity to the representation of culture. Michael Thelwell explains his desire in his novelization of *The Harder They Come* to construct a Jamaican novel, instead of a novel about Jamaica. Explaining the differences, he notes that a Jamaican novel:

> is, an artifact naturally and organically derived from the cultural sensibilities, references, experiences, and political perceptions of the people, recognizably anchored in their historical experiences, and expressed in a language informed by the metaphors, imagery, proverbial lore, narrative forms, styles, and traditions of the indigenous class.[562]

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[560] Herskovits, "Mules and Men," 219.
[561] Cited in Edgar Schneider and Christian Wagner, "The Variability of Literary Dialect in Jamaican Creole," Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages 21.1 (2006): 46. Schneider and Wagner, "The Variability of Literary Dialect in Jamaican Creole," 46.
[562] Thelwell, The Harder They Come: From Film to Novel.

For Thelwell mere phonetic transcription and syntactical idiosyncrasy are not enough.[563] Unfortunately, at times in the novel Dash's representation of Gullah cultural sensibilities are hindered by being rendered as phonetic transcription. Authors, such as Gloria Naylor, have affectively conveyed the Gullah cultural sensibilities without the use of transliteration. Naylor instead uses metaphor, imagery, and style in *Mama Day* to convey a Gullah cultural sensibility.

Dash's novel is also hindered by her representation of the "folk." The "folk" in her novel are often rural and southern. By presenting the folk as rural and southern, Dash continues to situate or define the "folk narrative" and the folk as a class position, a weakness of the novel.[564] Anthropologist John W. Roberts stresses the importance of considering African American cultural diversity in the study of African American folk beliefs noting:

> Although African Americans as a cultural group historically have been subject to similar economic, political, and social conditions . . . they have as individuals experienced and evaluated the consequences of these conditions in very different ways.[565]

Thus, by not considering the influence of class, gender, geography, and sexuality on the vernacular traditions of African Americans, writers and scholars fail to underscore the full dynamic process of folk cultures, and its influence on external and internal responses.[566] While Dash challenges the traditional "absence of gendered discourse in African American folkloristic" by examining both men's and women's participation in

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[563] Thelwell, The Harder They Come: From Film to Novel.
[564] For a discussion of the folk in black literature see: John W. Roberts, From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).
[565] John W. Roberts, "African American Diversity and the Study of Folklore," Western Folklore 52.2/4 (1993): 164.
[566] Roberts, "African American Diversity and the Study of Folklore," 164.

folkloric traditions, her inadequate exploration of class diversity among Sea Island residents weakens her renderings of vernacular traditions.

Dash's stronger representations of Gullah culture are not reflected in her representation of language, but in her use of the narrative forms of the lie-story and folk narrative. Through her emphasis on folk culture and folk narratives, Dash taps into central motifs or themes within African American literature. The African American folk heritage, which includes the genres of folktales, jazz, blues, and spirituals, represents an important influence for past and present African American literary cultural expressions.[567] Daryl Cumber Dance underscores the importance of the African American folk heritage to black literary cultural expression. He explains the African American folk tradition has influenced:

> the subject matter, the themes, the motifs, the characters, the symbolism, the tone, the value system, the language and the style of African American literary expression.[568]

Dash is among the numerous black writers who not only infuse elements of folk culture within their works, such as vernacular, folk beliefs, and symbols, but also sought to create works that stand on their own as whole examples of folk expression.[569]

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[567] For references on the folk tradition of African American creative expression see Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act*. *Shadow and Act* includes a discussion of the Blues aesthetic within African American literature. Ellison is not alone in highlighting the appearance of various black cultural expressions within African American literature. For an examination of folklore and folk belief in literature see: Trudier Harris, Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). Trudier Harris illustrates Toni Morrison's use and creation of African American orature within her novels. For other works on folklore and African American literature see :Bernard W. Bell, The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), Eric J. Sundquist, The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction, Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures ; No. 35 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), Roberts, From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom, Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism.

[568] H. Nigel Thomas, From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, No. 118 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) viiii.

