

**“ ‘They Made Gullah’: Modernist Primitivists and the Discovery and Creation of
Sapelo Island, Georgia’s Gullah Community, 1915-1991”**

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT:

The history of Sapelo Islanders in published works reveals a complex cast of characters, each one working through ideas about racial distinction and inheritance; African culture and spirituality; and the legacy of slavery during the most turbulent years in America’s race-making history. Feuding social scientists, adventure seeking journalists, amateur folklorists, and other writers, initiated and shaped the perception of Sapelo Islanders’ distinct connection to Africa during the 1920s and 1930s, and labeled them “Gullah.” These researchers characterized the “Gullah,” as being uniquely connected to their African past, and as a population among whom African “survivals” were readily observable. This dissertation argues that the popular view of Sapelo Islanders’ “uniqueness” was the product of changing formulations about race and racial distinction in America. Consequently, the “discovery” of Sapelo Island’s Gullah folk was more a sign of times than an anthropological discovery.

This dissertation interrogates the intellectual motives of the researchers and writers who have explored Sapelo Islanders in their works, and argues that the advent of American Modernism, the development of new social scientific theories and popular cultural works during the 1920s and 1930s, and other trends shaped their depictions. This study begins by examining the changing meaning of blacks’ Africanness as a result of the shift from Victorian to Modernist thought, traces the “Gullah” in African survivals debates in the academe and uncovers the popular obsession with blacks’ Africanness expressed in the 1920s and 1930s “voodoo craze.” Next, the study charts the way that these larger national trends relative to black peoples’ Africanness touched down on Sapelo Island, Georgia and impacted the lives of the islanders caught in the primitivist’s gaze. Finally, the dissertation explores black women writers’ discovery of Sapelo Islanders in the wake of the Black Studies movement, and analyzes their contribution to the way that the Gullah have been imagined. From African savages during the Victorian period, to beloved primitives during

the advent of American Modernism, to beloved African American ancestors in the years following the Black Studies movement, Sapelo Island's "Gullah folk" have served to fill the needs of various groups' race fantasies for generations.

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Preface

Most of the people who discover Sapelo Islanders first encounter this coastal Georgia black community through the words that have been written about them in books. My first encounter with Sapelo Islanders was different. The island is the home of mother's family, and I count most of the islanders among the numerous family members who have greeted me with hugs and kisses after the long ferry ride during my annual summer visits since childhood. They have told me stories about "the old days," taken me on crabbing excursions, and fishing and swimming trips on the island's serene beaches. For me, the island was the place where I reunited with my grandparents, grand aunts and uncles, and a host cousins under the shade of Spanish moss trees.

When I finally discovered Sapelo Islanders in books, I was in college studying to become a high school history teacher. At the urging of one of my professors, I began what became a long search into what he described as my family's "Gullah" roots. I had never heard the term "Gullah" before he said it; no one who lived on, or was from Sapelo Island had ever used the word in my presence to describe themselves. Similarly, none of my family members, save one grand uncle who talked about being photographed for a magazine during the 1930s, had ever talked about the research that was conducted on the island or about the books and articles that had been published about it. Driven both by the curiosity that fuels the mind of everyone who studies and teaches history, and by the longing to make sense of their ancestral past that inspires many African Americans, I began searching for everything that had been written about Sapelo Islanders—a quest that brought me to graduate school, and ultimately birthed this study.

At first, what I found in W. Robert Moore's 1934 *National Geographic Magazine* article, Lydia Parrish's slave song collection, Lorenzo D. Turner's linguistics study, and Mary Granger's survival study excited me. In their works I found pictures of my ancestors and read stories that they told, which is a rare prospect for most African Americans. But, once the excitement subsided, and I took a closer look at these works and the ways they described Sapelo Islanders as bearers of a distinct African heritage, questions began to form in my mind. Why had this mixed group of writers (an adventure

seeking journalist, two white women amateur folklore collectors, and a black scholar) taken such a strong interest in the black people who lived on Sapelo Island? What was going on in America during the 1920s and 1930s that had made blacks like my great grandparents sought after research subjects whose lives and ideas were suddenly worth documenting? Why, during the 1920s and 1930s, was there such a marketable interest in black people's African heritage? And thinking back to my old conversation with that professor, where did the term "Gullah" come from? What does it mean?

This dissertation grapples with these questions and in so doing explores an important moment in America's race making history—a moment during which examining black people's Africanness had both academic and popular appeal. What I found revealed a complex story about how ideas about racial distinction, fantasies about primitive peoples, and notions of modernity shaped the intellectual preoccupations of 1920s and 1930s researchers and writers. The history that I thought I was writing gave way to a complex account in which Sapelo Islanders were no longer the primary subjects. In their place, a host of interesting characters emerged: 1920s and 1930s black and white scholars, journalists and novelists, and several black women writers who used Sapelo Island research in their fictional works during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, joined W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo D. Turner, and Mary Granger as the new primary subjects in the study.

During this process, I combed archives and libraries, as well as interviewed Sapelo Islanders. While most of the people I talked to had little knowledge about the books and articles from the 1930s where their stories or the stories of their parents had appeared, and most expressed little knowledge of the African survivals for which the island had become famous, Sapelo Islanders had a lot to say about being black in the Jim Crow south. They told me stories about life on the island that I had never heard nor read before. They talked about life on the island during the years when the two white millionaires, Howard Coffin and R.J. Reynolds, virtually ruled the island as a private oasis. They shared stories about the their families' dire economic circumstances and the difficulties that they faced as a result of hard times. Under the weight of their tales about racism and prejudice in relation to their families' lives, the island that I had once imagined as my childhood paradise, and that earlier researchers and writers had imagined

as a carefree haven for a quasi-African Gullah folk, now seemed very much a part of, the Jim Crow south.

In the end I learned that the history of Sapelo Islanders in published works was not the story of researchers and writers who stumbled upon a unique and distinct group of blacks who had managed to retain the language, traditions and beliefs of their African progenitors, but was a story about how race and racial distinction has been crafted in America. This study offers a new view of the “Gullah,” a view in which the Gullah have been used to fuel competing ideas about the significance of black people’s African heritage in order to define black people’s place in American society. In my discovery of the real story of Sapelo Islanders in published work, I have found much more than my ancestors. I found American Modernists using black people as a vehicle for their rebellion against their Victorian predecessors. I found the interwar years witnessing the inception of a rigorous debate between social scientists over the significance of black people’s African heritage and recovered trends, like the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze, that had been absent from the nation’s historical record. I unearthed a fierce struggle within the ranks of the Federal Writers’ Project over the way that coastal Georgia blacks’ Gullahness would be represented in a work that they commissioned. I also discovered black women writers using the Gullah to challenge their racial and gender identities in the years following the Black Studies movement. I have lost some things in this process too. I had to give up the fantasy view of a mystical, magical Gullah that black women writers have made in order to confront the slippery nature of “African survivals” and the mixed motives and influences of those who hunted survivals on Sapelo Island.

I offer to those who read this study a new story of the role that Sapelo Islanders have played in America’s imagination for more than seventy-seven years. I offer an account of the researchers and writers who, according to my grand uncle Joe A. Johnson, “ ‘made Gullah.’ ”

Introduction

On May 4, 2008 the *New York Times* reported that Sapelo Island, Georgia's Gullah community was entering into a vicious battle to keep their land. The headline read: "A Georgia Community With an African Feel Fights a Wave of Change." From the title, a question emerges: what about Sapelo Island gives it an "African feel"? The answer to this question will not be found in the details about land struggles between real estate developers and Hogg Hammock residents, nor can it be explained by the author's vague description of "Gullah/Geechee" people.¹ Casual readers of this article may have missed the reporter's veiled reference to Sapelo's "African feel" in the following sentence:

When Wevonneda Minis first came to this marshy barrier island where her ancestors had been rice-cultivating slaves, she learned of the dream her great-great-grandfather, Liberty Handy, had the night before he died. In a dream, people told her, a black cat scratched him.²

In 2008 the connection between a dream about a black cat's scratch and Africa is no longer obvious. We have long since forgotten that during the 1920s and 1930s, professional and amateur anthropologists and folklorists were obsessed with uncovering and documenting African survivals among blacks, and popular print media and artistic productions consistently depicted blacks as being connected to secret voodoo networks. Back then, a dream about a black cat reported by an African American would have instantly conjured images of voodoo doctors, gris gris bags, beating drums, blood sacrifices and African ancestors. In the context of 1920s and 1930s America, "voodoo" was a blanket term used to identify a myriad of African derived practices and ideologies specifically applied to blacks. Among these practices and beliefs were: folklore, herbal

¹ Shaila Dewan, "A Georgia Community With an African Feel Fights a Wave of Change" *New York Times* May 4, 2008. Dewan attempted to define Sapelo Island's and islanders' "African Feel": "Reachable only by ferry, Hogg Hammock is one of the last settlements of the Geechee people, also called Gullah, who in the days before air conditioning and bug repellent had the Sea Island virtually to themselves and whose speech and ways, as a result, retained a distinctly African flavor."

² Ibid.

remedies, dream-premonitions, spells and curses, spiritual rituals, death rites, musical performance styles and ideas about the afterlife—all of which were believed to be animated by an “African” essence and were assumed to be most pronounced in black communities in the rural south.³

While “voodoo” practices could be ascribed to black people across the United States, in the 1920s and 1930s, blacks in one region in particular drew whites fascinated by the idea of “African retentions” such as “voodoo.” That region was coastal Georgia and South Carolina. Writers’, journalists’ and scholars’ belief that blacks in this region had a unique relationship to African retentions resulted in Sapelo Islanders becoming one of the most sought after groups by researchers hoping to uncover African retentions as a consequence of this new interest. Fascination was so intense that it could be termed a “Gullah Explosion.” Accordingly, black residents of coastal Georgia and South Carolina, were linked by an identity that researchers and writers termed “Gullah,” and became the quintessential example of African survivals in the United States.

During the slavery era and beyond, white authors and folklore collectors noted the “uniqueness” of coastal Georgia blacks. They wrote about coastal Georgia blacks’ distinct dialect, folk tales, spiritual practices and superstitions.⁴ Basket weaving and fish net making techniques, Bruh Rabbit and Anansi folktales, the Ring Shout, Seekin’ baptismal rituals and the coastal Georgia dialect have been cited by researchers to mark the uniqueness of coastal Georgia blacks. However, early folk studies in coastal Georgia were not concerned with establishing the African origins of the practices and traditions that they described. During the 1920s and 1930s, the meaning and value of these folk practices, and their possible origin changed.

³ This definition of “voodoo” is derived from my reading of more than one hundred voodoo related newspaper reports, journal articles and anthropological and folklore studies produced during the 1920s and 1930s. “Voodoo” during this period, was loosely understood as a racial phenomenon as opposed to a term used to identify a set of specific spiritual practices.

⁴ Charles C. Jones published *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast* in 1888. Ruby Moore wrote an article for the *Journal of American Folklore* titled “Superstitions from Georgia” in 1894. John Bennett wrote an article published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “Gullah a Negro Patios” in 1908. Loraine Darby also published an essay in the *Journal of American Folklore* titled “Ring Games From Georgia” in 1917.

Indeed, the belief that Gullah people, like black Sapelo Islanders, have maintained this voodoo fueled “African feel” is deeply rooted in a specific, complex history in which an interesting cast of characters influenced by 1920s and 1930s intellectual and cultural trends published works that established the authentic Gullahness of black Sapelo Islanders. Lydia Parrish, wife of famed artist Maxfield Parrish, discovered black Sapelo Islanders while wintering on St. Simon Island during the 1920s and shortly thereafter began collecting slave songs in the region and organizing ring shout performances for white audiences. W. Robert Moore, an adventure seeking writer/photographer for *National Geographic Magazine*, initiated the introduction of black Sapelo Islanders and their Africanness to the magazine’s readership in 1934. Distinguished scholar Lorenzo D. Turner, the only black person to research black Sapelo Islanders during the period, began researching the Gullah dialect in 1930 and spent more than fifteen years in pursuit of the African roots of the dialect. Mary Granger, a native of Savannah, Georgia, and supervisor of the Federal Writers’ Project’s Savannah Unit, wrote the most widely referenced study of blacks in coastal Georgia in which Sapelo Islanders are featured: *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940). Moore, Parrish and Granger fixated on and wrote about Sapelo Islanders’ superstitious “African” styled practices, while Turner focused his attention on scholarly questions about African linguistic patterns.

While the majority of the aforementioned published works were conducted by amateur folklorists/anthropologists and journalists, leading social scientists and New Negro intelligentsia were entangled in these projects as either advisors or adversaries: Melville Herskovits, Sterling Brown, E. Franklin Frazier, Guy B. Johnson, Charles S. Johnson and Benjamin A. Botkin are among this list. The debate between these intellectuals over the validity of African retention theories in the academe was most pronounced in the development of Granger’s study, but is also evident in both Parrish’s and Turner’s study. A close examination of the way that this debate played out in the case of black Sapelo Islanders speaks to the political negotiations through which knowledge, and racial difference is constructed, and the way that the “Gullah” identity was formed.

Even more significant to the discovery of Sapelo Island's Gullah community were period specific forces that initiated the exploration of black people and black spaces. Granger, Moore, Parrish and Turner began conducting research between 1915 and 1935, so one can assume these years to be formative in the conceptualization of their projects. The interwar years mark major transitions in America's racial landscape. Racial segregation was at an all time high during these years, but the World War I era was also witness to a variety of countervailing cultural influences. The period saw the mass migration of southern blacks to northern cities, a shift from Victorianism to Modernism and heightened exploration of black spaces encouraged by the New Negro Black Arts movement. These phenomenon cultivated fantasies about blacks and their Africanness, justified racism, encouraged exoticism, spurred American Modernists and were central to the black arts movement. These forces collided and manifested in everything from Melville Herskovits' retention thesis to the hundreds of voodoo reports printed in black and white newspapers circulated in migration metropolises, and ultimately fueled outsiders' interest in Sapelo Island, Georgia's black community.

To date, scholars have paid little attention to the production of the Gullah identity, and have instead focused on the "uniqueness" of this black population.⁵ This tendency has obscured the way that racism impacted the cultural interventions through which the Gullah have been made; as well as buried the debates among black and white social scientists and intelligentsia about the validity of depictions of groups like Sapelo Islanders as Gullah.⁶ The result is that in both the American imaginary (as reflected in

⁵ Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory is the only contemporary scholar who has attempted to contextualize the production of the Gullah identity. In an appendix to his study *Black Atlantic Religions: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Matory explores the connection between Gullah identity and a transnational dialogue during the 1980s. Matory again takes up this subject in an essay titled "The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geeches and the Political Economy of African Cultures in the Americas" (2008). In the essay, Matory takes anthropologists to task for assuming African origins of "Gullah/Geeche" practices as well as seeks to chart a larger series of dialogues and motivations that shaped the identity.

⁶ David E. Whisnat analyzes "cultural interventions" in terms of the political and cultural imperatives that inspire and spur collectors attempting to preserve and or revive cultural traditions in his book *All That's Native and Fine: The Politics of*

the media) and in scholarly works, the Gullah identity is presented as an uncontested American reality.

The discovery of Sapelo Island's Gullah community in the 1920s and 1930s provides a perfect opportunity to chart the evolution of this racialized identity as well as serves as a case study for exoticism as a manifestation of racism in American history. Applying historical analysis to the emergence of black Sapelo Islanders as authentic Gullah folk turns the lens from the usual subjects of Gullah studies (blacks), and focuses instead on those who participated in the creation of the identity while paying close attention to unique forces at work at the time during which the bulk of published materials about Sapelo Islanders first emerged. It is from this vantage point that this study is crafted.

This dissertation argues that the discovery of Sapelo Island's Gullah community during the 1920s and 1930s is the product of evolving and changing ideas about race that were rooted in the advent of American Modernism. This study charts the interplay between racialized Victorian notions of *civilization* and *savagery* and the Modernists' quest to reclaim the virtues of the primitive evident in the works of the journalists, folklorists, anthropologists, collectors and researchers that came to Sapelo Island.⁷ These researchers planned the content of their interviews and framed their findings according to popular assessments of the racial heredity of blacks, and the purity of these traits among southern blacks. I argue that the "discovery" of Sapelo Island's Gullah community was more a sign of the times than it was an anthropological find.

This dissertation also explores the way that black women writers, in the wake of the Black Studies movement, used 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Island research to give new meaning to the Gullah identity. These women, inspired by new questions about the significance of race and gender that emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s, used the

Culture in American Region (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Ultimately, Whisnat concluded that cultural interventions are not benign or spontaneous phenomenon, but are, instead the product of political, cultural and economic forces.

⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought In the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

Gullah in their fictional works to establish a powerful matriarchal black American ancestry. Their works mark a new turn in history of the way that Sapelo Islanders were imagined in published works by both re-inventing the Gullah and the meaning of African survivals.

This study does not seek to verify, nor does it desire to invalidate anthropological claims: only experts in other disciplines can establish and evaluate the accuracy of African-Gullah/Geeche parallels. Instead, this dissertation seeks to historicize the cultural construction of longstanding interpretations of Sapelo Island's and islanders' "African feel"—interpretations which can be found in the works of black female novelists and artists during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor and Julie Dash), and in Sapelo Islanders' marketing of their authentic Gullahness as a commodity.

This dissertation links together national cultural phenomenon, intellectual discourses, institutional agendas and individual life histories that intersected on Sapelo Island, Georgia during the 1920s and 1930s. This study examines the centrality of race to the shift from Victorianism to Modernism; explores the impact that the migration of black southerners to migration metropolises had on the way that black southerners were imagined and noticed by northern whites and blacks; revisits the Harlem Renaissance and the way that it encouraged notions of racial heredity and distinction as well as encouraged the exploration of black spaces. I document a cultural phenomenon that I describe as the 1920s and 1930s "Voodoo craze," and reconstruct the intellectual and cultural imperatives that influenced the interest that the Federal Writers' Project paid to "the folk". I present biographical sketches of Moore, Parrish, Granger and Turner, locating each in terms of their interest in Gullah folk, their views on race and racial heredity, and analyze their published works. I also analyze the way that black women writers have used 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Island research in their imagining of the Gullah. Finally, I inject the voices of black Sapelo Islanders who were featured in, or whose parents were featured in Moore's, Granger's, Parrish's or Turner's works—these perspectives illuminate the way that white supremacy limited, and or dictated the extent to which black Sapelo Islanders participated in crafting their Gullah identity.

Historiography/ Literature Review

Although historians have yet to analyze the construction of Sapelo Islanders' Gullah identity, Sapelo Island's black community has been the subject of one social history, and has made an appearance in several other histories.

Historian William McFeely's book, *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom* (1994), is the first historical study to treat black Sapelo Islanders as worthy subjects. McFeely's study is the most complete history to date that explores the social history of black Sapelo Islanders from slavery to freedom. *Sapelo's People* charts the experiences of African slaves on the island, describes the Civil War years, and explores the gains that black Sapelo Islanders made during Reconstruction. McFeely does not engage with the popular notion that Sapelo Islanders were (and are) distinct because they retained an African essence. In fact, McFeely only refers to "Gullah culture" when briefly describing linguistic patterns.⁸

While there is only one history that focuses exclusively on black Sapelo Islanders, this community made an appearance in several historical monographs. Among the most recent are: Allan Austin's *Muslim Slaves in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (1997), Michael Gomez *Exchanging Our Country's Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998), Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (2005) and Philip Morgan's edited collection *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* (2010). Gomez's study is concerned with uncovering the African identities of enslaved blacks in America before 1830, and uses Sapelo Islanders to reconstruct the experiences of Muslim slaves in America. Allan Austin covers similar ground in *Muslim Slaves in Antebellum America* (1997). Steven Hahn reasserts the historical significance of black Sapelo Islanders by including them in a larger discussion about political activities in

⁸ McFeely uses the term "Gullah" once: "The growers of long-staple cotton, coveting slaves who knew how to raise the crop, managed to get slaves from single or related language groups in Africa, people who could talk to each other. With this as a base, they created, here in America, the creole language Gullah." *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), 41.

McIntosh County, Georgia during the Reconstruction period.⁹ More recent historical works that include Sapelo Islanders maintain the notion that the “Gullah” is in fact an authentic, organic cultural unit, distinct from other black communities. Philip Morgan’s edited collection, *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee* (2010), is the most recent historical study that treats Georgia’s Gullah as a consolidated group worthy of historical exploration. The insights provided by the scholars whose research is featured in the book reveals much about the history of coastal Georgia black communities, but these works do not interrogate the origins of the banner under which blacks in the region have been joined.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, anthropologists have considered Sapelo Islanders compelling subjects and have included them in studies. Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (1984) mentions Sapelo Islanders in his discussion of the persistence of Kongo spiritual traditions in America, using a report in Granger’s study to bolster his argument.¹¹ While Sapelo Islanders have filled a need for those anthropologists who champion the retentions and survivals thesis, anthropologist J. Lorand Matory has begun to raise questions about the Gullah identity:

The Africanness of the Gullahs, or Geeches, is not simply a hypothesis to be proven or disproven through an archaeology of verbal or material forms. Like the history of the entire black Atlantic world—and of human culture generally—it is preeminently a history of rival political interests, strategic cultural citations, and contestations of collective identity in which

⁹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003) 239-242.

¹⁰ Philip Morgan writes about blacks in Georgia’s lowcountry between 1733 through 1820. Betty Wood explores black women in coastal Georgia during the American Revolution. Vincent Caretta writes about the way that blacks in the region respond to rights rhetoric in the New Republic. Michael Gomez, Erskine Clarke and Timothy Powell explore black religion and folklore in the region. Theresa Singleton examines the role of archaeology in uncovering the Gullah-Geechee slave past and Allison Dorsey uncovers the history of black community development on Ossabaw Island between 1865 and 1900. Emory S. Campbell concludes the edition with his reflections on his Gullah heritage.

¹¹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of Spirit*, (New York: Vantage Books, 1984), 135.

translocal actors, including ethnographers themselves are patently and appropriately involved.¹²

Matory's assessment of the Gullah/Geeche identity is compelling, and closely approaches my view of the identity. However, a historical study that charts the evolution of the identity in a specific location is needed to make the "dialogue" through which the identity is created audible.¹³

Methods

Despite the fact that historians have not yet contextualized the creation of Gullah identity in relation to Sapelo Islanders, I patterned my study after several works. David E. Whisnat's *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (1983), Leah Dilworth's *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (1996) and Philip Deloria *Playing Indian* (1999) each illustrate the type of historical analysis that I employ.

David Whisnat's study charts the discovery of white "indigenous" populations in the Appalachian region. Whisnat argues that this discovery was not inevitable, but was rooted in a larger process that he termed "politics of culture."¹⁴ Whisnat explains that the politics of culture involves the manipulation of "culture" in response to larger political, economic or social issues.¹⁵ Culture, becomes an operative basis for agendas and judgments, and often obscures economic and political realities.¹⁶ What results is a fixation on romantically conceived notions of culture, which manifest in systemic cultural interventions. Whisnat categorizes systemic cultural interventions: archives and museums are "passive" interventions; cultural revitalization efforts are "active" interventions; and "positive" interventions sensitize revitalization efforts, while

¹² J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 298.

¹³ Ibid., Matory uses the term "dialogue" to describe the process through which identities are negotiated (294).

¹⁴ David Whisnat, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

“negative” interventions prohibit specific ethnic customs.¹⁷ He finds these patterns playing out in the development and activities of the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky during the early 1900s, Olive Dame Campbell’s collection of ballads performed by “mountain people,” and in the presence of folk music scouts and missionaries in the region during the 1920s.

Leah Dilworth’s *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (1996) also provides analytical tools through which the creation of Sapelo Islanders’ Gullah identity can be explored. Dilworth’s study focuses on the Southwest’s role in the American imagination, and in particular, Native Americans in the region. Pueblos, Navajos and Apaches in Arizona and New Mexico became exotic primitives to whom significant attention was paid between 1880s and 1920.¹⁸ Dilworth charts the way that artists, writers, ethnographers and scientists crafted images of Native Americans in the region. Dilworth wrote: “These images were more about their makers than about Native Americans and imagined a primitive that was a locus for idealized versions of history, spirituality, and unalienated labor.”¹⁹ Central to Dilworth’s study are two theoretical concepts: “uses of the primitive” and “collecting.” Dilworth argues that “the primitive” is used to create racialized fantasies about the “other;” an exercise that was essential to a society whose social, political and economic organizations and agendas were so intimately tangled in the construction of racial categories. Dilworth also explains that the primitive, viewed as living relics of the past, were essential to imagining, defining, and curing modernity.²⁰ She argues that the pursuit of “the primitive” was linked to larger processes of empire building and colonialism. In this view, the primitive is a functional object. Dilworth defines “collecting” as a “representational strategy.”²¹ This strategy involves constructing, typifying and imagining the primitive. In the case of Native Americans in her study, “collecting” made Indian life a spectacle for middle class

¹⁷ David Whisnat, 13.

¹⁸ Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the South West*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

consumption.²² Dilworth explores the combined phenomenon of collecting the primitive Native Americans in four case studies: the Hopi Snake Dance, the publications of the Fred Harvey Company, representations of Indian artisans, and Mary Austin's book *American Rhythm*.

Philip Deloria covers similar terrain in *Playing Indian* (1999), except that his study is more focused on a generalized, widespread phenomenon that is not linked to a specific period or locale. Deloria is concerned with contextualizing the uses of the Indian within the larger concept of the American identity. In Deloria's study, America's imagining of itself is dependent on the process of otherization, and the Indian becomes a vehicle for this identity formation project. Deloria explains: "Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self".²³ Deloria explores this particular process of American identity formation, tracking it through the Revolutionary period to the Cold War, documenting the interplay in all of its manifestations in American life.

Clearly, Whisnat's, Dilworth's and Deloria's studies are engaged in the type of historical analysis required in order to contextualize the creation and evolution of Sapelo Islander's Gullah identity. These historians have taken abstract motivations; needs and desires rooted notions of race, otherness, civilization, savagery and culture and made them tangible. My intervention in the body of historical literature on Sapelo Islanders involves situating ideas about Africanness, blackness and Gullahness within specific social and intellectual context, which clarifies the desires of collectors, the motivations for their cultural interventions and the basis on which specific representations of the Gullah that have become pervasive in American society, producing detrimental unintended consequences for Sapelo Islanders. Framing Moore's, Parrish's, Granger's and Turner's studies and reports in terms of the nature of cultural interventions, the function of "collecting" and the production of "representations", and the "uses of the primitive" makes dynamics and realities that have remained largely undetected visible.

Sources

²² Dilworth, 7.

²³ Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 3.

I rely on published and non-published literature in order to reconstruct the history of the creation of Sapelo Islander's Gullah identity. This list includes: W. Robert Moore's article "The Golden Isles of Guale" (1934), Mary Granger's study *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940), Lydia Parrish's *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942) and Lorenzo D. Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949). I also revisit academic works that defined the parameters of the African survivals debate during the period: Robert E. Park's essay "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures With Special Reference to the Negro" (1919), Guy B. Johnson's *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930), Melville Herskovits's essay "The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem" (1930) and *Myth of a Negro Past* (1941), Zora Neale Hurston's essay "Hoodoo in America" (1931), and E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939). I include several reviews, essays and debates published in academic journals and excerpts from other relevant works to bolster my analysis of these sources.

Establishing popular attitudes about African retentions, and the way that retentions were linked to "voodoo," is critical to this project. To achieve this end, I read and reference newspaper reports from papers circulated in migration metropolises between 1915-1935: the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *Chicago Defender*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are prominent in this project. Preliminary research yielded more than one hundred articles about blacks, black ex-southerners, and their connection to voodoo between 1915-1935. Migration metropolis newspapers are of particular interest because they were produced in regions where the influx of southern migrants produced an interesting phenomenon: black migrants were "noticed" by white and black northerners.²⁴ As a result, black ex-southerners and black southerners occupied a new place in the imagination of white and black northerners, and it is in this imaginary realm that I argue that black southerners

²⁴ For analysis on white and black ex-southerners and the way that they were "noticed" during the 1920s and 1930s, see James Gregory's *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of White and Black Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 11.

were cast as authentic folk who embodied Africanness, making them ideal subjects for academic studies, news paper reports and artistic productions.

I analyze documents from several archival collections. I researched in the National Archive and Records Administration archive, Savannah Historical Society archive and National Geographic Society's archive. These institutions contained a wealth of material useful for this project.

I use oral histories to integrate the voices and perspectives of Sapelo Islanders and provide more extensive biographic information about Mary Granger and Lydia Parrish. I interviewed Sapelo Islanders who were either featured in, or whose parents were featured in Moore's, Parrish's, Granger's or Turner's work. I also interviewed Mary Granger's grandnephew, Harvey Granger, Jr. and Lydia Parrish's granddaughter, Anne Heard.

Chapter Outlines

The first chapter of the dissertation explores the period-specific currents that facilitated the creation of Sapelo Islander's Gullah identity. Here, I examine the origins of American Modernist Primitivism, the forces that propelled white exploration of black spaces and the depiction of Southern blacks as distinct and authentic. Collectively, these currents establish the "climate" in which the interest paid to Sapelo Islanders was formed.

Chapters two and three sort out ideas about African survivals during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter two tracks both the way that African survivals were conceptualized by Modernist social scientists, follows subsequent debates that emerged between prominent anthropologists and sociologists, and links academic discourse about survivals to the Sea Islanders. The third chapter introduces the way that African survivals were imagined and described in popular print sources. Here I follow the 1920s and 1930s "voodoo craze," and link this phenomenon to assumptions about black Americans' Africanness, and to the "discovery" Sapelo Island's Gullah community.

Chapters four and five chart the way that all of the aforementioned trends touch down on Sapelo Island, Georgia. Chapter four concentrates on Parrish's, Turner's and Moore's role in casting Sapelo Islander's as authentic Gullah folk. Chapter five focuses on Mary Granger's and the Federal Writers' Project Savannah Unit's assessment of survivals among coastal Georgia blacks, and the debate that ensued over her study.

Chapter six charts the revival of Gullah folk as artistic subjects as a result of the Black Studies movement. This chapter carefully maps out how black women fiction writers used 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Island Gullah research in their imaginings of Gullah folk. Central to this analysis is the new turn in the way that the relationship between blacks and their African ancestors was understood.

Prologue

“ ‘Soldiers of the Jubilee’: Black Sapelo Islanders and the Long Fight for Freedom, 1791-1912”

Sapelo Island, Georgia is remarkable for many reasons. Guarded by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, it is one of the largest barrier islands among several that stretch along the South Carolina and Georgia coastline. It contains more than 18,000-acres of lush landscape, accented by Spanish moss trees, expansive marshlands, thick patches of pinewoods, and white sand beaches bordered by billowy sand dunes. To date, the island can only be reached by ferry, has two paved roads, a small post office and one gas station. The Reynolds Mansion and the University of Georgia’s Marine Institute sit on the north end of the island. Hogg Hammock, the lone surviving black settlement, nestled in the island’s interior, is home to less than one hundred residents. People who visit Sapelo fixate on the island’s picturesque topography, and its relative isolation. However, visitors are most intrigued by the island’s small population, authentic “Gullah” crafts, cuisine and people. The authentic Gullahness of Sapelo Islanders, the belief that these blacks have a distinct relationship to their African progenitors mystical arts and folk traditions, can largely be attributed 1920s and 1930s African survivals hunters.

As a result of the sensational voodoo filled stories told about Sapelo Islanders since the 1930s, tourists who visit the island today rarely consider the fact this quasi-tropical oasis is the backdrop on which thousands of years of human history played out, including the horrors of chattel slavery and a long fight in which the descendants of African slaves sought to claim their freedom. The truth about the lives and struggles of

the Africans who lived on Sapelo, and their descendants, have been obscured by sensational tales of retention, superstition, conjuh, rootwork, drums and shadows. Yet, the actual history of black life on Sapelo unveils a different portrait of the islanders' past—a view that researchers and writers had to ignore in order to make them like the “Gullah” primitives who filled their race fantasies.

The first documented group of Africans brought to Sapelo came in 1791. They came more than two hundred years after the island's indigenous inhabitants, the Guale Indians, murdered and banished Spanish missionaries in the 16th century, before disappearing. They came more than sixty years after the first Scottish Highlanders settled the mainland near the island, and more than forty years after slave holding was first permitted in the then colony of Georgia.²⁵ These Africans were chattel property of the French Sapelo Company, a business enterprise led by two French men, Julien Joseph Hyacinthe de Chappedelaine and Francois Marie Loys Dumousay, who hoped to become wealthy plantation owners. These Frenchmen purchased fifteen slaves in a Savannah slave market, intent on using their labor to make their dreams of wealth come true.²⁶

No one knows exactly where the first fifteen Africans enslaved on Sapelo Island originated. Perhaps they were saltwater Africans traded from the Gold Coast, West Central Africa, the Bight of Benin or the Bight of Biafra. Maybe some of the fifteen slaves had already labored in the Caribbean, or on a nearby plantation in Georgia, South

²⁵ Buddy Sullivan, *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater: The Story of McIntosh County & Sapelo* (Darien: McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, 1990), 8-16.

²⁶ Martha L. Keber, “Refuge and Ruin: The French Sapelo Company” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 86, Issue 2 (Summer 2002) 176.

Carolina or Florida. While details of the misfortunes that resulted in the enslavement of these Africans on Sapelo Island remains a mystery, their desire to be free does not.

The leaders of the French Sapelo Company spared their slaves no degree of cruelty in pursuit of profits from their rice and cotton crops. The two men and their white servants-overseers frequently whipped slaves, put iron collars on their necks, and weighted their ankles with shackles to increase productivity and force cooperation.²⁷ De Chappedelaine and Dumousay reserved a special punishment for the slaves that they found to be particularly rebellious and troublesome: these slaves were exiled on the uninhabited neighboring Blackbeard Island and were left alone to brave the elements and survive without rations.²⁸

It is likely that the violence that de Chappedelaine and Dumousay inflicted on the first Africans on Sapelo stopped some slaves from striking out against their masters, but these two men could not suppress their slaves' desire to be free and their ability to punish their masters for their cruelty. At least two of de Chappedelaine's and Dumousay's slaves devised a plan to cross the ocean, and head back to the mainland, in pursuit of their freedom. Grace and William, stole money from one of the French Sapelo Company's white servants and set out to escape, but they were apprehended.²⁹ Surely, the pair was punished harshly, but that did not deter other slaves from plotting acts of rebellion. One slave decided to destroy de Chappedelaine's and Dumousay's corn crop and set fire to a stable and the hay barn in order to exact revenge.³⁰

²⁷ Keber, 179.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Keber, 179.

The French Sapelo Company's plantation enterprise ended in ruin not long after the first fifteen Africans came to Sapelo Island. Their slaves continuing efforts to sabotage any attempt to establish a profitable plantation probably played a role in the company's demise. Yet, the French Sapelo Company managed to purchase 65 more slaves before tragedy and financial hardships forced them to sell their Sapelo holdings.³¹

More enslaved Africans came to Sapelo at the turn of the century. In 1805, French planter, John Montalet fled St. Domingo with several of his slaves in tow in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. Montalet sought refuge from the St. Domingo uprising in Savannah and ultimately ventured south of the city to set up a small plantation on Sapelo.³² Edward Swarbeck, ship captain and slave trader, also brought more Africans to the island.³³ Little is known about how Swarbeck's and Montalet's slaves fared, but a vast historical record exists through which the experiences of a third group of Sapelo slaves can be determined. In 1802, Thomas Spalding, a McIntosh County, Georgia native, purchased the French Sapelo Company's island property and eighty of their slaves.³⁴ In the years leading up to the Civil War, Spalding ran the largest plantation on the island, and brought the greatest number of enslaved people to Sapelo.

Spalding earned an important place in Georgia's history for the large-scale production of Sea Island cotton cultivated on many of the four thousand acres of land that

³¹ Sullivan, 84.

³² Ibid., 83-85.

³³ Sullivan, 87. William McFeely, *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 50.

³⁴ Sullivan, 84.

he owned, but one of his slaves also gained a significant place in the historical record.³⁵ Bilali Mohammed, a Fula from Futa Jallon, was Spalding's most trusted slave driver.³⁶

While the first groups of Africans enslaved on Sapelo attempted to secure their freedom by running away and destroying their master's crops, Bilali Mohammed employed a different strategy in order to establish a degree of autonomy in spite of his enslavement. Mohammed's refusal to embrace Christianity and acclimate to the religious culture prescribed by his white master is clear evidence of resistance. Mohammed's commitment to Islam was noted by several of Spalding's visitors. His practices clearly set him apart from other Africans enslaved on the island.³⁷ Mohammed's position as Spalding's head driver also afforded the Fula a modicum of power through which he negotiated the terms of his bondage. From the start, Mohammed's knowledge of cotton production enabled him to negotiate with Spalding. Mohammed insisted that he and his daughters be kept together, and Spalding obliged and brought Mohammed and seven of his daughters to Sapelo.³⁸ In return, Mohammed managed Spalding's plantation; he kept meticulous plantation records in Arabic and defended Spalding's interests in times of crisis.³⁹ Mohammed took up arms to protect his master's interests during the War of 1812 and was recognized for his bravery in pamphlet published in 1829.⁴⁰ Mohammed was again noted for his bravery during a hurricane in 1824 in which he saved hundreds of

³⁵McFeely, 37-38, see Sullivan for amount of acreage that Spalding owned (95).

³⁶ Allan D. Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 86.

³⁷ Austin, 86.

³⁸ McFeely, 38.

³⁹ Charles Wylly Spalding, *The Seed That Was Sown In the Colony of Georgia* (Boston: Neale Publishing Company, 1910), 52.

⁴⁰ Austin, 86-87.