While the black folk heritage as a primary influence in literature is not often contested, the degrees of integration of folklore in literature and the methods for analyzing folklore within African American literature certainly are. Folklorists, such as Sw. Anand Prahlad, have been critical of the use of folklore in African American literary criticism and the identification of folklore in literature. In "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," Prahlad argues in their analysis of black literature African American literary scholars have failed to consider folklore scholarship; continue to perpetuate an outdated notion of the "folk" in their study of folklore; and often express an "apprehension about non-textual expressive communication."[570] When folklore is used he writes:

> Folklore becomes for these scholars symbolic and historic representations of the consciousness and aesthetics of the group, not real-life processes, strategies, or dynamics so deeply embedded in individual lives that they cannot be readily extracted.[571]

African American literary scholars, such as Trudier Harris and Wendy Walters, have importantly responded to these critiques. Trudier Harris underscores the historical written-oral interplay of black cultural expressions and notes that folk beliefs were foundational to black literary forms.[572] Wendy Walters directly challenges the folklorists' critique of the existence of folklore in literature.[573] She asserts that the novel "(as

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[569] Folklorists and literary scholars debate whether folklore in literature represents a form of folklore or rather the use of elements of folklore. This distinction surrounds the relationship between the whole and parts. As a way of marking an important distinction between folklore and literature, folklorists, such as Dan Ben-Amos, emphasize the importance of folklore as a communicative process that occurs in a specific moment. However, African American literary scholars argue that this particular understanding of folklore fails to recognize the integral nature of black oral and written cultural expressions.

[570] Sw. Anand Prahlad, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Folklore, Folkloristics, and African American Literary Criticism," African American Review 33.4 (1999): 567.

[571] Prahlad, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Folklore, Folkloristics, and African American Literary Criticism," 568.

[572] Harris, Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison 2.

[573] Walters' work is especially useful for my study of Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust*. She examines the use of legend of the Flying Africans within the Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino literature and culture. She asserts that black women writers, such as Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison, use and revise the legend in their novels.

opposed to folklore collections) functions as dynamic sites for contextualizing" folklore "and for questioning previous versions of the legend[s] as they existed in cultural memory and in recorded folklore histories."[574]

Structuring the novel around lie-stories is not enough to create a "folk aura" or to challenge what folklorists have often called literature's use of parts not the whole of folklore. Therefore, Dash emphasizes the integration or lack of integration of folk narratives into the daily lives of permanent Islanders and their mainland family members. By examining the daily use of folklore and its function as individual possession and communal property, Dash considers the importance of folk narratives in framing and sustaining beliefs. Through folk narratives such as the "The Story of Ayodele" and the "Ibo Landing," Dash describes folk beliefs surrounding death and the desire for reconnection with family and land. She also re-interprets the canonical tale of the Flying Africans and its variant the myth of Ibo Landing.

Dash locates the preservation of canonical stories, particularly the legend of the Flying Africans, within the geographical location of the Sea Islands. By exploring myths/legends, such as the Flying Africans, and its various iterations in lie-stories in the novel, she demonstrates how Africans and their American descendants transmitted cultural values surrounding circularity through folklore; challenged traditional socio-historical narratives of slavery; and chronicled models of individual and communal resistance to oppression and exploitation. Although he does not specifically reference Dash's film or novel, Gay Wilentz compares and contrasts the appearance of this legend/myth in the works of numerous black men and women writers in order to

[574]Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 4.

demonstrate how writers of the Diaspora "have incorporated these aspects of the orature in their work, a part of a cultural milieu almost effaced and certainly distorted by the dominant culture."[575] Citing differences in interpretations and representations of the legend based on gender, Wilentz makes a critical assessment regarding black men and women's use of the tale by suggesting that black women writers "follow a pattern from often undocumented African and African American storytellers, aim to pass on cultural values and traditions-including tales and legends."[576]

Through her use of this particular legend, Dash stresses the dynamism of oral recollections; the individuality of lie-stories; and the ability for lie-stories to construct an interpretative framework needed so that individuals may respond to silences, imposed or self-imposed. The Flying Africans, a narrative of return, flight, and resistance represents an instructive narrative not only for the characters in the 1920s, but also for African Americans today, a goal Dash expresses in interviews about the film. In her analysis of this tale, Wendy Walters underscores the pervasiveness of tale throughout the African Diaspora focusing on its appearance in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino folk traditions as an example of the "dynamic and mutable" folk expression of people of the African Diaspora.[577] The multiple and varied references to flight in the lie-stories collected by Amelia Varnes, not only underscore the centrality of the myth to Gullah culture, but also speaks to the desire for circularity in the lives of African bondsmen and their descendants and the role storytelling plays in conveying the past, present, and future.

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[575] Wilentz examines Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Ralph Ellison's "Flying Home," Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature ": 21.

[576] Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature ": 28.

[577] Walters, ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/ Take My Wings and Cleave De Air": The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 10.

When African American experiences, particularly those of slavery have been recorded, as in the case of the WPA narratives; they were subject in their dictation to the interpretation of the white researchers who recorded them.[578] Although Amelia represents an authorial voice transcribing for the reader the lie-stories of family members and their neighbors on the Island, Dash suggests that her growing understanding and appreciation of Gullah culture enable her to engage with these stories very differently than the white researchers who had come before her. So that at the end of the novel, she "quailed at the thought of people traipsing across the Island, intruding, prodding, uncovering. . .But now she feared that same progress, the havoc, the separation that were inevitable."[579] Amelia not only reconsiders the role of researchers uncovering and recording Gullah culture, but also reconsiders the ability for academic discourses to capture "their culture, their ways, how they talked with each other."[580]

If the lie-story, is shaped by the speaker through acts of ventriloquism on the part of the researcher, it allows individuals to recall not only what others have voiced to them, but also gives them space to express their own relationships with memory and narrative and their own interpretations.[581] Each character's telling of his/her lie story is an exercise of individual agency within a larger social and historical structure. While the storyteller pulls upon a body of knowledge shared by the community, his interpretation and response to this knowledge is based on gender and age specific experiences.

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[578] See Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness:Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[579] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 284.
[580] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 283.
[581] Susan Ritchie discusses challenges to ventriloquist representation in folklore, arguing that while folklorists have often advocated to preserve the cultures of historically underrepresented groups, they have also at times muted the very individuals they claim to speak for. Susan Ritchie, "Ventriloquist Folklore: Who Speaks for Representation?," Western Folklore 52.2/4 (1993).

By representing a multitude of storytellers and representations of story, Dash attempts to address critiques surrounding the dominance of Nana and the Unborn Child as primary storytellers in the film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).[582] Through the novel, she seeks to highlight the individuality of oral recollections, which is underscored succinctly in an exchange between Amelia and Elizabeth, and reiterated in Ben's telling of Ibo Landing. Before Elizabeth tells the lie-story of her namesake, Ayodele, she proclaims:

> All I know is what come to me from Nana and my mama. You got to talk to the others. Everybody live out here got their own story. .I can take you to them, but you have to get them to tell you. You got to let them tell it their own way. I can tell you right now. It's not going to be easy, because they don't like red-bones.[583]

Dash not only emphasizes the distinctiveness of individual stories, everybody has their own story, which they tell in their own way, but also the *necessity* for listeners to find their own ways to access and collect those stories. As in the film, Dash wants to convey the active role audiences/listeners have in the perpetuation of story. Elizabeth's words serve not only as a directive for Amelia's research on the Island, but also for audiences/readers. If part of Elizabeth's message to Amelia is about hearing the story, the other part is about the processes surrounding the cultural and historical transmission of knowledge through story. What Elizabeth "knows" comes to her from other women in her family.

In various accounts recorded in the 1930s in *Drums and Shadows*, Islanders recall parents and grandparents references to individuals who could fly, naming Africa as the destination of many of their journeys. Paul Singleton, who was born during slavery on a

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[582] See Paulla Ebron's comment about the narrators in the film *Daughters of the Dust*. Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture."
[583] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 86.

plantation near Darien, Georgia recalled, "Muh daddy use tuh tell me all duh time bout folks wut could fly back tuh Africa."[584] Mose Brown was told by his grandmother of a man and wife, both African captives, who returned together.[585] *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, part of a 1940 WPA project, is an important, if only partial, representation of folk beliefs among Sea Islanders. Participants not only discuss beliefs about magic and identify the prominence of particularly folk narratives, such as the legend of the Flying Africans; they also provide multiple accounts of how individuals connected in practice, through the construction of buildings, or through storytelling with memories of Africa.

In the novel, Dash explores relationships and memories of Africa expressed within folk narratives. Through the "Story of Ayodele," she taps into the ways Sea Islanders preserved real or constructed memories of Africa within folktales as means of building community and connecting individuals with geographically distant landscapes. While the story recalls various moments and landscapes: an early African childhood, a Middle Passage experience, Ayodele's enslavement in the Americas and her spiritual return, its descriptive depth is reserved for two landscapes: Africa and the Sea Islands. These places function as sites of community for Ayodele and locations where cultural traditions are transmitted.