Spalding's slaves, moving them into the sheltered safety of houses used to store cotton and sugar.⁴¹

Mohammed's strategy, which involved using skills and cooperation as tools for negotiation with his master, did not appeal to other African Muslims enslaved on Sapelo. Mohammed's spiritual brothers ran away. Runaway notices for Sapelo fugitives Alik and Abdali were issued in 1802, and again for Toney, Jacob and Musa in 1807.⁴² These Muslim slaves claimed their freedom and took the dangerous trek across the ocean to the mainland to regain their autonomy.

Scholars have pointed to the development of independent slave communities on Sapelo as evidence of Spalding's desire to facilitate a benevolent, mini-feudal society comprised of slave villages, but documented acts of slave resistance tell a different story.⁴³ Several of Spalding's slaves chose the uncertainty and dangers of fugitive and maroon life over the supposed comforts of Spalding's slave villages. A group of Spalding's slaves ran away and took the woods for several weeks. Eventually, Spalding negotiated with the slaves and was able to coax them out of hiding.⁴⁴ Older Sapelo Islanders say that their cemetery is named after this ban of maroon. They tell the story of a group of maroons that hid on Sapelo. Their master left the slaves in the woods until

⁴¹ Ibid., 86.

⁴² Michael Gomez, "Muslims in Early America" *Journal of Southern History* (November 1994): 696.

⁴³ Buddy Sullivan argues that Spalding facilitated the creation of slave villages, and gave his slaves "a great deal of leeway and freedom" in *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater* (120- 121). Austin also points to Spalding's "slave villages" and the fact that Spalding did not force Bilali Mohammed to abandon Islam as a marker of benevolence (85-98) in *African Muslims in Antebellum America*.

⁴⁴ McFeely, 54.

they learned how to “behave,” and they refused, thus the name Behavior Cemetery.⁴⁵ Spalding slaves continued to run away. In 1807 Spalding issued a run away notice for Landau. He offered a twenty-dollar reward for the return of the French and English-speaking slave that he believed was hiding in Savannah or on Sapelo.⁴⁶ Clearly, Spalding’s slaves were not content with their lot and aspired toward freedom and the ability to live out their highest destinies according to their own desires. However, Spalding did not yield to his slaves’ demands for freedom. Instead, Spalding continued to purchase slaves. By 1840 he held over four hundred Africans captive on Sapelo. When he died in 1851, he deeded those slaves to his children.⁴⁷

After Spalding’s death, Sapelo’s enslaved population continued to press toward freedom. It is likely that the slaves who toiled in the “big house” listened closely to Spalding’s children discuss the sectional conflict that threatened to destroy the empire that their father built on the backs of his slaves. Once the Civil War began, the house servants carried the news to the slaves who toiled in the fields, so they too could devise escape schemes to be acted out in the midst of the confusion that the war caused. Charles Spalding, one of the heirs to Thomas Spalding’s fortune in land and slaves, worried that an uprising was on the horizon. He composed a letter to an official of the Georgia militia in which he asked for naval troops to patrol local waters to quell slaveholder’s fears.⁴⁸ Charles Spalding’s request remained unanswered, and instead, Union naval forces began

⁴⁵ Cornelia Bailey, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geeche Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 137.

⁴⁶ McFeely, 55.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁸ McFeely, 62.

patrolling low country waters in November of 1861.⁴⁹ Shortly there after, Union naval patrols were in the waters off of Sapelo's coast, and Spalding's heirs decided to leave the island in search of safety in Baldwin County.⁵⁰ They took their slaves with them, more than three hundred, leaving the very young and the very old behind.⁵¹

For many of Sapelo's enslaved people the nearness of Union forces signaled a new pathway to freedom. Nine slaves hid in the marsh and attempted run for Union ships. One of the men was shot and killed by his master during the escape, but his comrades made it to freedom.⁵² Other Sapelo slaves ran away and enlisted in the Union army. March Wilson and James Lemon were among this group. Both men were held captive on Sapelo before joining Union forces in the fight to liberate their fellow bonds people.⁵³

The evacuation afforded slaves yet another opportunity to escape. Sampson Hogg and Fortune Bell fled from their masters and joined the 25,000 freed people that followed General William T. Sherman to Savannah.⁵⁴ When General Sherman conceded to local black leader's call for land and independence in the winter of 1865, and devised a plan from which Special Field Order No. 15 emerged. Formerly enslaved people from Sapelo Island stepped up to claim the land that Sherman gave them, land on which they had

⁴⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., 67.

⁵² Ibid., 65.

⁵³ McFeely uncovered records of military service for March Wilson and James Lemon (67-80).

⁵⁴ McFeely, 84.

previously worked as chattel.⁵⁵ Fergus Wilson was one such ex-slave from Sapelo who registered for General Sherman's land redistribution plan. Wilson was granted forty acres of land that had previously belonged to the Spaldings.⁵⁶

General Sherman's program paved the way for blacks who had been enslaved on Sapelo to return to the island, and establish an all black free settlement. When the freedmen and freedwomen returned to Sapelo, they found Spalding's mansion in near ruins. They completed the destruction of the symbol of the power that once held them in bondage.⁵⁷ By May of 1865, the Freedman's Bureau divided 390 acres of Spalding's land into plots of various sizes and granted them to fourteen freedmen.⁵⁸ Tunis Campbell, the Freedman's Bureau agent appointed to oversee the affairs of ex-slaves in the region, aided the redistribution of Spalding's land, and the re-settlement of Sapelo. Campbell, an educated free black man from New Jersey and a black separatist, oversaw the settlement of more than four hundred blacks on St. Catherine Island and Sapelo Island.⁵⁹ Campbell worked hard to keep Sapelo's freed people safe from sharecropping schemes and contract work.⁶⁰ Campbell also consolidated the potential for black political

⁵⁵ Steven Hahn describes the meeting between twenty black leaders, General Sherman and visiting secretary of war Edwin M. Stanton that resulted in the birth of Special field Order No. 15, the infamous land redistribution plan that facilitated the creation of black settlements on the sea islands in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003) 144-146.

⁵⁶ McFeely, 91.

⁵⁷ Sullivan, 137.

⁵⁸ McFeely, 131.

⁵⁹ Allison Dorsey, "The great cry of our people is land!": Black Settlement and Community Development on Ossabaw Island, Georgia, 1865-1900" in Philip Morgan's *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry: The Atlantic World and the Gullah Geechee*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 228.

⁶⁰ McFeely, 134-136.

leadership in the region, transforming McIntosh County into an enclave of black power. For this, Campbell was punished. The bureau accused him of misconduct, dismissed him and levied criminal charges against him. As a result, he was sentenced to serve time on the chain gang in 1867. However, Campbell had already facilitated a plan through which blacks in the region could actualize their freedom aspirations. His incarceration did not halt the progress that blacks made in McIntosh County. By 1868, black men in McIntosh County, which included Sapelo Island, had served as county clerk, county ordinary, justice of the peace, constable, city marshal, election registrar, representatives in the general assembly and senate, as well as jurors and bailiffs.⁶¹

Freedom had finally come, and black Sapelo Islanders began to build their communities on the skeletal remains of the island's old slave villages. They built a school two months after the war ended that served sixty adults and children, and they also built a second school in 1870.⁶² No one knows how Sapelo Islanders reconciled their Islamic roots with their newly expressed Christianity, but they did. In May of 1866 they established the First African Baptist Church.⁶³ By 1867, several Sapelo Islanders were registered voters.⁶⁴

After generations of bondage and long strivings for freedom, Sapelo Islanders were finally able to live as free people. They worked and farmed for themselves and built their community and its institutions with their hands, hearts and souls. So when Spalding's heirs sent a representative to take back the land from their ex-slaves, Sapelo

⁶¹ Hahn, 239.

⁶² McFeely, 102-103.

⁶³ Ibid., 116.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 124.

Islanders threatened to kill the representative and anyone else who dared to take their land away.⁶⁵ Sapelo Islanders did not know that President Andrew Johnson returned Confederate lands, nor did they expect that when Spalding's heirs returned to once again to stake claims to the land, they had the federal government and troops on their side.⁶⁶

Spalding's heirs reclaimed their Sapelo holdings during the 1870s, but they could not reclaim the black people who lived there. Nine Spalding heirs shared the island with fifty-nine black families, 311 black people in all.⁶⁷ Most islanders refused to work for the Spaldings; instead, they subsisted on gardens, small farms, domestic livestock, wild game and the bounty of fish that lived in ocean waters that surrounded them.⁶⁸ The islanders who worked for the Spaldings and rented farms for sharecropping, constantly challenged their landlords. They demanded their pay in advance and refused to sign unfavorable contracts.⁶⁹ Spalding heirs did not profit from the land that they took back. Never again would the Spalding name be attached to a significant amount of Sea Island cotton.⁷⁰

The Spaldings return deeply troubled Sapelo Islanders. They understood that land was the most valuable asset that could be acquired to secure their survival and freedom. Consequently, the freed people of the island strategized and devised a new tactic to secure their most clearly articulated freedom aspiration: land ownership. In 1871, a group of freedmen, William Hillery, John Grovener and Belali Bell organized the

⁶⁵ See McFeely, 129-130, and Sullivan, 406.

⁶⁶ McFeely, 137.

⁶⁷ See McFeely. 139 and Michele Nicole Johnson's *Images of America: Sapelo Island's Hogg Hammock* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 20.

⁶⁸ McFeely, 139.

⁶⁹ J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont & Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 22.

⁷⁰ McFeely, 140.

William Hillery Company. While one could argue that the ex-slaves granted land through Special Field Order No. 15 had “paid” for the land with their labor and liberty, these freedmen are considered the first black people to purchase land on Sapelo Island. The men made a \$500 dollar deposit on nearly 1,000 acres of land in the Raccoon Bluff hammock. Each man kept a few hundred acres for themselves, and then divided and sold 33-to 35-acre tracts to their fellow freedmen and freedwomen.⁷¹ The company had secured high, dry, arable land for Sapelo Islanders. They grew peas, rice, potatoes and sugarcane and traded their crops in markets on the mainland, and were able to hold on to their freedom for a little while longer.

Sapelo Islanders could not have predicted that 41 years after they, once again, secured land on Sapelo, a white patriarch would emerge and reinstate a plantation system on the island. In 1910, 539 blacks were living on Sapelo Island when automobile tycoon, Howard Coffin discovered the island while attending an automobile race in Savannah.⁷² Coffin was captivated by the island and began imagining a winter home that would double as a profit making enterprise. At a time when the United States government was increasing its empire by occupying islands in the Caribbean and Pacific, Coffin made plans to act out his occupation of Sapelo. Coffin convinced the white landowners who benefitted from the repeal of Field Order No. 15 to sell him their land. By 1912 Coffin finalized the purchase of a large portion of the island for \$150,000.⁷³ Coffin even

⁷¹ See McFeely, 141-142, and Johnson, 21.

⁷² McFeely discusses black disenfranchisement (125), and Sullivan describes Coffin’s discovery of Sapelo Island (600).

⁷³ Sullivan, 600-606.

managed to purchase several tracts of land from black landowners in Raccoon Bluff, threatening the gains that the William Hillery Company made.⁷⁴

During the 1870s, Sapelo Islanders, residents of one of the state's black power enclaves, could stand up to Spalding's desperate heirs and dictate the terms of their labor and interracial cohabitation of the island. But by the time Coffin staked claims to a large portion of the island in 1912, Sapelo Islanders had been disenfranchised for nearly six years—and the reinstatement of white domination, and the institutionalization of Jim Crow was complete. Islanders had little power to resist the change that was coming.

Once Coffin secured ownership of a large portion of the island, he quickly transformed Sapelo into his private moneymaking island oasis. Coffin built a mansion on the exact site of Spalding's mansion. He imported tropical birds from Guatemala, built shell roads and artesian wells for livestock and island residents alike. Coffin cleared land for crops, established a cattle ranch, built a sawmill and an oyster and shrimp cannery. He set up armed guards on neighboring Blackbeard Island, claiming that the measure was taken to keep thieves from raiding his shrimp and oyster cannery. Coffin built the Cloister Hotel and resort on near by Sea Island. He entertained his rich, famous and powerful friends on Sapelo during the winters that he spent there, instead of in his mansion in Grosse Point, Michigan. Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, President and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge and President Herbert Hoover were just a few of his famous guests.⁷⁵

Life for Sapelo Islanders changed in the wake of Coffin's rule of the island. The Sapelo Islanders who worked for Coffin were now wage earners, but their circumstances

⁷⁴ Ibid., 605.

⁷⁵ Sullivan writes extensively about Howard Coffin on Sapelo Island (600-655).

closely mirrored life on the island during the antebellum years. Once again, black women worked in the “big house” cooking meals for Coffin and his guests, cleaning the mansion and the guest quarters. Black women also worked in Coffin’s shrimp and oyster cannery and worked in the fields.⁷⁶ Black men did manual labor for Coffin. They built the roads, prepared crops, manned the sawmill, tended to cattle, worked in the green house, built boats and erected structures. Some Sapelo Islanders worked at Coffin’s Cloister Hotel/Resort as waiters, bellhops and maids.⁷⁷

As a result of Coffin’s presence on Sapelo, black independent economic activity all but disappeared on the island. Descendants of the Sapelo Islanders who lived on the island during Coffin’s reign report that blacks who refused to work for Coffin were perceived as a threat. It is no surprise that most of the Sapelo Islanders determined to maintain their economic independence lived in Raccoon Bluff. This group of islanders were frequently visited by white “island managers” employed by Coffin (and his millionaire successor R.J. Reynolds, the tobacco heir), to ensure that they were not engaged in subversive or illegal activities, as well as to “watch” the island during the months when their bosses were away.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Sullivan asserts that Coffin established the cannery to provide wages for black women on the island (623).

⁷⁷ Johnson’s photographic documentary book contains photographs of Sapelo Islanders conducting a rodeo for President Coolidge as well as photos of Sapelo Islanders singing in the “circus room” at the “big house.” (56-57,70).

⁷⁸ In interviews, Cornelia Bailey and Paul Walker explained that blacks who lived “in the bluff” were perceived as particularly problematic because they were not financially dependent on “big house” operations for survival. Paul Walker also described the role of island managers: “Check on the Black People; make sure to try to keep the Black People in line. That’s the main thing, to keep the Black People in line. No uproar or anything, especially against the Whites.” (Interview, June 13, 2009).

Islanders were distressed by Coffin's takeover, and they critiqued Coffin's lifestyle and the power that their white employers had over them in a "shout" song that was eventually performed throughout the region. The song, "Pay Me My Money Down," speaks to the tense relationship between blacks in the region and the whites who controlled their economic survival and dictated the terms of their freedom.⁷⁹ The refrain, "Pay me, oh pay me or go to jail, pay me my money down" could possibly represent loan arrangements between white employers and their black workers. In times of economic hardships, some blacks petitioned their employers for help, using their land as collateral for loans in order to avoid imprisonment if they were unable to pay them back.⁸⁰ The song clearly points out that white employers had the power to have blacks thrown in a mainland jail. To date, there are no police or local government structures on Sapelo, so the island's white patriarch had full control over the island and its residents. They used their money, their political connections and most importantly, their whiteness to legitimize their dictatorial rule of the island. They sang:

Wish't I was Mr. Coffin's son
 Pay me my money down
 Stay in the house and drink good rum
 Pay me my money down.
 You owe me, pay me or go to jail
 Pay me my money down.⁸¹

⁷⁹ "Pay Me My Money Down" was collected by Lydia Parrish and published in *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1942), 208.

⁸⁰ Sapelo Islander Cornelia Bailey writes about land-money loans between black employees and white employers in her memoir *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geechee Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 262. Joe Johnson also described these transactions in an interview (July 1, 2009).

⁸¹ Parrish, 208.

Clearly, Sapelo Islanders saw Coffin's riches as the key to earthly freedom and luxury. While they worked hard in his fields, at his mill, in his house, at his cannery, at his dairy or at his hotel, Coffin sailed local waters on his yacht and entertained the most influential and affluent people in the United States. Coffin did not have a son, but Sapelo Islanders understood that power, money and white skin privilege were inherited. To imagine themselves as Coffin's heirs was a fantasy about having access to unmitigated power, wealth and lavish luxuries. As the song travelled through coastal Georgia, other black communities added their own verses dedicated to their white employers. Blacks on St. Simon sang about their "big boss" Mr. Foster: "Wish't I was Mr. Foster's son...I'd set on the bank an' see the work done."⁸² Again, blacks worked while whites control and dictate their labor. The dreams of the freed people that built their communities had been trampled upon, and it became clear that they were up against great odds, and at a disadvantage.

Along with Coffin, and his high profile guests, came the media. At first, journalists were content to report scenes from Coffin's opulent mansion, luxurious yacht and elaborate hotel, but eventually, changes in America's intellectual and cultural landscape shifted the focus of the outsiders visiting Sapelo. These changes inspired a curiosity about life beyond the "big house": and the Sapelo Islanders that lived in Hog Hammock, Raccoon Bluff, Belle Marsh, Shell Hammock, Lumber Landing and Hanging Bull became as exotic and intriguing as the birds that Coffin imported from Guatemala. As a result, they would be called Gullah, and wave of ethno-tourism would ensue, ripping

⁸² Ibid., 208.

from their hands the scraps of land that remained, the last remnants of their ancestors' freedom.

Despite the fact that 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Island researchers claimed to explore the connection between Sapelo Islanders and their African and slave past in their works, the actual history of Sapelo Islanders did not factor into their formulations of black life on the island. The fact that Sapelo Islanders and their ancestors had waged a long fought battle for freedom, established institutions on the island and engaged in multiple maneuvers to secure land did not factor in the way that 1920s and 1930s researchers and writers imagined them. Instead, these researchers and writers described them as childlike and superstitious primitives who were provoked into trance-states by drumbeats and wild rhythms. They characterized Sapelo Islanders, the very men and women who pursued voting rights, education, Christianity and land ownership as tools through which they could shape their destiny, into people who put their faith in gris gris bags and root doctors to secure their future. Researchers and writers did not consider the impact that the white patriarchs who returned the island to a plantation state as significant forces in Sapelo Islanders' lives. Instead they wrote that Sapelo Islanders insisted that spirits and ghostly shadows dictated the course events of their lives.

The researchers and writers who studied Sapelo Islanders during the 1920s and 1930s were blinded by popular fantasies about the connection between blacks and their African ancestors. They were influenced by new academic formulations about African survivals and were captivated by sensational voodoo tales in the media. Their search for Sapelo Islanders' connection to an African past was not rooted in the past, but was

grounded in 1920s and 1930s cultural and intellectual preoccupations, and their writings would impact how Sapelo Islanders would be imagined by Americans for generations.

Part I:

The Intellectual and Cultural Influences that Inspired the Making of the New

Gullah in the 1920s and 1930s

Chapter 1

From Wild Savages to Beloved Primitives: Modernists Recast American Black's

Africanness

No veils of civilization hide the stark realities of love, birth, death, from their eyes, but they find happiness in the present instead of always in tomorrow and again tomorrow or in something still to be discovered...On large plantations, where Negroes are in tremendous majority, the field hands have few contacts with white people and no need to amend their speech or give up the customs and traditions of their African ancestry.

-Julia Peterkin, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 1933⁸³

By the 1930s Howard Coffin's guests began to venture beyond the grounds of the "big house." Before the 1930s, the only "outsiders" to visit the island were Howard Coffin's personal friends and business associates, and the few mainland blacks who came to visit their relatives and friends. For Coffin's guests, the island's main attractions were its serene beaches, dense hunting grounds and expansive marshlands. But during the 1920s and 1930s a new attraction was added to the list of the island's most compelling features. Black Sapelo Islanders were the new attraction.

Increased interest in Sapelo Islanders' "culture" and folk traditions brought four researchers and writers to the island during the 1920s and 1930s: W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo D. Turner and Mary Granger. Moore was a white reporter and photographer for *National Geographic Magazine*, Parrish and Granger were white

⁸³ Julia Peterkin, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Robert O. Ballou, 1933), 12-23.

amateur folklore collectors, and Turner was a black scholar. They were the first in the new category of Sapelo Island visitors who came to the island to explore black life and venture beyond the grounds of the big house. These four researchers took photographs of the islanders, told stories about them, interviewed them, collected their songs and samples of their dialect and published their imaginings of Sapelo Islanders for all to read. In the end, they made Sapelo Islanders *Gullah*.

The increased interest in the folk culture of southern blacks, and more specifically, of blacks who lived on islands off the South Carolina and Georgia coast during the 1920s and 1930s was caused by a shift in the way that many Americans understood black people's racial heredity. The "discovery" of Sapelo Island's black community, and the subsequent determination that these people were, in fact, authentic "Gullah" folk reflects a larger transformation in how blackness was understood during the period. Prior to the 1920s and 1930s, black folklore, crafts, dialect, rituals, spirituality and traditions were largely imagined by whites as curious expressions of an inferior, uneducable, savage people whose biological heritage retarded their ability to achieve the heights of civilized culture and life. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, researchers, writers and journalists transformed these traits, in terms of significance and value, and they became markers of primitiveness worthy of documentation, collection and interpretation.

The shift from Victorian thought to Modernist thought was at the heart of the change in how blackness was imagined during the 1920s and 1930s. Before then, the Africanness of American blacks was invoked to establish a biological racial heritage of

black inferiority.⁸⁴ This view of black's Africanness was most clearly articulated in Victorian thought, and was indelible tied to "civilization" discourse. The advent of Modernist thought in America challenged the ideological underpinnings of Victorian thought and dismantled the rigid Victorian dichotomy between "civilized" and "savage" peoples, and consequently reworked ideas about the continued legacy of the African heritage of American and Atlantic World blacks.

The discovery and labeling of Sapelo Islanders as authentic Gullah folk derived from this transformation of ideas about race and culture, which resulted in an adjustment in the way that many social scientists and folklorists perceived the relationship between black people and their African progenitors. During the 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Islanders were visited by researchers who sought to establish the African origins of their cultural practices, as well as include them in a larger network of low country blacks assumed to share similar connections to their African ancestors. Sapelo Islanders' dialect was investigated, their folklore was documented, their crafts were inspected, and their spirituality and religious beliefs were interrogated.

This chapter explores the intellectual and cultural milieu that inspired the search for authentic Gullah folk on Sapelo Island. It traces researchers' increased interest in black folk life, the heightened exploration of black spaces, the popularity of black

⁸⁴ In this study, the term "Africanness" is used to describe imagined intrinsic qualities assigned to black people. The idea that blacks are connected to their African forefathers—a link that hinges on a biological connection—has also been imagined as a quasi-spiritual phenomenon, and has been imagined as a force that compels black behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and abilities. Whether black people and their Africanness has been understood as a biological or spiritual phenomenon, it has largely been constructed as a result of the way that Africa and her people have been imagined by outsiders, thus creating a black essentialist fiction. Like other racial categories and qualities, the meaning of Africanness is not fixed, and has changed over time, and has been reconstituted in order to bolster discourse.

subjects and African themes in the arts and literature, which were latent consequences caused by this transformation of ideas about the uniqueness and value of black culture. Finally, the chapter will unearth the origin of the Gullah label and look at the way that the advent of Modernism during the 1920s created a space in which one novelist, Julia Peterkin, was able to put the Gullah in the forefront of the nation's imagination.

Victorians' Savages

The most widely used strategy employed by white Americans to establish the moral legitimacy of America's racial hierarchy were pervasive ideologies about black inferiority. During the Victorian period, American Victorians' ideas about "civilization" encapsulated notions of white superiority and black inferiority in an identifiable discourse. Civilization discourse constructed non-white people, and blacks in particular as primitive savages.⁸⁵ Thus, "civilization" was an explicitly racial concept that denoted a specific stage in human racial evolution.⁸⁶ According to Victorian thinkers' calculations, non-whites were relegated to the ranks of barbarism and primitive savagery, and only white races had evolved to the civilized stage.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Victorians imagined evolutionary potential in biological terms, and concluded that both "civilization" and "savagery" were inherited traits. Civilization, then, became a status that could only be achieved by advanced white races.⁸⁸

"Culture," as understood by Victorians, was the mark of civilized peoples. Victorian morality assigned, under the heading of civilization, all that was moral and

⁸⁵ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 25.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

prosperous.⁸⁹ Victorians also identified self-restraint as the key to civilized culture, and perceived formal education as a source of discipline.⁹⁰ Subsequently, savage peoples were characterized as being impulsive and irrational, immoral and non-productive.⁹¹ Victorians also surmised that savages were unable to control their animalistic impulses, which increased the likely hood that they would engage in immoral conduct.

While the Victorians' conceptualization of white civilization excluded some white skinned "ethnic" peoples, blacks were imagined to be the world's most savage primitives.⁹² Africa, and her descendants held a special place in the Victorians' view of human evolution. Whites frequently depicted African peoples, and those linked to Africa by "heredity" as savages stuck in the earliest stages of human evolution. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago clearly illustrated how Victorians understood non-whites, and more specifically blacks, within the framework of civilization discourse. The exposition consisted of two racially specific exhibits: one highlighting the successes of white civilization and the other portraying the dark barbarism of non-whites.⁹³ The dichotomy between whites and non-whites was demarcated by the "White City" and the "Midway" exhibit; the "Midway" showcased barbarous spectacles of non-white peoples from around the world, and featured an exhibit that was a replica of a "Dahomey village" complete with huts and black people beating tom-toms. Guidebooks distributed to visitors advised that they tour the Midway after visiting the White City so that they would better appreciate the difference between the

⁸⁹ Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian Thought to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁹¹ Singal, 27.

⁹² Bederman, 25.

⁹³ Ibid., 31.

civilized White City and the uncivilized native villages.⁹⁴ Hubert Howe Bancroft identified the portion of the exhibit that depicted Africa as *the* antithesis of white civilization in his 1893 account of the fair. Howe wrote: “All the continents are here represented, and many nations of each continent, civilized, semi-civilized, and barbarous, from Caucasian to the African black, with the head in the shape of a cocoa-nut and with barely enough of clothing to serve for the wadding of a gun.”⁹⁵ Clearly, the idea of black savagery was central to defining and shaping the concept of white civilization—a phenomenon that followed the pattern through which racial difference was constructed in America.

The Victorians’ assessment of Africa, African peoples and African descendants is evident in both popular literature and scholarly works produced by whites even as Victorianism began to wane. The enduring popularity of Edgar Rice Burroughs’ best-selling novel *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) is evidence of the pervasive view of black-African savagery. The savage primal African jungle populated with man-eating cannibals that Burroughs imagined was a familiar story about the white man’s encounter with black savages.⁹⁶ However, fictional works were not the only mediums through which ideas about black-African savagery were communicated. American scholars wrote Victorians’ fantasies of black-African savagery into the academic record as fact. In the same year that Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes* was published, historian John Daniels published a study about blacks in Boston in which his belief in black-African savagery is

⁹⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁵ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Dream City: A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World’s Columbian Exposition* (St. Louis: N.D. Thompson Publishing CO., 1893), 836.

⁹⁶ Bederman, 219. Bederman points out the Burrough’s novel sold 750,000 copies by 1934, which indicates the popular appeal of tales that offered virtual encounters with savagery.

clearly expressed. Daniels wrote: “It is of course undeniable that the precedent conditions out of which the Negro population is derived, have, from the earliest period down to the present, been of peculiarly inferior kind.” Daniels continued, describing the first blacks who came to Boston as originating from the “African jungle where from time immemorial their ancestors have lived in a stage of primitive savagery.” He explained that Boston’s first blacks were “savages themselves, utterly ignorant of civilization, having no religion above fear-born superstition, and lacking all conception of reasoned morality.”⁹⁷ Early social scientists engaged in psychoanalytical studies that described black-Africans as child like, superstitious, uninhibited peoples who demonstrated strong sexual instincts and a tendency to express themselves through music and dancing as opposed to civilized forms of communication.⁹⁸

Despite the fact that Victorian notions of culture and civilization lost its grip on the American social psyche, the racial dichotomy on which it was built remained intact, adding to its construct the lines of delineation drawn by white Victorians. Subsequently, Modernists seeking to free themselves from the strictures of Victorianism simultaneously rejected and embraced the racialized notions of otherness reiterated by their ideological predecessors. Understanding this transition, and its consequences in American culture is critical in order to understand the larger forces that encouraged the emergence of Sapelo Islanders in published works.

Modernists’ Beloved Primitives

⁹⁷ John Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 399.

⁹⁸ Melville Herskovits cites J. Dollard and J.E. Lind’s article “Phylogenic Elements in the Psychoses of the Negro” published in the *Psychoanalytical Review* (303), in his book *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941) 23.

Two distinct forces hastened the decline of Victorian thought in America. The dawn of consumer culture eroded the Victorian ethos, while the advent of the social sciences delivered a final blow to the Victorian view of “culture.” These forces undercut the heart of Victorian logic, ending the pervasive striving toward an ideal Victorian society.

America’s transition from a producer culture to a consumer culture involved a significant transformation in American values. Prior to the 1920s, Victorian morality served as the mark against which the appropriateness of both behavior and desire was assessed. But by the 1920s, the abundance of material goods supplied by corporate producers forced a change in American values. This transition created a revolution in which Victorian values (work, order and restraint) were abandoned for a consumer values (consumption, leisure and free expression) as the key to individual satisfaction.⁹⁹ The economic changes that resulted in both higher wages for whites, and monotonous work routines, prompted the development of a leisure culture that hinged on the rejection of the Victorian value of “self-restraint.”¹⁰⁰ The abandonment of “restraint” as a fundamental value represents a critical rupture in the Victorian barrier between “civilized” and “savage” peoples. Equally as disruptive was the new position that the world of leisure, which Victorians had painted as the hot bed of vice, occupied in this values revolution. The breakdown of core Victorian truths opened the door for new interpretations about the nature of human society.

⁹⁹ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 57.

¹⁰⁰ Beryl Satter discusses this dynamic in *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement 1875-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 218.

At the same time, the advent of the social sciences was deeply rooted in Modernists' desire to uncover "new truths." The quest to reconcile gaps in Victorian logic spurred the development of new theories and threatened the very thing that Victorians sought to protect: white hegemony. Social scientists, and more specifically cultural anthropologists like Franz Boas, rejected the Victorian view of race and culture. Boas argued that "races" could not be ranked because they were impossible to classify. He also argued that "culture" was not a racial, nor was it a biological phenomenon.¹⁰¹ Cultural anthropologists presented a challenge to Victorians' conceptualization of "civilized" and "savage" peoples: they consistently proved that "savage" life was not so different from "civilized" life.¹⁰² New anthropological theories crippled Victorian logic. The world that Victorians painted did not make sense in the face of new social scientific theories. American Victorianism could not stand against the new truths that social scientists innovated to explain and describe human nature.

American Modernism was led by social scientists, but was also birthed by American artists and writers grappling with the essence of "human nature." Although American Modernism took many different forms, the ideological tendency of Modernists can be described in general terms. Modernists wanted to make sense of their environment. Modernists also tried to resolve the conflict between the "conscious self" and the "unconscious self", the latter having been completely suppressed by Victorian morality.¹⁰³ Whereas Victorian moralists excluded human irrationality from their

¹⁰¹ Lee Baker discusses Boas' theories in his study *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁰² Singal, 6.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 6-8.

conception of culture, Modernists tried to reclaim man's irrationality.¹⁰⁴ Modernists sought to reconcile their "civilized" enculturation with what they believed to be their deeper human instincts and primitive impulses in order to achieve a sense of wholeness, and they had to break down the barrier between the "civilized" and "the savage" to do so.¹⁰⁵ Modernists' desire to examine the "unconscious self" sent them on a quest to discover and explore the people that existed outside of Victorian civilization—people free from the constraints of the civilized world.

The fact that Modernists looked to groups identified as "savage" by Victorians in order to achieve a sense of wholeness, did not represent a total departure from racist civilization discourse, but instead, was an adjustment of the discourse. They kept the Victorian line that separated the "civilized" from the "savage" and used it to divide white Modernists from his "beloved primitives." Modernists developed a nostalgic admiration for primitives who bore what Victorians had categorized as the markings of savagery. Modernists were most infatuated with beloved primitives who they imagined to be stuck in an earlier time, free from the constraints of modernity, close to the earth; people that they imagined were not bound by sophisticated thought. In admiring the primitive, Modernist Primitivists contrived a positive picture of the people that Victorians called savage: they imagined them to be authentic and closer to some human truth. However, Modernist Primitivists projected their fantasies onto their beloved primitives like their ideological predecessors did their savages. They used their beloved primitives to settle

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁵ Singal, 8.

their own inner turmoil and clarify their humanity similar to the way that Victorians used their savages to bolster their sense of racial superiority.¹⁰⁶

The fact that Africans and their descendants were among Modernist Primitivists' favorite subjects is not surprising when one considers the context in which American Modernism emerged. The placement of Africans, and their descendants, in the Victorian spectrum of human evolution guaranteed that they would be among the most beloved primitives sought after by Modernist Primitivists. Sieglinde Lemke argues in *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (1998) that Modernists were dependent on black-African expressions in order to act out their rebellion against Victorianism.¹⁰⁷ Lemke writes: "By exploring this terra incognita, the primitivist discovers the vitality and sensuality of which he feels deprived. The primitivist is drawn to the black other: either figuratively to the mythical other, or literally to the 'other of color.'"¹⁰⁸ Lemeke goes further and concludes that Modernist artists did not reject Victorianism by innovating "new" forms; instead, they made "black" things and incorporated them in Western forms.¹⁰⁹ Modernists used Africanness to strike against Victorianism. Artist Pablo Picasso, sculptor Alberto Giacometti, "dance-band maestro" and self-proclaimed jazz music rehabilitator Paul Whiteman, and the popularity of Josephine Baker is evidence of this phenomenon.¹¹⁰ The use of black subjects or the

¹⁰⁶ For further analysis on the "uses of the primitive", see Leah Dilworth's *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 4-7.

¹⁰⁷ Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹¹⁰ Sieglinde Lemeke works through the black-African inspirations of Modernists artists and audiences in *Primitivist Modernism*.

incorporation of black-African forms in art, music, novels and in social scientific studies was a vehicle for rebellion and was, at times, a form of romantic racism.¹¹¹

Much like their predecessors, Modernist Primitivists made little distinction between Atlantic World blacks and their African ancestors. They too believed that the essence of the Africans that they fantasized about was present in Atlantic World blacks. So, the American Modernist Primitivist did not need to travel to Africa to encounter authentic free peoples because they believed that the mystique and allure of their most beloved primitive was right within reach. As a result, Sapelo Islanders would be counted among the most exotic black primitives that America had to offer Modernist Primitivists.

Intensification of White Exploration of Black Spaces

Modernists' preoccupation with Africanness inspired conflicting and complicated reactions from blacks and whites in migration metropolises. Modernists' use of Africanness as a platform for rebellion against Victorian morality resulted in the intensification of white exploration of black spaces which took many forms in the 1920s and 1930s. Segregation created "black spaces": where the customs and laws that mandated separation between blacks and whites resulted in visible black residential zones as well as leisure and consumer centers. During the 1920s, black spaces were easy to find, and the popularity of "black culture" tempted adventurous whites to explore the exotic world inhabited by beloved primitives. Also, it was during this period that America discovered the African American heritage of popular culture, which helped to

¹¹¹ George M. Frederickson describes "romantic racism" in his study *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Harper Row Publishers, 1971), 97-130.

fuel adventurous whites' attraction to black spaces.¹¹² White bohemian fascination with black culture was especially pronounced in black metropolises like Harlem during the 1920s.¹¹³ Black communities like Harlem became sites of "leisure" where whites could go "slumming" and escape the constraints of civilized life.¹¹⁴ White Modernists penetrated the barrier between the black and white worlds in search of the freedom that imagined their beloved primitives had.

Moreover white intellectuals engaged in remote slumming from the Ivory Tower. Sociologist Robert Park and anthropologist Franz Boas, are two of the white scholars who engaged in academic slumming during the interwar period. Historian Davarian Baldwin explains: "Plantation cafes (or Cotton Clubs), bricolage art pieces and cultural relativisms all derived a direct sense of inspiration and profit as early 'samplers' of what many white people perceived as the unique primitivism of African and southern folk cultures."¹¹⁵ Although Park's and Boas' motivations and intellectual orientations were quite different, both men dedicated their careers to making sense of the people that existed on the other side of the veil that separated white civilization from blacks. In fact, Boas is credited for significantly transforming the way that scholars understood Africa, which inspired black and white academics alike to take a second look at both African "things" and African people.¹¹⁶ It is likely that the 1923 "Primitive Negro Art Exhibit"

¹¹² Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹⁴ Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 84 and 133.

¹¹⁵ Davarian Baldwin, "Black Belts and Ivory Towers: The Place of Race in U.S. Social Thought 1892-1948", *Critical Sociology* (2004) 421.

¹¹⁶ Lemke cites W.E.B. DuBois' recollection of the commencement speech that Franz Boas delivered to Atlanta University's graduating class in which Boas instructed graduates to "not

showcased at the Brooklyn Museum, featuring objects made in Africa that were subsequently categorized as “art”, was inspired by the larger exploration of black people and calls made by Boas to recast Africanness.¹¹⁷

The intensification of white exploration of black spaces may have shaped many black-white encounters, but in no certain terms can all of these encounters be simply described as the product of white exoticism of black subjects. Interracial contact and cooperation between whites and blacks during the 1920s was not always the result of exoticism or primitivism. Blacks were not completely powerless and did play a role in the Modernist re-definition of Africanness.¹¹⁸ The “new” generation of American blacks, defined by their shared experiences with racial segregation, who challenged the white power structure, sought out educational and economic opportunities in pursuit of upward mobility and equality constituted the New Negro movement that took shape in the years after World War I. During the 1920s, the New Negro leaders who organized the Harlem Renaissance were plugged into Modernist discourses and tried to tackle racial inequality through the arts. New Negroes branded “black art” according to popular beliefs about authentic black-African folk expressions.¹¹⁹ For these New Negroes, their African past served two purposes: first, their African and black folk past functioned as a symbol of their shared history through which race pride could be cultivated, and second, the fact

be ashamed of your African past,” and continued citing examples of great black kingdoms in south of the Sahara. (7).

¹¹⁷ Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life In Harlem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 129-139.

¹¹⁸ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16-21.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

that New Negroes could now point to an “African-black folk past” marked their station within modernity.

The New Negro leaders of the Harlem Renaissance interpreted white rebellion against Victorianism and Modernist Primitivism as an opportunity to press for racial equality. To the New Negro, the rejection of Victorianism reflected a crack in the wall of white supremacy embodied by the Victorian view of civilization. It was an opportunity to re-think race and recast Africanness in the larger American social psyche. Harlem Renaissance organizers, like Charles S. Johnson, surmised that challenging racial oppression through the arts was relatively safe considering the rash of anti-black violence which was prevalent during the period because the arts were the only arena that black had not been barred from participating in.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the quest for racial equality through the arts promised to reveal black people’s human complexity when they were depicted as artistic subjects, as well as demonstrate black people’s ability to significantly contribute to the world of arts and letters as artists and writers. Harlem Renaissance writers considered themselves Modernists and they too relied on black essentialist notions in order to attract patrons and audiences to the black art initiative, as well as to resolve their own misgivings about their African heritage.¹²¹ So, when Langston Hughes penned the connection between black Americans and their African past in his 1921 poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, and Countee Cullen wrote in his 1925 poem “Heritage,” “What is Africa to Me,” they drew inspiration from the Modernist impulse and, as black

¹²⁰ Lewis, 46-48.

¹²¹ Hutchinson, (30), Nathaniel Huggins also links black artists and writers to primitivists notions of Africanness, as well as discusses the link between Africa and the New Negro in his study *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 188.

men, posited their own understanding of their connection to Africa.¹²² Ultimately, Black Modernist writers and artists were essentially “neoprimitivists” who acted in concert with white Modernists.¹²³

While black Modernists wanted to take advantage of the fact that new ideas had weakened notions of racial superiority and inferiority and opened the door for new imaginings of black people’s Africanness, black thinkers disagreed on how to best take advantage of this opportunity. Historian David L. Lewis explains:

Some community leaders feared that what was nice for Connie’s and the Cotton Club and good for the entertainment business was not necessarily good for Harlem. Some observers wondered out loud what a spacious Sugar Hill apartment or the flair for mixing the races socially had to do with substantial progress in civil rights.¹²⁴

On both sides of the debate however, New Negroes played on white Modernists’ exoticism of blacks in order to further their agenda for racial inclusion. The New Negroes’ orchestration of the Harlem Renaissance drew on Modernist primitivism for its audiences, which at times proved to be a problematic strategy. When white Modernist writers fictionalized their encounters with black people in black spaces, they tended to typify the “black essence” and inadvertently presented a picture of black life that contradicted Harlem Renaissance leaders’ objectives.

The period saw stage works by white writers such as Eugene O’Neil’s play *Emperor Jones*, which appealed to black and white audiences. It bridged the racial divide by attracting both whites fascinated by the allure of primitivism and blacks who longed

¹²² Corbould, 131-160.

¹²³ Lemke discusses “neoprimitivism” and its relationship to black art (7).

¹²⁴ David L. Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 219.

for works that reflected their lives and experiences.¹²⁵ Yet, in an attempt to depict racial difference, O'Neil romanticized "black attributes" that Victorians damned: he associated blackness with "natural release" and whiteness with "internalized restraint."¹²⁶ Another white Modernist writer, Carl Van Vechten, wrote a book that also made black Modernists leery about the transformative power of Modernist primitivism. Van Vechten's 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven* was actually damaging to the Harlem Renaissance leaders' efforts because the novel depicted Harlem's upwardly mobile and educated blacks as barely able to suppress their primitive tendencies.¹²⁷ Black Modernists had good reason to be concerned about the potential dangers inherent in validating the belief that there was an essence that distinguished blacks from other people. Ann Douglas explains:

It is one thing to be in search of the 'primitive,' as white artists of the 1920s were; another thing to be told, as the black New Yorkers were, that you are the primitive, the savage 'id' of Freud's new psychoanalytical discourse, trailing clouds of barbaric, prehistoric, preliterate 'folk' culture wherever you go.¹²⁸

White artists' search for the primitive ultimately became a problem for the New Negroes who encouraged white interest in black life. However, the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance continued to call for the creation of "black art" and "black literature" despite the dangers involved in invoking the notion of a "black essence" and inviting white audiences to observe and consume Africanness as a commodity. Charles S. Johnson, a black sociologist and editor of one of the leading black periodicals during the period,

¹²⁵ Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 209.

¹²⁶ Mumford analyzed O'Neil's tendencies with regard to constructing racial difference in a discussion of O'Neil's play "All God's Chillun' Got Wings" (126).

¹²⁷ Lewis, 188.

¹²⁸ Douglas, 98.

specifically called for the production of black stories by black authors. He explained that he wanted to: “encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors and about Negro life, not merely because they are Negro authors but because what they write is literature and because the literature is interesting.” Johnson also indicated that he hoped efforts to generate black stories would, “foster a market for the Negro writer and for literature about Negroes.” Johnson concluded, and emphasized that he desired to “bring these writers in contact with the general world of letters to which they have been for the most part timid and inarticulate strangers.”¹²⁹ Johnson’s intentions were good, but the belief that there was a distinct “Negro life,” or a common “black” experience marked by something that extended beyond the social construct that defined the boundaries of racial difference, paved the way for white and black writers to formulate ideas about “authentic blackness.” What emerged was a fiction in which blacks were animated by a non-descript African essence, and most writers looked to southern blacks for the most authentic performances.

Authentic Blackness of Southern Blacks

More than one million blacks moved from the south to the north by the mid-1930s. This historic change in America’s racial geography resulted in demographic transformations in various regions, but also produced a significant interest in black southerners and ex-southerners. White and black northerners alike noticed the arrival of

¹²⁹ Lewis, 97.

black ex-southerners.¹³⁰ Predictably, racial tensions crested between white residents and black migrants competing for jobs. However, northern whites were not the only old settlers to greet black migrants with hostility. Black northerners also expressed anxiety over the arrival of their southern counterparts. Allan Spear describes this anxiety in his study of black Chicago: “As the migration progressed, Negro leaders became increasingly aware of the problems presented by newcomers.”¹³¹ He explains: “The crude, rustic ways of many migrants, their inability to maintain accepted standards of cleanliness, and their traditionally sycophantic demeanor in the presence of whites antagonized the old settlers.”¹³² As a result, white and black Modernist social scientists began to turn their gaze to black migrants and southerners in order to explain heightened tensions between the races as well as to search for pathological patterns believed to be unique among black southerners and ex-southerners.¹³³

During the 1920s and 1930s black migrants, and the world that they left behind, occupied a new place in white and black northerners’ imagination. Black migrants were characterized as foreign and were depicted as mysterious “others.” Everything about black migrants was read as a mark of profound difference: their speech, style of religious worship, mannerisms and musical performances signaled their distinctiveness. For Modernists in search of beloved primitives, black migrants and black southerners appeared to manifest authentic Africanness. These newly transplanted exotic primitives

¹³⁰ James Gregory explores the “noticing” phenomenon in his study *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

¹³¹ Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of the Negro Ghetto 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 168.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³³ Baldwin, 400.

were easy to find—residential segregation and the re-zoning of “vice” to black neighborhoods created a ready made spectacle. Modernists estimated that these blacks were closer to their African past, and the fact that they had lived in rural settings helped them to retain much of their Africanness. The later belief was spurred by the notion that inherent to Africanness is a particular relationship to nature and natural phenomenon which became even more exotic in this period of high industrialization. While educated blacks are counted among those that migrated north, they were considered less exotic than were their poorer and less educated comrades. Education was perceived as a force that diminished Africanness, rendering learned blacks as less authentic subjects. As a result, white and black Modernist writers, artists and social scientists looked to poor blacks living in south for authentic black folk representations.¹³⁴ New Negro leader, Alain Locke, encouraged the study of black folklore so that blacks would embrace their African heritage, consequently increasing the social value of authentic black southern lore.¹³⁵ Black writers heeded Locke’s and Johnson’s call, and constructed the image of authentic black folk by writing black stories, using largely southern dialects to mark their characters’ authenticity.¹³⁶ Poet Sterling Brown and writer Zora Neale Hurston popularized dialect writing among their peers, and poet Langston Hughes declared that “common folk” were the key to art.¹³⁷ However, Black Modernist writers were not the

¹³⁴ J.M. Favor describes black southerners unique role in the assessment of black authenticity in his study *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 15.

¹³⁵ Baker describes Locke’s position on black folklore in relationship to Africa (35).

¹³⁶ David Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 13-14, 18.

¹³⁷ Lewis discusses Hughes’ view of “common folk” as the key to art (191).

only writers that attempted to represent the authentic Africanness of southern blacks in their work.

Authentic Gullah Folk

The fact that white and black northerners began to look to southern blacks for exotic and authentic folk representations guaranteed that the blacks who lived on isolated islands in coastal Georgia and South Carolina would take center stage. Modernist Primitivists pointed to their dialect and traditions as evidence of their unique primitiveness. One white writer in particular took advantage of the popularity of stories about black life and the novelty of southern blacks, and introduced the “Gullah folk” who lived in isolated regions in coastal South Carolina to the nation’s readers during the 1920s, consequently establishing them as manifesting the most authentic and pure brand of Africanness in the south. Julia Peterkin was the first woman from the south to win a Pulitzer Prize. She wrote more than a dozen short stories, four widely read novels and one ethnographic study—all of which featured the “Gullahs” that lived on her plantation in South Carolina.¹³⁸

Who were the “Gullah” people that Julia Peterkin wrote about? What exactly distinguished the Gullah from other southern blacks? The term “Gullah” has been loosely used to describe linguistic patterns among blacks living in coastal South Carolina and Georgia, and the precise origins of the label are hard to pin down. Evidence suggests that the use of the term originated in the slave trade. One theory asserts that “Gullah”

¹³⁸ Julia Peterkin’s most widely read works include her novels, *Green Thursday* (1924), *Black April* (1927), *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), *Bright Skin* (1932) and her attempt at an ethnography of South Carolina’s Gullah people *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1933).

was an abbreviation of “Angola,” the region where Bantu speaking slaves originated.¹³⁹ “Golla” was used as a pre-fix in numerous slave advertisements in South Carolina dating back to 1742.¹⁴⁰ Another theory cites slave importation patterns as the source of the label. The importation of large numbers of slaves from Winward Coast (modern day Sierra Leone and Liberia) where “Golas” and “Gizzis” lived may account for the origin of the term, as well as the alternate term, “Geeche,” that blacks from coastal regions use to describe themselves.¹⁴¹ In 1850, T.J. Bowen, an American Baptist missionary visited Liberia and concluded that the “Gola” people of Liberia were the progenitors of “Gullah negroes.”¹⁴² White missionary reports have proven to be problematic sources for sorting out African ethnicities, but the Gullah label was so loosely defined that almost any explanation seemed valid. Yet, significant evidence indicates that the label emerged from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and took root in South Carolina, but it was not popularly used to describe coastal Georgia blacks until the 1930s.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Margaret Creel attempts to sort out the origin of the term Gullah in her study *“A Peculiar People”: Slave Religion and Community Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Creel, 17-18. Cornelia Walker Bailey, Betty Cooper, Paul Walker, Joe Johnson and Catherine Hillery, all Sapelo Islanders interviewed for this dissertation project did not call themselves “Gullah,” and said that whites used the term to describe them. Bailey wrote in her memoir: “There’s nothing wrong with ‘Gullah’ if that’s what you identify with, but a lot of us, including me, have always thought of ourselves as Geeche and we want to be known by our traditional name. Matter of fact, we’re Saltwater Geeche.” *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geeche Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 5.

¹⁴² T.J. Bowen, *Central Africa and Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa; from 1849 to 1856*. Charleston Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.

¹⁴³ Creel, 18. Creel explains that coastal Georgia blacks were called Geeche and not Gullah.

While slave importation patterns and subsequent labeling of enslaved Africans may account for the presence of the word “Gullah” in the American vocabulary, isolating and defining the qualities and people associated with the label is complicated. During the later years of the 19th century, southern writers, Joel Chandler Harris and Charles Colcock Jones, Jr., introduced coastal Georgia blacks’ dialect and folklore to Americans in their works. Soldiers who fought in the Civil War also noted the strange dialect prevalent among blacks in coastal South Carolina. Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870), a memoir of Union soldier stationed in South Carolina during the Civil War, included what he interpreted as the Gullah dialect to characterize the speech of the blacks who he encountered in the region.¹⁴⁴ However, these early descriptions of blacks in the region were not articulated with an explicit connection to the Gullah label, nor were they preoccupied with the African character of the traits that they described. In fact, John Bennet was the first researcher to use the term in 1908 in his essay “Gullah: A Negro Patios.”¹⁴⁵ Bennet’s work was followed by Ambrose Gonzales’ folklore collection, *The Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast* (1922). Ambrose commented on what he determined to be “baby talk” used by slave owners to speak to their non-English speaking slaves in the introduction to the collection and told Gullah tales by using the dialect. Two years later, George Philip Krapp, a Columbia University professor similarly argued that the Gullah dialect was a form of broken English.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Fields and Osgood, 1870).

¹⁴⁵ John Bennet, “Gullah: A Negro Patios,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, October 1908.

¹⁴⁶ Lorenzo D. Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 8.

A review of the history of the use of the term Gullah in published works reveals two clear patterns. The first pattern is that these works were largely about blacks living in coastal South Carolina. The second discernable pattern pertains to nature of the way that the Gullah were categorized: the identity was assigned according to region, race and dialect. But 1920s and 1930s writers and researchers assigned new characteristics and a new region to the Gullah identity: they extended “the Gullah” label to blacks in coastal Georgia, and they added African derived spiritual and voodoo practices to the traditions that made the people included under this banner unique. Clearly, the qualities and people associated with the term evolved over time. More important still is the fact that the Gullah identity was constructed according to the way that whites, and other “outsiders” imagined coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks. The people who the label was supposed to represent did not articulate that they were “Gullah.” Coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks did contribute to the repository of folklore material used to characterize the Gullah, but they did not initiate the use of the label. In fact, only in one black community in coastal Georgia did blacks use a term close to “Gullah” to talk about other blacks during the 1930s. In Tatemville, several blacks interviewed for a folklore study used “Golla” as a prefix that preceded the names of African born slaves who they remembered or knew—but they never used this prefix to identify themselves. One interviewee explained that all of the blacks who came from Africa or the Caribbean were called “Golla” during slavery.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Mary Granger, Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 65-70.

Julia Peterkin was one of the “outsiders” whose imaginings about the blacks she wrote about significantly shaped 1920s and 1930s characterizations of the Gullah. Even though southern writers and folklore collectors had investigated and written about blacks that lived in coastal Georgia and South Carolina before Julia Peterkin, and emphasized that these blacks were distinct from other blacks in America, Peterkin’s writings initiated the consolidation of “Gullah” as a distinct identity by Modernist Primitivists who became obsessed with uncovering the African origins of Gullah culture.¹⁴⁸ While she was not the originator of the concept, she made it wildly popular.

Unlike white Modernists in the north, Julia Peterkin did not have to venture into black spaces in order to encounter, observe and engage with beloved primitives. Peterkin, a South Carolina native and wife of a plantation owner, lived among the blacks who worked for her. The racial arrangement inherent to the southern plantation offered Peterkin a unique entry point into black life and lent credibility to her depiction of the Gullah.

Julia Mood Peterkin was born in 1880 in Laurens, South Carolina to a prominent family. Her mother died before her second birthday, so Peterkin was left in the care of a black nursemaid, “Maum Patsy,” whom she credited with teaching her the Gullah

¹⁴⁸ Joel Chandler Harris, Georgia native and 19th century fiction writer, folklorist and journalist authored numerous stories featuring what was later called the “Gullah dialect.” Similarly, late 19th and early 20th century folklorists marked the uniqueness of blacks in coastal Georgia and South Carolina but do not yet call them “Gullah”: S. G. Benjamin, “The Sea Islands” *Harper’s* (November, 1878), Charles C. Jones *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), A.M.H. Christensen, Julia Peterkin, *Black April* (Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1927). *Afro-American Folklore Told Round the Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina*, (Boston: Cupples, 1892), Ruby Moore, “Superstitions from Georgia” *Journal of American Folklore* (1894), and Loraine Darby, “Ring Games from Georgia” *Journal of American Folklore* (1917). Lee Baker explains that early folklorists were interested in documented black superstition and pathology (33-24)- a pattern clearly established by Victorian views of racial difference.

dialect.¹⁴⁹ She attended Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and married William Peterkin after she graduated. Julia moved with William Peterkin to Sumter, South Carolina, to help him run Lang Syne Plantation.¹⁵⁰ The 2,000-acre plantation was staffed by 500 black people.¹⁵¹ Once on the plantation, Peterkin committed herself to fully acquaint herself with the black people that surrounded her, and their life habits, so that she could function as a proper plantation mistress.¹⁵² What she learned about them, and the events of their lives would become the subject of her short stories and novels, and the use of their dialect would distinguish her writings from others that wrote black stories.

Julia Peterkin was a reluctant Modernist. She did not begin her writing career until 1921, when she was in her forties, and explained that she wrote about blacks because she had to: “Among the Negroes...I saw sickness and death and superstition and frenzy and desire. My eyes look on horror and misery. The things stayed with me and I had to get rid of them.”¹⁵³ For most Modernist writers, black subjects served to unify disparate parts of themselves, but for Peterkin, the racial hierarchy, which relegated black southerners to plantation work, saddled her with beloved primitives. It is also important to note Peterkin’s usage of the words “superstition”, “frenzy” and “desire”, are all connected to the Victorian assessment of black’s savage characteristics. This is not

¹⁴⁹ Nghana tamu Lewis, “The Rhetoric of Mobility, the Politics of Consciousness: Julia Mood Peterkin and the Case of White Black Writer,” *African American Review*, (Winter, 2004), 589-608 includes a brief biography (590).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 591.

¹⁵¹ Bessie Bearden, “Julia Peterkin Discusses Her Carolina Plantation” *The Chicago Defender*, June 10, 1933, 15.

¹⁵² Lewis, 594.

¹⁵³ Frank Durham compiled many of Peterkin’s interviews in the edition that he edited, *Collected Short Stories of Julia Peterkin* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 21.

surprising because Modernist primitivists did not abandon Victorian characterizations, they simply re-imagined them. While Peterkin represented her desire to write about black subjects as a catharsis of sorts, she was actually challenging literary critics who said that the south was a vacuum in which the arts and letters floundered, and argued that white writers could not honestly portray black life.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Peterkin was aware of both the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance and fully intended to participate in both. Once she began to write her stories down, a short time passed before she published her short stories in the south's premiere Modernist literary publication *The Reviewer*.¹⁵⁵

Americans who read Julia Peterkin's short stories and novels were presented with Gullah life on fictional Blue Brook Plantation. While Blue Brook was not real, Peterkin claimed that the stories that she wrote were informed by actual events on Lang Syne.¹⁵⁶ Peterkin characterized the uniqueness of the Gullah people, according to her imagination, on the first page of her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Scarlet Sister* (1928):

The black people who live in the Quarters at Blue Brook Plantation believe they are far the best black people living on the whole "Neck," as they call that long, narrow strip of land lying between the sea on one side and the river with its swamps and deserted rice-fields on the other. They are no Guinea negroes with thick lips and wide noses and low ways; or Dinkas with squatty skulls and gray-tinged skin betraying their mean blood; they are Gullahs with tall straight bodies, and high heads filled with sense.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Nghana tamu Lewis, 591-592. Lewis describes Peterkin's relationship to Henry Mencken, the literary critic who challenged southern writers to produce "real" art.

¹⁵⁵ Durham, 4-20. Joseph Singal also writes extensively about *The Reviewer* and its editor, Emily Clark. The publication featured Greenwich village regulars like Carl Van Vechten, Achmed Adullah and Eugene O'Neill. (85-87).

¹⁵⁶ Durham, 22.

¹⁵⁷ Julia Peterkin, *Scarlet Sister Mary* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), 11.

Peterkin's references to transplanted African ethnicities, "Guinea" and "Dinkas," established the centrality of Africa to the Gullahs that she imagined. Blue Brook Gullahs are closer to their African origins and identify themselves according to African categories. Peterkin's beloved primitives all spoke "Gullah," they were superstitious and practiced "roots" and "conjuh," they had an aversion toward formal education and were hypersexual. Daddy Cudjoe, Blue Brook's voodoo man, lived on the fringe of the community, yet most of Blue Brook's good Christians used his services when they became impatient with prayer or difficult life circumstances. More attractive to Mordernist Primitivists was the fact that Blue Brook's black residents retained an inimitable connection to their African past that extended beyond naming themselves after an African ethnicity—they had retained actually practices and objects. For example, Blue Brook's black elder-matriarch and mid-wife, Maum Hannah, was in possession of a magical charm made by her African ancestors: "Maum Hannah, his own first cousin, had a string of charm beads their old grandmother had brought all the way from Africa when she came on a slave ship."¹⁵⁸

While Peterkin rooted her characters in an African past, she did not discuss their enslavement or race relations between Blue Brook's blacks and whites. Blue Brook's white owners were always away from the plantation and Peterkin's Gullah characters never expressed any concerns about racism. Perhaps this is the product of Peterkin's lack of concern about "the race question": "I'm not a propagandist and the race question means nothing to me."¹⁵⁹ However, it is ironic that Peterkin began her first published

¹⁵⁸ Julia Peterkin, *Black April* (Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1927), 18.

¹⁵⁹ Durham, 22.

book with a story about Maum Hannah being told by a white man to abandon the house that she lived in because he purchased the land that it was on.¹⁶⁰ In the story, Maum Hannah, invokes spiritual support to save her home, and is instructed by a divine entity to burn down the white man's new home, and she did. Despite the fact that Peterkin worried that her sympathetic portrayal of black people would attract harassment and violence from the Ku Klux Klan, her characters did not harbor similar fears or anxieties.¹⁶¹ Still, Peterkin's stories engaged with black characters in a way that white authors had not achieved before: she followed characters through personal trials and triumphs, adding humanity and complexity to "black life." Ultimately, Peterkin gained a reputation among literary reviewers and in the popular press for being particularly realistic in her presentation of black southern life and they considered her a Gullah expert.¹⁶²

While whites in the south despised Julia Peterkin's work, she won the hearts and minds of New Negro intelligentsia and earned the respect of literary critics in the north, and as a result her work and her subjects gained the national spotlight.¹⁶³ W.E.B DuBois, Alain Locke, Countée Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes and Walter White praised Peterkin's work for what they considered to be an authentic portrayal of black southern life.¹⁶⁴ In 1929 Peterkin visited Harlem and was welcomed

¹⁶⁰ Julia Peterkin, *Green Thursday* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 9-25.

¹⁶¹ Nghana tamu Lewis describes Peterkin's fear of the Ku Klux Klan (596).

¹⁶² Dorothy Heyward, co-author of *Porgy* identified Julia Peterkin as a Gullah dialect expert: " 'Porgy's' Native Tongue: A Dissertation on Gullah, the Negro Language of the Play" *New York Times*, Dec 4, 1927 p. X2.

¹⁶³ Nghana tamu Lewis, 596.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 606.

with open arms.¹⁶⁵ Following the publications of Peterkin's first novel *Green Thursday* (1924) and her second novel *Black April* (1927), a *New York Times* headline announced her third novel, *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), "Peterkin Writes Again of Gullah Negroes." The article concluded that Peterkin did much more than imagine Gullah folk, and explained that she "is busy with the negro before he loses his simple estate in the South Side of Chicago or Harlem. She is busy setting methods of life on paper that must soon pass away forever."¹⁶⁶ This line in the article clearly marks the blurred line between fact and fiction: Peterkin's Gullah stories were interpreted as fact disguised as fiction. Her beloved primitives won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1928 for *Scarlet Sister Mary*. Black journalists interpreted Peterkin's Pulitzer Prize as a triumph for black arts movement's anti-racist initiative: "So you see men and women are being encouraged to uncover facts and figures on the race subject and present them to the reading world. A sure sign of a revolution in the making."¹⁶⁷ They too began to imagine the Gullah and used Blue Brook as a reference point: "Miss Peterkin's novel is about a certain class of people in South Carolina who have managed to keep pretty close to nature in spite of the march of civilization and American missionaries."¹⁶⁸ *Scarlet Sister Mary* was so popular that it was transformed into a play, in which all white actors were selected to depict Blue Brook's Gullah.¹⁶⁹ The "Gullah" made Julia Peterkin a very famous woman. But,

¹⁶⁵ "Julia Peterkin Will Not Write About White Folks", *The Chicago Defender*, June 1, 1929, section A1.

¹⁶⁶ John R. Chamberlin, "Julia Peterkin Writes Again of the Gullah Negroes", *New York Times*, October 21, 1928, 63.

¹⁶⁷ "The Week: Interesting On the Job Pulitzer Prizes", *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1929, section A1.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ "Ethel Barrymore to Play Role in 'Scarlet Sister Mary' Show", *Chicago Defender*, June 22, 1929, 7.

Peterkin's acclaim benefited Lang Syne's black laborers as well. An anonymous donor from New York pledged to contribute one dollar to pay membership dues for 100 blacks on Peterkin's plantation in support of the N.A.A.C.P.'s "Penny-a-head" campaign.¹⁷⁰

Clearly, Peterkin's Blue Brook Plantation nestled itself deep in the imagination of all who encountered it, and they began to imagine authentic Gullah folk.

The first widespread conceptualization of Gullah people was literally rooted in fiction. While Peterkin was busy crafting Gullah tales which were interpreted by the people who read them as quasi-ethnographic reports, Modernist social scientists began to seriously take up questions about African retentions and looked for verifiable phenomenon through which they could prove that voodoo, roots and conjuh practices among southern blacks originated in Africa. Peterkin delivered to Modernist Primitivists a population of black southerners whose authentic Africanness appeared to be unquestionable. The hunt for Gullah people, and the search for real life equivalents of Daddy Cudjoe and Maum Hannah and her African beads would eventually lead researchers to Sapelo Island, Georgia.

¹⁷⁰ "Pays for Hundred Julia Peterkin S.C. Negroes", *Atlanta Daily World*, February 12, 1934, 1.

Chapter 2

Slumming in the Ivory Tower: Debating the Africanness of American Blacks in the Academe

“I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folk-lore.’ ”

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)

Shad Hall was an old man by the 1930s. He was one of the child slaves who Thomas Spalding's heirs left behind while fleeing Sapelo Island in pursuit of sanctuary from encroaching Union forces during the Civil War.¹⁷¹ Hall lived his entire life on the island. He witnessed the return of freedmen and freedwomen at the Civil War's end, and watched his family and community members build schools and churches, actualizing their freedom aspirations. Hall lived through both the triumph of blacks in the region during the Reconstruction period and the dreadful return of the plantation system under Howard Coffin's rule.

Shad Hall was well known and respected among blacks on the island for his expert knowledge of herbal remedies. Sapelo Islanders remember Hall, and affectionately call him as “Uncle Shad” or “The Old Man.”¹⁷² They recount his passing and indicate that he was at least 111 years old when he died.¹⁷³ While much of Uncle Shad's esteem was derived from the fact that he managed to survive the years in

¹⁷¹ McFeely, 83-84.

¹⁷² Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper (April 9, 2010) and Fred Johnson (August 9, 2005). Betty Johnson Cooper was a young girl when Shad Hall died, but she remembered him well because one of her childhood chores involved bringing him meals from her mother's kitchen once he was infirm. Fred Johnson was the oldest resident on the island at the time of the interview. He was born in 1913 and was 92 years old in 2005.

¹⁷³ Interview with Fred Johnson.

relatively good health, black islanders also valued Hall's remedies for common ailments and sicknesses.¹⁷⁴ "Uncle Shad" was not the only herbalist on the island.¹⁷⁵ During the 1920s and 1930s, island residents continued to rely on herbal remedies because the island's proximity to doctors on the mainland and the fact that many black islanders were too poor to pay for medical treatments made herbal medicine an essential part of their daily lives.¹⁷⁶ In return for Uncle Shad's faithful service to Sapelo Islanders and in acknowledgement of his status as respected elder, islanders cared for him until his death. According to their local customs and tradition, women in the community took turns making his meals and cleaning his small dwelling, and the men set aside a portion of the fish that they caught and the bounty from their gardens and farms for Hall's upkeep.¹⁷⁷

Shad Hall's legacy, relative to the "knowledge" that he possessed, extends beyond black Sapelo Islanders' sentimental recollections. During the 1920s and 1930s, scholars at universities in migration metropolises constructed new social scientific theories that transformed the value and meaning of the memories and knowledge that elderly blacks in south, like Hall, possessed. The debates that took place in the academe during the 1920s and 1930s among social scientists about the possibility of African survivals in America were, in part, responsible for the emergent belief that elderly blacks in the south, and

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Fred Johnson. Johnson explained that there was at least one other herbalist on the island: John Bryant.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Catherine Hillery (July 3, 2009). Catherine Hillery was the oldest island resident at the time of the interview. Hillery explained "In them days, them old time people would go in the woods, get medicine and make medicine and give it to you. Them days was so hard they didn't have money to go to no doctor."

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper.

more specifically in the low country, possessed knowledge and held memories that could be used to validate African retention theories.

Anthropologists and sociologists whose work explored black life and culture in America, clashed in a bitter ideological conflict over the question of whether African cultural traditions, cosmology, stories, material culture, religious rituals and linguistic patterns had survived chattel slavery. Not surprisingly, many of the academics who believed in African retentions looked to elderly blacks and their memories to resolve this conflict. The popularity of the black characters featured in Julia Peterkin's novels served as proto-typical caricatures of the types of old southern blacks whose folk wisdom and knowledge connected African practices to blacks in the American south. Peterkin's characters Maum Hannah (Blue Brook's midwife) and Daddy Cudjoe (Blue Brook's root doctor and conjurer) are quintessential examples of this connection. The fame of Julia Peterkin's *Blue Brook Gullahs* helped single out blacks living on islands in coastal South Carolina and Georgia as being populations with a hyper connection to the African past just as social scientists were poised to take up questions about the origins of black American culture. Consequently, when researchers and journalists came to Sapelo Island they sought Hall out, interviewed him and pillaged his memories in search of definitive answers to the African survivals question. As a result, Shad Hall and his memories featured prominently in 1930s Sapelo Island research.¹⁷⁸ Prior to the 1920s and 1930s, a poor elderly black man in the south such as Shad Hall, would not have garnered scholarly

¹⁷⁸ Shad Hall was a featured subject in Mary Granger/Federal Writers' Project Savannah Unit's *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), Lydia Parrish's *Slave Songs of the Georgia* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1942), and Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

attention and would have died in obscurity, only to be remembered by loved ones. But Hall's lot was different because of black and white Modernist Primitivist researchers and writers who traveled to Sapelo Island in search of authentic Africanness among southern blacks.

Tracing the evolution of African survival theories in the academe is critical to understand how the Gullah label was applied to Sapelo Islanders and coded as a verifiable fact. The motives of the first four researchers to explore Sapelo Islanders were tied to theories about African survivals. The African survivals debate that raged between American anthropologists and sociologists during the 1920s and 1930s was deeply rooted in the relationship between these disciplines and the construction of racial identities in America. On one side of the debate scholars argued that slavery destroyed all vestiges of African culture among New World blacks. On the other side of the debate, academics contended that blacks, especially those in isolated regions, retained African culture and traditions.

Within the American context, the evolving academic fields of sociology and anthropology consistently grappled with racial difference. From the first American sociological study, W.E.B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899) to the American ethnologists and folklore collectors who pioneered what became the field of American anthropology, racial distinction and the impact of notions of racial distinction informed the construction of theories in these fields.¹⁷⁹ By the 1920s, anthropology and sociology grew in power and prestige because anthropology explained

¹⁷⁹ Lee D. Baker provides a full account of the genesis of anthropology with regard to blacks in America in *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

the culture of non-whites who white Americans encountered both at home and at the site of various U.S. imperial projects abroad, and sociology became an influential field because its theories attempted to make sense of social and cultural patterns that played out in America.¹⁸⁰ Historian Lee Baker perfectly describes the theoretical paradigms that distinguished sociology and anthropology during the period. According to Baker, anthropology “marshaled its nascent authority to describe the difference of exterior others” while sociology “marshaled its nascent authority to document the sameness of interior others.” But the two fields did have in common a core assessment of race by the 1920s: “both sociology and anthropology rejected notions of biological inferiority, but each embraced different ways of describing customs and behaviors.”¹⁸¹ However, it would be an error to assume that the line between these fields were hard and fast during these years, overlap and interchange between the disciplines can be observed both in their methods and theories. Yet, the distinct power and authority that these disciplines gained during the period is undeniable.

More important still, is the way that American Modernist thought shaped anthropology and sociology during the 1920s and 1930s by demanding that attention be paid to black beloved primitives by raising questions about their Africanness. Where as the field of anthropology had almost exclusively focused on Native Americans before the 1920s, with the advent of the New Negro movement, black intelligentsia such as Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, and James Weldon Johnson pressed the discipline to paint a new picture of black Americans. They hoped that anthropological studies of black

¹⁸⁰ Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 10.

southerners would reveal “a rich, distinctive culture that was historical and particular,” and cement the value of black folk culture in the academy.¹⁸² These members of the New Negro intelligentsia argued for the redemptive potential of a close examination of black folk life and culture and they were not deterred by the racist precedent set by the white folklore collectors’ work during the late 1890s.

Early white collectors of black folklore and culture brought the Victorian view of black-African savagery to their observations of black people. They focused their studies on the description of black practices they believed were evidence of black ignorance and superstition.¹⁸³ Even as these white folklorists recorded and collected black spirituals, folktales, dialect patterns and non-Christian spiritual practices (voodoo, roots and conjuh), they conceived a pathological and savage black folk -- and they believed that African spiritual primitivism was at the root of all black folk practices. Nevertheless, New Negro Modernist Primitivists anticipated that anthropological portraits of “black culture” would undo the damaging effects of white folklorist’s studies and encourage blacks to embrace their black heritage.¹⁸⁴

On the other hand, sociologists interested in establishing the “sameness” of black Americans by exploring the ways that historical and economic factors shaped what was perceived as racial difference, believed the search for black American racial distinction to be a problematic enterprise. At stake on both sides of the issue was the possibility that either course of action (the pursuit of notions of racial distinction or the presentation of

¹⁸² Lee D. Baker explores this phenomenon in *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 13.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 35.

black culture as the absolute product of chattel slavery and American racism) would bolster prevailing notions of black inferiority used to justify racism and segregation.

Despite opposition, anthropologists emerged from the African survivals debate with an impassioned desire to track down remnants of African culture among American blacks. They focused their attention on the continuity of African spiritual primitivism and headed south in search of the most authentic brand of these practices. Not surprisingly, researchers who took up anthropological questions believed that blacks like Julia Perterkin's fictional Blue Brook Gullah folk, and the elderly characters that populated the imaginary plantation, were the best subjects for this sort of inquiry.

This chapter examines and contextualizes the African survivals debate and explores the evolution of the notion that African spiritual primitivism offered the most reliable evidence of retentions. The discussion begins with analysis of sociologist Robert E. Park and anthropologist Franz Boas' view of African survivals, which also outlines the debate between their students, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville Herskovits on the matter. Boas' student Zora Neale Hurston, and her anthropological career will also be explored. Hurston's work elevated voodoo, roots and conjuh to the ranks of a serious anthropological subject. Her work established voodoo as the most readily available evidence of African survivals among southern blacks. As a result, voodoo emerged as the quintessential African survival, capturing the attention of researchers and the imagination of the nation.

Teachers: Franz Boas and Robert E. Park

Many scholars tackled the African survivals question during the 1920s and 1930s, but the intellectual contest between white Jewish anthropologist Melville Herskovits and

black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier to define American blackness relative to Africa and slavery set the parameters for African survival studies. Frazier denied the presence of African cultural forms among American blacks while Herskovits argued that African retentions were persistent in black communities throughout the African Diaspora. Despite E. Franklin Frazier's insistence that Herskovits was wrong, Melville Herskovits emerged as the foremost authority in the field of African retentions. As a result, two Sapelo Island researchers called on Herskovits to guide their studies, which placed Sapelo Islanders in the middle of their debate.¹⁸⁵

One reason why the debate between the two scholars was so hard fought is that it picked up on earlier ideological tensions between their intellectual predecessors.¹⁸⁶ Robert Park instructed and advised E. Franklin Frazier at the University of Chicago and Franz Boas did the same for Melville Herskovits at Columbia University. Park, a white sociologist, and Boas a white Jewish anthropologist, can easily be credited with ushering in modern sociology and anthropology. On the surface it would seem that the contest between these two men could simply be attributed to disciplinary differences. However, evidence suggests that Robert Park developed his social conditioning thesis drawing from Franz Boas' "cultural determinism" theory.¹⁸⁷ Boas and Park had in fact engaged in inter-disciplinary analysis, but had very different readings of black Americans.

¹⁸⁵ Mary Granger, author of *Drums and Shadows*, and Lydia Parrish, author of *Slave Songs of the Georgia*, both thank Melville Herskovits for his assistance and cite his research in their respective works, and E. Franklin Frazier was asked to review Mary Granger's study.

¹⁸⁶ Baldwin, 425.

¹⁸⁷ Baldwin, 400.