As in *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano* (1794), Ayodele's story begins with references to an idyllic childhood in an unspecified African village. In recounting Ayodele's birth, Elizabeth casts some light on African derived traditions of

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[584] Georgia Writers' Project. Savannah Unit., Drums and Shadows; Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972) 17. check page number

[585] Georgia Writers' Project. Savannah Unit., Drums and Shadows; Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes 18.

naming, explaining to Amelia that Ayodele came into the world of her African village "hand first," which was treated as good sign.[586] In Elizabeth's references to Ayodele's childhood, she underscores African gendered divisions of labor, where men participated in husbandry and women cultivated various crops. The cultivation of land was an important lesson taught to each girl child who "would move from field to field learning to grow the different crops from each woman" in her family. This observation supports, Paymore, an African brought to the Sea Islands, description of the array of skill sets, such as the cultivation of rice and indigo particularly important in the Sea Islands, Africans brought with them. It also helps construct a narrative of agrarian life both in Africa and in the Americas and identifies closeness to land as integral to rites of passage, particularly for women.

The "Story of Ayodele" seeks to overcome the challenges African Americans have faced in tracing their genealogical records beyond the Middle Passage by identifying an African foremother, "the first us to work dis lan," as its protagonist. Sarah, born as Ayodele, possesses a pre-history underscored in the story through accounts of her African childhood and her knowledge of indigo cultivation.[587] The story not only offers her "true true name" for the reader/listener, but also the circumstances of her naming. By enabling the protagonist to maintain what is identified as her African name and emphasizing her specialized knowledge of indigo cultivation, the story functions as a narrative of origins for Sea Islanders and the Sea Islands. By locating familial and cultural origins within an individual, the story also connects readers with an African landscape visually made possible by references to Ayodele's childhood. The story,

[586] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 87.
[587] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 87.

however, is constrained by the limits of individual knowledge. Elizabeth is aware that the name is "African, and it means 'Her who brings joy,'" yet she does not know the exact country or ethnic origins of the name or its holder, the maternal Peazant ancestor.[588]

Etymologies of the Yoruba Nigerian name offer an important feature by specifying the extent of the name's meaning. In some definitions of the name it not only describes an individual who brings joy, but she brings joy to a specific location—the *home*. If Sea Island listeners in the novel can identify their origins in Ayodele, they still are unable to locate her specific origins. Yet, the power of the story as Elizabeth proclaims lies not in this fact, but in the fact that Ayodele is remembered and remembered as Ayodele not Sarah. Her birth name is recalled in story and commemorated in the subsequent naming of girl children born by the first son.

The story of Ayodele also bridges together the forced removal from Africa with return, if only spiritual, by chronicling the stages of Ayodele's life which are marked by freedom, enslavement, death, and liberation. Like other variations of myth of the Flying African, "The Story of Ayodele" underscores flight and the transcendence of the spirit. Her crossing over, ushered by the singing of older captives, who gathered around her bed "to sing the funeral songs in the many tongues from the old land," is described using the metaphor of flight.[589] Elizabeth recalls, "They say her floated over the field an past" the big house, over the her son and husband, over the old market, which housed captives soon to be sold, and over the slave trader's home where "she gathered the cries of the African captives "swept into the home of the slave trader an let them go."[590] Returning to the Pinchney plantation, Ayodele watches and participates in the preparations for her

[588] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 87.
[589] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 92.
[590] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 92.

crossing. As they lower the coffin in the ground, the story concludes with Ayodele "flying with arms stretched out . . . across the waves to where the spirits of she family wait to rejoice in she return."[591]

The myth of Ibo Landing, a variant of the myth of the Flying Africans, is recounted in the film and in the novel. Amelia is told the story of Ibo Landing by her cousin, Ben, Elizabeth's younger brother. Ben's version of Ibo Landing underscores the individuality of recollection, the dynamic nature of story, and the use of story/legend to illuminate acts of heroism by African captives. Ben's version of Ibo Landing is told to him by Paymore, who arrived on the last ships to transport captive Africans to the Sea Islands, and presumably not by his mother, Eula, who recalls the story in the film.[592] It is significant that Ben recounts the story of Ibo Landing as told to him by Paymore given Paymore's integral role in teaching boys on the Island "to learn de ol ways, de secret ways been passed down from one to de next."[593] Boys of a certain age were sent to Paymore until his death. Paymore seems to be inspired to some degree by the character of Bilal Muhammad, a historical figure, who appears in the film and instructs young boys in the film in Islamic worship. Bilal came to the Sea Islands as an enslaved African and recounts to Mr. Snead, the photographer, his first hand observation of Ibo Landing. Like Bilal, Paymore emphasizes his presence and knowledge of the Ibos in his story of Ibo Landing.