Franz Boas directly challenged the way that Victorians imagined race and culture. Boas was born in Germany on July 9, 1858. He studied geography and physics, and earned his Ph.D. in Germany. Boas became interested in exploring questions of race and culture while conducting fieldwork among Eskimos, and the encounter sparked his interest in anthropology. At the point during which Boas came to the United States and took up a career working in museums and lecturing at Columbia University in 1896, anthropology was a field of study that had not yet completed professionalization. Consequently, Boas was the first anthropology professor at Columbia University. During the 1890s, anthropology was still populated by untrained researchers, most of whom studied Native Americans, and like most white researchers of this era, including established scholars; they used their research to legitimize ideas about the racial inferiority of non-whites.¹⁸⁸

Franz Boas' work broke with early American anthropology's racist tradition. Franz Boas' "cultural determinism" theory contradicted notions of white superiority. "Cultural determinism" asserted that theories, which argued that there was a biological basis for racial distinctions, were false, and that historical particularism accounted for differences observed between "races."¹⁸⁹ Boas' declaration changed the trajectory of anthropology.¹⁹⁰ While Boas' anti-racist brand of anthropology attracted the admiration, attention and scholarly support of W.E.B. DuBois and other black intelligentsia, it is

¹⁸⁸ Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 11-53.

¹⁸⁹ Baker, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, 6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

worth noting that Boas did at times suggest that blacks were inferior to whites.¹⁹¹ Boas juggled the difficult task of both rejecting racial categories while simultaneously working with, and conceptualizing the very categories that he tried to eradicate—and sometimes, he reverted backwards. Despite the occasional inconsistency of his view of race, inferiority and superiority, Boas' work was widely promoted in the black press.¹⁹²

Boas, like others in his field of study, maintained a sustained interest in Native Americans, but had begun to apply his anti-racist cultural determinism theory to black Americans and the American "race problem" by 1910.¹⁹³ Perhaps the nearness of Columbia University to Harlem, and Boas' intellectual proximity to New Negro intelligentsia encouraged him to pay more attention to blacks. During the 1920s and 1930s, Boas called for the establishment of African museums in the United States to combat racism and raise black people's self-esteem.¹⁹⁴ Inherent in Boas' vision of African museums in America, was his belief that negative perceptions of black people's

¹⁹¹ Jerry Gershenhorn, 54. Gershenhorn explains: "Nevertheless, Boas occasionally placed blacks as inferior to whites. For example, in *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928) Boas said that 'there were 'no pure races' but maintained that 'serially the Negro brain is less extremely human than that of the White,' because higher percentage of European people had a higher brain weight than the Negro population." Mia Bay discusses Franz Boas' relationship with W.E.B DuBois and other New Negro Intelligentsia in *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 205-210. Clare Corbould describes the relationship between W.E.B. DuBois and Franz Boas in *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939* (63).

¹⁹² Corbould, 194. Hutchinson also writes that New Negroes closely followed Boas' work (62-63).

¹⁹³ See Baker's *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* for a discussion of Boas and his Native American subjects (12). See Mia Bay's study, *White Image in the Black Mind* for clarification of Boas' activities within, and influence on the black community (205-210).

¹⁹⁴ Hutchinson, 63.

assumed Africanness was at the root of ideas about black inferiority. For Boas, the establishment of the connection between black Americans and a positive view of Africa was needed in order to combat anti-black racism. Boas explained that: “To those unfamiliar with the products of native African art and industry, a walk through one of the large museums of Europe would be a revelation.” The “revelation,” Boas wrote, would result from an encounter with the “black-smith, the wood carver, the weaver, the potter—these all produce ware original in form, executed with great care, and exhibiting that love of labor, and interests in results of work, which are apparently so often lacking among the negroes in our American surroundings.” He insisted that, “All different kinds of activities that we consider valuable in the citizens of our country can be found in aboriginal Africa.”¹⁹⁵ Boas’ view of African culture and people reflects a clear break with the assumption that Africanness was synonymous with primitiveness. Inherent to the “primitive” category is the determination that primitive people, and their practices lacked discipline, order and rationality.¹⁹⁶ For Boas, assigning “primitiveness,” as defined by the Victorian hierarchy, to Africans presented a problem, because, as he explained, “primitive” peoples organized their cultural lives according to same patterns that supposed “civilized” peoples did. For Boas, white Americans’ misreading of African peoples was at the heart of American racism. Whites’ lack of appreciation for, and lack of knowledge about Africans constituted “the race problem.”

Boas also understood that if anthropology was to be used as a weapon against white superiority, and more anthropological work was to be conducted among black

¹⁹⁵ Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1921) 270.

¹⁹⁶ Lemke, 4.

subjects, the field needed black anthropologists. Boas believed that racism had conditioned blacks to deliberately hide the true inner workings of their cultural and private lives from white observers.¹⁹⁷ Accordingly, he was convinced that white anthropologists and folklore collectors were not well suited to explore black American subjects. White collectors of black folklore and culture during the period, such as Guy Johnson and Howard Odum, were often criticized for their misreading of black culture.¹⁹⁸ The predominant problem with their studies was that they concluded that black folk culture was “primitive.” On the other hand, Boas believed that black collectors, like Arthur Fauset (brother of Jessie Fauset, Harlem Renaissance writer), produced black folklore collections that promised to reveal more authentic and accurate explorations of black life.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, Boas promoted the training of black anthropologists.²⁰⁰

Although, Franz Boas would come to believe that African cultural survivals could be found in North America, that was not his first impression.²⁰¹ However, more and more, he became convinced that vestiges of African culture could be found in the African Diaspora. By the 1930s, he articulated the belief that if any African culture survived American slavery, it would be found in the south: “The amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the

¹⁹⁷ Boas wrote in the forward to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935): “She has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life.”

¹⁹⁸ Robert E. Hemenway discusses this dynamic in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 89.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁰⁰ Gershenhorn, 32.

²⁰¹ Boas, 272.

importance of which diminishes with increasing distance from the south.”²⁰² The possibility that African traditions survived in the American south, presented Boas, and the anthropologists that he trained, with an opportunity to link American blacks to a new vision of Africa—a vision that promised to elevate the value of black folk culture and folk life in the eyes of white Americans and erode racism.

Robert Park, and the sociologists that he led, championed a different view of black American culture and its connection to Africa. Robert Park was born on February 14, 1864 in Pennsylvania, but he grew up in Redwing, Minnesota.²⁰³ Park studied at the University of Michigan, and after he graduated he spent 11 years in journalism. He was thirty-four years old when he took up graduate studies at Harvard University and traveled to Germany to round out his training in sociology.²⁰⁴ After travelling and studying, Park became enthralled in the sociological anomaly of blacks in America. While working with the Congo Reform Association, an organization that sought to rectify the injustices committed against Africans in the Congo at the hands of European colonial authorities, Park’s curiosity and concern about the relationship between whites and blacks, and the abuses that followed ideas about black inferiority and white superiority. Park wrote:

I had become convinced that conditions in the Congo were not the result of mere administrative abuses. Rather they were the conditions one was likely to meet wherever an European people invaded the territory of a more primitive folk in order to uplift, civilize and incidentally exploit them.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Franz Boas wrote those lines in the foreword to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935).

²⁰³ Winifred Raushenbush, *Robert E. Park: A Biography of a Sociologist* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 3.

²⁰⁴ Raushenbush, 29 and Baldwin, 400.

²⁰⁵ Raushenbush, 38.

The deep Victorian roots of Park's view of "race," relative to the dichotomy between the "civilized" and the "primitive" is clear. The problem that Park found in the Congo, was not racism, but the tensions that resulted from "European people" attempting to "uplift" and "civilize" primitives. According to Park black exploitation in the Congo was "incidental."

As a result of Park's work with the Congo Reform Association, he surmised that black assimilation through education would act as a civilizing agent for Africans in the Congo, and blacks in America. Booker T. Washington was also involved with the Congo Reform Association. Park invited Booker T. Washington to join him on a tour of an industrial school for natives in South Africa. Washington declined, insisting that Park first visit his school before going to Africa.²⁰⁶ Park agreed, and began a long relationship with Booker T. Washington: Park took a job as Washington's publicist at Tuskegee in 1905. The two men worked side-by-side at Tuskegee.²⁰⁷ During the course of their relationship, Park refined his belief that black assimilation to white society was the key to dismantling racism and segregation, and added to his remedy Washington's self betterment thesis as a solution to the black American condition.²⁰⁸ "Assimilation," according to Park, required that one group in a society incorporate another group's

²⁰⁶ Raushenbush, 39.

²⁰⁷ Raushenbush, 36-42.

²⁰⁸ Raushenbush provides a detailed account of Booker T. Washington's and Robert Park's long relationship (50-51), and Baldwin describes the way that Washington and Park influenced each others thinking on the race question (408). Baker discusses Park's assessment of black assimilation and black pathology (26).

“language, characteristic attitudes, habits and modes of behavior.”²⁰⁹ Park perceived black American culture and racial discrimination as forces that created social pathology in the African American community. Park read negative educational outcomes, the lack of education, disorganization within the family structure, criminality and other social ills as manifestations of black pathology that could be eradicated by assimilation and the elimination racial discrimination. By the time Park took his post at the University of Chicago, his view on black pathology and the power of assimilation to undercut racism was well developed and shaped the course of sociological research at the university.

Robert Park’s strain of urban sociology dominated academic life at the University of Chicago.²¹⁰ He believed that social environment and conditioning had the greatest impact on human nature, and he used black subjects to prove this point.²¹¹ Park maintained that cultural evolution was the product of socio-historical conditions.²¹² With regard to black culture, Park concluded that “black culture” was strictly created by slavery and Jim Crow racism and he viewed black lower class culture as pathological.²¹³

Park’s view of black culture was not dramatically different from the Victorians.’ Park, may have embraced the Modernist preoccupation with black life, but he continued to invoke Victorian ideas about race and civilization. Scholar Davarian Baldwin explains

²⁰⁹ Robert E. Park, “Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups With Particular Reference to the Negro,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 5, March 1914, pp. 606-623.

²¹⁰ Jerry G. Watts “On Reconsidering Park, Johnson, DuBois, Frazier and Reid: Reply to Benjamin Bowser’s ‘The Contribution of Blacks to Sociological Knowledge.’” *Phylon* (1960), 280.

²¹¹ Watts explains Parks “conditioning thesis” in his essay (280). Baldwin addresses the role that black Americans played in the construction of sociological theories in his essay (399).

²¹² Baldwin, 400.

²¹³ Hutchinson, 58.

that “Park’s developing theory of race relations measured social interactions and groups along a scale from savagery or primitivism to civilization.”²¹⁴ In essence, Park’s call for black “assimilation” was ultimately a call for black “civilization.” Even as Modernist ideas permeated social scientists’ concepts of race, culture and social life, Victorian language and philosophy persisted, mixing with Modernist notions.

According to Park’s calculations, African culture did not survive slavery, nor should black Americans recover it, because the expression of any “cultural traits” that were distinctly black would hinder efforts toward racial equality. Park’s denouncement of African retention theories followed from his supposition that black assimilation to white standards of civilized behavior would eradicate black pathology and encourage full integration of blacks into American society. In 1919, the height of racial unrest in Chicago, Park published “The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro” in *The Journal of Negro History*. In the article, Park described blacks as primitives and wrote, “In fact there’s every reason to believe, it seems to me that the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left everything behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament.”²¹⁵ One could deduce that Park’s use of the phrase “tropical temperament” referenced the vague African essence that was popularly ascribed to blacks during the period. However, that conclusion is incorrect. Throughout the essay, Park distinguished “Africa” and “African culture” from black’s “tropical temperament.” Park conceded to anthropological theories that mitigated notions of racial distinction created by biological difference, which is evident in his analysis in

²¹⁴ Baldwin, 409.

²¹⁵ Robert Park, “The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro” *Journal of Negro History*, 4 (April, 1919) 113.

the essay: “Admitting, as the anthropologists now seem disposed to do, that the average native intelligence in the races is about the same.” Yet, he argued that “racial temperaments” exist, and are derived from quasi-biological, non-cultural distinctions between the races: “certain innate and characteristic differences of temperament which manifest themselves especially in the objects of attention, in tastes and in talents.”²¹⁶ He maintained that blacks expressed a unique “racial temperament”, but insisted that their temperament was innate rather than one constructed through the reproduction of African cultural traits. In fact, Park definitively refuted the presence of African cultural forms in America: “It is very difficult to find in the South today anything that can be traced directly back to Africa.”²¹⁷ Yet, he acknowledged the dominance of spiritual primitivism among blacks, but attributed the phenomenon to economic and social forces, not African heritage.

This does not mean that there is not a great deal of superstition, conjuring, ‘root doctoring’ and magic generally among the Negroes of the United States. What it does mean is that the superstitions we find are those which we might expect to grow up anywhere among an imaginative people, living in and intellectual twilight such as exists on the isolated plantations of the Southern States.²¹⁸

For Park, blacks “superstition,” “conjuring” and “ ‘root doctoring’ ” was the product of black ignorance created by a lack of education and exposure to other forces that he believed would civilize them.

As Park made his historic argument against African survival theories, he simultaneously presented Sea Islanders, like Sapelo Islanders, as the only population of

²¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 116.

southern blacks in which African culture survived. Park made the case for Sea Islanders' uniqueness by employing sociological analysis. He argued that the social environment in which Sea Islanders were enslaved, and their geographic isolation, facilitated the reproduction of African culture. Park explained that while it was rare, African religious forms did survive in America among Sea Island populations:

On the Sea Island, however, where the slaves were and still are more completely isolated than anywhere in the South, the Negro population approached more closely to the cultural status of the native African...The Sea Island Negroes speak a distinct dialect and retain certain customs which are supposed to be of African origin. It is however in their religious practices that we have the nearest approach to anything positively African.²¹⁹

Park pointed to Sea Islanders' dialect and customs to distinguish them from other American blacks. Yet, it was their religious practices that made them the exception to his belief that African culture had not taken root in America. Indeed, despite his rejection of scholarship that emphasized African retentions, Park may have originated the idea that authentic African spiritual primitivism thrived on the Sea Islands, as well as the notion that African spiritual survivals are among the most definitive African survivals. This anomaly is part of the larger mixed legacy of Park's reading of black American culture. On one hand, Park acknowledged the impact of white American's racism on black American life. Yet, he insisted that distinct "racial temperaments" distinguished whites from blacks. More important is that he totally denied the African presence, and subsequently painted Sea Islanders as exotic racial oddities.

Robert Park and Franz Boas were intellectual adversaries of sorts. The fact that both men represented academic disciplines with opposing theories, and the fact that even

²¹⁹ Ibid., 121.

their most influential black allies, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, were also rivals underscores the ideological differences between them. Yet, another distinction between these two social scientists deserves attention. Boas' inquiry into blacks' African past was strictly employed to undercut the racial hierarchy. But Park's understanding of black culture was cemented in the Victorian view of race. Park's Victorian "uplift" philosophy dictated how he envisioned black culture, and predictably informed his belief that black's "tropical temperament" be suppressed and their link to Africa be denied.

Despite these differences, both Franz Boas and Robert Park significantly contributed to the intellectual formulations through which the Gullah were imagined during the 1920s and 1930s. Boas' call for anthropological studies of black southern life with a specific emphasis on the African origins of black southern culture, and Park's belief that black Sea Island culture was the most African in the United States, established the scholarly basis for 1920s and 1930s Gullah studies.

Students: E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits

Boas' and Park's scholarly differences were never reconciled and starting in the 1920s the two men's students, Melville Herskovits who worked with Boas at Columbia University and E. Franklin Frazier who trained with Park in Chicago, initiated their own battle over the origins of black culture relative to African influences. For more than two decades, Herskovits and Frazier debated back and forth, fighting in the footnotes of their published works. In fact, the debate between Herskovits and Frazier reared its head when questions were raised about Gullah studies in coastal Georgia.

E. Franklin Frazier, argued against African survivals, claiming that slavery had completely destroyed African cultural practices and that "black culture" was the

byproduct of oppression and degradation. E. Franklin Frazier was born in Maryland in 1894. His father was a bank messenger and his mother had been born a slave.²²⁰ Frazier was admitted to Howard University on scholarship in 1912.²²¹ He taught school throughout the south after graduating from Howard University in 1916.²²² Years after Frazier began his teaching career, Frazier decided to continue his studies. By 1927, Frazier earned graduate degrees from Clark University in Massachusetts and the University of Chicago.²²³ At that point, Frazier was already a seasoned published scholar and educator, a literary contest winner, and was a contributor to Alain Locke's edited collection *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925).²²⁴

Frazier was not a young, impressionable graduate student when he began working with Robert Park.²²⁵ He was over 30 years old and had a long record of intellectual accomplishments when he began working with Park, which may be one reason why he was comfortable expressing his frustrations with his mentors view of black culture and race: in this area, Frazier was one of Park's greatest critics.²²⁶ Frazier and his colleague Charles S. Johnson, one of the most influential leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, were members of the "second wave" of black sociologists trained at University of Chicago. This group of black sociologists drew their inspiration from and patterned their work

²²⁰ Anthony M. Platt, *E. Franklin Frazier Reconsidered* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1991), 12-13.

²²¹ Platt, 21.

²²² Ibid., 22-31.

²²³ Ibid., 85.

²²⁴ See Platt for more information about E. Franklin Frazier and literary contest (63).

²²⁵ Both Platt (88) and Baldwin (424) argue that Frazier was both an accomplished academic and mature student upon entering the University of Chicago.

²²⁶ Baldwin, 424.

after the work of W.E.B. DuBois; Park was not their only influence.²²⁷ Although Frazier admired and utilized Park's methods for exploring the impact of social forces, Frazier was disturbed by his mentor's view of black culture, and attempted to focus his examination of the black community on dynamics that helped to unearth the race and class struggles that created "black pathology"; this view can largely be attributed to W.E.B DuBois' influence.²²⁸ Frazier was a racial Modernist: his attack on the Victorian racial hierarchy hinged on the outright denial that any distinctions, outside of those constructed by white society, could be used to distinguish blacks from whites. Predictably, Frazier contended that Park's theory on "racial temperament" was "pseudoscientific nonsense," and explained that the "disorganization" observed in the black communities was the result of slavery and discrimination.²²⁹

E. Franklin Frazier's objection to African survival theories was clearly communicated in his writings. Frazier argued that blacks lost all ties to African culture during the Middle Passage and enslavement process.²³⁰ Unlike many blacks whose negative view of Africa inspired their rejection of African survivals theory, Frazier's denial of survivals seems to be embedded in his larger argument that slavery and racism has stripped everything from blacks, especially their culture. Like Park, Frazier insisted that examples of African retentions among New World blacks were few and far in between, were mostly concentrated in the West Indies, and were even more rare in the United

²²⁷ Ibid., 419.

²²⁸ Baldwin, 400.

²²⁹ Ibid., 424-425.

²³⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 4.

States.²³¹ With regard to African culture and the black family structure, Frazier wrote: “There is no reliable evidence that African culture has had any influence on its development... Except in rare instances the few memories and traditions of African forbearers that once stirred the imagination of older generations have failed to take root in the minds of present generation of Negro youth.”²³² Frazier’s argument against the African spiritual survivals is also salient: “Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly completely stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America.”²³³ He continued, and compared the fate of African religion among enslaved blacks to that of other oppressed groups: “Other conquered races have continued to worship their household gods within the intimate circle of their kinsmen. But American slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men and women of the same blood and household.”²³⁴ Frazier’s declaration clearly asserted that slavery destroyed African religious practices through the destruction of the black family structure. From this vantage point, “roots”, “conjuh” or “voodoo” could not possibly be comprised of African cosmology.

Frazier’s attack on survival theories was not only levied against social scientists, he also condemned New Negro intelligentsia for conjuring up the “African past.” “When educated Negroes of the present generation attempt to resurrect the forgotten memories of their ancestors, they are seeking in alien culture of Africa a basis for race pride and racial

²³¹ Ibid., 5-8.

²³² Ibid., 12-19.

²³³ Ibid., 21.

²³⁴ Ibid., 21.

identification.”²³⁵ He quoted from Countee Cullen’s poem “What is Africa to Me?” to exact his criticism:

Hence, when a young sophisticated Negro poet asks, ‘What is Africa to me?’ and answers with true poetic license that the African heritage surges up in him ‘In an old remembered way’ we hear the voice of a new race consciousness in a world of conflict and frustration rather than the past speaking through traditions that have become refined and hallowed as they have been transmitted from generation to generation.²³⁶

The “new race consciousness” that Frazier accused of rousing New Negroes’ desire to uncover the African heritage of black American culture was at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Frazier, this “new race consciousness” was spurred by “frustration” not pride, and the African past that New Negro writers imagined was a fiction. Surely much of Frazier’s outright refusal to entertain the possibility that even shreds of African culture had survived among American blacks was rooted in his personal awareness of and encounters with the American racism and white supremacy. Black people’s link to Africa had always been presented as the origin of their inferiority, which was the basis for their oppression. For Frazier, the possibility that African survival theories would be codified as fact in the academe, and subsequently perpetuate the notion that African culture continued to influence black American life, presented a dangerous scenario.

Unlike Frazier, anthropologist Melville Herskovits was convinced that African culture had survived in the Americas and that understanding and acknowledging survivals could combat white supremacy and eradicate racism. Born in 1895, the son of

²³⁵ Ibid.,16.

²³⁶ Ibid., 16.

Jewish immigrants, Herskovits lived during his youth in Ohio, Texas and Pennsylvania, and had just begun college when his studies were interrupted by a call to serve a tour of duty in France during World War I.²³⁷ Once his tour was complete, Herskovits came back to the states and attended the University of Chicago in pursuit of a degree in history. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1920, Herskovits moved to New York to attend graduate school. Certainly, that fact that Herskovits studied under Franz Boas can be identified as the inspiration for his anti-racist anthropological theories. Yet, the fact that he was, himself a victim of discrimination in the form of anti-Semitism, and that he had taken full advantage of the interracial contact that crested in New York City during the 1920s undoubtedly shaped Herskovits' view of race and notions of superiority.²³⁸ Herskovits spent a great deal of time interacting with New Negro intelligentsia in New York, and as consequence he was considered an "honorary New Negro."²³⁹ Between 1923 and 1924, Herskovits attended N.A.A.C.P. and Urban League meetings, as well as attended a few meetings at the *Crisis* magazine.²⁴⁰ Herskovits, like his mentor, spent time with W.E.B. DuBois.²⁴¹ He also forged a relationship with Charles S. Johnson and traveled to Howard University to meet with Alain Locke.²⁴² He gave talks at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, and like Frazier, authored a prize-winning essay that was featured in Locke's *The New Negro: An*

²³⁷ Gershenhorn, 11-13.

²³⁸ Jerry Gershenhorn describes the discrimination that Herskovits faces at the University of Chicago (14). Ann Douglas explores the way that white/black collaborative energy crested in New York during the 1920s in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan In the 1920s*.

²³⁹ David Levering Lewis, 116.

²⁴⁰ Gershenhorn, 32.

²⁴¹ Gershenhorn, 32.

²⁴² *Ibid.*,

*Interpretation.*²⁴³ Following Boas' lead, Herskovits was committed to training black anthropologists, and hired black assistants to aid him while conducting research.²⁴⁴

Herskovits view of African American cultural connections to Africa evolved over time. Herskovits began his career arguing, in the spirit of cultural determinist theories, that there was no difference between black and white life, but he eventually abandoned this view in favor of a more complicated reading of black culture formation in the Americas.²⁴⁵ Herskovits' career can be defined by his determination to prove that anti-black racism was the product of white fictions about uncivilized African savages. Inspired by Boas' teachings, Herskovits decided that disabusing whites of these notions was the only way to unravel racism. Where Boas sought to remedy racism by presenting a new view of black American's African past, Herskovits sought to establish the link between African culture and American blacks. To this end, Herskovits employed anthropological methodologies to elevate the social structures, religious cosmology and histories of West African societies. He spent over twenty years researching these subjects which he framed in terms of theories about African survivals—evidence of widespread African “syncretism” and “retentions” among New World blacks that became his scholarly trademark.²⁴⁶

Herskovits admitted that Brazilian anthropologist, Arthur Ramos, first introduced the syncretism theory but most scholars have credited Herskovits for popularizing the

²⁴³ Ibid.,

²⁴⁴ Gershenhorn writes about Herskovits and his black research assistants (138).

²⁴⁵ Baker (24), Hutchinson (76) and Corbould (161) assert that Herskovits anthropological theories about racial distinction changed over time.

²⁴⁶ Melville Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), xiii.

theory.²⁴⁷ “Syncretism,” as interpreted by Herskovits and applied to blacks in the Atlantic World, was the process through which Africans identified European cultural forms in relation to “matching” cultural forms significant in their own conceptualization of reality that resulted in the fusion of both cultures, creating distinct new world forms.

The increased attention paid to black culture in social science research by the 1930s both shaped Herskovits’ theories and provided him with the opportunity to join the ranks of noted scholars. He acknowledged social scientists’ preoccupation with black culture: “The folklore collections are impressive in their extent, linguistic studies and those of Negro dialects are beginning to be given the attention they deserve, while religious ceremonial practices have for many years fascinated students in various portions of the Americas.”²⁴⁸ Certainly Modernist primitivism popularized the type of folklore and cultural studies that Herskovits commented on. Yet, Herskovits, called for a more in-depth exploration of the African context so that Modernists’ examinations of black culture and folklore could be distinguished from the Victorian Primitivist and Modernist Primitivist collections that simply featured black savagery and primitiveness: “With better knowledge of the African cultures we shall have an adequate basis to investigate the affiliation of those cultural traits the American Negro has retained in his contact with white and Indian civilizations.”²⁴⁹

Herskovits spent a great deal of time in his career looking for examples of syncretism in black practices throughout the Atlantic World and traveled to Suriname,

²⁴⁷ Ibid., xxii.

²⁴⁸ Melville Herskovits, “The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem” *American Anthropologist*, 32 (1930) 149.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 149.

Dahomey, Haiti, Trinidad and throughout the United States on this quest. Ultimately, Herskovits argued that African influences could be found in black people's motor habits (walking, speaking, laughing, sitting postures, dancing, singing, burden carrying, hoeing, etc), social organizations, folklore, family structure, childrearing, perception of the afterlife, religious worship styles and language.²⁵⁰

As the debate between Frazier and Herskovits raged during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, both Herskovits and Frazier weighed in on the research that was conducted on Sapelo Islanders. Predictably, Frazier was critical of the way that the amateur researchers who studied blacks in coastal Georgia fashioned the Gullah identity, while Herskovits cheered them on.

One year after Julia Peterkin's novel *Scarlet Sister Mary* won the Pulitzer Prize, Melville Herskovits championed the search for African survivals among the Gullah: "Next on our table we should place such isolated groups living in the United States as the Negroes of the Savannahs of southern Georgia, or those of the Gullah islands off the Carolina coast where African elements of culture are more tenuous."²⁵¹ Had Park's conclusion about Sea Islanders inspired Herskovits' curiosity about "Gullah" folk? Or did the popularity of Peterkin's work make the unique relationship between "Gullah" people and their African heritage a common assumption? Herskovits more than admired Peterkin's work, like many Americans who read Julia Peterkin's novels he interpreted her fiction as fact: Herskovits cited Gullah practices that she described in her book *Green*

²⁵⁰ Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of Herskovits' study *The Myth of the Negro Past* outline, in great detail, African survivals in the Atlantic World.

²⁵¹ Melville Herskovits, "The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem" *American Anthropologist*, 32 (1930) 145-155.

Thursday in his landmark study, *Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) as evidence of the African roots of Gullah culture.²⁵² Consequently, once the “Gullah” identity was consolidated in the ivory tower, it transitioned from Peterkin’s fiction to social scientific fact. For Frazier, social scientists’ characterization of the Gullah as a quasi-African ethnic group was preposterous, and he completely rejected this view of “the Gullah” when he was asked to review the writings of one Sapelo Island researcher.

The Making of a Black Anthropologist: Zora Neale Hurston and Voodoo, the Quintessential African Survival

Herskovits’ impact on the studies that labeled Sapelo Islanders and other blacks living in coastal Georgia as authentic Gullah folk extended beyond his insistence that more anthropological evidence be collected among blacks in the region, but can also be seen in the type of data that Gullah researchers pursued. Researchers’ re-definition of the Gullah identity during the 1920s and 1930s, which included expanding their definition to include coastal Georgia blacks, also added to its characterization of Gullah folk African spiritual primitivism. Trends in the academe played a significant role in the addition of African spiritual primitivism to the list of Gullah characteristics. The possibility that African spiritual survivals might be discovered among Sapelo Islanders and other blacks living in coastal Georgia excited Mary Granger and Lydia Parrish. While forces outside of the academe were also responsible for generating an increased interest in voodoo, roots and conjuh’ during the 1920s and 1930s, anthropologists under Franz Boas’ tutelage at Columbia University established voodoo as the quintessential African survival to be unearthed among southern blacks. Herskovits explained: “The history of the voodoo cult

²⁵² Melville Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941), 236.

is reasonably well known...and, in the form it has flourished in the West Indian islands, a form not unlike that of the South of this country, many African survivals have been established as being present.” Herskovits also argued that there was a very specific reason why “voodoo” emerged as the cultural practice in which the most pure African survivals would be uncovered: “Voodoo has, from its inception, been under the ban, and has been practiced in great secrecy. Is it strange, that here the purest form of African customs, those which have been tampered with least by the white man, should survive?”²⁵³ According to Herskovits’s estimations, voodoo represented the only aspect of blacks’ lives that had not been significantly influenced by white culture because it was hidden and practiced in secrecy. Yet, in the development of the syncreticism thesis in his own research, Herskovits acknowledged that European forms were fused with African forms in voodoo rites.²⁵⁴

Herskovits’ perception of the authenticity of voodoo as evidence of syncretism and the centrality of voodoo to African survivals discourse was not developed in an intellectual vacuum. Black Harlem Renaissance writer and Franz Boas trained anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston, began to treat voodoo practices in black southern communities as a serious scholarly subject in 1931. Her anthropological works defined the parameters of African spiritual survivals among southern blacks. While Hurston’s role in drawing voodoo into the African survivals discussion is in and of itself profound, equally interesting is the fact that she played the part of both scholar and subject in the Modernist Primitivist drama. Surely Hurston, a young, black, woman from the south, had

²⁵³ Melville Herskovits, Untitled Review of Newbell Niles Puckette’s book *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926), *Journal of American Folklore*, 40 (1927) 311.

²⁵⁴ Melville Herskovits, *Myth of a Negro Past*, 124.

to carefully navigate Modernist Primitivists imaginings of her blackness and New Negro expectations of her relative to uplifting the race, all while trying to establish herself as a writer and scholar. However difficult striking the balance must have been, Hurston did so, and published four novels, two folklore studies, and authored autobiography and several short stories.

Zora Neale Hurston's path to the ivory tower was anything but easy. Hurston grew up in an all black town, Eatonville, Florida, and was born sometime between 1891 and 1901.²⁵⁵ Her father was a Baptist minister, and her mother was a homemaker.²⁵⁶ Lucy Hurston, Hurston's mother, instilled in Hurston a love for knowledge. She gathered all eight of her children in her bedroom each night to do lessons, repeating with her children the academic drills that she used when she was a schoolteacher.²⁵⁷ When her mother passed away her father quickly remarried, and Hurston's tense relationship with her new stepmother resulted in Hurston being sent away to boarding school in Jacksonville, Florida.²⁵⁸ Hurston left Jacksonville before completing her studies and took up work as wardrobe girl in a Gilbert and Sullivan repertory company that was touring the south.²⁵⁹ She somehow made her way to Baltimore, Maryland where she was able to gain admission and economic support for tuition at Morgan Academy in 1917.²⁶⁰ She

²⁵⁵ Hemenway explains that determining Hurston's exact age and birth date is complicated by the fact that there is no formal record of her birth, as well as that she frequently misrepresented her age (13). Valerie Boyd describes Eatonville, Florida in *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York, Scribner, 2003), 19-22.

²⁵⁶ Hemenway, 14.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 15- 17.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

graduated from Morgan Academy in 1918, and supported herself and paid tuition for part-time studies at Howard University, by working as a manicurist.²⁶¹

Hurston struggled through course work at Howard, where she had trouble competing with the academic performance of her middle class cohorts while juggling work and her studies. Despite the fact that Hurston did not always achieve high marks, her writing showed great promise. She labored tirelessly over stories through which she channeled her childhood experiences in black Eatonville and the quality of her writings gained her acceptance into a literary organization that Alain Locke founded at Howard University.²⁶² Locke was so impressed with her work that he referred her work to Charles S. Johnson, the founder and editor of the *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*.²⁶³ Hurston's writings engaged with black subjects and black life, and Charles S. Johnson sought to publish exactly the type of stories that Hurston wrote. Hurston's short stories "Drenched in Light," "Spunk" and her play "Color Struck", blended black folk life and her experiences in Eatonville so expertly that they were all accepted and published in *Opportunity*.²⁶⁴ Two of Hurston's three submissions were awarded prizes, and only five months after her first submission, she was beckoned to New York to attend an award dinner that celebrated the accomplishments of the shining stars of the Harlem Renaissance in 1924.²⁶⁵

Like so many blacks from the south during the period, Hurston decided to move to New York in 1925. The move set a new course for her career as a writer and her

²⁶¹ Hemenway, 10, Boyd, 79-87.

²⁶² Hemenway, 19, Boyd, 84

²⁶³ Hemenway, 20.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 20.

academic studies. Hurston described her first days in New York: “So the first week of January, 1925, found me in New York with \$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope.”²⁶⁶ Charles S. Johnson and his wife helped Hurston get settled, but they would be counted among others who helped the young writer transition to a new life in New York.²⁶⁷ Fannie Hurst, a famous white Jewish novelist, and judge for the *Opportunity*’s literary contest, was taken by Hurston’s work and offered her a job as her live-in secretary despite the fact that Hurston could barely type.²⁶⁸ Fannie Hurst was not the only prominent white New Yorker impressed with Hurston’s talents and charm. Annie Nathan Meyer, the white Jewish founder of Barnard College, the women’s college at Columbia University, arranged for Hurston to attend Barnard on a full scholarship in the fall of 1925.²⁶⁹ Zora Neale Hurston was Barnard’s only black student when she enrolled. According to Hurston’s writings, she did not experience discrimination at Barnard.²⁷⁰ Perhaps the mixture of Hurston’s brilliance and literary skills, and the Modernist’s obsession with black people and the heightened interracial contact that it inspired, was responsible for the outpouring of white support that Hurston received in New York. Whatever the case, Hurston’s time spent at Barnard transformed her from a literary talent to a social scientist.

Zora Neale Hurston first became acquainted with Franz Boas and anthropology by chance, but she quickly became enthralled in the discipline. Hurston’s academic

²⁶⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York, Library of America, 1995), 683.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶⁹ Hemenway, 21.

²⁷⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York, Library of America, 1995), 684.

adviser suggested that she take an anthropology course for “cultural reasons.”²⁷¹ After taking a course in the department she became acquainted with Boas whom she called “King of Kings.”²⁷² Hurston does not describe what specifically called her to take up anthropological research. However, the clear and consistent interest in black folk life reflected in her fiction writings hints at the source of her inclination to explore “culture.” Hurston also deeply admired Boas: “That man can make people work the hardest with just one look or word, of anybody else in creation. He is idolized by everybody who takes his orders. We call him Papa, too...Don’t raise a point which you can’t defend. He wants facts, not guesses.”²⁷³ Hurston’s admiration of Boas was not unrequited. Boas acknowledged Hurston’s intellect and encouraged her to become an anthropologist.²⁷⁴ Hurston and other anthropology students frequently attended social gatherings at Boas’ house.²⁷⁵ Through these series of social and academic interactions between Hurston, Boas, and anthropology students at Columbia and Barnard, Hurston met Melville Herskovits who also took an active role in introducing her the field of anthropology. Eventually, Hurston worked as Herskovits’ and Boas’ assistant. She measured skulls for Boas in Harlem and collected evidence that helped him to refute assertions about black people’s intellectual inferiority.²⁷⁶

At first glance, it may appear that Hurston was the sole beneficiary of the relationship that she maintained with Herskovits and Boas. However, Hurston taught

²⁷¹ Hurston, 684.

²⁷² *Ibid.*,

²⁷³ *Ibid.*,

²⁷⁴ Hutchinson, 70.

²⁷⁵ Hurston, 684.

²⁷⁶ Hutchinson describes Hurston’s relationship with Herskovits (67), and Hemenway writes about Hurston and Boas’ research ventures (63).

Herskovits and Boas a few lessons too. Hurston openly disagreed with Herskovits at times, and influenced some of his work.²⁷⁷ The time that Herskovits spent with Hurston while conducting research, and the attention he paid to her mannerisms during those times, inspired his research of black motor behavior as a potential African survival.²⁷⁸ More importantly, Boas was so impressed with Hurston that he envisioned her producing, for black Americans, the type of studies that he conducted on Native Americans—research that could be used to counter the racist assumption that surmised that illiterate folk culture marked inferiority and reflected no intrinsic value.²⁷⁹ Perhaps Hurston's tales about life in black Eatonville captured Boas' imagination and won his confidence in her ability to apply anthropological tools to the study of her people. Boas was so confident in his assessment of Hurston's ability to significantly contribute to the study of black folk life that he personally reached out to Carter G. Woodson to secure a fellowship from the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History so that she could conduct fieldwork in the south when she completed coursework at Barnard.²⁸⁰ Somehow Boas persuaded Woodson to award Hurston the fellowship over a seasoned scholar, and Hurston's former teacher, Alain Locke.²⁸¹ Hurston recalled the day that Boas told her about the fellowship: "Two weeks before I graduated from Barnard, Dr. Boas sent for me and told me that he had arranged a fellowship for me. I was to go south and collect Negro folk-lore...I was extremely proud that Papa Franz felt like sending me."²⁸²

²⁷⁷Gershenhorn (86), Hutchinson (76).

²⁷⁸ Gershenhorn, 66 and 69.

²⁷⁹ Hemenway, 88.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Hemenway, 89.

²⁸² Hurston, 685-688.