The story of Ibo Landing recounted in the novel also underscores the agency of enslaved bonds people by demonstrating their resistance to slavery and a desire on the

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[591] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 93.
[592] It is important that Ben recalls the story of Ibo Landing as told to him by Paymore not his mother. Paymore was integral in leading young island boys through rites of passage on the Island. Ben was one of the last groups of boys to participate in this ritual.
[593] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 101.

part of the storyteller to record history based on their perception of events. In their narration of tales, the storytellers in the novel emphasize the historicity of the events they recall. Supporting this claim, Ben closes his telling of Ibo Landing by adding "Paymore claret [it] to be de absolute truth!"[594] It is not only what Paymore heard, but is what he saw, recorded and passed down orally. The version of Ibo Landing recalled in the novel is strikingly different from the one told in the film by his mother. In Eula's version, the Ibos collectively walk on water shortly after arriving on the Island. Ben's version makes several revisions surrounding the circumstances of departure and the extent of descriptions relating to who the Ibo were in relation to other enslaved groups. His version intertwines the personal history of Paymore, the individual who recounts the story to Ben; Paymore's recollections of the Ibos; and the circumstances of their flight and its aftermath. Paymore had an uncanny ability for identifying where various groups of bondspeople were from, in part, because he was involved in the slave trade and "put deem on de boats."[595] Paymore's participation in the slave trade and his accounts of African cultural diversity also draw parallels to Olaudah Equiano's narrative.

In his narration of events, Paymore identifies various skills different enslaved people brought with them. Planters often associated characteristics with various African ethnic groups. These associations informed not only who they imported, but also accounted for the bans placed on the importation of certain groups. Igbos,[596] in particular, were often characterized by planters as prone to suicide and deceitful. Michael Gomez analyzes the frequent appearance of Igbos in folklore, such as the stories of the Flying Africans, as well as their contribution to African American identity. The Bight of Biafra,

[594] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 105.
[595] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 103.
[596] Ibo is also spelled as Igbo.

the region were Igbos are from, accounted for one-quarter of the African imported to North America.[597] The demand for Igbos was inconsistent with some North American colonies, like South Carolina, deciding they would not import Igbos. Gomez notes, "a close link between Igbo and suicide was clearly established in the minds of many planters, and a self-terminating labor force was clearly out of the questions."[598] The recurring appearance Igbos in the stories of the Flying Africans illuminates their particular responses to enslavement. Igbos resisted slavery with greater frequency than other groups in two ways: suicide and absconding. Not only did they resist slavery using the only means available, but their responses were informed by the cultural, social, and religious beliefs Igbos brought with them. Igbo belief in reincarnation meant that suicide "contained within it the seed for regeneration and renewal."[599]

In this narration of the story, the Ibos are marked as a group who defy enslavement, demonstrated in their ability to "walk cross de water, head for home," something which other captives attempted to do but "when dey step off de landing dey fall in de water."[600] If Ibos are marked as heroes within the story, this title is not extended to all, particularly Paymore, who wrestles with the shame of having assisted in placing captives on the boats. Additionally, in the story, other captives are unable to cross on the bridge the Ibos built and fall in the water. In recalling, Paymore's first-hand accounts of enslaved life, Ben presents a complex story regarding African complicity in the slave

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[597] Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South 114-15.
[598] Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South 120.
[599] Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South 120.
[600] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 104-05.

trade, juxtaposing individuals like Ayodele, who were captured, with individuals, like Paymore, who participated in the slave trade.

Paymore's passing, like Nana's, symbolizes a break if not an end to a particular transmission of an African cultural heritage, the ability for traditions to continue or be passed down from single individuals to groups. Explaining the impact of the loss of individuals who are marked as culture bearers, Ben exclaims, "Now dat him [Paymore] gone, I don know who gonna teach de ol ways. Dont nobody know all of it like Paymore."[601] The absence of significant ancestor figures is also expressed during the preparations for the burial of the bones of African captives found on land Lucy purchased: "As they went about their work, each woman felt what they had missed when Nana and others had passed on and this ritual had disappeared from their lives."[602] While the novel invests individuals with great amounts of knowledge, it must also deal with the costs it presents through their passing. The novel represents particular individuals, such as Paymore and Nana, as links to a historical past and demonstrates that by claiming stories as her own each individual may access the past and thus preserve it.[603] The physical absence of specific ancestor figures, like Nana, provides the novel with an opportunity to explore the dynamic nature of folklore and beliefs by highlighting adaptability to new familial, social, political, and economic environments.