In 1927, Hurston took the \$1,400 that Woodson had given her for six months of research and headed south to Florida in pursuit of black folklore. She arrived first in Jacksonville, Florida, 66 miles south of Sapelo Island, full of excitement and enthusiasm, but those emotions quickly faded. Hurston's research venture was not successful. Boas had hoped that Hurston's blackness and her familiarity with the local culture in the region would encourage black subjects to open up to her, but that did not happen. When Hurston sent her first report to Boas, he was disappointed that she had not uncovered new material; her submission mirrored so much of the black folklore that had already been collected by whites.²⁸³ She later determined that she did not have the "right approach." She explained: "The glamour of Barnard College was still upon me...I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, 'Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?' The men and women who had treasuries of material seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads."²⁸⁴ In Hurston's own words, the "civilizing" effects of formal academic training and city life acted as a wedge lodged between her and the black southern folk whom she attempted to transform from hometown-kinfolk to research subjects. However, Hurston's field research was not a total disappointment. She collected a few voodoo tales that triggered her to devise new formulations about the merits of a serious scholarly examination of "hoodoo" in black communities in the south.²⁸⁵ Hurston decided that hoodoo doctors in black southern communities "took the

²⁸³ Hemenway, 91.

²⁸⁴ Hurston, 688.

²⁸⁵ Hemenway, 92.

place of the medical man, the priest, and the lawyer, with the added fear-power that none of the others have.”²⁸⁶

By 1928, Hurston was enroute to New Orleans to explore and document voodoo in black communities. By 1931, she had collected enough data to publish an article. “Hoodoo in America” was featured in the *Journal of American Folklore*. It is no surprise that Hurston, a member of the American Folk-Lore Society, presented her research in the organization’s journal.²⁸⁷ Since 1888, the American Folk-Lore Society dedicated its interests to exploring the primitive world of non-whites and featured the results of these encounters in its journal.

Hurston’s article consisted of over one hundred pages of magical formulas, mystical charms and dark rites and rituals practiced by American blacks in New Orleans, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama and occasionally Georgia.²⁸⁸ Hurston introduced her study by defining “voodoo,” and other terms relative to the practice: “Veaudeau is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs, but it is known to the American Negro. His own name for his practices is hoodoo, both terms being related to the West African term juju.” Hurston pointed out to readers that “hoodoo” was not the only name that American blacks used to identify African magic practices and beliefs: “ ‘Conjure’ is also freely used by the American Negro for these practices.” In the article, Hurston did not distinguish herbal medicine from African magic; instead, she conflated the two practices and presented them as one in the same: “ ‘Roots’ is the Southern Negro’s term

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Hurston mentions being admitted to the American Folk-Lore Society, *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 684.

²⁸⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, “Hoodoo in America,” *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, October-December (1931) 317-417.

for folk-doctoring by herbs and prescriptions, and by extension, and because of all hoodoo doctor's cure by roots, it may be used as a synonym for hoodoo."²⁸⁹

While *Hoodoo in America*'s readers may have found that Hurston's writings illuminated the inner world of a dark practice, what they encountered in the article may have actually distorted the image of voodoo instead of clarifying it. Hurston's explanation of voodoo terminology was undoubtedly helpful to the article's academic audience. In fact, Hurston's definition of "voodoo" is the most concise description of the practice to appear in scholarly literature during the period. The direct relationship that Hurston asserted between "conjure", "hoodoo," "roots" and Africa is significant within the framework of the African survivals debate, simply because she identified these practices as being African in origin, which substantiated her colleagues' claim that African practices survived in America. Still, her description of "hoodoo" is problematic: it was vague, and merely asserted a loose link between Africa, New World blacks, herbal medicine and magic. For example, Hurston's conclusion that all herbal medicine was "root doctoring," or a manifestation of voodoo obscured the reason why herbal remedies were pervasive in black southern communities. While Hurston acknowledged that most of her subjects were poor, she did not consider the economic realities that may have encouraged, what she assumed to be, black southerners' "preference" for herbal medicine. Similarly, the rest of the study follows no specific pattern of academic inquiry, but instead describes specific rites and rituals, providing "how to" instructions for everything from human sacrifice to punishing unkind landlords.²⁹⁰ Ultimately, Hurston's

²⁸⁹ Hurston, "Hoodoo in America", 317.

²⁹⁰ Hurston, "Hoodoo in America", 317-417.

most stunning assessment of “hoodoo in America” is this declaration: “Shreds of hoodoo beliefs and practices are found wherever any number of Negroes is found in America.”²⁹¹ Surely, the fact that Hurston was black helped to establish the legitimacy of her claim—a claim that filtered down from the academe to the newspaper reading American public in very disturbing ways.

Hurston’s career as an anthropologist was concentrated on voodoo research. A participant observer in this research, she even underwent several initiations and participated in numerous rituals in order to gain the trust of her subjects.²⁹² The culmination of Hurston’s voodoo research in the American south was the publication of *Mules and Men* (1935). Despite Hurston’s anthropological training, her fieldwork was packaged for a popular audience of lay readers. American readers that purchased books about black southerners had become accustomed to the sort of stories that Julia Peterkin told, and surely publishing companies wanted to replicate the success of these tales. The representation of black folklore and black southern culture in *Mules and Men* strayed so far from Boas’ mandates for good anthropology in order to attract popular readers that Hurston apologized for her failure and begged Boas to write the introduction in a private letter that she sent him in 1934. Hurston wrote: “So I hope that the unscientific matter that must be there for the sake of the average reader will not keep you from writing the introduction...” She promised Boas that the conversations and incidents that she reported were true but admitted that the work was not acceptable for academic audiences: “But of

²⁹¹ Ibid., 318.

²⁹² Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (182) Hurston wrote about her initiations: “When I found out about Turner I had already studied under five two-headed doctors and gone through an initiation ceremony with each.”

course I would have never set them down for scientists to read....” Hurston explained to Boas that her “anthropological” study had to be crafted to attract the growing popular interest in works that explored the exotic primitive Africanness of American blacks: “But the man in the street is different... You see some of the preposterous stuff put out by various persons on various folk-subjects.”²⁹³ Whether or not Boas was disturbed or excited by Hurston’s book, he did write an introduction to her study. Despite the fact that *Mules and Men* did not represent the best practices in terms of anthropological theory construction, Hurston’s voodoo studies continued to garner prestige. Hurston’s voodoo research won her the Guggenheim Fellowship prize in 1936 and in 1937—she used the award to explore voodoo and folk magic in Jamaica and Haiti.²⁹⁴

Zora Neale Hurston never communicated that she experienced inner conflict over presenting what had long been established as black-African spiritual savagery, to the world. Even the insecurities that she revealed to Boas in the 1934 letter focused on the ways in which she could have betrayed the academic discipline that she had grown to love. Zora Neale Hurston was proud of her blackness and lightheartedly admitted that she felt the stirrings of the African essence that her anthropologist colleagues theorized about deep in her soul. In the midst of her voodoo fieldwork in 1928, Hurston wrote an essay titled “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” that was published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most widely circulated black papers during the period.²⁹⁵ The essay

²⁹³ Hemenway, 164.

²⁹⁴ Hemenway, 227. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1937) was the published study that resulted from the research Hurston conducted with the Guggenheim funding award.

²⁹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1928, section A1.

lauded her blackness, and rejected the supposition that she should feel bad about being black: “Someone is always reminding me that I am the daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me.”²⁹⁶ In fact, Hurston wrote that whites were in the worse predicament: “The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never as exciting as the game of getting.”²⁹⁷ When describing how jazz music affected her, Hurston used creative imagery to play with her self-proclaimed primitive savagery:

This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rendering it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen-follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeoooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something-give pain, give death to what I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find my white friend sitting motionless in his seat smoking calmly.²⁹⁸

Certainly, Hurston’s literary play with her Africanness was designed to intentionally invoke the stark contrast between white “civilization” and black “savagery.” Dancing wildly, the assegai, references to the “jungle,” body paints, the “war drum” and even the desire to “slaughter something” were all traits that could be found in popular fantasies about African primitive people. Despite the fact that “black savagery” was in vogue among Modernist Primitivists during the 1920s and 1930s, ten years after the publication

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

of “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”, a newspaper report about Hurston’s voodoo research in Haiti, labeled her as being as primitive and savage as her subjects, and her work was reduced to absurdity. The article reported:

After eleven months in the dark jungles back of Port-au-Prince, chanting voodoo chants, drinking the blood of the sacrificial goat...Miss Hurston returns a believer in voodooism...Despite her degree from Barnard, the books she has written, the Columbia and Guggenheim Fellowships which she has won, Miss Hurston is a happy-go-lucky pagan.²⁹⁹

Hurston’s work also inspired a storm of controversy between New Negro intelligentsia simply because the content of her anthropological studies so closely mirrored the Victorian depiction of black ignorance and savagery derived from black people’s Africanness.³⁰⁰ The tensions that Hurston’s voodoo reports created are evident in a review of *Mules and Men* published in the *Journal of Negro History*: “Certainly the writer, if she has not convinced all readers of the power of Voodooism, has offered new evidence of widespread ignorance and superstition.”³⁰¹

Hurston’s contribution to African survivals theories is clear, but less discernable is the paradox in which she was trapped. Even as anthropological voodoo research could have unearthed substantial and legitimate fragments of West African cosmology, America’s racial construct muddled the perception of everyone involved: the researchers, the informants/subjects and those who read and interpreted the research were all working through complicated realities created by racism. For Hurston, the examination of non-

²⁹⁹ Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1943*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 293.

³⁰⁰ Hemenway, 218-227.

³⁰¹ B.C. McNeil, “Untitled Review” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 21, No 2 (April, 1936) 223-225.

Christian religious traditions among black southerners was an opportunity to embrace and document practices deemed reprehensible by whites with pride. Yet, Hurston's work, and white and black reactions to it, certainly suggests that the New Negro intelligentsia's dream of a marriage between anthropology and black culture studies, a dream in which black culture was perceived as distinct and a valuable source of race pride, would become a voodoo filled nightmare.

The possibility that remnants of African culture have survived among southern blacks should not overshadow the historically specific scholarly context that shaped and encouraged the discovery and identification of unique black communities in which researchers believed African retentions were abundant. The exhaustive anthropological research conducted in coastal Georgia, research that involved Sapelo Islanders, is a testament to the impact that discussions in the academe had on low country blacks during the 1930s. Discourse among social scientists in the ivory tower about black culture and black folk life was a major phenomenon through which the trajectory of Gullah studies was defined. Franz Boas' students significantly contributed to cultural and intellectual climate that hastened the research that was conducted on Sapelo Island, Georgia and greatly encouraged the determination that this group of black people, were in fact authentic Gullah folk. As we will see, E. Franklin Frazier's rebuttals to African survivals theories could not stand against the growing national preoccupation with exotic black southerners and their culture, believed to be born from their innate wild African impulses. Despite the fact that Boas, Herskovits and Hurston had good intentions when they presented theories about the African origins of black culture, and may have actually been

on the verge of uncovering profound African cultural reproductions in America, these anthropologists could not control the reaction that their theories would cause when co-joined with popular culture and American racism.

When researchers finally descended on Sapelo Island, Georgia in the 1930s and trekked through marshland and pinewoods to Hog Hammock in search of one of the island's eldest black resident, Shad Hall, they asked him about "roots," "conjuh" and voodoo drums-the things that the "experts" claimed embodied the most potent African essence. They did not bother to ask Hall about his vast knowledge of local botanicals, nor did they ask him to recount the tumultuous history of triumph and loss through which black Sapelo Islanders had come to understand them selves. Not only did Sapelo Islanders have to deal with the oppressive domination of their island by Howard Coffin and his successor R.J. Reynolds, but they also had to navigate the onslaught of inquisitive researchers in search of their African heritage.

Chapter 3

**The Voodoo Craze: Popular Media Interprets African Survivals During the 1920s
and 1930s**

“Black magic, voodooism, the evil eye and sundry other terms indicative of ‘devil’ worship when called to the attention of the average citizen in many instances conjure up a mental picture of some lonesome spot in the African bush where the chief medicine man attired in weird garb, gibberingly calls on the powers of darkness to ward off impending evil. It is not generally known that in the heart of Washington there is a certain class of citizens, who while they do not dance around a totem pole attired as was ‘gunga Din’ and striped with multicolored muds, still cling to many superstitious beliefs that were brought here with the first shipload of slaves landed at Jamestown, Va.”

-*The Washington Post*³⁰²

Shad Hall was not the only elderly Sapelo Islander sought by researchers hoping to uncover the African roots of black islanders’ “Gullah” culture during the 1920s and 1930s. Hall’s cousin and island midwife, Katie Brown, was also visited by several researchers who believed that in Brown’s memories of old slave songs, birthing rituals and religious and spiritual traditions lay a definitive link between Sapelo Islanders and their African past. The popularity of Julia Peterkin’s *Blue Brook Gullahs*, and their treasured midwife Maum Hannah, guaranteed that Katie Brown would rank high on researchers’ list of interviewees most likely to reveal connections between Sapelo Islanders and African traditions. Consequently, the stories that Brown told her inquisitive visitors, and the songs that she sang and prayers that she recited for them were featured in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940), *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942), *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) and in a paper titled “Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth” presented by Melville

³⁰² “Voodooism Prevalent Practice Still in Heart of Washington” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 1921, 34.

Herskovits' student, William Bascom, at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in 1941.³⁰³

Researchers asked Shad Hall and Katie Brown a plethora of questions pertaining to their family histories and cultural traditions. But they were especially interested in Sapelo Islanders' spiritual practices. In fact, Lorenzo D. Turner was the only Sapelo Island researcher during the period who focused on elements other than Gullah spiritual practices. Despite the fact that Sapelo Islanders had identified themselves as Christians well before the Civil War, and marked emancipation by founding their own Baptist churches, researchers questioned Sapelo Islanders about roots, hoodoo, conjuh, spells and rituals performed to placate the dead—all of which they believed to be non-Christian and pure derivatives of African cosmology. While Sapelo Islanders did report spiritual beliefs and practices that were not exclusively derived from European forms, researchers who came to Sapelo enhanced these reports with pre-assumptions of their own. They viewed Islanders through a conceptual lens colored by the dominant view of black southern spiritual life during the period. During the 1920s and 1930s, Americans were bombarded with astounding tales about blood thirsty black voodoo cults, clandestine rituals led by “rootworkers,” spells and hexes that stole souls and transformed people into zombies, and macabre charms and amulets that dangled from black bodies designed to invoke the protection of dark entities from beyond the grave. Sapelo Island researchers may have uncovered, among their subjects, shreds of sophisticated principles and

³⁰³ William Bascom's paper “Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth” was published in Mary A. Twining's and Keith Baird's anthology *African Presence in the Carolina's & Georgia: Sea Island Roots* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1991), 27-36.

practices unique to West African cosmology. But, they could not grasp the complexity of what they uncovered because they interpreted their findings according to the sensational character that African survivals took on in popular media.³⁰⁴

When one researcher asked Katie Brown about “voodoo” on Sapelo Island, she replied: “I ain know bout cunjuh...I heahs bout spells on people, but I an see um.”³⁰⁵ In the context of 1920s and 1930s America, perhaps Brown’s response would have been interpreted as either disappointing or deceptive. The belief that American blacks, and more specifically, American blacks living in the south were involved in, and or believed in the power of secret voodoo cults and voodoo rituals was widespread. Moreover, Peterkin’s portrayal of the Gullah consistently depicted superstitious folk whose commitment to Christianity wavered in the presence of Blue Brook’s root worker, Daddy Cudjoe’s, enticing power. While anthropologists like Melville Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston identified voodoo as the quintessential survival of African spiritual primitivism among New World blacks, and assigned positive connotations to this phenomenon, their theories were not the only formulations that influenced Sapelo Island researchers. Popular print media also championed the idea that there was a connection

³⁰⁴ Jason R. Young attempts to connect the reports of black spiritual folk culture, including Sapelo Island research, to definitive African roots in *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007). His efforts reflect the possible African correlates of practices and traditions described in *Drums and Shadows* and *Slave Songs* from the Georgia Coast that were underdeveloped in these studies because of the pervasive nature of popular ideas about voodoo during the 1920s and 1930s.

³⁰⁵ Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 160.

between New World blacks, and African spiritual practices, but deemed these practices immoral, illogical, pathological and dangerous.

Newspapers during the period frequently reported voodoo tales about secret rituals, mortal hexes, human sacrifices and naïve black migrants spending all of their money on voodoo doctors' cures and charms. Such reports reflected the social impact of the Great Migration as well as the public fascination with voodoo. There was a surge of voodoo related reports in migration metropolis newspapers with the greatest concentrations showing up roughly between 1920 and 1932 in *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Amsterdam News*. White newspapers presented voodoo reports as evidence of black ignorance and savage primitiveness: in white presses whites had achieved the height of modern civilization, and blacks remained pre-modern primitives. While voodoo reports in black newspapers refuted voodoo tales reported in white newspapers, condemned voodoo practices and communicated a clear anxiety about the presence of black southern migrants in migration metropolises. Sapelo Island researchers W.R. Moore, Lydia Parrish, Mary Granger and Lorenzo Dow Turner began conducting research in coastal Georgia between 1915 and 1935, so one can assume that the popular view of black's Africanness during these years were formative in the conceptualization of their projects. Therefore, a close examination of popular ideas about African spiritual survivals reflected in newspaper reporting trends is as critical to understand the ideological inspirations for Gullah research, as is the exploration of African survival theories devised in the academe. When voodoo reports from this period and Sapelo Island researchers' characterizations of islanders are read side-by-side, it becomes clear

that the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze significantly shaped the way that Sapelo Islanders' Gullahness was imagined.

Metropolis newspapers' assessment of African spiritual survivals and Africanness reflected the Victorian dichotomy between black savagery and white civilization. Despite the fact that in 1848 two white sisters in upstate New York, Kate and Margaret Fox, started the Spiritualist movement that touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of white Americans, during the 1920s and 1930s non-Christian black spiritual practices and beliefs took center stage as the most curious and primitive New World spiritual traditions. The Fox sisters popularized communication with the dead through spirit mediums, séances, clairvoyant and healing circles and other rituals designed to invoke spirit visitors to influence the lives of the living.³⁰⁶ By 1910, at least 400,000 Americans registered as followers of the white-led Spiritualist movement.³⁰⁷ Yet, blacks were identified by newspaper reporters as the predominant group of Americans who sought out spirits to intervene in their life's dramas as well as believed in superstitions and the power of spirit rituals.

American Modernist currents may have helped popularize Africanness, but voodoo-related newspaper reports racialized savagery with a specificity that suggests that Modernism also inspired a backlash against its adherents' challenges to Victorian notions

³⁰⁶ For more on the rise and evolution of American Spiritualism, see David Chapin's *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), Barbara Weisberg's *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004).

³⁰⁷ In 1920, Joseph McCabe published a history of the American Spiritualist Movement in which he included estimates of membership and practitioners, *Spiritualism: A Popular History from 1847* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), 57-58.

of culture that were deeply rooted in white supremacy. Similarly, shifts in America's racial geography caused by the waves of southern black migrants to the north also challenged the nation's racial order. The 1920s actually saw a significant rise in Ku Klux Klan membership that was indicative of white anxieties about all of the racial boundary crossing associated with Modernism.³⁰⁸ Hiram Wesley Evans, the leader of the KKK during the 1920s, championed a brand of white supremacy that envisioned a hierarchy in which white Protestant Christians ruled "civilization."³⁰⁹ Certainly, news reports about voodoo murders and black savagery helped fuel Evans' white washed version of "civilization." Among Christians, there is an established pattern of marking the "other" by associating them with satanic rituals involving cannibalism, blood sacrifices, orgies and human sacrifices.³¹⁰ Accordingly, black voodoo practitioners were presented to America's newspaper reading public as the primary perpetrators of satanic ritual abuse. The characterizations of blacks' Africanness described in voodoo related newspaper reports reflected the persistence of the Victorian views of blacks as savage primitives whose very nature compelled them to engage in perverse acts and made them susceptible to irrational superstitions.

During the 1920s and 1930s, sensational newspaper headlines announced the prevalence of black voodooists in U.S. occupied territories and the United States by describing large numbers of voodoo related murders, quack-voodoo doctors as well as reviewing a wide variety of voodoo themed plays, films and fictional works. This

³⁰⁸ Loren Baritz, *The Culture of the Twenties* (New York: Bobbs-Merril, 1983), 85.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 102-108.

³¹⁰ David Frankfurter explores this phenomenon *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

chapter examines these voodoo reports in order to flesh out the popular context through which African spiritual survivals, which became an essential characteristic of the Gullah identity, were generally imagined during this period. Using voodoo related newspaper reports in migration metropolis, I will reconstruct the way that African spiritual survivals were understood out side of the ivory tower. I will also analyze the way that voodoo reports were treated in white newspapers (*The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*) and in black papers (*The Chicago Defender* and *The New York Amsterdam News*).

Voodoo and Black Savagery Abroad: Voodoo Reports from U.S. Occupied Territories

The international expansion of the American government's domestic policy of white supremacy and domination through imperial projects set the stage for epic encounters between civilized whites and savage non-whites. Consistent with Victorian understandings of the relationship between race and civilization, non-white occupied peoples were depicted by newspaper reports as immoral, uncultured primitives in need of the paternalistic control and guidance of white civilization. These encounters were characterized and translated for America's newspaper reading public by the journalists who carried stories about the savage non-white world beyond U.S. borders. More than forty-three articles were published in migration metropolis newspapers between 1915 and 1935 that depicted black subjects in U.S. occupied countries as demonstrating savage behaviors deeply rooted in their Africanness. The United States' occupation of Haiti emerged in the American imaginary as the pinnacle of the encounter between white

civilization and black savagery, and voodoo was cast as the ultimate mark of the “Black Republic’s” savagery as well as provided a justification for occupation.³¹¹

In 1915 *The Washington Post* paved the way for voodoo reports from Haiti. The article titled “Haiti, Land of Voodooos and Many Revolutions” described the political climate in Haiti by concluding: “Superstition flourishes with politics, and one is not much better than the other.”³¹² The unidentified author took on voodoo: “Voodooism with all its horrible barbaric rites still flourishes among the people and its priests have always exerted considerable influence on the government.”³¹³ A month later, *The Chicago Tribune* printed an article titled “Haiti The Isle of Tragedy” followed the trend of linking turbulent Haitian politics to Africanness: “He lives much as he lived in Africa.”³¹⁴ By 1920 newspapers began to capitalize on white-eye witness reports of black savagery in Haiti. *The Chicago Tribune* ran one such article titled “Voodooism is Faith of Haiti, Admiral Says; Kill Humans, Drink Blood, Knapp Reports,” explained “That 95 percent of the natives of Haiti believe in the African jungle faith of voodooism which requires the sacrifice of human beings and drinking human blood.”³¹⁵ At least ten more articles about Haiti were printed by 1935 and published in migration metropolis newspapers—each cited voodoo in the text. The articles explored everything from the tenements of voodoo,

³¹¹ Mary Renda’s study *Taking Haiti* unearths the relationship between white civilization, black savages and America’s cultural response to Haiti’s occupation (12-127).

³¹² “Haiti, Land of Voodooos and Many Revolutions” *The Washington Post*, August 8, 1915, section ES5.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Louise James, “Haiti The Land of Tragedy” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 12, 1915, section B9.

³¹⁵ “Voodooism in Haiti, Admiral Says: Kill Humans, Drink Blood, Knapp Reports” *The Chicago Tribune*, December 15, 1920, 5.

U.S. interventions strategies, Haiti's political history, Haitian folk music and the challenge that voodoo practitioners presented to America's paternalistic endeavors.³¹⁶

The national imaginary, as reflected in newspaper reporting trends, ran wild with tales of Haitian voodoo. One *New York Times* report declared that a fifty-seven year old Haitian immigrant, Jean Joseph Ysneod Dauphin took voodoo pills that turned him white and was only admitted into the United States under the condition that he would allow American scientists to examine him.³¹⁷ *The New York Times* did not follow the report with any updates, but ten days later, Harlem's black paper, *The Amsterdam News*, ran a counter report in which the author announced that Dauphin's claims were misleading.³¹⁸ In fact, the article's author, T.R. Poston, used the article to deliver a scathing critique of the Haitian voodoo reporting trend and the United State's occupation of Haiti: "Haitians are sensitive people...especially resentful of the scores of white writers who have distorted the superstitions of the ignorant, stressed the exoticism of tropic existence and deliberately or unconsciously furnished propaganda for the establishment of marine rule

³¹⁶ W.B. McCormick, "Voodooism in Haiti," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1922, 92; Richard Loeder, "A Voodoo Castle in Haiti," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1923, section SM4; "U.S.- Built hard Roads Lift Scale of Living," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 15, 1927, 12; "Superstition Rules Tropics: Tell Tales of Voodoo in West Indies," *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 11, 1928, section A1; William Lawson, "U.S. Nurses Haiti, Filthy and Sick Back to Health," *The Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 1929, 8; "Haiti Voodoo Rites Doomed to Extinction: Modern Civilization Ends Cult Worship," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 27, 1930, 16; L.G. Labastille, "Haiti's Native Art: Songs of the Peasant and Voodoo Service," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1931, 115; "Yankee Artist Is Praised For Work in Haiti," *The Chicago Defender*, January 9, 1932, 3; James Miller, "Voodooism Still Reigns in Haiti," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1933.

³¹⁷ "White Negro Allowed to Land," *The New York Times*, November 25, 1933, 9.

³¹⁸ T.R. Poston, "Voodoo Played No Part in Changing Man to White, Haitians Contend," *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 28, 1933, 9.

in the island.”³¹⁹ The frustration that Poston communicated in his retort is characteristic of the black presses response to both the occupation of Haiti and the representation of black voodoo. Black newspapers, like white newspapers, associated voodooism with pathology and dysfunction, but unlike white newspapers, black presses generally considered “superstitious” practices as behaviors expressed by “ignorant” people. Conversely, white newspapers consistently presented the danger that voodooism posed to all who encountered its practitioners.

Haiti was not the only focus of African Diaspora voodoo reports. Cuba’s large black population presented yet another theatre in which the contest between white civilization and black savagery would generate more lurid voodoo reports in American papers. Most of the voodoo reports from Cuba between 1915 and 1935 related murders, human sacrifice plots involving white victims and other forms of ritual abuse.³²⁰ Headlines announced Cuban cannibals, Cuban voodoo blood seekers, rituals involving hearts being torn from living bodies, human sacrifices of black babies and human sacrifices involving white victims. *The New York Times* printed one of the earliest

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ “Death For Three Voodooists: Two Cuban Men and a Woman Killed Aged White Man for His Blood,” *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1916, section ES18; “Cuban Soldiers Kill 5 Voodoo Worshippers,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 1919, 12; “Cubans Kill Voodoos: Avenge Sacrifice of Children in Cannibalistic Rites,” *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1919, section ES13; “White Child Voodoo Victim: Body Found in Cuba With Heart Torn Out by Witch Doctors,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1922, 1; “Voodoo Plot to Slay Baby Foiled In Cuba,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 1929, 16; “Voodoo Plot To ‘Sacrifice’ Baby Nipped In Cuba,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 10, 1929, 21; “3 Seized in Voodoo Lot,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1930, 29; “Held As Witch In Killing: Aged Woman Arrested in Cuba as ‘Voodoo’ Doctor,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1930, section N9; “Unbidden Attendant Dies in Voodoo Meeting,” *The Washington Post*, June 7, 1930, 2; “Cuban Boy, 8, Killed As Voodoo Sacrifice,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1931, 21.

articles highlighting the dangers of voodoo rites in black Caribbean communities.³²¹ The article, “Death For Three Voodooists” described the execution of three “voodooists” who were killed for sacrificing a white man for his blood.³²² In 1927, both the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* printed the same Associated Press article about a white American girl who was saved from a Cuban voodoo plot in which she was intended to become a human sacrifice so that her blood could be used to save a sick “Negress.”³²³ Although more common in white newspapers Caribbean voodoo reports occasionally appeared in the black presses. *The Chicago Defender* reported a voodoo murder in Panama. The headline read: “Commits Murder to Escape Voodoo Spell,” and described the suspect’s behavior upon capture: “As he gave himself up to the police he broke into singsong patios of the voodoo death chant.”³²⁴

The prevalence of voodoo reports that depicted blacks across the Diaspora as bloodthirsty ritual murderers disturbed Melville Herskovits. Herskovits’ believed that uncovering the African origins of black culture and life in the New World could help restore dignity to the descendants of Africa. But popular representations of voodoo rites characterized as African in mainstream newspapers undermined those efforts. In 1935

³²¹ Voodoo reports from Trinidad, Panama and Brazil also circulated around Chicago, New York and Washington, D.C.: “Commits Murder to Escape Voodoo Spell,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1928, 13; “Letters to Voodooist Cause Brazil Scandal,” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 1930, section A4; “Voodoo Magician Arrested in Trinidad,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1931, 11; “Girl Is Slain in Jungle At a Voodoo Ceremony,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 1933, 12.

³²² “Death For Three Voodooists,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 1916, section ES18.

³²³ “American Girl saved From Voodoo Killing,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 1927, section E21; “American Child Saved From Voodoo Sacrifice,” *The Washington Post*, April 17, 1927, section M3.

³²⁴ “Commits Murder to Escape Voodoo Spell,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 3, 1928, 13.

Herskovits was finally interviewed about Haitian voodooism and *The Chicago Daily Tribune* ran the story. In an article entitled “Voodoo Terror Refuted By Herskovits,” Herskovits rejected popular understandings of Haitian voodoo: “As pictured in fiction and in the movies...voodooism includes blood rites and terrors. In reality the religion is most peaceful. The cult followers go to the ceremony regularly every Saturday night, and human sacrifice is unknown.”³²⁵

African Savagery at Home: Was the Murder Voodoo Related?

Herskovits’ attempt to disassociate the spiritual practice of voodoo from human sacrifice and other blood driven ritual atrocities came too late. By 1935, migration metropolis newspapers had already linked black Americans to blacks in the Diaspora, tying black American communities to what was believed to be the legacy of murderous African voodooism and childlike superstition. Over fifty-two murders committed between 1915 and 1935 were linked to voodoo in New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C. newspapers.³²⁶ Each described heinous crimes, gruesome ritual scenes, or passionate violence induced by fear of a voodoo curse.

³²⁵ “Voodoo Terror Refuted By Herskovits,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 18, 1935, 9.

³²⁶ There are too many American voodoo related murder reports to discuss individually in this chapter. The following is a list of the reports that will not be directly addressed: “Boy’s Torturer Jailed: May Be Voodoo Fanatic” *The Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1921, 9; “Death For Girl’s Assailant: Jury Convicts Negro ‘Voodoo’ Doctor,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 1922; “Woman’s Slayer Gets 10 Years’ Imprisonment,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 3, 1928, 13; “Fulton Given 20 Years” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 2, 1926, 8; “Girl Believed Third Victim of Voodoo Killers” *The Chicago Tribune*, December 2, and 1928, 8; “Fasting Man Seized in Witchcraft Raid: Cleveland Police Connect Voodoo Cult With Murder Case,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 1929, 3; “Fanatic Suspected As Seers’ Slayer,” *The Washington Post* March 20, 1929, 10;

White migration metropolis newspapers reported supposed voodoo related murders in the black community, but paid less attention to actual rituals of murderous violence popular among white Americans. Despite the fact that the surge of racial violence acted out by whites against blacks during the period followed a specific pattern and was enacted ritualistically, in white newspapers the lure of imagined voodoo induced violent frenzy was singled out as the most powerful example of grotesque ritual abuse. Grace Elizabeth Hale contextualizes the nature of white southern ritual lynching in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation In the South, 1890-1940* (1998). Hale argues that lynching was a unique white American ritual: “white southerners made an important contribution to the rapidly evolving forms of leisure in twentieth-century America: they modernized and perfected violence in the form of spectator lynching, as entertainment...”³²⁷ In *Making Whiteness*, Hale describes lynching scenes during which white mob members scrambled to collect dismembered body parts of black victims, in the

“Patient Kills Voodoo Doctor,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1929, 1; “Voodoo Doctor Shot in Battle,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 23, 1930, 3; “Woman Buried Alive 8 Cult Members Held” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 1933, 1; “Voodoo Slayer Given 33 Years,” *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1934, 22; “Witch Craft Offered As Murder Defense,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 28, 1934, 15; “‘Conjure’ Doctor Slain in Mississippi When He Disturbs Graves,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 12, 1935, 8; “Found Guilty of Murder: ‘Old Doc Voodoo’ of Harlem Convicted of Killing Two,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 1935, 3; “Killer of ‘Voodoo’ Man Over Love Charm Jailed,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1935, 3; “‘Voodoo’ Slaying Stuns East Harlem,” *Amsterdam News*, February 27, 1929; “Court Hear ‘Voodoo’ Slaying Plea Tomorrow” *Amsterdam News*, March 20, 1929; “Study Sanity of a Man Who Slew in Fear of ‘Voodoo’ ” *Amsterdam News*, April 3, 1929; “Slayer Who Feared ‘Voodoo’ Sent to Asylum After Study of Lunacy” *Amsterdam News*, April 24, 1929; “Girl Believed Third Victim of Voodoo Killers,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1928, 8; “Killer of ‘Voodoo’ Man Over Love Charm Jailed,” *Washington Post*, February 1935.

³²⁷ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation In the South, 1890-1940*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998) 203.

hopes of securing an ear, finger, or penis as a trophies and relics.³²⁸ Hale explains that in spectacle lynchings “blacks themselves became consumer items”: photographs of lynchers posing next to black corpses and stereographs of lynched black men were sold for money.³²⁹ Hale also emphasizes that while public lynching was most prevalent in the south in the 1900s, by 1920 the practice became a “new national pastime.”³³⁰ Black presses frequently declared the “savage” nature of the white lynching ritual. In fact, one *Amsterdam News* headline invoked terminology that was generally reserved for describing voodooists: “Southern Florida Has Wild Orgy Of Lynching.”³³¹ Similarly, *The Chicago Defender* printed an article depicting the sexual nature of the white lynching ritual when the paper reported the mob murder of a black Louisiana woman who was stripped naked, tied to a log with wire, drenched with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death by a group of white men because she refused their sexual advances.³³²

While white migration metropolis presses condemned lynchings as unjustified, immoral and criminal acts, they reserved descriptions of ritualistic savagery for black voodoo related murders. Subsequently, the designation of “ritual murders” in white migration metropolis newspapers reflects a conceptual inversion in which “savage” acts and ritual abuse were determined by the race of the actor, not by the act. This conceptual inversion served to obscure the reality that whites literally, consistently, and ritualistically sacrificed black people in order to maintain the white power structure. During the 1920s

³²⁸ Ibid., 213.

³²⁹ Ibid., 229.

³³⁰ Ibid., 204-205.

³³¹ “Southern Florida Has Wild Orgy Of Lynching,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1926, 2.

³³² “Burn Woman Alive Who Fought To Save Honor: Mob Soaks Body OF Woman In Gasoline Then Applies Match,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1925, 1.

and 1930s, the period during which racial segregation and the white supremacy was firmly planted in the nation, and the point during which New Negroes presented new challenges to the white supremacy, reinforcing the racial distinctions identified by the Victorians was critical to maintain the power structure. Voodoo murder reports did exactly that. Linking black “savagery” to an inherited African essence provided a justification for continued white dominance and black oppression.

Voodoo-related murder reports tended to depict black voodooists consistent with the type of African savagery described in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914). Burrough’s novel, filled with African cannibals who kept remains of human sacrifices as souvenirs, sold 750,000 copies by 1934.³³³ The popularity of Burrough’s book clearly illuminates Americans’ interest in tales about encounters with African savages and voodoo reports fanned the flames of this fad. News stories like the one printed in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1916 verified the persistence of African savagery in America. The front-page article recounted the series of events in which a human torso discovered by workmen remained unidentified for eight years until a skull was found between Jennie L. Smith’s mattress.³³⁴ Smith was described as “an old Negress who pretended to be a witch and ‘voodooist’.”³³⁵ A 1925 *New York Times* headline read “Human Bones Found in Voodoo Man’s Cave: Negro Chambers of Horror Beneath His House Killed Woman, His Daughter Says.”³³⁶ The report described a secret

³³³ Bederman, 219.

³³⁴ “Skull Found May Clear Up Gunness Case,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 6, 1916, 1.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ “Human Bones Found In Voodoo Man’s Cave,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1925, 21.

cave underneath H.H. Hughcock's Atlantic City, New Jersey home: "The detectives said that in each of the underground passages they had found something to calculate horror or fright...in the largest chamber doll-like heads covered in phosphorous were suspended from the ceiling."³³⁷ Similarly, in 1928 the arrest of a thirty-seven year old black Cleveland man, referred to as a "negro voodoo doctor," found in possession of a decapitated head was reported in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Defender*.³³⁸ Generally, the circumstances that led up to, and motivations for these murders remained unexplored in the text of the reports. Yet, voodoo rites were used to explain the presence of human remains. Despite the fact that white lynch mobs also collected body parts, newspaper reports generally presented black voodooists as the primary culprits of this sort of desecration.

Murder mysteries involving black people were almost instantly associated with voodoo during the period even when no evidence of "voodoo" was found at the scene of the crime. In April 1923, *The Washington Post* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported the discovery of infant bones in a pond in Crisfield, Maryland.³³⁹ Both headlines identified "voodoo" as the culprit. *The Washington Post* article began: "The discovery of handfuls of human bones, unquestionably those of infants, in the bed of a pond...followed the finding of headless bodies of two colored children in the same pond

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "Voodoo Doctor Held For Slaying Of Negro," *The New York Times*, December 22, 1928, 10; "Voodoo Rites Seen In Man's Beheading," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 1928, 9; "Hold Voodoo Doctor for Beheading Man," *The Chicago Defender*, December 29, 1928, 1.