By presenting multiple versions of the myth of the Flying Africans, Dash suggests that the importance of mythic memories lies not in their provability, or whether people

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[601] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 101.
[602] Dash, Daughters of the Dust 237.
[603] The ancestor represents a prominent motif in African American literature. Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that particularly in migration narratives ancestors play a pivotal role in the experiences migrants have in new geographies and the relationships they construct or sustain with homeplaces. Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?": The African-American Migration Narrative 6.

actually flew, but in the power of story to convey particular sentiments, experiences or values. The story of the "The Sorcerer" suggests that histories, even those neglected surface, and pushes the viewer to consider what contemporary individuals do with this historical knowledge. Within this context, the lie-story represents metaphorical and literal representations of black experiences. Dash not only introduces audiences to pieces of cultural memory that exist in oral histories, but also demonstrates the dynamic nature of folklore by re-envisioning cultural and personal mythology within the novel.

Since the context and function of folk narratives and beliefs are the primary interests of the novel, Dash does not simply recreate folktales by pulling them verbatim from the numerous collections of folktales drawn from the Sea Islands. Nor does she isolate them from the process in which they are told and produced; instead Dash attempts to underscore the very beliefs which inform those tales, while highlighting the circumstances and function of their narration. In her film and novel set in the Sea Islands, Dash visually, linguistically, and culturally positions the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina as the site and source of an important black folk heritage which links Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas through ritual, migrations, and artistic responses to enslavement in orature.

Conclusion

The Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina have captured the imagination and interests of artists and scholars for more than a century. Visually stunning and culturally distinct, these Islands have been an important geography for identifying and specifying the African roots of African American culture. Living in relative isolation, enslaved Africans brought to the Sea Islands recreated upon these shores culture, language, and religious beliefs which resembled, but did not duplicate what they left behind. The continuation of African cultural traditions and the expression of African derived languages challenged the prevailing views that the Middle Passage severed Africans' connections with their homeland. It also challenged the belief that African culture did not withstand the fateful voyage to the New World. The work of linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner and the folkloric collection *Drums and Shadows* provided evidence through linguistic examples and oral recollections for the Sea Islands' link to Africa.

While interests in the Sea Islands by scholars and artists never completely dissipated, it did wane in the 1950s. The late 1960s and 1970s represented a resurgence of interests in the Sea Islands and Gullah culture. The political, social, and cultural movements of the late 1960s and 1970s prompted a re-evaluation of black American connections to Africa and their familial pasts in America. The work of Alex Haley, in particular, reflected a new relationship with Black Americans' African cultural heritage,

one that was also articulated by artists during the Black Arts Movement. Haley's use of oral history underscored another re-evaluation, one that emphasized the importance of oral history in the recovery and discovery of African American history.

During the 1970s, black women writers also highlighted the importance of oral history and folklore as an important source for recovering what they viewed as not only a maligned history of black Americans, but also black women. The works of authors, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, drew attention to memory and recollection, often turning to the southern landscape as a space for visualizing and uncovering both. While many artists during the Black Arts Movement turned to Africa, Walker and Morrison represented artists who visualized African roots to American cultures in the southern landscape. Unlike their many of their predecessors, the South, in these literary works represented a foundational landscape of ancestry, culture, and black history. The South's position as such directed the choices, experiences, and movements of characters in these novels. Return migration, of some sort, physical, spiritual, or cultural, represented a necessary and essential act for their characters. Black artists' renderings of return migration south coincided not only with a transformation in black Americans relationship with their familial past and the southern landscape, but also occurred during a period of dramatic demographic shift in black movement, the Great Return Migration. The visualizations of the Sea Islands in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* and her novel *Daughters of the Dust* are informed by, reflect, and represent the transformations articulated above. In their examination of the Sea Islands, they invoke the geography as a

site for exploring the multiple and diverse migrations which have marked the black experience.

In each of the works examined in this dissertation migration emerges as a prominent motif. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash foreground the migratory experiences of black women as they travel to and from homeplaces in the Sea Islands. In their examination of migration, these artists not only demonstrate how migration often separates individuals from homeplaces, but also contemplate the impact of migrations upon individuals' and groups' relationships with home. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash present individuals conflicted with the choices surrounding their migratory decisions, which is often represented as the abandonment of their cultural past and traditions. Certainly, home for the protagonists and central characters of these works, Avey Johnson, Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, Eula Peazant, Elizabeth Peazant, and Amelia Varnes are marked as vexed places and characters must wrestle with their individual and familial past. However, the act of reclamation and cultural embrace is seen by these artists as necessary for the construction of a viable self image.