³³⁹ "Lay Death of Babies to Voodoo Sacrifices," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 1923, 6; "Seek Voodoos in Killing of Many Infants," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 22, 1923, 3.

yesterday afternoon.”³⁴⁰ Even though authorities had no clues in the case, the writer explained that police “share the belief of some residents that the children were sacrifices of voodooism.”³⁴¹ Predictably, the community’s residents were described as secretive blacks, complicit in voodooism: “the negroes on this point of Eastern Shore are taciturn. They never tell on one another...no matter what they are accused of doing.”³⁴² *The Chicago Daily Tribune* article actually goes further and assumed that local black residents possessed knowledge of African born voodoo rites: “Negroes throughout the city are being questioned closely to learn if the dead infants had been human sacrifices to the relic of barbarism of darkest Africa and the West Indies, voodooism.”³⁴³ Almost a month later, after the mystery of the infant bones had been solved, Harlem’s own *Amsterdam News* was the only paper to run an article announcing that voodoo did not play a role in the death of infants and the desecration of their remains. *The Amsterdam News* headline read “Voodoo Tale Shown To Be Absurd,” and the article explained that an unsavory undertaker contracted to bury the bodies of still born infants of unwed mothers saved him self a few dollars by disposing of the bodies in the pond.³⁴⁴ However, occasionally black presses followed the dominant trend and suggested that the answer to a murder mystery would be found in a secret voodoo sect. Surely even black presses were seduced by the allure and popularity of racy voodoo stories that indeed helped to sensationalize otherwise mundane tragedies. *The Chicago Defender* reported the murder of three Harlem women on their front page: one woman’s throat was slashed, another

³⁴⁰ Ibid. *The Washington Post*.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid., *The Chicago Daily Tribune*

³⁴⁴ “Voodoo Tale Shown To Be Absurd,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 1923, 1.

asphyxiated by an indoor laundry line, the third was strangled and an infant starved to death after being alone at the murder scene for three days. There were no leads in the case, so the writer concluded at the end of the article: “Whether the slayings were the result of the policy racket or the working of some voodoo cult detectives are unable to say. No policy slips were found.”³⁴⁵

Voodoo murder reports also emphasized the dangers of crossing racial boundaries. During the 1920s the Modernist impulse inspired some whites to explore of black spaces. Some whites living in migration metropolises during the 1920s had taken the risk of exploring black communities, black music and black bodies, while other whites who believed in maintaining racial boundaries perceived interracial contact, especially interracial sexual contact, to be dangerous.³⁴⁶ Voodoo related murder reports reasserted the danger in civilized whites mingling with black savages. Unsurprisingly, the most widely reported voodoo murder was the murder of a white woman at the hands of a black male voodooist. The 1923 murder of white nurse Elise Barthell made news in all of the major metropolis newspapers. Headlines announced that Barthell was murdered by Alonzo Savage,” a negro voodoo doctor.”³⁴⁷ According to reports, Barthell and Savage worked together: he was a butler and she was a nurse at the home of an affluent physician. Barthell asked Savage to help her resolve a romantic issue. Reports

³⁴⁵ “3 Women Found Slain: Night Club Dancer’s Throat Slashed; Mother Killed: Baby Left to Starve Dies,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 21, 1931, 1.

³⁴⁶ Kevin Mumford explores this dynamic in depth in Part II & Part III of *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³⁴⁷ “Police Hold Friend of Murder Nurse,” *The Washington Post*, October 9, 1923, 3; “Occultists Held For Murder,” *Amsterdam News*, October 10, 1923, 1; “Voodooist Slew Pittsburgh Nurse,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1923, page 10; “Nurse’s Slayer Executed,” *The Washington Post*, April 1, 1924, page 4.

explained that Savage killed Barthell during a secret meeting at an abandoned mansion during which she refused to pay for his services. Savage confessed that he “struck the nurse in the face when she grabbed the money out of his hand, felled her with a brick and then dropped a seventy pound block of marble on her head.”³⁴⁸ *The Washington Post* described Barthell’s murder using more graphic language: “he pushed a loose marble block from the wall, crushing the victim’s skull.”³⁴⁹ A black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, was the only paper that ran an article that revealed discrepancies in the Barthell murder story.³⁵⁰ *The Courier* reported that Barthell was pregnant and was involved in a love triangle that may have involved the same white man that drove her to meet Savage the night of her murder. Yet, the most important detail in the report was that Savage was not a “voodoo doctor.”³⁵¹ Ultimately, Savage was executed in April of 1924, and in reporting the event *The Washington Post* maintained that Barthell was killed because she refused to pay \$395.00 for a “love charm.” Similarly, *The Chicago Defender* reported that a black woman voodooist killed her white husband.³⁵² Other voodoo-related murder stories highlighted the dangers of employing black voodooists: A white Atlantic City shop owner was reported to have been burned to death by a black voodooist that he hired to work for him.³⁵³

³⁴⁸ Ibid., *The New York Times*.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., *The Washington Post*.

³⁵⁰ “Misguided Love Caused Death of Nurse, Alleged New Angle Unfolded As Girl’s Condition Is Brought to Light,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 13, 1923, 1.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² “Voodoo Slayer in Court Without Funds,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 21, 1931.

³⁵³ “Voodooism Sifted in Fire Death Case,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1929, 16; “Finds Charred Body, Blames Voodooism For Man’s Death,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1929, 4.

While black newspapers tended to, most consistently, take up the charge of refuting the accuracy of voodoo related murder reports, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Amsterdam News* at times ran articles that presented black people's connection to Africa in a negative light.

While some New Negro writers, artists and intellectuals such as Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen and Alain Locke championed a distinctly Modernist view of the healing effect of unifying black American traditions with "African" folk traditions, others were troubled by "black folk" (especially the scores of "black folk" that migrated to the north) and the invocation of African survivals. The reporting trends surrounding the murder of James L. Smith by Moorish Scientist Robert Harris, perfectly illustrates this conflict. *The Chicago Defender* ran the story on its front page and described it as a "human sacrifice."³⁵⁴ The *Defender* also identified the Morrish Science Temple, an early black Muslim organization, as a voodoo cult that Chicago's black religious community made an effort to eradicate: "A concentrated effort on the part of ministers, organizations and individuals has been launched to wipe out the evil influence of the 'religious cult, which includes certain aspects of voodooism and Mohammedianism'."³⁵⁵ Clearly, an older black tradition of racial uplift, a Victorian tradition, influenced some black leaders' tendency to lump all non-Christian black spiritual practices in with the type of voodoo imagined in popular literature. To some extent, the Victorian black uplift tradition heeded the declaration that white "civilization" had furnished blacks with an alternative to the African savagery from which they came. *The Chicago Defender's* December 10th

³⁵⁴ "Declare Voodoo King Insane," *The Chicago Defender*, December 17, 1932, 1.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

headline perfectly illustrates this conflicted view of African heritage relative to “voodoo”: “Voodoo Rites of The Jungles in Odd Contrasts With Background of City: Powerful Religious Cults Which Had Beginnings in Africa Still Make Human Sacrifices.”³⁵⁶ The article featured the Moorish Science Temple, and described all of their gatherings and ceremonies using to popular voodoo-language. Dewey R. Jones, the journalist that authored the article, explained that the rash of voodoo human sacrifices in American cities presented city police with the same questions that “white guardians of civilization have pondered in Haiti, in Africa and in South American jungles for hundreds of years.”³⁵⁷ Clearly, Jones’ statement reflects the elevated status of white “civilization.” Jones went further connected the Moorish Science Temple to Haitian voodoo despite the organization grounded its philosophy in Islamic tradition—the fact that a Moorish Scientist committed a “ritual” murder was all that was needed to link the sect to Africa and voodoo. Jones was, it seems, aware of his denigration of African spiritual traditions and attempted to remedy this representation near the article’s end by linking Christianity to weird rites: “After all, it must have been some religious fanaticism that brought Daniel face-to-face with some lions during biblical times. All religions known to man have, at one phase or another, demanded the human sacrifice.”³⁵⁸ However, in the end, Jones acknowledged the fact that voodoo, and all traces of African savagery among blacks in migration metropolises needed to be stamped out:

But voodooism must go from this country, say police in various cities where its influence have been felt. There is something deadly in

³⁵⁶ Dewey Jones, “Voodoo Rites of the Jungle Contrast...” *The Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1932, 1.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

trying to mix jungle rites with tall buildings and modern urban fixtures. There is something in the minds of those who go in for voodooism under the city conditions that the ordinary mind cannot fathom.³⁵⁹

In Jones' condemnation of "jungle rites" the New Negroes perception of the contrast between the modern city and primitive rural spaces is clearly articulated. The "city" was an important symbol in the transformation of the "Old Negro" to the "New Negro:" it stood in opposition to the remote rural plantation that was the symbol of black bondage. Essentially, Jones argues that blacks who seek out "voodooism" in the city have failed to embrace modernity which threatened the success of the New Negro agenda.

Civilizing Savages: Crack Down on Root Doctors

While migration metropolis headlines depicted black voodooists as perpetrators of human sacrifices and being overwhelmed with their "tropical temperament" to the point of murder, newspapers also ran stories that can be read as cautionary tales to voodoo followers and potential root doctor customers. Between 1915 and 1935, twenty-six stories about voodoo doctors who accidentally killed their clients or engaged in mail and other types of fraud ran in New York, Chicago and Washington papers. These stories identified gullible blacks as victims of African born superstitions that compelled them to look for supernatural remedies for illness, poverty and heartache.

In 1927, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Amsterdam News* all reported the incarceration of Alabama voodoo doctor, William Carpenter.³⁶⁰ The seventy-three year old Mobile, Alabama "voodoo

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ "Voodoo Doctor Jailed With 4 'High Priests'," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1927, 5; "Voodoo Doctor Four Priests Taken in South" *The Chicago Daily Tribune*,

doctor” and four of his “high priests” were jailed after he chained a black woman to a fence to rid her of evil spirits.³⁶¹ Carpenter’s client died, and Carpenter and his assistants were charged with murder and practicing medicine without a license.³⁶² While Carpenter’s exorcism was designed to invoke “angels” to drive out evil spirits, all of the reports linked his practices and ceremonies to African voodoo and not Christianity, simply because Carpenter, his assistants, and his client were black.³⁶³ Carpenter’s dual charge reveals a larger effort to punish supposed black voodooists and drive out their practices with legal weapons.

Black presses supported the crackdown on voodoo. More than half of the reports that announced legal maneuvers to halt voodoo practices in migration metropolises were printed in the *Amsterdam News* and *Chicago Defender*.³⁶⁴ Much of the black press’ angst against supposed voodoo practitioners and followers was rooted in tensions

August 22, 1927, 11; “Voodoo Doctor Chains Patients Say Police,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 1927, 2; “Voodoo Doctor Jailed After Patient Dies,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1927, 1.

³⁶¹ Ibid., *The New York Times*.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ “Two Voodoos Meet Their One ‘Hoodoo’- Jail” *The Chicago Defender*, November 29, 1924, 2; “Fortune Teller and Voodoo in Toils Law,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 24, 1925, 2; “Gets Award For \$179 Paid to Remove Evil Spirit,” *Amsterdam News*, February 4, 1925, 1; “Alleged Voodoo Doctor, Clairvoyant, Palmist, Preacher, Undertaker, Nabbed,” *Amsterdam News*, April 15, 1925, 1; “Federal Agents Raid voodoo Doctor’s Office,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 9, 1927, 1; “Doctor’s Sentenced for Selling Voodoo Charms,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 16, 1927, section A8; “Corks Gilded by Voodoo Man to Represent Gold,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 24, 1927, 3; “Voodoo Trick Charged: Held Woman for Police,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 1, 1927, 6; “Nab Voodoo Doctor For Missuse of Mail,” *Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1927, 4; “Police Arrest Voodoo Doctor,” *Amsterdam News*, August 10, 1927, 4; “Jail Voodoo Doctor When Potions Fail,” *Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1928, section A1; “African Voodoo Man Dealt ‘Pen’ Term on Bogus Charge,” *Amsterdam News*, September 26, 1928, 1; “Voodoo Doctor Gets Fine Loitering,” *Chicago Defender*, December 19, 1931, 3.

between black southern migrants and northern blacks. In fact, the *Chicago Defender* was one of the first black institutions to criticize black southern migrants' behavior in Chicago.³⁶⁵ For many aspiring class northern blacks, poor southern blacks migrants' mannerisms, speech, dress, music, storefront churches and their acquiescent performance in the presence of whites threatened to undermine their achievements. More importantly, some northern blacks understood the persistence of African styled superstitions among blacks as the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes. The belief that voodoo was most popular among black southerners and migrants helped spur the attacks on voodoo charlatans in black migration metropolis newspapers. *Amsterdam News* headlines announced, "Harlem-The Mecca of Fakers: Oriental Fakers, Gypsies and Obeah-men Find Harlem Good Camping Grounds." In the article, the reporter identified black people's faith in voodoo charms as a contributing factor to high mortality rates among members of the race.³⁶⁶

Yet, at the same time, both the *Chicago Defender* and the *Amsterdam News* benefited, in advertising dollars, from their readerships' interest in voodoo cures, magical remedies and spiritualists. The *Amsterdam News* featured advertisements for "Professors" that called themselves "Magician, Healer, and Occultist", specialists in "African and Oriental Occultism" that specialized in crystal gazing, psychic readings,

³⁶⁵ Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969).

³⁶⁶ Edgar Grey, "Harlem- The Mecca of Fakers" *Amsterdam News*, March 30, 1927, 16.
John Diaz, "High Negro Mortality," *Amsterdam News*, August 31, 1927, 19.

“Black Magic Native of Africa.”³⁶⁷ These men claimed African authenticity; “Professor Domingo” announced that he was from the coast of West Africa, and “Professor Salindukee” claimed to have “Just arrived from South Africa, Native of Zulu.”³⁶⁸ In fact, on any given day during the 1920s and 1930s, *Amsterdam News* and *Chicago Defender*’s readers could find advertisements for “Lucky hand charms,” “voodoo bags,” “mo-jo incense,” “New Orleans Van Van Oil,” “New Orleans Lucky Powder,” and a host of announcements from Kate Fox and Maggie Fox styled spiritualist mediums.³⁶⁹ It is hard to determine if the demand for voodoo goods and services was the product of crafty businessmen attempting to profit from all of the furor about voodoo magic in the press, or if the demand for magical charms and services derived from an older, authentic spiritual practice. What is clear is that the voodoo product industry was extensive and its practitioners carefully packaged themselves, taking on titles that communicated expertise and authenticity in order to entice paying customers.

If the black press was trying to cleanse the black metropolis of the damaging impact of voodoo and the association of black people with African savagery, their efforts were minimal in comparison to the federal agents intent on reducing the frequency of mojo and gris-gris bags being shipped through the mail.³⁷⁰ As if tensions between

³⁶⁷ The *New York Amsterdam News* ran advertisements for Professor Salindukee, Professor Domingo and Professor Akpandac and Professor N. Phoenix in 1923.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, March 28, 1923, page 3, May 30, 1923, page 2, May 9, 1923, June 20, 1923, page 8.

³⁶⁹ Specific presentations of the advertisements described can be found in the *Chicago Defender*. “Spiritualists” advertisements were most prevalent in *The New York Amsterdam News*, more than 17 announcements of medium services can be found in the February 1, 1933 and May 31, 1933 editions of the paper.

³⁷⁰ “Post Office Stops Voodoo Practice,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 1924, 4; “Seize Price List of Voodoo Doctor,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 1925, 3;

southern black migrants and northerners were not high enough, printed stories about southern voodoo doctors sending spells through the mail did not help. The *Chicago Defender* exposed the antics associated with mojo-mail in 1925 in an article titled “U.S. Interrupts Work of Voodoo Mail Order Doctor.”³⁷¹ Prince Hugh, a Mississippi voodoo doctor was reported to ask his long distance clients to “Just spit on a white cloth, send it with \$14. To Prince Hugh and he’ll cure your tuberculosis. For just \$21 more the prince guaranteed to keep you from ever getting broke.”³⁷² During a sting operation, Hugh was baited into shipping a postmaster a bogus cure. The article did not report Hugh’s punishment, but if he met a fate similar to that of another Mississippi magic healer, he would have been sentenced to serve time on the chain gang.³⁷³

Voodoo doctors were jailed for a host of crimes related to mail fraud and practicing medicine without a license. New York State Board of Medical Examiners prosecuted three voodoo healers in 1930.³⁷⁴ However, New York’s Board of Medical Examiners was not specifically targeting voodoo doctors. Dr. Harold Rypin, the secretary of the State Board of Medical Examiners, explained his mission to a *New York Times* reporter:

‘Medical Quackery will probably never disappear, being inherent in the human race...but the facts show that the operation of medical practice act has made a real inroad against illegal practitioners of

“Voodoo Doctor Indicted,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1927, 8; “Voodoo Charms Sold By Mail, U.S. Charges,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 1927, 8; “Voodoo Doctor Given Additional Six Months,” *The Washington Post*, January 24, 1929.

³⁷¹ “U.S. Interrupts Work of Voodoo Mail Order Doctor,” *Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1925, section A1.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ “Magician Healer Gets Chain Gang,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 10, 1931, 5.

³⁷⁴ “State Law Removes Quack Doctor Signs,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1930, 25.

medicine and that quackery is under better control and is diminishing more steadily in New York City and else in the United States.³⁷⁵

Rypin envisioned “medical quackery” to be an ill that crossed race lines, but the relationship between voodoo doctors, black people and Africanness was intrinsically linked to a racially constructed idea of civilization. In this paradigm, whites that were victims of medical quackery were seen as naïve, while blacks that fell victim to medical quackery at the hands of “voodoo doctors” were believed to be expressing an inherited racial trait.

Voodoo Entertainment

The sensational, horrifying and thrilling character of voodoo related newspaper reports ensured that voodoo would emerge as a popular arts and entertainment theme during the 1920s and the 1930s. The preoccupation with what was imagined to be black people’s African born savage spiritual practices, provided a dramatic substance that give birth to tales more fantastical than the stories told in newspapers. Radio shows, films, plays and musicals invoked a version of voodoo that was born in the American imagination. The thrilling discovery of strange African rites acted out in migration metropolises became a cultural obsession.

Voodoo was popular not only in fiction, but in travel guides as well. By 1920, travel had become a new leisure activity for America’s middle class.³⁷⁶ The peak in middle class travel and exploration of “exotic places” heightened encounters between the civilized and savage natives resulting in a significant increase in the publication of travel

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Mumford describes the popularity of middle class travel and writing (134) and Renda also explores, more specifically, travel writing and exoticism (237-255).

journals and novels.³⁷⁷ Naturally, interest in voodoo practices, and the black people that participated in them, encouraged middle class adventurers to travel to tropical locales stocked with black primitives. Harry L. Foster's Caribbean travel guide *Combing the Caribees*, received accolades in a review published in 1929.³⁷⁸ Foster's book advised travelers on a host of issues surrounding travel to the Caribbean, including voodoo. In the *New York Times* review of Foster's guide, the reviewer compared his description of voodoo to W.B. Seabrook's best selling account of Haitian voodoo, *Magic Island* (1929). Seabrook, a journalist who became a world traveler and writer, was a true Modernist Primitivist. Scholar Mary Renda explains that: "Seabrook sought not to Christianize Haiti but to learn from Voodoo, to get at some truth about himself by escaping the strictures of civilization as he knew it."³⁷⁹ It was in an expose of Haitian voodoo that Seabrook reacquainted his civilized self with his primitive self, and crafted a highly sexualized account of Haitian folk religion.³⁸⁰ Seabrook's book was well received. Even the *Amsterdam News*, the very paper that wrote against Haiti's occupation, the exoticism of Haitian people and Haiti's folk religion, applauded Seabrook's work. An *Amsterdam News* reviewer explained that Seabrook had achieved a great feat in representing Haiti, and wrote that he, "shook off both prejudice and preconception" while investigating

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Halsey Raines, "Animated Guide to the Caribbean," *The New York Times*, May 1929, section BR4.

³⁷⁹ Renda (248), extensively analyzes Seabrook's book and its meaning within the American culture of occupation (246-255).

³⁸⁰ Renda explores the way that racial identity, sexuality and "primitive" folk practice (247).

Haitian voodoo.³⁸¹ The press seemed to favor travel accounts of voodoo, produced by lay people like Seabrook, instead of scholarly works produced by voodoo experts like Boas-trained anthropologists Zora Neale and Martha Beckwith. This is evident in the *New York Times*'s declaration that a black-magic "study" written by priest, was the first "scholarly treatment of voodoo."³⁸² Both Hurston and Beckwith had published voodoo studies that predated the publication of *Voodooes and Obeahs* (1933), but their works were dwarfed by amateur observations of "the weird rites of voodoo and strange practices of obeah."³⁸³ The raw impressions of untrained observers were simply more entertaining and less complicated than were academic treatments of the subject.

Magic Island was so well liked that it was transformed into a play and film. The film adaption of Seabrook's book, "Zombie" was announced in 1931.³⁸⁴ Seabrook's voodoo tales became the foundation of a screenplay about a young couple on their way to be married that have an encounter with a zombie-making voodoo concoction, and legions of zombies while stopping over in Haiti on a cruise. When "Zombie," America's first zombie movie, was completed, filmmakers changed the name of the motion picture to "White Zombie." The film was featured in Loews' Fox Theatre and starred Bela Lugosi.³⁸⁵ "White Zombie" was filmed on location in Haiti to add to the realness of the horror that it portrayed. Seabrook's book and the movie it inspired, was discussed as if it

³⁸¹ Aubrey Brower, "Book Review: Harlem Isn't Africa" *Amsterdam News*, June 12, 1929, 20.

³⁸² "Black Magic Among Dark People," *New York Times*, April 23, 1933.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ George Shafter, "Movie Gossip from Hollywood," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1931.

³⁸⁵ "Island Scene of Thrilling Voodoo Tale," *The Washington Post*, July 1932, section A1.

was unquestionably accurate. When describing the film, one reviewer wrote about Seabrook's Haitian Zombies as if they were real: "Even the government in Haiti recognizes the Zombie practice, for article 249 of the penal code mentions it specifically."³⁸⁶ Seabrook's tales had captured the American imaginary with such intensity that the popular story was also transformed into a stage play, "Zombie," that ran in New York and Chicago.³⁸⁷

The popularity of black music during the 1920s and 1930s also inspired associations between jazz, voodoo, and African savagery. Newspapers described the dangerous relationship between voodoo drums, its listeners and the hypnotic effect that its music had on devotees that triggered an innate primal savage state. The revived articulation of the dangers of black music during the very moment that black music was gaining popularity among white audiences signaled the Victorian backlash and Modernism. Reports about Cuba's ban on voodoo drums to break up cults also helped perpetuate the idea that black music was dangerous: "To those who have studied voodooism the bongo drum is likewise known for it is used to incite dancers to a dangerous state of savagery."³⁸⁸ During an interview for a newspaper report about voodoo, Melville Herskovits explained that voodoo drums were looked upon seriously by devotees and played a special role in spiritual ceremonies held by voodoo followers, but his efforts to establish the sanctity and cosmological significance of ceremonial drums

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ " 'Zombie', Play of Voodooism Opens Tonight," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 13, 1932, section C9.

Charles Colin, " 'Zombie' Play Thrills and Voodoo Rites," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 1932, 19.

³⁸⁸ "Cuba bans Beating of African Bongo Drums," *New York Times*, February 17, 1929, 59.

had little popular impact.³⁸⁹ Herskovits' analysis of the relationship between music and African spiritual ritual did not penetrate Americans' Victorian fantasy about black people unable to restrain themselves and control their impulses when seduced by primal drum rhythms.

However, like many elements of the voodoo craze, Americans loved and hated the voodoo drum simultaneously. NBC Radio broadcasted African drumming featuring drums that W.B. Seabrook acquired while travelling through Africa while gathering material for a follow up book to *Magic Island*.³⁹⁰ The drums used in the segment were described as: "worn and polished wood...rich natural color, has a luster as though still reflecting the flickering lights and shadows of a council fire before the voodoo doctor's tent."³⁹¹

White music critics applied popular voodoo fantasies to their assessment of jazz music. They imagined jazz to be a more complex medium of African hypnotics than voodoo drum beats, but nonetheless presented the same inherent disturbing African essence. One music critic used the terms "hysteria," "destruction," and "chaos" to describe the genre and concluded that the form was "the same formula as the voodoo chants which Ethiopian cotton pickers used to hymn in the Mississippi swamps."³⁹² A somewhat favorable review of jazz music declared that, "Jazz is being wrecked by nerve-wracking devices...Jazz is the victim of its wild modern devotees who are as bad as

³⁸⁹ "Drums Are The Only Mystery of Voodooist Cult," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 1935, section R14.

³⁹⁰ "Drums of Voodoos Overheard on Radio," *Washington Post*, October 28, 1928, section RS2.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² "Knowing Jazz, Homer and Nero Knew Not Chaos," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1921, 17.

voodoo worshippers in darkest Africa.”³⁹³ By the 1920s and 1930s, the dominant American imaginary injected a perverse view Africa and voodoo into every aspect of “black” cultural life.

New Negro artists played with voodoo themes in their works despite the all of the dangers associated with the practice of voodoo. For many of these artists, voodoo was a fundamental characteristic of black folk life. H. Lawrence Freeman’s groundbreaking opera is a good example of this tendency. Freeman’s opera “Voodoo,” the first all black opera to première on Broadway, opened in 1928. Freeman was a well-established black composer who came out of the Pekin Theater, Chicago’s leading training ground for black musicians during the period.³⁹⁴ Freeman’s “Voodoo” was not just the first all black opera to appear on Broadway, but it was also the first opera composed to jazz music.³⁹⁵ The curious mix of Modernist currents that encouraged the popularity of black’s Africanness, and the Victorian backlash against Modernism that produced titillating tales about black voodooists, ripened the stage for Lawrence’s production.

The opera told the story of an antebellum Louisiana voodoo queen engaged in a spiritual battle with a rival voodooists queen over the affections of a Creole overseer.³⁹⁶ The opera’s theatrics included “colloquial negro dialect,” amulets, mystic ceremonies and an interrupted human sacrifice.³⁹⁷ Theatergoers paid anywhere from one to three dollars

³⁹³ “Calls America Still Savage Musically,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1922.

³⁹⁴ Ellesstine Perkins Holley, “Black Concert Music in Chicago, 1890s to the 1930s” *Black Music Research Journal*, (Spring, 1990) 141-149, 143.

³⁹⁵ “‘Voodoo’ at 52 Street,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 29, 1928.

³⁹⁶ “‘Voodoo’ A Naïve Mélange,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 1928, 20.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

for tickets to see the production at the Palm Garden on West 52nd Street.³⁹⁸ Nine days after the opera opened, the *Amsterdam News* reported that the production closed because it ran out of funds.³⁹⁹ The reporter also suggested that white primitivists' expectations for an authentic black voodoo production had worked against Freeman's opera: "It was perhaps too much to expect that white patrons would look with favor on Negro music that aspired to something beyond jazz or ragtime."⁴⁰⁰ The assumption here is that while white audience could embrace a voodoo tale as an authentic "black" story, Freeman's decision to fuse Southern black melodies, jazz and traditional operatic forms too closely blurred the line between civilized and savage musical performance styles. Perhaps white audiences expected that Freeman's score would purely consist of primal rhythms, as opposed to a complex blend of styles that reflected the depth of Freeman's musical training. Even so, "Voodoo" became Freeman's most popular work.

The fate of Freeman's opera did not deter future theatrical productions of voodoo plots. At least three more voodoo productions opened in New York and Chicago in the years following Freeman's opera's short run. "Savage Rhythm," opened in New York in 1932, "Voodoo Incantation" began in 1933 and "Voodooism in New Orleans" came to the stage in 1934.⁴⁰¹ Each work presented a plot that was animated by the African essence that migration metropolis residents believed were captured in voodoo practices preserved in black communities. Clearly, what had been described in migration

³⁹⁸ Display Ad 21, *Amsterdam News*, September 5, 1928, 6.

³⁹⁹ "Lawrence Freeman's Opera," *Amsterdam News*, September 19, 1928, 16.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Reviews of the plays and musicals: Burnes Mantle, "Negro Opus of Deep South," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 10, 1932, section C1; Brooks Atkins, "Voodoo Incantation," *New York Times*, February 28, 1933, 15; Brooks Atkins, "Voodooism in New Orleans," *New York Times*, October 8, 1934, 14.

metropolises news reports as an encroaching danger emerged as great source of entertainment.

The pinnacle of voodoo themed entertainment took the form of a 1937 short film included in *The March of Time* series, titled “Harlem’s Black Magic.” It is fitting that the apex of the voodoo craze would present in a film series that was part fiction film and part documentary journalism, because so much of what had been printed about the relationship between black Americans and voodoo teetered the line between fact and fiction. Scholar Raymond Fielding explains that when the *March of Time* series first appeared in the Spring of 1935, the films, which were a cross between “confrontational journalism and docudrama” with a bit of satire, confounded the filmmaking industry.⁴⁰² Despite the fact that the *March of Time* shorts did not neatly fit into a prescribed genre, the series that began as a CBS radio show quickly became a box office success. Fielding notes “The films most unusual feature was its re-creation or staging of events that had taken place but which had not been photographed by newsreel cameras.”⁴⁰³ The *March of Time* released a new short film monthly that was shown in movie theatres across the United States and around the world. Its films covered social and political issues, and were viewed by at least 20 million Americans and more than one million people around the world by 1938.⁴⁰⁴

If the *March of Time* series specialized in “re-creating” events, what exactly was being “staged” in “Harlem’s Black Magic”? The quasi-informational series sought to acquaint American and international audiences with the persistent strain of African

⁴⁰² Raymond Fielding, “The March of Time, 1935-1951” HBO Archives.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

voodoo and superstitions believed to be widespread among the hundreds of thousands of blacks that lived in Harlem. “Harlem’s Black Magic’s” total run time was not longer than six minutes, but in that short amount of time, the bulk of migration metropolis voodoo reports were acted out on the film screen.

In the film, the male voice of the omniscient narrator guides audiences through a series of staged scenes and images that are supposed to represent voodoo in Harlem. The opening scene demarcates white civilization from black savagery with images of the skyscrapers that accented New York’s skyline, and a narrator describes Harlem’s geography relative to white civilization: “In the shadow of Manhattan’s towering skyscrapers lies black sprawling Harlem.”⁴⁰⁵ The filmmaker’s use of the term “shadow” serves to articulate multiple realities: the word described the literal blackness and darkness of the film’s subjects; it is also a preview of the “dark” and secretive spiritual realm and ceremonies associated with voodoo; and most importantly it locates black Harlem in the “shadow” of the physical symbols thought to manifest white civilization’s greatness and declare the primitive state in which black people were imagined to exist.

As the narrator continues, various images of Harlem are displayed, and Harlem blacks are described as deeply religious. The narrator identifies the great assortment of churches as the evidence of black religiosity: “in addition to their religious beliefs, Harlem’s people have a childlike faith in spirits and spiritualism.”⁴⁰⁶ A series of storefront signs for spiritualist churches, incense and dream book advertisements scroll across the screen. Even though the Spiritualist movement was initiated in the late 1840s,

⁴⁰⁵ *March of Time!* “Harlem’s Black Magic,” March 19, 1937, HBO Archives, Volume 3, Episode 8.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

and was largely populated by whites, by the 1920s and 1930s, it became a mark of African voodoo. The filmmakers included a staged storefront church scene in which a black woman standing in front of a make shift alter consisting of two lit candles, led a dark shadowy congregation in a song: “Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart I will pray.”⁴⁰⁷ *March of Time* creators turned this black Christian standard ballad into evidence of “childlike faith in spirits.” The narrator continues, and explains that the Great Depression had inspired a resurgence of African practices among Harlem’s black residents, claiming that they viewed the occult as a viable tool through which they could acquire money, or the “numbers” that would bring them money if they won the policy racket.⁴⁰⁸ What came next was the most definitive statement about the nature of African survivals: the staged scene that followed invited audiences to observe one of the many secret meetings of a “exotic, barbaric” voodoo cult whose roots “go back to the darkest Africa.”⁴⁰⁹ The “secret meeting” was recreated by group of black actors crammed into a small dark room, beating drums, dancing wildly, flailing their arms and making a host of unintelligible sounds around an alter decorated bones and a human skull encircled with candles. The secret voodoo sect was then linked back to Haiti: subtitles informed audiences that “The purest form of African voodoo in the Western World is found, not in Harlem but in the black Republic of Haiti.”⁴¹⁰ Footage of blacks at a waterfall in Haiti engaged in some sort of ritual were described as people who “worship and fear devil

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

gods,” and “indulge in wild orgies to cleanse themselves.”⁴¹¹ The remaining re-creations depict gullible blacks being swindled by “racketeers” (a black woman and her encounter with a spiritualist medium, “Prof. Payanga Devasso”, police officers and their attempts to capture root doctors and charge them for practicing medicine without a license, white healthcare workers finding voodoo charms on patients, and a black mother refusing medical treatment for her child so that she could consult her voodoo doctor.⁴¹² Near the film’s end the narrator reveals that “nearly one third of Harlem’s Negroes have become voodoo worshippers.”⁴¹³ In the final scene, the narrator delivers a warning to the audience, and says that “Harlem mystics” have devised a new strategy to maintain their profitable practices; they “give themselves fancy ecclesiastical titles and masquerade as Christian clergyman.” Images of storefront churches and signs changed from “Prof. Payanga Devasso: Metaphysician and Spiritual Adviser” to “Bishop Payango Davasso.” From this vantage, even black Christianity becomes suspect. After consuming images of voodoo dolls, magical incense and gris gris bags, audiences were left with these final words paired with the imagery of the secret voodoo cult dancing with sacrificial chickens: “and in back rooms in Harlem... continues in all its primitive savagery, and superstition, the witchcraft of the African Congo.”⁴¹⁴

Right after “Harlem’s Black Magic” debuted in New York City’s Radio City Music Hall, *Amsterdam News* fired back at the *March of Time*’s creators with a caustic

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

review on the papers front page.⁴¹⁵ The reviewer wrote: “The outlandishly and stupidly distorted scenes which the producers of the new feature series have released as a picture of Harlem constitute one of the grossest as well as latest libels perpetuated upon this uptown community.”⁴¹⁶ The reviewer described the offense: “The whole film is staged with an exotic, weird setting, which would tend to present Harlem to the uninitiated as a veritable jungle, whose inhabitants never get any nearer to acting like ordinary human beings than wearing clothes.”⁴¹⁷ The Federal Council of Churches, N.A.A.C.P. and the Associated Film Audiences all protested the film, but the *March of Times* series still won an Academy Award in 1937 for having “revolutionized newsreel.”⁴¹⁸

The March of Time’s creators, unwittingly, captured the essence of how black Americans were imagined during the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze. The positive view of African survivals that anthropologists like Herskovits, Hurston and Boas championed in the ivory tower, and the noble yearnings of the black Modernist artists and writers to unify the black American with their African past never fully overcame Victorianism’s strong hold on American thought. If scholars were to use “Harlem’s Black Magic” as the barometer that gauges Boas’, Herskovits’ and Hurston’s success in inspiring a deep appreciation for African survivals and black folk spiritual traditions, then they would conclude that they failed. The complexities of American racism, and its corresponding ideas about racial distinction, produced an environment in which theories that asserted a continued relationship between black people and their African progenitors could not take

⁴¹⁵ St. Clair Bourne, “Harlem ‘Black Magic’ Film Arouses Storm,” *Amsterdam News*, March 27, 1937, 1.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Fielding, 1.

root without being strangled by myths of black savagery. If Harlem, the mecca of black intellectual life and upward mobility, could easily be reduced to a community of wild and gullible primitives, then surely black southerners, like black Sapelo Islanders were doomed to be seen as the most exotic relics of black people's primitive African past. For Sapelo Islanders, escaping the expectant gaze of white observers trying to catch a glimpse of an authentic voodoo rite would be near impossible.

It would be equally as difficult for Sapelo Island researchers to purge their psyches of all that they had been told about black people and voodoo. When leading news sources like the *New York Times* declare that: "The spread of schools and other cultural influences for Negroes in the South apparently has made little headway in combating superstition. Voodoo flourishes here...in every section there is a hoodoo doctor," the imagination is ignited and a picture begins to form.⁴¹⁹ Sapelo Island Gullah researchers arrived on the island with fantasies about voodoo drums, conjuh bags, blood sacrifices, African voodooists, ever-present spirits of the undead, and primitive black folk, and, once there, they hunted those fantasies. When W.R. Moore's, Mary Granger's and Lydia Parrish's written accounts of their encounters with Sapelo islanders are read within the context of the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze, their works reveal more about the racial perspectives of their authors than they reveal about African survivals among the Gullah.

⁴¹⁹ James Welsh, "Voodoo Rites In The South," *New York Times*, February 2, 1936, section XX10.

Part II: Sapelo Islanders Become Authentic Gullah Folk

Chapter 4

Hunting Survivals: W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish and Lorenzo D. Turner Discover Gullah Folk on Sapelo Island

“On Sapelo Island, I found in the Johnson family a combination of the old dance form with rather more modern steps than the original African pantomime warranted...”

“ ‘Negroes can put themselves into very peculiar physical-mental states with extraordinary ease. They will go into trances, or throw fits at the slightest provocation. Even a Negro beating a tom-tom quickly becomes very strange; his pupils dilate and do not focus, he seems to become a rhythmic and unconscious automation.’ From first-hand experience, I know that this characteristic survives to a surprising degree among rural Negroes of the Georgia Coast.”

-Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942)⁴²⁰

Shortly after their marriage in 1905, Emmett and Emma Johnson made their home among family and friends in the black community called Hog Hammock on Sapelo Island, Georgia.⁴²¹ Emma, a descendant of the enslaved Africans held captive by Thomas Spalding, lived on Sapelo Island “from the cradle to the grave” like her family had for generations.⁴²² But, her husband Emmett Johnson was the first generation of his family to be born and raised on Sapelo. His father, Isaac Johnson, Sr., left his home in Effingham County, Georgia and came to Sapelo Island sometime between 1870 and 1880

⁴²⁰ Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (Athens: Brown Thrasher Book by the University of Georgia Press, 1992), 111, 176.

⁴²¹ McIntosh County Court Marriage License.

⁴²² Mae Ruth Green’s unpublished genealogical study of Sapelo Island’s black families. I reviewed the document courtesy of SICARS (Sapelo Island Culture and Revitalization Society)

seeking cheaper land long before Howard Coffin purchased most of the island.⁴²³

Emmett Johnson learned his father's trade, boat building and carpentry, and worked as ship builder during the 1920s and the early part of the 1930s for Howard Coffin. Emma Johnson worked at home and managed the limited food and financial resources that Emmett's pay provided, carefully rationing out what was needed to care for their fifteen children.⁴²⁴

Each day, Emmett Johnson left their modest home, and drove his oxcart to the island's north end, which served as the command center of Howard Coffin's island operations. Emmett worked under the direction of white island managers who Coffin paid to oversee his island enterprises and "watch" the island's black residents during the months that he spent in Michigan.⁴²⁵ While Emmett worked on the island's north end, Emma organized her domestic work. She assigned each day of the week to various tasks: tending to the vegetable garden, milling corn, hulling rice, smoking fish, making preserves and canning vegetables, and washing the family's clothes in the large cast iron wash pot in the yard—all while caring for the children.⁴²⁶ Howard Coffin stocked the island with a plethora of wild turkeys and prime cattle, but blacks were not allowed to hunt and eat these animals because they were reserved for Coffin and his white hunting parties. Consequently, providing food for the Johnson family was a continual struggle. Despite Emma's and Emmett's hard work and incessant labor, they remained very poor

⁴²³ Interview with Fred Johnson (August 9, 2005), and Joe A. Johnson (July 1, 2009): Emma and Emmett Walker's sons. This account of Isaac Johnson, Sr. coming to Sapelo is also described in Mae Ruth Green's unpublished genealogy of Sapelo's black families.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Interview with Paul Walker (June 4, 2009).

⁴²⁶ Interview with Joe A. Johnson, Emma and Emmett Johnson's son (July 1, 2009).

and found it difficult to provide their children's needs. Even in the face of poverty, Emma and Emmett never had to worry about being homeless. They owned the land that their house stood on, land that Emmett's father had passed down to them.

Emma and Emmett Johnson's monotonous and difficult work routines were broken up by a few activities. The family regularly attended Sunday morning church services at St. Luke's Baptist Church on the island. Emmett, like most black men on Sapelo, was member a of the Farmer's Alliance and went to their meetings at the Farmers Alliance Hall.⁴²⁷ Occasionally, the family attended a funeral or a social gathering. Emmett joined the island men when they built and repaired houses for friends and family members, took boats out on the ocean to go "shrimping," or helped fishing parties "drag the net" to gather a bounty of fish to feed their families.⁴²⁸ Emma helped the island women care for the sick and elderly, and prepare meals to feed the men while they worked on houses, or meals that fed mourners during "set-ups with the dead" and after burials.⁴²⁹ On very rare occasions did Emma and Emmett take trips to the mainland. Before the 1950s, the journey to the mainland on a small engine boat took almost four

⁴²⁷ Interview with Joe A. Johnson (July 1, 2009) Sapelo's Farmers Alliance, founded in 1892, was a branch of the Populist organization and was affiliated with the Colored Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union. The first Farmer's Alliance Hall was located in Raccoon Bluff, and a second Hall was built in Hog Hammock in 1929 (Michele Johnson, 63-64).

⁴²⁸ "Drag the net" is a fishing technique that involves pulling a fishing net (6 or 7 feet in diameter) in the ocean—the tasks requires at least 5 or 6 participants in order to manage the net and catch fish.

⁴²⁹ Interviews with Paul Walker (June 4, 2009) and Betty Cooper (April 9, 2010) "Set-ups with the dead" were viewings held at the home of the deceased. Prior to the 1950's, the ritual is described as being necessary in order to build a casket and await the arrival of family members that lived on the mainland. The length of time of a "set-up" varied depending on the time of the year. During summer months, this ritual was shorter, and was longer during the winter months.

hours, and for most black Sapelo Islanders dependent on rowboats during 1920s and 1930s, the trip could take an entire day.⁴³⁰

Like other poor blacks in the Jim Crow south, Emma and Emmett Johnson's daily life was filled with struggle and strife, and navigating harsh economic realities and oppressive racism consumed them. The Johnson's educational training consisted of a couple of years of grammar school. Their employment options were limited to the few jobs that Howard Coffin offered to blacks on the island because a daily commute from the island to the mainland was nearly impossible. Howard Coffin paid Sapelo Islanders just enough to keep them in poverty and in debt to his company store.⁴³¹ Had islanders challenged Coffin to increase their pay, improve working conditions or attempted to unionize, they would have surely faced the prospects of being fired, or worse, banished from their ancestral homeland, a tragedy that involved leaving their beloved family, community and land behind. Even if islanders like Emma and Emmett Johnson did pursue a livelihood in one of the mainland communities in McIntosh County, they would have been relegated to the low paying positions open to black laborers—Jim Crow customs guaranteed that. So, they worked hard and prayed to maintain the little that they had.

Emma and Emmett did not know that far away from Sapelo Island, the idea that African culture and traditions survived among rural blacks had taken center stage in academic circles and in popular culture. They did not know about the popular obsession with black voodooists evident in migration metropolis newspaper reports and in popular

⁴³⁰ Interview with Joe A. Johnson (July 1, 2009).

⁴³¹ Interview with Joe A. Johnson (July 1, 2009).

entertainment. Nothing in Emmett and Emma Johnson's daily life forecasted that they would become prey in the Modernist Primitivists' hunt for African survivals—a hunt that would draw researchers and journalists to their home island, and to their very doorstep.

This chapter examines the first wave of Modernist and Modernist Primitivists that came to Sapelo Island, Georgia and explores how they portrayed the link between Sapelo Islanders and their African heritage in their published works. W. Robert Moore's *National Geographic* article, Lydia Parrish's slave song collection and Lorenzo D. Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* will be evaluated relative to popular ideas about African survivals, and the "Gullah." Here, I will analyze the ways that larger intellectual and cultural discourses "touched down" on Sapelo Island impacted Sapelo Islanders, and facilitated the birth of the idea among academics and Americans that this population of southern blacks was "unique." This chapter will also look into the way that race and subsequent power dynamics impacted the extent to which Sapelo Islanders were able to negotiate the way that they were represented in these works.

W. Robert Moore's "Golden Isles of Gaule": *National Geographic Magazine* on Sapelo Island

Howard Coffin hoped that his Sea Island Cloister Hotel would prove to be the most successful of all of his coastal Georgia business ventures.⁴³² While Coffin maintained Sapelo Island as his personal seasonal paradise and as the headquarters of a few profit yielding enterprises, the resort that he built on nearby Sea Island was open to the white middle class public to enjoy. Despite the fact that by 1932 the Great

⁴³² Buddy Sullivan, *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater: The Story of McIntosh County & Sapelo* (McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, 1990), 654.

Depression had ravaged Coffin's assets and forced him to sign over his island holdings to his business partner Bill Jones, Coffin still actively promoted his Cloister Hotel.⁴³³

Advertisements for Coffin's Sea Island Cloister Hotel and beach resort regularly ran in the *New York Times*. The advertisements beacons tourists with catchy introductory phrases such as, "You can be here Tomorrow," "Live Here for Less Than it Costs At Home" and "Romantic Country."⁴³⁴ The advertisement's author identified golf, hunting, fishing and boating as the featured activities to be enjoyed in the "lands of fragrant pines, great live oaks and sunny waters which during four centuries have attracted the nobility of Europe and the aristocracy of America."⁴³⁵ The fact that middle class white Americans had adopted "travel" as a new pastime during the 1920s and 1930s, alone, would have attracted tourists to Coffin's Sea Island resort.⁴³⁶ Yet, it was the *National Geographic Magazine* 1934 article, "The Golden Isles of Guale," that appealed to white middle class travelers' desire to have their own encounter with exotic island terrain and non-white indigenous peoples, similar to those described in popular travel novels. The new white American "travel bug," which was facilitated by the culture of U.S. imperialism, encouraged the exploration of exotic peoples and places.⁴³⁷ Even Coffin's occupation of Sapelo Island can easily be read within the context of U.S. imperialism:

⁴³³ Sullivan describes the impact of the depression on Coffin's businesses and the strategies that he employed to salvage his investments (655-665).

⁴³⁴ Display Ad 97, *New York Times*, January 17, 1932, pg. xx9. Display Ad 33, *New York Times*, February 16, 1932, 39. Display Ad 20, *New York Times*, February 25, 1932, 42.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 134.

⁴³⁷ Kevin Mumford (134) discusses this phenomenon and Mary Renda uses travel writers who recorded their experiences in Haiti as evidence of this phenomenon (35, 231-232).

Howard Coffin was one of many white American millionaires who acted out small scale occupation of islands along Georgia's coast and dominated poor island inhabitants.⁴³⁸

One *New York Times* article explained: "There is a new demand for islands that are 100 per cent tropical. The vogue for South Sea Island fiction and fact stories has found expression in a quest for near-at-hand substitutes."⁴³⁹ W. Robert Moore's article not only delivered to *National Geographic Magazine's* readership an exciting glimpse into a quasi-tropical resort that served as a play ground for the rich and powerful, but also painted the black residents who lived on Georgia's coastal islands, and Sapelo Islanders in particular, as an essential part of the natural exotic scenery to be explored.

Long before W. Robert Moore, the white Michigan farm boy-turned-world explorer, came to work for *National Geographic Magazine*, the publication had taken up the task of mapping racial and geographical difference.⁴⁴⁰ In 1888, the Washington, D.C. based group, National Geographic Society, was organized by a group of local white "scientific intellectuals" desiring to create a society "for the increase and diffusion of

⁴³⁸ Waldon Fawcett, "Island Fad Hits South" *New York Times*, February 7, 1937, 128. In the article Fawcett lists a series of millionaires that owned Georgia Islands. The Carnegie family owned a large portion of Cumberland Island, Georgia. The Candler family (of Coca-Cola) owned what remained of Cumberland Island. J.P. Morgan owned most of Jekyll Island, Georgia. Ossabaw Island was owned by Dr. H. N. Torrey of Detroit- the husband of an heiress to a glass fortune.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Details of W. Robert Moore's early life can be found in his unpublished memoir "The First Million Miles: Story of a National Geographic Staff Man" which is housed at *National Geographic Magazine's* private archive at the National Geographic Society in Washington D.C. (1-2), as well as in a *Washington Post, Times Herald* article "Traveled Million Miles for Magazine: Geographic's W.R. Moore Dies" March 23, 1968, B6.

Catherine Lutz and Jane Lou Collins explore the history and cultural impact of *National Geographic Magazine* in *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xii.

geographical knowledge.”⁴⁴¹ While the founders of the society and subsequent magazine imagined “geographical knowledge” to be an obtainable, objective fact set, ideas about racial distinction dictated how “geographic difference” would be described and captured in the magazine’s textual descriptions and photographs.⁴⁴² Gail Bederman explains that the publication specialized in telling the Victorian-style adventure stories that featured non-white primitives: “*National Geographic*...achieved a large circulation by breathlessly depicting the heroic adventures of ‘civilized’ white male explorers among ‘primitive’ tribes in darkest Africa.”⁴⁴³ Yet, each issue of the magazine, which is estimated to have reached 37 million people, conveyed to its largely white middle class readership a highly specific worldview masked as a mix of scientific fact, cultural artifact, entertainment and educational material.⁴⁴⁴ Predictably, Moore’s article did not stray from that formula.

W. Robert Moore’s adventures among non-white primitives began long before he landed on Sapelo Island, Georgia. His long career with *National Geographic Magazine* launched when he won a photographic contest sponsored by the magazine. Moore purchased his first Kodak camera in California, on his way to teach in Bangkok after he graduated from Hillsdale College.⁴⁴⁵ He wrote: “On a misty morning in Hong Kong I aimed it in the direction toward a passing Chinese junk. The result won a prize...”⁴⁴⁶ Moore’s career at *National Geographic* took off from that moment: by the time he

⁴⁴¹ Lisa Krause Thomas and Renee Braden, *High Adventure: The Story of the National Geographic Society*, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2008), 8-9.

⁴⁴² Lutz and Collins, xiii.

⁴⁴³ Gail Bederman, 22.

⁴⁴⁴ Lutz and Collins estimate *National Geographic* readership (2,6),

⁴⁴⁵ W. Robert Moore, “The First Million Miles,” 3.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,

retired, Moore published 69 articles and 2,000 photographs in the magazine and traveled a total 633,000 miles to cover stories.⁴⁴⁷ Throughout the 1930s, Moore was many times the featured lecturer at talks hosted by National Geographic Society. He described his adventures to National Geographic Society members, local teachers, and general audiences of people eager to hear first hand accounts of Moore's foreign excursions among primitive and exotic peoples.⁴⁴⁸

W. Robert Moore's view of the primitive places and people that he explored closely mirror the dominant fantasies that whites held about non-white people during the period. When describing his Ethiopian tour, during Haile Selassie's coronation, it is evident that Moore was influenced by popular fantasies about Africa and African people. " 'Ethiopia surpasses the wildest dreams of fantasy a man can have...a country of elephants-ornamented with bizarre trappings, ridden by proud men. It is a nation of lions, a primitive nation of many tongues, a nation in which time has stood still.' " ⁴⁴⁹ Moore's primitivist assessment of Ethiopia's people is telling: " 'As for the natives...they are docile and peaceful. They become only aroused at such events as coronations and impending wars.' " ⁴⁵⁰ Timelessness, or the lack of "evolutionary" progress over time; the close relationship between the primitive man, nature and its creatures; and the

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁴⁸ *The Washington Post* announced each of Moore's speaking engagements: "Ancient Shrines of Orient Snapped in Natural Colors," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1942, 8; "Geographical Expert to Address Educators," July 1, 1934, 10; "Barbaric Splendor of Ethiopia Recalled by D.C. Journalist," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1935, 10; "W.R. Moore Will Deliver Travel Lecture Tonight," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 1936, 3; "W. R. Moore to Describe Modern French Life," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 1937, 19.

⁴⁴⁹ "Barbaric Splendor of Ethiopia Recalled by D.C. Journalist," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1935, 10.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

generalization of behavioral traits, all of which revolve around simple emotions and uncomplicated dispositions echo the dominant view of “primitive man.” This is the primitivist lens through which Moore read Sapelo Islanders.

Despite the fact that Moore’s depiction of Sapelo Islanders may have encouraged researchers to visit Sapelo Island, and bolstered their belief that there was a viable market in which works about the island’s black residents could be published, he did not count the trip among the most memorable of his career. In the unpublished memoir about his days as a *National Geographic Magazine* “Staff Man”, Moore matter-of-factly described his encounter on Georgia’s coast, “Among other home assignments, I photographed and prepared articles on Maryland, Nevada, and the islands along the Georgia coast.”⁴⁵¹ However, when Howard Coffin opened the door for Moore to tour his private oasis to drum up business for his nearby resort, what resulted was the first published work in which the link between Sapelo Islanders and an undeniable voodoo fueled African essence was coded as fact.

Like other *National Geographic Magazine* “Staff Men,” Moore visited the Georgia coast while taking a break from his global travels, and probably took the trip with his family sometime during 1933.⁴⁵² Moore toured Sapelo Island, Cumberland Island, St. Catherine’s Island, Jekyll Island, Ossabaw Island, and St. Simon and Sea Islands.⁴⁵³ During his visit, Moore spent time on Sea Island’s beach and resort, visited Coffin’s opulent Sapelo Island mansion, photographed white vacationers skeet shooting

⁴⁵¹ W. Robert Moore, “The First Million Miles,” 279.

⁴⁵² The *National Geographic Magazine* archivist explained that staff writers generally covered domestic stories while on vacation (July, 2010).

⁴⁵³ W. Robert Moore, “The Golden Isles of Guale,” *National Geographic Magazine*, February 1934, Volume 65, Number 2, 235-264.

on the beach, and captured scenes of coastal Georgia's vast marshlands and sand dunes.⁴⁵⁴

Moore also unearthed the local history of region during the colonial period and the antebellum years, and toured the ruins of old plantation houses, slave quarters, and Native American structures.⁴⁵⁵ While looking back into coastal Georgia's history, Moore discovered, what he understood to be relics of the region's past: coastal Georgia blacks. Moore photographed black human relics near their tabby slave cottages on Ossabaw, and captured black men participating in boat races, an activity that he explained as "Crew racing was a favorite sport of slavery days."⁴⁵⁶ He noted that on resorts, "Negro boys now caddy over a superb golf course where their ancestors picked the fluffy bolls of luxuriant cotton..."⁴⁵⁷ On St. Simon he visited a "praise house" used by black residents for religious gatherings and observed the performance of spirituals. Moore wrote, "negroes of the island gather to sing their spirituals, plantation and works songs that have come down from ante-bellum days."⁴⁵⁸ He described these songs as "stirring to hear naïve rhythmic spirituals..." and linked the songs musical form back to African origins, "In the rhythm of these accompaniments to their labor, the muffled beat of African tom-toms seems to sound dimly in the background."⁴⁵⁹ Clearly, Moore perceived his black relics according to popular ideas about African survivals. For the Modernist Primitivist, cultural retentions were not marked by complex and sophisticated social processes, but

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 245 & 256.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 262.

instead represented a sort of retardation of the evolutionary impulse toward progress. His description of a “naïve” musical form is a critical assessment of the retention process. The fact that the songs “stirred” something in him is more evidence of the Modernist Primitivists’ belief that blacks, and their African counterparts, operated at a base level of human emotions that could lure out the primitive self that civilized whites worked so hard to suppress.

Despite the fact that W. Robert Moore found Ossabaw’s and St. Simon’s blacks intriguing, he presented Sapelo Islanders as the most captivating artifacts in the region. After Moore admired Howard Coffin’s mansion, the artesian wells that he built on the island and the island’s picturesque beaches, he turned his attention to the black life beyond the island’s north end. After all, Julia Peterkin’s successful novels about the Gullah, which first appeared in the 1920s, had created a permanent place in the American imaginary for sea island blacks. Moreover, Peterkin’s first attempt to write an ethnographic report of the Gullah people in South Carolina was published during the same year that Moore travelled to the coast.⁴⁶⁰ However, her fictional and non-fictional Gullah works focused on blacks in South Carolina. Moore’s discovery of Georgia’s black sea islanders introduced a new population to the world that Peterkin created. So, accompanied by one of Howard Coffin’s island managers, W. Robert Moore explored Raccoon Bluff, Hog Hammock and Shell Hammock, with his camera in one hand, and his note pad in the other, ready to document all that he discovered.

⁴⁶⁰ Julia Peterkin’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Robert O. Ballou, 1933), included over 230 pages of text and a photographic study conducted by Doris Ulman featuring “Gullah” blacks.

Moore's first encounter with the black Sapelo Islanders occurred in Behavior Cemetery. Surely, the pervasive voodoo craze inspired Moore to take a closer look at what he described as the "Strange customs" that "prevail in negro cemeteries."⁴⁶¹ Popular fantasies about secret black voodoo networks in the south encouraged Moore's sensational reading of the gravesite decorations that he found in Behavior Cemetery. In the section of the article titled "Clocks, Lamps and Dishes Adorn Negro Graves," Moore explained that among Sapelo Islanders "ancient practices mingled with their religion to-day." Moore took a photograph of a burial plot in Behavior Cemetery that was featured in the "Golden Isles of Guale" article, and identified for readers the objects involved in the "strange" burial rite:

Short pots are planted at either end of the grave, and upon the mounds of earth are placed cups and dishes, oil lamps, and alarm clocks. On one I also saw a broken thermos bottle; on another a small coin bank! The oil lamps are to furnish light through unknown paths, the alarms are to sound on Judgment Day and the dishes-the banks, too I assume!- are for the personal use of their former owner.⁴⁶²

Moore did not indicate how he learned the meaning of the gravesite decorations. Nor did he attempt to identify a specific set of "ancient" practices from which the ritual derived. This is not surprising when one considers that the underlying assumption of a link between black relics and the African past did not require explanation or justification. Moore did not need to complicate his thrilling and entertaining discovery by employing Melville Herskovits' syncretism theory in order to satisfy his readership's curiosity. The role of voodoo in popular culture during the period ensured that the photograph of the gravesite alone would appeal to National Geographic's readership's lust for thrills and

⁴⁶¹ Moore., 248.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 251.

chills. While it is likely that the gravesite decorations was a syncretic New World cultural form, in Moore's article, the practice had no historical roots: it was simply understood as "strange." Later in the article, Moore wrote that Sapelo Islanders "are all good Baptists now," and described Christian baptisms performed in creeks, and wrote about praise houses on the island. However, his earlier description of the fusion between "ancient" practices that mingled with "their religion today" reinforced the popular belief, that among American blacks secret African spiritual rituals involving spirits and the dead were prevalent.⁴⁶³ Moore further muddled Sapelo Islanders' religious landscape when he wrote that islanders were "Mohammedan" during slavery, and presented Belali Mohammed (he calls him Bu Allah), as an example of the islander's Muslim past.⁴⁶⁴ Painting Sapelo Islanders' religious activities as "strange" and exotic was critical to Moore's attempt to establish their authenticity as artifacts. Black people's propensity to engage in primitive spiritual rituals and superstition was a defining trait that marked their Africanness during the 1920s and 1930s.

Moore next turned his attention to what he called "pleasure" outlets.⁴⁶⁵ He wrote: "there are several 'to do' halls, where the secret societies hold their meetings and Terpsichorean devotees give vent to their African-born rhythm."⁴⁶⁶ The "hall" that Moore referred to was the Farmers' Alliance Hall, which had been used to host meetings for the Sapelo Island branch the Colored Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union. The organization was originally founded in Texas in 1886: the alliance was created to

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 251-252.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 252-253.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

organize and promote the economic interest of black farmers during the turbulent years following Reconstruction. Yet, Moore's willful blindness with regard to the race and power dynamics in the region obscured the hall's true function and led him to conclude that the primary character of the meeting place was defined by an imagined African secretive nature. As far as Moore was concerned, Sapelo Islanders had been under the graceful protection and care of white paternalist figures since the slavery days. This view is clearly expressed in Moore's description of Thomas Spalding: "As a slave owner, however, Spalding came ultimately to suffer, even though he treated his 'helpers' with such kindness that the planters in the South dubbed Sapelo 'Nigger Heaven.'"⁴⁶⁷ No where in the historical record that Moore used to paint the picture of Sapelo Island's past did he uncover the host of runaway notices, nor did he unearth the long battle that Sapelo Islanders waged to retain the land that Tunis Campbell and Special Field Order 15 helped them to secure as a reparation for their bondage. Moore could not imagine that the secrecy surrounding black Sapelo Islanders' gatherings at the hall was designed to protect and shield them from the watchful eyes of island managers and the consequences associated with gathering to discuss matters that might usurp Howard Coffin's authority.

While it is true that the Farmers' Alliance Hall also hosted dances and socials, Moore's characterizations of these dances are inextricably linked to popular ideas about African survivals among blacks. The very notion that black dances arise from a primal need to "give vent" to an "African-born rhythm" is derived from the dominant primitivist assessment that characterized black people's uncontrollable savage impulses, which were believed to be overwhelmed by the provocation of musical rhythms. This

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 249.

characterization of an African essence was at the core of Moore's reading of Sapelo Islanders. Moore described everything about black Sapelo Islanders as if exotic and innate. He even wrote about popular Christian and Islamic names among islanders, like Julius, Caesar, Ishmael, Isaac, Nero, Bilali and Balaam, as if they were examples of a "picturesque" quality inherent to blacks.⁴⁶⁸

Moore's next stop was to Sapelo Island's Hog Hammock community. Here, Moore pretended to have a chance encounter with Emmett and Emma Johnson and their fifteen children at their home. However, Emmett and Emma's youngest son, Joe Johnson, recalls that Moore made arrangements to photograph the island's largest family prior to showing up at their doorstep.⁴⁶⁹ It is likely that the white island manager that Coffin designated to chauffeur Moore around the island identified Emmett's family as a subject of interest and prearranged the meeting. Yet, Moore wrote about the episode as if it were truly a "chance encounter," and dedicated an entire section of the article to Emma and Emmett Johnson's family. In the section titled "Fifteen 'Head' of Children," Moore quoted the exchange between himself and Emmett Johnson: "Yes, suh," said Emmett proudly. "We have fifteen head of children. They's all here to-day."⁴⁷⁰ Moore continued: "Emmett beamed at my request to photograph his kinky-headed group."⁴⁷¹ However, Joe Johnson tells a different story. He remembered that at least four of his eldest siblings were already adults and living and working on the mainland when Moore

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview, Joe Johnson, July 1, 2009.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

came to photograph his family.⁴⁷² But Moore was so desperate to take a picture featuring fifteen black children that he put four of the neighbors' children in place of the Johnson siblings who were not there.⁴⁷³ Joe Johnson's account reveals that Moore not only misrepresented Emmett Johnson with a fictitious quotation, but also deliberately constructed a fraudulent picture of the family. Documentary photographs were not only essential to *National Geographic Magazine's* charge to chart and document geographic and racial difference, but were also an essential element of documentary journalism and documentary books during the 1930s.⁴⁷⁴ These works relied on photographs as much as they did text in order to create a sense of authenticity within the text. For Moore, the photograph of the Johnson family was necessary in order to give his readers a visual representation of authentic sea island folk. Moore further degraded the Johnson family by making a joke based on what Joe Johnson identified as a lie:

‘We had better count them up to see if they are all here,’ remarked my companion just before I was ready to ‘shoot.’ There were sixteen! We counted again; sure enough there was one too many. Emmett checked his family. One of the youngsters belonging to a neighbor had joined the group.⁴⁷⁵

According to Moore's report, after the picture was taken Emma and Emmett Johnson's nine-year old son Isaac rolled up his pants and spontaneously began to dance.⁴⁷⁶ Moore took a picture of Isaac in action, and titled it “Balling The Jack.” The caption read: “Young Isaac exhibits a pair of agile feet burning with African rhythm,

⁴⁷² Interview, Joe Johnson, July 1, 2009.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ William Stott explores the role of documentary expressions in books and journalism during the 1930s in his study: *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

⁴⁷⁵ W. Robert Moore, “Gold Isles of Gualé,” 253.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 253.

while his sister provides the cadence by clapping her hands.”⁴⁷⁷ Again, on Sapelo, Moore finds blacks needing to “give vent” to an inner African musical impulse. For W. Robert Moore, and many white Americans during the period, the mark of blackness was a primitive African essence that needed to express itself—a racial trait that Moore determined was heightened among the human artifacts that he discovered on Sapelo Island.

Moore included three more photographs of Sapelo Islanders in the article. An older photograph of Emma and Emmett Johnson’s son, Fred Johnson, driving Calvin Coolidge and Howard Coffin in Emmett’s oxcart on a hunting excursion taken by Foltz Studio in 1928 was presented in the article. Fred Johnson, described by Moore as “small and dusky coachman,” remembered that he was working in the fields for Howard Coffin when he was chosen to drive the president in his father’s oxcart.⁴⁷⁸ Another group of Sapelo Islanders riding in an oxcart were also featured in the article. Moore described this group, and the function of the cart, in the photograph’s caption:

Sapelo Island has several Negro settlements, descendants of the old slave population. Besides serving as transport, the ox is used to plow and cultivate the small parcel of land which provides the family sustenance.⁴⁷⁹

Moore included an additional photograph of a Sapelo Islander in order to mark the uniqueness of the population and establish their quality as relics of the antebellum past. The photograph titled “Descendants of Plantation Workers,” featured a young unidentified black woman that Moore described as “returning home after a four-mile

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 251.

Interview, Fred Johnson, August 9, 2005.

⁴⁷⁹ W. Robert Moore, “Golden Isles of Gualo,” 258.

walk, carrying her youngster and balancing a bag of yams on her head.”⁴⁸⁰ Moore’s nameless subject was Hettie Walker. Her daughter, Cornelia Walker Bailey, author of *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geeche Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia* (2000) recognized her mother in the photograph and remembered her parents talking about the conditions under which the picture was taken. She explained that her mother was walking from Raccoon Bluff, carrying her sister Ada, to their home in a section of the island known as Belle Marsh.⁴⁸¹ Bailey said that a despised island manager, whom she called “Cap’n Frank,” drove Moore around the island that day. They encountered Hettie Walker on the road and asked to take her picture.⁴⁸² Hettie Walker, powerless to refuse or protest, posed for Moore’s photograph. Later the family learned that the picture was published in *National Geographic Magazine*.

As was the case for Hettie Walker, had Emma and Emmett Johnson refused to pose for Moore’s photographs, they understood that they would potentially offend Howard Coffin’s guest. For Emmett Johnson, such an infraction could have resulted in the loss of his job. Furthermore, all of Howard Coffin’s guests were “important people.” Presidents Coolidge and Hoover, Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh, were among the most powerful, most wealthy and most influential whites in America. Sapelo Islanders had every reason to believe that Howard Coffin was one of the most powerful white men in the nation. Joe Johnson described Moore as a “big shot,” and explained that when the

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁸¹ Interview, Cornelia Walker Bailey, July 3, 2009.

⁴⁸² Cornelia Walker Bailey (interviewed in July 3, 2009) and Paul Walker (interviewed June 4, 2009) both described a contentious relationship between “Cap’n Frank” and Sapelo Islanders. In particular, they described tensions between Cap’n Frank and the islanders that refused to work for Howard Coffin or R. J. Reynolds.

“big boss’ ” guests approached Sapelo Islanders, blacks were obligated to comply with their requests.⁴⁸³ In the case of Emmett and Emma Johnson, Hettie Walker, and the other Sapelo Islanders captured in Moore’s lens, the consequence of their acquiescence was that they were depicted as relics, painted as exotic, and mocked.

Nonetheless, the millions of *National Geographic Magazine* subscribers that opened the February 1934 edition, and the readers who paid 50 cents to purchase the publication at shops and newsstands, eager to encounter the “other” in dramatic text and rich photos, were undoubtedly satisfied. The edition featured an article covering Mrs. Robinson Crusoe’s travels in Ecuador and an article titled “A Native Son’s Rambles in Oregon”: each displaying numerous photographs of “Indians” and descriptions of their lifestyles and rituals. In the last article, readers discovered authentic sea island folk and their weird African rites among the thirty-six photographs in W. Robert Moore’s article. Although a copy of the family portrait that Moore photographed hung in the Johnson’s home, their children do not believe that they ever saw the magazine, nor did they ever read the article in which they were immortalized.

The Sapelo Islanders featured in Moore’s article had no control over how they were represented. While they posed for photographs, and at best, had a vague understanding of the fact the photographs would be used in a publication, they were completely unaware of Moore’s intent to characterize them as exotic, primitive oddities. The ability to represent oneself (or engage in impression management), and the ability to represent others with the weight of authority is a form of power. During the 1920s and 1930s, blacks struggled against American racism, which took many forms. In the case of

⁴⁸³ Interview, Joe Johnson, July 1, 2009.

the Sapelo Islanders featured in Moore's article, a distinct manifestation of American racism becomes evident: the article reflected the American racist tradition of whites representing blacks in ways that established their inferiority.

“Miz Parrish’s Negroes”: Hunting Slaves Songs of The Georgia Sea Islands

W. Robert Moore was not the only Sapelo Island researcher who visited Emma and Emmett Johnson and wrote about them in a published work that they would never see nor read. Neither Emma nor Emmett Johnson, nor any of their children knew that they were discussed in Lydia Parrish's book *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942).⁴⁸⁴ Lydia Parrish, the wife of famed artists Maxfield Parrish, spent more than twenty-five years collecting slave songs and organizing slave song performances throughout coastal Georgia.⁴⁸⁵ One of Emma and Emmett Johnson's sons, Ronister Johnson, remembered Lydia Parrish and recalled an occasion when she organized a group of elderly black Sapelo Island men to sing for Howard Coffin at the 'big house,' but he did not know about his family's presence in her book.⁴⁸⁶ Yet, they were included in Parrish's study—a study that she hoped would definitively connect black musical performance on the Georgia coast to African religious, cultural and musical traditions.

Lydia Parrish's inquiries into the musical traditions of coastal Georgia blacks were shaped by the debates about African survivals in the academe and the popularity of

⁴⁸⁴ Interview, Joe Johnson, July 1, 2009 and Fred Johnson, August 9, 2005. Neither Joe Johnson nor Fred Johnson had seen the book, and indicated that their parents knew nothing about it.

⁴⁸⁵ Parrish, 9-41.

⁴⁸⁶ Art Rosenbaum, a folk music researcher, performer and professor at the University of Georgia, interviewed Ronister Johnson in 1976 and asked him about Lydia Parrish's activities on Sapelo Island. Ronister Johnson's recollection was included in Rosenbaum's 1991 foreword to the second edition of Parrish's *Slave Songs* published in 1992 (xiii).

black cultural themes in the media. She relied heavily on Melville Herskovits' formulations about African retentions to structure her understanding of the music and the people that she collected.⁴⁸⁷ Yet, her initial attraction to "slave songs" was ignited during her childhood. Parrish grew up in an Quaker community south of Philadelphia where "descendants of slaves- and ex-slaves themselves- were the only singers."⁴⁸⁸ She explained that the Quaker's abolitionist views "attracted a singing race into their midst" which animated their otherwise quiet community with music.⁴⁸⁹ Parrish believed that the slave songs that she heard echoing from the kitchen and the fields in her home community touched a part of her that Victorian strictures suppressed. She explained why the Quakers did not try to "curb" the black's in their midst "musical exuberance": "Perhaps, with them as with me, the Negro's music filled a real need."⁴⁹⁰ From the very start of Parrish's racial socialization she learned that the black people who operated in the periphery of her world served whites literally and figuratively: they held the key to a musical gift that brought them a joy that civilized culture denied them. So, when she first visited Georgia's coast in 1909 and heard the slave songs again, she vowed to capture as much as of her childhood joy as she could.⁴⁹¹

In 1912, three years after Lydia Parrish's first visit to Georgia's coast, she began wintering on St. Simon Island.⁴⁹² Despite the fact that Maxfield Parrish did not join his wife during her trips to St. Simon Island, Lydia Parrish's status as the wife of a prolific

⁴⁸⁷ Lydia Parrish thanked Herskovits for making his research available to her (xxii), and cited his writings throughout her book.

⁴⁸⁸ Parrish, xxv.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., xxvi.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

American artist placed her within social proximity of Howard Coffin and the other rich whites that wintered and lived on Georgia's coast.⁴⁹³ While Lydia Parrish acquainted herself with the whites in the area, she remained curious about the black people on the coast and was disturbed by their "stillness".⁴⁹⁴ The lack of "musical exuberance" among St. Simon's blacks troubled her because it seemed that the natural link between blacks and their African essence, which was most clearly articulated in musical expression, had been artificially disrupted. Parrish quickly uncovered the disruptive influence responsible for the "stillness": "the island was a summer resort, and contact with city whites and their black servants had its numbing influence" on local blacks.⁴⁹⁵ After what Parrish described as "three musically barren winters," she discovered a few older blacks that remembered "the old songs" and learned, that if she offered enough money, they would sing them for her.⁴⁹⁶

By 1915, Lydia Parrish began collecting slave songs. She spent hours listening to local blacks sing and wrote out the lyrics and recorded each song's melodies by hand.⁴⁹⁷ While Parrish was the first white woman to collect "slave songs" in coastal Georgia, she was not the first white American who attempted to document this type of American music: her work would contribute to a large repository of "slave songs" that had been

⁴⁹³ Interview, Anne Heard, Lydia Parrish's granddaughter, (July 23, 2009). Anne Heard explained that Lydia Parrish visited Georgia's coast alone, and eventually moved there.

⁴⁹⁴ Parrish, 9.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.,

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Anne Heard (July 23, 2009).

collected by whites.⁴⁹⁸ Even though whites initiated the first wave of interest in collecting slave songs in the 1850s, by 1925 some blacks began collecting slave songs too. New Negroes inspired by Alain Locke's call to record "black folk" traditions, such as James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, took up the task of documenting slave songs.⁴⁹⁹ Lydia Parrish's slave song collection was influenced by both the old tradition of white sentimentalism about the "glorious plantation days," and the new interest expressed by whites and blacks in black folk life, black folk music, and its African roots. As a result, both of these influences are evident in her description of the people and songs that she collected.

As Lydia Parrish's tenure as a slave song collector and cultural preservationist progressed, and the intellectual and cultural currents shifted from Victorian thought to Modernist thought creating a space in which the meaning of black's African heredity could be re-imagined, Lydia Parrish crafted new meanings for the slave songs that she loved within the context of the African survivals discourse. While Lydia Parrish acknowledged that many of the slave songs that she adored were grounded in the American Christian tradition, it was their "African character" that captivated and

⁴⁹⁸ Lauri Ramey explains that a significant interest in "slave songs" was expressed between the 1850s and 1880s in her study *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2. Fredrika Bremer's *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* (1853); Francis Anne Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation 1838-1839* (1863); William Francis Allen's, Charles Pickard Ware's, and Lucy McKim Garrison's *Negro Slave Songs of the United States* (1867); Thomas Fenner's, Frederic G. Rathbun and Miss Bessie Cleveland's *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by Hampton Students* (1874); J.B.T Marsh's *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1875); Theodore F. Seward's *As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University* (1872); and Rev. Marshall W. Taylor's *Plantation Melodies* (1882) were all slave song collections.