The Sea Islands represents a distinct and unique location for visualizing black migrations. In their examination of migration, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash also underscore the Sea Islands important link as a bridge to other spaces and times, particularly Africa and the rural South. These works not only focus on individual migrations, which are physical and cultural, but they couch these individual journeys within larger historical experiences such as the Transatlantic slave trade, the Great Migration, and the Great Return Migration. The Sea Islands in these works offers an important space for narrating the enslaved experience, because it provides material for

narrating a history of resistance, traditions preserved, and family links remembered. Given the familial and cultural fractures slavery produced, the presence of cultural continuity and memories of Africa in the Sea Islands is important and emphasized in the works of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash. Naylor underscores the history of resistance in the Sea Islands through the African foremother, Sapphira, who not only secures her freedom and those of other enslaved Africans in Willow Springs, but also secures property rights for them as well. In the novel, *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash also envisions the Sea Islands as a site for reconstructing African American genealogical links by featuring an African foremother, Ayodele. Ayodele remembers not only the Middle Passage, but importantly her life before enslavement. The memories of Africa presented by Naylor and Dash reflect accounts featured in the folkloric collection *Drums and Shadows*. The accounts of these foremothers and subsequently their memories are preserved in the oral histories of their descendants and underscore the importance of oral histories and folklore in recalling and preserving cultural memory.

While slavery and the Middle Passage are revisited in these works, so to are the events and periods of the Great Migration and the Great Return Migration. In their examination of the Great Migration, Marshall and Dash examine the struggles black Americans have experienced and the sacrifices they have made in their search for full inclusion into American society. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson and her husband demonstrate the abandonment of cultural rituals, beliefs, and traditions in the pursuit of material success and social acceptance. Haagar's desire to escape her past prompts her to disassociate herself and her children from a Gullah cultural heritage. The impact of these choices is profound and affects not only the individual, but also their

children. In her exploration of Avey's choices and her return, Marshall emphasizes a necessary balance between social mobility and the acknowledgement and embrace of one's cultural heritage. I would argue that Naylor and Dash also underscore this point. Migration, is, not seen as an evil, but an inevitable feature of life. It is the choices that people make surrounding this event that are optional these artists suggests.

Return migration in these works is thus not always conceived by the traditional definition. It does not mean that the individual returns to the homeplace to live permanently. Return, represents going back to a place, site, or moment of cultural disconnection and a re-evaluation of one's choices and the consequences of those choices. Marshall, Dash, and Naylor prompt the reader to return as well into the cultural past of black Americans with the Sea Islands as their entry point. In her use of indigo as a symbol for the scars of slavery in the film *Daughters of the Dust,* Julie Dash explains that she wanted to show the audiences something they had seen before in a new way. The use of the Sea Islands geography in these works has the same function—to show the reader something they have seen before, but in a new way. While the Sea Islands offer a new space for visualizing the stories of black migrations, it also adds to this narrative by providing new experiences and circumstances. The reconstruction of memory and history in the Sea Islands emerges as empowering for these characters and the artists hope for their audiences as well.

If the Sea Islands emerge as a bridge to landscapes and cultural memory, the works of Marshall, Naylor, and Dash emerge as a bridge introducing and connecting audiences to this landscape. The 1980s and 1990s represented an important period of cultural production, scholarship, and social and cultural activism surrounding the Sea

Islands. The coalescence of scholarship, festivals, publications, and artistic works has brought renewed local and national attention to the Sea Islands. Historically ridiculed as "backward" and "primitive" Gullah culture has moved into the mainstream. However, this moment of critical attention is also a moment of increasing concern about the survival of Gullah communities and culture. Tourism, land development, unemployment, and outmigration have adversely impacted many Gullah communities. Gullah culture is rapidly transforming, a concern vocalized by many community groups and associations, which have formed in the last twenty years to address these transformations. The environmental and social changes occurring in the Sea Islands in some ways are not unique, but reflect the transformations of rural communities nationally.

The artistic and scholarly works about Gullah culture have served not only to introduce audiences to Gullah culture and inspire a greater appreciation, but to also encourage preservation efforts. Preservation efforts have taken a number of forms from the creation of festivals, children's literature and television programming to include films and books. The publication of the De Nyew Testament (Gullah Bible) in 2005 epitomizes these efforts. The novels of Marshall, Dash, and Naylor and Dash's film are equally important in introducing Gullah culture and the Sea Islands to new audiences, portraying the contemporary realities of the Gullah people, and illuminating the significance of the Sea Islands for the examination of African American history and in the construction of African American culture.

Gullah culture in these works in visualized in a number of ways. In *Praisesong for the Widow,* Paule Marshall illustrates religious beliefs and practices through her representations of the Ring Shout. The Ring Shout in the novel not only symbolizes

Gullah cultural traditions, but in its use of circularity underscores the African antecedents of Gullah religious and cultural practices. While Marshall draws upon a historical tradition, Naylor constructs fictional Sea Island traditions in her construction of Candle Walk. Naylor's Candle Walk, although fictional, conveys the interdependence and mutual support that defined life in the Sea Islands. Her rituals underscore not actual cultural performances, but the ethos or perspective which undergirds them. Julie Dash's film provides visually stunning representations of Gullah culture. Her portrayal of Gullah life in the Sea Islands at the turn of the century in the film *Daughters of the Dust* underscores not only the African roots of Gullah culture, but also its syncretism. Echoes of Africa emerge everywhere in the film from the religious practices of Nana, the hairstyles worn by females characters, the games played by men, and the postures people assume. Not only can Gullah culture be seen in the film, but also heard. The sounds of Gullah spoken on screen are important for creating a sense of place for the audience. Marshall, Naylor, and Dash represent Gullah culture in their works through material culture, such as baskets and quilts, through cultural performances and rituals, and also through folklore.

Folklore and oral recollections represent important mediums in these works for the representation and preservation of cultural traditions, beliefs, practices, and memories. The Black Power Movements and the Black Arts Movement not only transformed black Americans relationships to their cultural past, but also emphasized the elevation of folk culture and orality. In their works, Marshall, Dash, and Naylor call attention to the importance of folklore for constructing an alternative historiography of black life, and uncovering cultural memories. They draw upon the myths and stories found in folkloric

collections, like 1940 *Drums and Shadows*, which was reissued in 1972. In their examination and use of folklore, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash confront and challenge the ventriloquism and muting and of black voices in early written accounts. They take into account the absences and distortions in some cases in sources like the WPA narratives. They also consider the traditional divisions between history and memory, by which history is identified as something verifiable. Particularly in their evocation of the myth of Ibo Landing they underscored not the "truth" of the event, but its significance and meaning for enslaved Africans and their descendants.

Particularly for Marshall and Dash, their use of the myth of Ibo Landing and its variation, the story of the Flying Africans, underscores the importance of personal and communal recollections for narrating historical events. The appearance of this tale in their works also underscores the interplay between oral and written forms in African American literature. In their use of folklore, Marshall, Naylor, and Dash illuminate how folklore has been foundational to African American literary production. In their examination of folklore, they present the novel as an important and alternative site of transmission. In their representation of folklore and orality, Marshall, Dash, and Naylor challenge the divisions between folklore and literature constructed often times by folklorists. Instead, they offer the novel and film not only as a site for portraying folklore and thus cultural memory, but as itself a form of folklore.

Folklore emerges in these works an important mechanism for engaging cultural memory. By situating the Sea Islands as a site of important folkloric materials, Marshall, Dash, and Naylor underscore the importance of the Sea Islands as a geography for recovering cultural memories. They recover memories of an African and rural black

American cultural past, and emphasize the importance of embracing and preserving cultural traditions. The cultural past, accessed through the Sea Islands, emerges as instructive for contemporary audiences. They construct the Sea Islands as an important *lieux de mémoire*, a site of memory. Certainly, the Sea Islands are not the only significant geography identified in the novels and film by Marshall, Naylor, and Dash. In their examination of the Sea Islands they importantly examine the interplay between rural and urban experiences. One of the limitations of these works is their representations of contemporary challenges to Gullah people. While there are allusions to these challenges in *Mama Day* and the novel and film *Daughters of the Dust*, there are not extensive representations. As a result at times in these works a gulf developments between the representations and the realities of contemporary life in the Sea Islands. Certainly, Marshall, Dash, and Naylor's emphasis on the importance of Sea Islands cultural heritage to all black Americans is important; however, the dramatic changes in the landscape they present as sacred and central to African American culture and identity can not be overlooked.

What then is the impact or importance of the representations of the Sea Islands in their works? The discovery and reclamation of their Sea Islands heritage for characters in these works serve as a metaphor for a broader rediscovery of the Sea Islands by black Americans during the 1980s. By evoking the Sea Islands, they present it in addition to locations such as Africa and Harlem, as an important geographical reference for examining the cultural experiences of black people. The Sea Islands emerges as an important landscape in the black cultural imagination. Through their works Marshall,

Naylor, and Dash illuminate what anthropologist Patricia Guthrie has written about the Sea Islands:

> the area and its people are especially important to African Americans because we find in this sacred place physical, emotional, and spiritual roots of our present-day existence.[604]

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Mama Day*, and the film and the novel *Daughters of the Dust* the Sea Islands offer the promise of home.

[604] Guthrie, Catching Sense: African American Communities on a South Carolina Sea Island 1.

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