⁴⁹⁹ James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson published *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* in 1925.

compelled her to preserve the music and promote its performance.⁵⁰⁰ She believed that the songs, themselves, had an “almost human will to live.”⁵⁰¹

Frequently persons, who have heard the singers the night before, telephone for the words of a song. The tune haunts them, but without the verses they cannot give it expression. They have my sympathy, I too, have suffered in the same fashion, and been obliged in self-defense to learn the songs. When I complained to Julia, my cook, of their torment, she answered: ‘they do us that way too, until we learn them.’⁵⁰²

The spirit-like quality that Parrish assigned to slave songs was certainly an outgrowth of the popular association between black people, their Africanness and an innate primitive spiritualism during the 1920s and 1930s. Parrish’s description of the songs’ spirit-like ability to “haunt” and torment all who heard them invokes the ominous feel associated with black traditions during the voodoo craze. The African spiritual power that she found in black music could possess even whites: “these songs have no regard for color.”⁵⁰³

According to Lydia Parrish’s calculations, the songs that she collected were the product of an inherent racial trait. Consequently, African survivals as she understood them, were biologically and spiritually bound to black bodies. In Parrish’s writings, she articulated a very specific calculation of black “musical exuberance.” She explained that Africans (and blacks) demonstrated an innate preoccupation with rhythm and knowledge of music, where as white music was taught and cultivated, and concentrated on melody and musicality.⁵⁰⁴ According to Parrish’s logic, blacks musical expression was akin to a natural emotional release, while white musical expression was the product of a conscious

⁵⁰⁰ Lydia Parrish, xxix.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., xxix.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 9.

intellectual effort and hard work. This view of the relationship between race and musical production and performance clearly illustrates the deep Victorian roots of the Modernist view of his beloved primitive. To some extent, Parrish appears to have surmised that enslaved people's ability to fuse African musical styles with the music of colonial planters reflected an advanced skill set.⁵⁰⁵ Yet she concluded that this feat was achieved because of black people's innate "remarkable musical gift and deeply religious nature".⁵⁰⁶ Ultimately, Parrish concluded that although African survivals were most pronounced among blacks on Georgia's coast, they could be found in the music and dances of black people anywhere:

If you are interested in African survivals and have a Negro community on or near your property, all you need do (provided you live in a remote district and are generous with your silver) is to let it be known that you wish to see such solo dances as the 'Buzzard Lope,' 'Juba,' 'The Mobile Buck,' and 'The Mosquito Dance' (accompanied by an occasional exclamation of 'Slap 'em! Slap 'em')- and they may be forthcoming...⁵⁰⁷

Parish's instructions to whites hoping to observe authentic African survivals reveals her assumptions about the economic power that whites have over blacks: she assumed a landlord-tenant relationship between whites and blacks who live in close proximity to one another, as well as believed that for the right amount of money, blacks would freely perform for whites.

There was one black musical performance style that she observed in coastal Georgia and South Carolina that she determined to be an undeniable African survival that was unique to Gullah blacks in the region: ring-shouts. She wrote that the "most popular

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

form is the ring-shout, in which a number of dancers move counter-clockwise in a circle.”⁵⁰⁸ According to Parrish, the black religious expression known as “shouts” was a response to extreme emotional and spiritual provocation that could be observed among blacks throughout the south. But “ring-shouts,” she explained, were unique to coastal Georgia and South Carolina. While “ring-shouts” were most commonly observed in religious gatherings, they were performed to secular songs as well. Parrish argued that white slave owners misunderstood the origin of the performance and referred to scholar Lorenzo D. Turner’s linguistic research to prove that term “shout” derived from the Arabic word “saut” which meant to walk or run around the Kaaba.⁵⁰⁹ She further clarified the African origin of the performance style:

Those who have traveled in Africa, and have seen native dancing, are convinced that the shout of the American Negro is nothing more than a survival of an African tribal dance, and that the accompanying chants in their form and melody are quite as typical of Africa as the dance itself.⁵¹⁰

Despite the fact that Parrish’s view of “Africa” reflects the belief that the continent was populated by a homogenous, static group of black people, animated by a quasi-biological and spiritual “African” essence, her writings about the ring-shout may have provided one of the most significant documentation of a potential African survival on the Georgia coast.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ A host of scholars and writers have referenced Lydia Parrish’s descriptions of ring-shouts and shout songs in the exploration of the African roots of black American traditions—there are too many of these works to list.

While Lydia Parrish sought to save coastal Georgia's slave songs from extinction and preserve what she believed was the greatest example of African survivals in North America, she found that another African survivals threatened the success of her intervention. Lydia Parrish imagined that one of the greatest obstacles to her preservation and collection efforts was black people's secretiveness: "The secretiveness of the Negro is, I believe, the fundamental reason for our ignorance of the race and its background, and this trait is in itself probably an African survival."⁵¹² Parrish referred to Melville Herskovits' writing to validate her conclusion, and quoted from Herskovits' report of a conversation that he had with a "Dutch Guiana Bush Negro": " 'Long ago our ancestors taught us that it is unwise for a man to tell anyone more than half of what he knows about anything.'"⁵¹³ Parrish complained that she continually encountered this "African survival" when attempting to entice blacks to sing for her. She offered the example of, what she described as, "the lengths to which the Negro carries reluctance to give information."⁵¹⁴ For fifteen years, Parrish's laundress and cook on St. Simon, Julia, acted as an intermediary and introduced Lydia Parrish to blacks who would sing slave songs for her. Parrish wrote: "She never sang a note on my place, and I assumed that she could not." Parrish continued: "But in 1927 at Mrs. Arnold's funeral her dramatic moment arrived. With the group she had brought to my door, she stood beside the open grave, she sang as well as the others."⁵¹⁵ On this African survival, Parrish concluded "the average

⁵¹² Ibid., 20.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

Negro enjoys intensely knowing something that the white man does not.”⁵¹⁶ Parrish also decided that blacks, contrary to the white opinion, were smart tricksters: “like their African cousins, our colored people are born actors; and an outsider with a pet theory about them can find ready confirmation of almost any notion.”⁵¹⁷

Like W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish’s reading of the “secretiveness” of coastal Georgia blacks was divorced from the realities of life in the Jim Crow South. Parrish did not understand that for blacks “secrets” and limited communication with whites functioned as a defensive mechanism against white violence. One Sapelo Islander reported while describing her youth on the island during the 1930s that “getting involved” with white people was dangerous. She said: “Back in them days they’ll kill you if you get involved with white people.”⁵¹⁸ While the Sapelo Islander explained that interracial interaction did not literally pose a threat to one’s life, she said that if a black person “forgot their place” trouble was sure to follow.

It is also apparent that Parrish had not considered the possibility that coastal Georgia blacks resented being asked to entertain the whites whose social, economic and political power dictated the terms of their lives. On the contrary, Parrish argued that slave songs would be saved if whites made more requests for their performance. She explained that educated blacks and local black schoolteachers were the greatest enemies of coastal Georgia’s slave songs. She wrote, “Negro school teachers...do their utmost to discredit and uproot every trace of it. Instead of being proud of their race’s contribution

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹⁸ Interview, Catherine Hillery, (July 3, 2009).

to the world of music...too many of them treat it like a family skeleton.”⁵¹⁹ She believed that the powerful influence of “self-hating” educated blacks could only be overcome by the generous admiration of paternalist whites. Predictably, Parrish was a true Modernist Primitivist, who deplored the Victorian uplift ideology from which many educated blacks in the South formulated their path to racial equality.

Like many New Negroes, Parrish championed the notion that black people would benefit greatly from cultivating pride in their African heritage and African born traditions.⁵²⁰ Her desire to “save” what she understood to be a vanishing tradition was sincere. Perhaps her exposure to Melville Herskovits’ theories helped to inspire the evolution of her slave song collecting mission from one that simply involved capturing her childhood love, to one designed to restore black people’s dignity. Yet, Parrish’s own romantic racist tendencies shaped her view of how blacks could regain a respect and love of their heritage. She argued, “the rural Negro has always taken his cue from the white folks at the ‘Big House.’”⁵²¹ So, “If they favor and enjoy the slave songs, it may be that he is not so far wrong after all, in cherishing his heritage in the face of jeers from the “style” leaders of his community.”⁵²² Parrish explained that all whites had to do was “allow the Negroes to provide entertainment in the manner that was usual on many antebellum estates.” She also suggested that offering blacks money in exchange for the performance of a slave song would also encourage their participation.⁵²³ During the Great Depression, this particular strategy worked well for Parrish’s purposes: “During the

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., xxvi.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 12.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid., 10.

bleak winters of the depression, some singers literally sang for supper-which they thankfully observed, the Lord had provided.”⁵²⁴ Ultimately, Parrish argued that blacks needed white people’s validation in order to develop pride in their African heritage.

Parrish credited Howard Coffin, the “ ‘Big Boss’ of Sapelo Island,” for following her formula and significantly helping to increase the prestige of slave songs by providing audiences for their performance at his mansion and at the Cloister Hotel.⁵²⁵ Coffin had literally recreated an “antebellum estate” on Sapelo Island and offered up “his Negroes” for slave song performances for his private guests.⁵²⁶ The Sapelo Islanders who performed for Coffin and his guests may have been motivated to do so for a host of reasons. Perhaps they hoped to gain a favored position in the eyes of their employer in order to secure their livelihood, or maybe they were excited by the prospects of being in the company of Coffin’s powerful guests. If Coffin took Parrish’s advice and paid Sapelo Islanders to sing, then it is very likely that the promise of money that could be used to supplement their wages made singing a few old songs for “white folks” an easy choice.

By 1937, news of Parrish’s slave song performances at Coffin’s Cloister Hotel had traveled as far as Washington, D.C. *The Washington Post* reported that “real Negro spirituals...sung by the Saint Simon’s Negro singers under the direction of Mrs. Maxfield Parrish” would perform in the lounge of the Cloister Hotel.⁵²⁷ Parrish understood that the

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 12, xxi-xxii.

⁵²⁶ Parrish wrote that Howard Coffin “Never lost an opportunity to share with others his delight in slave songs” (xxi).

⁵²⁷ “Bridle Party Plans to Hold Picnic on Isle” *The Washington Post*, January 10, 1937, section F5.

time was right for slave song performances: trends in the academe and in American popular culture during the 1930s had brought “authentic” black southern musical performance and culture to mainstream audiences. On this Parrish wrote:

From the fact Broadway features Negro actors, dancers, and musicians as never before, and that the producers of a negro opera attempted to teach the Harlem blacks to speak and sing like their primitive Southern cousins, it is clear that this is no time for the race to be disdainful of its African Heritage.⁵²⁸

The fact that black actors, dancers and musicians who performed in stage works such as H. Lawrence Freeman’s 1928 opera “Voodoo,” had learned to “sing and speak like their primitive Southern cousins,” signaled to Parrish that the moment had arrived for black coastal Georgians to declare their uniqueness, cash in on and embrace their innate racial talents and preserve as well as share their ancestral traditions. Together, Lydia Parrish and Howard Coffin brought authentic Gullah slave song performances to white audiences, delivering what Parrish believed to be genuine black relics of the African past for their entertainment.

Lydia Parrish’s close relationship with Howard Coffin provided her unlimited access to Sapelo Islanders. Over the years, she frequently visited the blacks who lived on the island, and the Johnson family was one of the families that Parrish went to see. During Parrish’s first visit to the Johnson home she convinced Emma and Emmett’s twins, Naomi and Isaac, to perform what Parrish called an “African pantomime.”⁵²⁹ Parrish cautioned her readers: “Those who are squeamish had better skip that part.” Naomi and Isaac performed “Throw Me Anywhere,” a children’s song-dance game

⁵²⁸ Parrish, 11.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 111.

during which “one lay on the floor...representing a dead cow,” and another participant “called out cues in a sharp staccato,” and the other participant mimics a buzzard.⁵³⁰

Parrish noted that Naomi “did the patting while Isaac did the dancing.” Parrish recorded the song:

March aroun’ (the cow)
 Jump across! (see if she’s daid)
 Get the eye! (always go for that first)
 So glad! (cow daid)
 Get the guts! (they like ‘em next best)
 Go to eatin’! (on the meat)
 All right-cow mos’ gone!
 Dog comin’!
 Look aroun’ for mo’ meat!
 All right-Belly full!
 Goin to tell the res.⁵³¹

Parrish did not explain how Naomi and Isaac’s song and dance classified as an African survival. Yet, it is likely that the song/dance was a “survival” of a black critique of race-power dynamics from the antebellum era. Sapelo Islander Cornelia Bailey presents a compelling race-based analysis of the meaning and performance of buzzard-prey song/dances—an interpretation that varies greatly from Parrish’s conclusion that the song was simply an “African pantomime.” In her book, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man* (2000), Bailey linked the “Buzzard Lope” dance and similar song/dance performances to racial oppression. When writing about the time that she witnessed her father and his friends performing the dance, she explains that “There’s a story that goes with the dance and its from the days of slavery.” She writes:

When the people who were enslaved had a hard task master...and
 they were working in the fields, in the sun, in the summertime, and

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

the heat got to someone...and he fell over dead in the field...The master wouldn't let the workers stop...But a whole day in August was a lifetime, and buzzards came, and they circled around, and the head buzzard came in and checked out the prey and the other buzzards joined him, and they started their natural thing of cleaning up the earth.⁵³²

Bailey's story about slaves worked to death and eaten by buzzards as they lay dead in the field because cruel slave masters would not allow blacks to bury their dead before the work was done is jarring. Bailey's version of plantation life bears no resemblance to the romantic plantation that Lydia Parrish imagined. Bailey concludes that the men performing the dance "might take turns acting out the buzzard in the dance but they weren't the buzzard. They were the prey. Black people had been bossed around and picked on ever since we got here."⁵³³ According to Bailey's interpretation, Isaac and Naomi had learned more than a children's song/dance, they had learned the grim realities of black life and death and had been introduced to the relationship between the "prey" and "the hunter"—a dynamic that was all too present in the lives of black Sapelo Islanders. Lydia Parrish, the "survivals" hunter, never attempted to analyze the metaphors and symbolism of the song lyrics that she collected.

Parrish visited the Johnson house a second time, and also wrote about it in her book. In describing the cause for her second visit, she wrote: "in hunting up Emma Johnson's twins, I came upon such a picture as must have been common in plantation days."⁵³⁴ Parrish romantically described the scene that took her imagination back to the antebellum days:

⁵³² Bailey, 178-183.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 234

Under the immense live oaks, two boys were beating rice in a home-made mortar. Chickens were all about, picking up stray grains. A couple of fanners were on the ground ready to fan rice as soon as the hulls were loosened in the mortar. Fanning, as can be imagined...Emma was thrifty, and the rice hulls- which looked like bran-fell on oilcloth laid on the ground. She told me they were to feed pigs.⁵³⁵

Parrish's sentimental view of "plantation days" relative to Emma Johnson's performance of mundane chores reflects the Modernist Primitivists' tendency to completely imagine their subjects according to their own fantasies. During the 1920s and 1930s, the poverty and hardships that plagued black rural life were deemed exotic and intriguing. For Emma Johnson, the "picture" that Parrish encountered at the Johnson house was a snapshot into her daily struggle to feed her family, and what Parrish noted as Emma Johnson's thriftiness was an essential survival strategy. Parrish's description of Emma Johnson and her children's work reflects bourgeois luxury of "appreciating" the simple life of those who live "close to nature." Parrish was at least aware of the tension that her unannounced visit caused: "the boys were 'shamed' and stopped singing when I came up."⁵³⁶ However, Parrish was happy to find that "there was no shyness about Emma."⁵³⁷ During this visit to the Johnson family, Parrish asked Emma, steeped in work, to sing for her. It would have been hard for Emma Johnson to refuse Parrish's request. Parrish, like other guests of Howard Coffin who toured the island's black hammock communities, was most likely escorted by one of Coffin's island managers—this likelihood was even greater for a white woman travelling alone. The Johnson's depended on Howard Coffin for work: shunning one of his guests' requests carried the potential of creating trouble for

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

the couple. So, Emma Johnson agreed, and unwittingly contributed three songs to Lydia Parrish's slave song collection: "Hard Time in Ole Virginny," "Aye Lord, Buddin' of the Fig tree," and "My Ole Missus Promise Me." Emma Johnson sang these lyrics to Lydia Parrish while she beat rice: "My ole missus promise me, Hard time in ole Virginny, When she die she set me free."⁵³⁸

On Sapelo Island, Parrish found a plethora of material from which she concluded that African survivals were most pronounced among blacks living on Georgia's coast. Parrish interviewed two of the island's oldest residents, Shad Hall and Katie Brown, and added the ghost stories and the remedies that they told her to a host of tales that she gathered about voodoo, roots and conjure that filled twelve pages of her book.⁵³⁹ Parrish was most taken by Katie Brown's description of cemetery rituals involving passing children over graves to ward off visitations by deceased family members, and the remedies that Brown provided for fighting off "hags" that torment sleepers and unwanted ghostly visitors.⁵⁴⁰ Lydia Parrish responded to the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze by recording the strange spiritual practices of coastal Georgia blacks. She wrote about gravesite decorations on Sapelo Island, the use of "frizzle headed chickens" to do dig up conjure bags, described the use of specific charms, and reported a story about an encounter that a Johnson family member had with a "shadow" (ghost).

Outside of Brown's and Hall's advanced age and their respective roles as island midwife and herbalist, one of the reasons that Lydia Parrish considered Katie Brown's

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Parrish even included a photograph a woman named Milly Polecat, "the Witch Doctor." (224). She dedicated an entire section to the exploration of voodoo, roots and conjure in her book (29-40)

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 29-31.

and Shad Hall's rituals, remedies and descriptions to be authentic was because they were direct descendants of Bilali Mohammed. Brown's and Hall's connection to an African born slave made them even more reliable African survivals subjects. Conversely, Brown and Hall had their own reasons for entertaining Lydia Parrish's inquiries. Sapelo Islanders had always sought Brown and Hall out for information and advice. For years, black women on Sapelo Island looked to Katie Brown to provide prenatal care, deliver their children, and help them tend to their newborn babies' needs. Similarly, islanders consulted Shad Hall for healing remedies and herbal medicines. Brown and Hall had always served as repositories of knowledge, and even though they were confronted with new white and black visitors from the mainland during the 1930s, visitors who asked Hall and Brown different questions from the ones that they had grown accustomed to, they remained poised to perform their usual duties. Brown and Hall may have even interpreted the new interest that Coffin's guests and other researchers and writers expressed in their knowledge of the past and the stories that they told as recognition of their position as respected elders among the islanders. However valuable Brown and Hall were to Sapelo Islanders, it is important to note that the interactions between these two elderly black informants and Lydia Parrish were shaped by Jim Crow customs. Even if they did not want to answer Parrish's questions, they would have had to carefully craft their response to her inquiries as not to offend her. Perhaps they would have used the same strategy employed by Parrish's cook Julia, and pretended not to know the answers to her questions. While this strategy would have quickly ended an unwanted interview, it would have also required that Hall and Brown deny the very source of their esteem in the community—their knowledge. If Brown and Hall were uneasy about talking to whites

from the mainland, they overcame their nervousness and became the most documented Sapelo Islanders featured in published works.

Katie Brown and Shad Hall were also eager to talk about their Muslim ancestors. The two shared with Parrish memories of the Islamic traditions that their ancestor passed down to his children. They repeated for her fragments of his prayers, and talked about special foods that the family prepared during Muslim observances.⁵⁴¹ Brown and Hall told Parrish about Bilali's prayer rituals and she reported that Mohammed and his wife "got down flat" during prayers.⁵⁴² From Parrish's vantage point, Islamic religious traditions were as exotic and strange as were voodoo, roots and conjure.

Parrish became so interested in the life of the Muslim slave fictionalized in Joel Chandler Harris' late 19th century stories that she began to hunt down his legendary Arabic journal. According to the affidavit that was submitted to the University of Georgia with Mohammed's journal in 1930, Bilali Mohammed gave his journal to white man named Reverend Goulding, a friend of Joel Chandler Harris, and told him that its contents included stories about his life in America.⁵⁴³ The scenario described in the affidavit seems unlikely. More likely is the possibility that Reverend Goulding, acting like the buzzard in Isaac and Naomi's song, took the journal from Mohammed and kept it as a souvenir from "slavery days." Lydia Parrish secured a photo static copy of his journal from the university and sent it to Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ B. G. Martin writes about Francis R. Goulding's Affidavit, Francis R. Goulding Papers, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Library, in his article "Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The 'Bilali Diary' in Context," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXVII, No. 3, Fall 1994.

in 1937.⁵⁴⁴ Melville Herskovits quickly forwarded the document to his Northwestern University colleague, Joseph Greenberg.⁵⁴⁵ After working with the document for years, and even taking it to Northern Nigeria for transcription clues, Greenberg was able to translate some of the content of the thirteen page journal. According to Greenberg's translations, the journal contained instructions for proper Muslim cleansing rituals, and its style of writing led Greenberg to conclude that Bilali Mohammed was a "young student" at the time of his capture.⁵⁴⁶ Greenberg explained that Mohammed had attempted to write down what he had learned through memorization.⁵⁴⁷

Thanks to Lydia Parrish's survival hunting on Sapelo Island, Bilali Mohammed's journal was transcribed. Finally, Joel Chandler Harris' fictional character Ben-Ali, the Mohammedan, and his soft leather "memorandum book" with writing that looked like "pothooks" containing tales of his slave raiding and subsequent enslavement, and Charles Spalding Wylly's claims that the journal contained Thomas Spalding's plantation figures, were finally proven to be pure fiction.⁵⁴⁸ What replaced those fictional Victorian era representations of Bilali Mohammed was the new Modernist view of an enslaved African who was a devout Muslim, student and scholar, ripped from his studies and forced into slavery on island in Georgia.

⁵⁴⁴ Parrish (25), Joseph Greenberg, "The Decipherment of the 'Ben -Ali Diary,' a Preliminary Statement," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 1940), pg. 372-375.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Joel Chandler Harris, *The Story of Aaron (So Named) The Son of Ben Ali* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1896) and Charles Spalding Wylly, *The Seed That Was Sown in the Colony of Georgia* (Boston: The Neale Publishing Company, 1910).

Lorenzo Dow Turner: The Father of Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect Comes to Sapelo

Lydia Parrish's hunt for African survivals encouraged another Modernist re-imaging of coastal Georgia blacks. She was, in part, largely responsible for bringing Lorenzo Dow Turner to Sapelo Island. Parrish used her close ties with Howard Coffin and other whites in the area to help Turner, a black scholar, gain access to coastal Georgia blacks without arousing suspicion that he had come to agitate their Negroes.⁵⁴⁹ Turner's research would produce the only Gullah study involving Sapelo Islanders that presented definitive proof of links between coastal Georgia blacks and their African progenitors. Turner's study, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949), revolutionized the way that the Gullah dialect was imagined, elevating it from a mark of ignorance and backwardness to profound evidence that African words and linguistic patterns had survived the Middle Passage and slavery.

The fact that Lorenzo Dow Turner was the only black researcher to explore African survivals among coastal Georgia's blacks is significant. Turner's mother was born a slave in North Carolina, so one could assume that for him, questions of slavery and African survivals took on a different set of meanings than they did for white Gullah researchers.⁵⁵⁰ Like many other members of the New Negro intelligentsia, Turner faced many challenges during his years as a student. Despite economic difficulties, and having to work as waiter and porter to fund his studies, Turner graduated from Howard

⁵⁴⁹ Margaret Wade-Lewis writes about the Turner's relationship to Lydia Parrish in her study, *Lorenzo Dow Turner: Father of Gullah Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 82.

⁵⁵⁰ Wade-Lewis writes about Turner's parents (12).

University in 1910.⁵⁵¹ Turner went on to complete graduate studies at Howard University and at the University of Chicago before returning to Howard to take a position as an English professor. While at Howard University, Turner worked closely with Carter G. Woodson.⁵⁵² Woodson, the father of black historical studies, encouraged the rescue, reconstruction and preservation of black history.⁵⁵³ Naturally, when Turner expressed an interest in exploring the dialect that he heard his students from South Carolina speak to one another to his mentor, Woodson encouraged his curiosity.⁵⁵⁴ Woodson even donated a portion of a large grant that he won in 1927 to fund Turner's first research trip to St. Helena Island, South Carolina.⁵⁵⁵

Turner's preliminary research on St. Helena reinforced his resolve to tackle the Gullah dialect. Shortly after visiting coastal South Carolina, Turner began in depth training in the field of linguistics. Turner knew that he would have to arm himself with expert linguistics skills in order to successfully refute the dominant view of the Gullah dialect. John Bennett, Guy B. Johnson, Ambrose E. Gonzales, H.P. Johnson, Mason Crum and George Philip Krapp, consistently argued that the Gullah dialect was a simple form of "baby talk" that developed between white plantation owners and their slaves as a result of the language divide between them.⁵⁵⁶ Turner, by contrast, was convinced that the Gullah dialect included a vocabulary drawn from several West African languages. He studied at a linguistics institute at the City University of New York during the 1930s,

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 13-26.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 36, 73.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵⁶ Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949), 5-14.

during the months when he did not have to teach classes at Fisk University.⁵⁵⁷ There he learned the phonetic alphabet and transcription methods, and gained research skills that transformed him from an English professor to linguistics expert. Despite the fact that Turner had trouble securing funding for his study, he was eventually awarded research funds from a linguistics award that enabled him to begin fieldwork in coastal Georgia and South Carolina in the spring of 1932.⁵⁵⁸ Like Parrish, Turner believed that Gullah research was time sensitive. In particular he feared that the dialect would soon become extinct. In a research proposal, he explained the urgency of his proposed study:

Even though their speech, which is unique among the dialects of the country, has undergone little or no change since the seventeenth century, such a condition cannot long obtain, for contact with the outside world, which modern means of transportation and increasing advantages make inevitable, is daily becoming more and more easy and distinctive characteristics of these people and their speech are gradually but surely disappearing.⁵⁵⁹

While Turner's interest in the Gullah varied from Moore's and Parrish's, he shared their belief that the Gullah were relics of the past. The fact that he concluded that their speech had "undergone little or no change since the seventeenth century" is evidence of Turner's belief that Gullah folk were stuck in an earlier time. For Turner, the advent of modern technological innovations threatened to corrupt the Gullah dialect by bringing Gullah folk in contact with the modern "outside world." Yet, Turner believed that if he moved quickly, his study would reveal a significant connection between the Gullah dialect and several West African languages.

⁵⁵⁷ Wade-Lewis, 66.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 81 & 98

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

Since Turner believed that the sole quality that made coastal South Carolina and Georgia blacks unique was in jeopardy of “disappearing,” he aggressively pursued funding for his research from several organizations. The urgency of Turner’s proposal was responded to with an award. He spent the spring of 1932 and the summer of 1933 and 1934 in South Carolina and Georgia. In South Carolina, he collected linguistic samples on Edisto Island, Johns Island, St. Helena Island, Hilton Head, Wadmalaw Island, and in Bluffton, Cordsville, Pickney Island, Sandy Island, and Georgetown.⁵⁶⁰ In Georgia, he collected samples on Harris Neck and Brewer’s Neck, St. Simon Island, St. Mary’s, Darien and Sapelo Island.⁵⁶¹ Turner traveled with a 30 pound electric recorder and, in most locations, he sought out black community leaders to act as intermediaries.⁵⁶² To ensure that he gathered the most “pure” linguistic samples, Turner had very specific criterion for his informants, in each locale he sought out: “at least three informants” two of whom had to be “above sixty years of age and one between forty and sixty. Both sexes represented, with one exception all of the informants were natives of their respective communities. Their parents were also natives.”⁵⁶³ For the interviews, Turner developed a highly systematic method of gathering Gullah linguistic samples: he organized a worksheet patterned after those used by the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada.⁵⁶⁴ It seemed that Turner had devised a research strategy that would avoid the biases and romantic racial sentimentalism that plagued most Gullah researchers.

⁵⁶⁰ Turner, 291.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Wade-Lewis, 81.

⁵⁶³ Turner, lx.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

Turner's linguistic research plans appeared to be devoid of the popular culture motivations that tainted Gullah studies. But, Turner could not avoid the allure of folk culture material that had become so trendy during the 1920s and 1930s. The phonograph recordings that he made included samples in which subjects gave autobiographical sketches, narratives of religious experiences (prayers and sermons), religious and secular songs, folktales, proverbs, superstitions, descriptions of living conditions on the sea islands, recollections of slavery, systems of counting, and methods of planting, harvesting crops and cooking.⁵⁶⁵ Perhaps Turner surmised that if the Gullah had in fact retained their African progenitors' spiritual and cultural traditions, then a discussion of these practices would yield the greatest number of West African linguistic correlates. Ultimately, Turner had formulated a system through which he could collect and document the sort of historical and folk culture material that New Negro scholars like Carter G. Woodson believed to be invaluable, while also gathering dialect samples that might actually verify the presence of African retentions.

Clearly, Turner's scholarly training and methodical research plan gave him an advantage over the other Gullah researchers that came to Sapelo Island. Where as other researchers like Moore and Parrish tended to simply assume that there was a unique connection between Sapelo Islanders and their African past, Turner's plan positioned him to actually verify those connections. Turner also had another advantage over Moore and Parrish in terms of his ability to solicit raw material from his subjects: he was black. Turner wrote about the negative reaction that one of his subjects had when he brought a white colleague along on an interview. He recalled that his colleague "unintentionally

⁵⁶⁵ Turner, lx.

used a tone of voice which the informant resented. Instantly, the interview ended. Apologies were of no avail. The informant refused to utter another word.”⁵⁶⁶ When Turner returned to the sea islands several weeks later, he reported: “I was confronted on every hand with this question... ‘Why did you bring the white man?’.”⁵⁶⁷

Even though Turner felt that the Gullah were generally reluctant to talk to strangers, and wrote that they had become annoyed with people’s curiosities about their speech and their lives, he found that his subjects became more comfortable with him over time and as a result, they used more African words in his presence.⁵⁶⁸ Even though Turner’s blackness had helped him earn his subjects’ trust, the fact that he was an outsider to their community did present a barrier that he had to work through. Yet, his visit to Sapelo Island stood out in islanders’ memories. While most elderly Sapelo Islanders today do not remember Lydia Parrish’s visits or her name, they recall that a “learned black man” had come to their community to ask them questions. Sapelo Islander Cornelia Bailey remembered the “old folks” talking about Turner’s visit to the island.⁵⁶⁹

When Turner came to Georgia’s coast in 1933, he relied on Lydia Parrish for support. Little is known about how the two met; perhaps their mutual relationship with Melville Herskovits led them to one another. Once the two became acquainted, Parrish made arrangements for Turner to conduct interviews and collect shout songs in the

⁵⁶⁶ Turner, 12.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁸ Turner, 11-12.

⁵⁶⁹ Interview with Cornelia Bailey, July 3, 2009.

building that she built for slave song performances on St. Simon Island.⁵⁷⁰ His recording device required reliable electricity, a commodity that few black homes on the Georgia sea islands had during the 1930s. For this reason, it is likely that Parrish accompanied Turner on his visit to Sapelo Island, and made arrangements for him to utilize one of Coffin's out buildings conduct and record interviews there as well.

Turner met with several Sapelo Islanders, but he recorded his meetings with Katie Brown, Shad Hall, Tom Lemon, Balaam Walker and Reverend John Dunham.⁵⁷¹ Brown, Hall, Lemon, Walker and Dunham told Turner what they remembered about slavery, shared transformative Christian religious experiences, they sang songs and made Christian prayers for Turner's recordings, and told Brer Rabbit and Brer Wolf stories.⁵⁷² Unlike the other researchers that came to Sapelo Island during the 1930s, Turner did not come to island in pursuit of mystic voodoo rites, African musical gifts and strange African rituals. Similarly, when Sapelo Islanders were not asked about conjuh and roots, they did not describe them as being an essential part of their lives.

One of the more compelling Sapelo Island recordings is of Katie Brown sharing her memory of the newly freedmen's and freedwomen's return to Sapelo Island near the Civil War's end. Brown told Turner that hoards of newly emancipated slaves walked to Savannah, Georgia to Union headquarters and requested that they be allowed to return to their island homes. Brown said: "And they get a great large boat and put all the people in it and bring them, and put them on the sea coast all along, until they got back to they

⁵⁷⁰ Wade-Lewis, 82.

⁵⁷¹ Taken from Lorenzo Dow Turner's Recording Collection, courtesy of Professor Thomas B. Klein, PhD, Georgia Southern University.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

different homes. And they did promise to give the people they homes, but afterward it was turn back to the owner-master.”⁵⁷³ Brown’s memory of General Sherman’s failed land distribution plan was keen. All of her life, Katie Brown witnessed black land loss on Sapelo Island.

Even though Sapelo Islanders did not directly describe the impact of racism on their daily lives during Turner’s recording sessions, Reverend John Dunham did talk about the “change” that occurred on Sapelo Island from the time that the newly freedmen and freedwomen returned to the island after the war, to the period of Coffin’s occupation of the island. Reverend Dunham said:

Things are very different now from what it used to be. The time has been when we made plenty of cotton, plenty of corn, plenty potatoes, plenty peas, plenty beans. Everything was plentiful. Money was plentiful. Now it get to the place where there is nothing, everything become hard. In the first of freedom when we landed on Sapelo Island, (I think it was about ‘65)...The Lord take care of us and feed us just like he feed the birds and the ravens in the field, and we thank God.⁵⁷⁴

The change that Reverend Dunham described as a transformation from a time when everything was “plentiful” to the time when “there is nothing” was a clear statement of Sapelo Islanders’ poverty. According to Dunham, when Sapelo Islanders were newly free and completely independent, they had everything that they needed. However, the reinstatement of the plantation state on the island made things “hard” for blacks because now they were poor wage laborers.

Most researchers asked Shad Hall about voodoo, conjuh, shadows (ghosts) and African ancestors, but Turner asked Hall to recite a prayer. Hall prayed for Turner’s

⁵⁷³ Ibid., Katie Brown recording (July/August 1933).

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., Reverend John Dunham (July/August 1933).

recording, and delivered a heartfelt Christian prayer of thanksgiving. Hall began:

“Everlasting God, we come to thee o’ father to render thanks unto thee for the saving grace that you have given from the early rising...” and Hall ended the prayer asking for deliverance from earthly suffering “through Jesus Christ and our Lord, Amen.”⁵⁷⁵

Turner did not provide editorial comments about the specific content of the recordings beyond a discussion of the relationship between specific words and syntax relative to African linguistic patterns. Yet, one might imagine that he must have paused to consider the weight of the personal stories, prayers and testimonies that Sapelo Islanders had entrusted him with.

By 1934, Turner had managed to acquire an extensive collection of Gullah dialect samples from coastal South Carolina and coastal Georgia. The next step in answering the question about the origins of the Gullah dialect was to establish African linguistic correlates. Even as Turner’s linguistic training prepared him to decode patterns in the Gullah dialect, he would have to become proficient in working with West African languages in order to prove his theory. Accordingly, Turner applied, and was accepted to the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London to study West African languages.⁵⁷⁶ Once again, Turner searched for a grant that would fund his studies and travel to Europe. He applied for the Guggenheim award in 1936 and competed against his former Howard University student, Zora Neale Hurston, for the award.⁵⁷⁷ Hurston pursued the award to continue her voodoo research, and she won the prize over her former teacher. Even though The Guggenheim Foundation decided to cast their support

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., Shad Hall recording (July/August 1933).

⁵⁷⁶ Wade-Lewis, 90.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 98-99.

for Hurston's African survivals research, Turner was able to gather enough financial support to leave for London in October of 1936.⁵⁷⁸

The training that Turner received at the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London, and the encounters that he had with Africans in Europe helped him unearth specific African roots of the Gullah dialect. At the University of London, Turner worked closely with scholars who had extensive training in West African languages. However, Turner's encounters with native African speakers while in Europe proved to be equally valuable to his work. While in Europe, Turner interviewed more than 25 African informants. The African informants represented the full array of linguistic families in West Africa: Bambara, Efik, Ewe, Fante, Fula, Ga, Ibibio, Ibo, Kikongo, Mende, Twi, Umbundu, Vai, Wolof and Yoruba speakers were all represented. One by one, Turner interviewed blacks from French West Africa, Southern Nigeria, Togo and Dahomey, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Belgian Congo, Liberia, Gambia and Senegal.⁵⁷⁹ During the interviews, Turner played Gullah recordings from the Georgia and South Carolina coast, and time and time again, connections were made that established a link between the Gullah dialect and its West African progenitor.⁵⁸⁰

After fifteen years of research, Turner concluded that West African linguistic patterns were abundantly evident in the dialect spoken by black people in coastal Georgia and South Carolina. Turner argued that these survivals "were most numerous in the vocabulary of the dialect but can also be observed in its sounds, syntax, morphology, and

⁵⁷⁸ Wade-Lewis, 105.

⁵⁷⁹ Turner, 292.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-111.

intonations.”⁵⁸¹ Looking closely at patterns of slave importation to South Carolina and Georgia from Africa helped Turner establish the clusters of linguistic concentrations that resulted in the survival of Twi, Dahomean, Mandingo, Yoruba, Ibo and Ovimbundu words and personal names in the Gullah dialect.⁵⁸² He used the more than 165 pages worth of Gullah personal names, words and their West African correlates to rebut the popular “baby talk” thesis. Turner noted that the Gullah dialect samples collected in coastal Georgia were the most fruitful in identifying direct West African correlates: “Approxiamately three-fourths of all Gullah personal names I collected in coastal Georgia, principally on St. Simon Island, Sapeloe Island, and Harris Neck, and in the vicinity of Darien.”⁵⁸³ Turner proved that systems of counting recorded in Darien, Georgia were direct derivatives of Fula numerical marking systems, and songs recorded in Harris Neck, Darien and St. Simon Island were of Mende origin.⁵⁸⁴ Turner found words used by Sapelo Islanders, like “bidi, bidi” (small chicken) used in Kongo linguistic families, and “nini” (female breast) shared the same meaning in Mende linguistic families.⁵⁸⁵

Turner’s research proved to be the most fruitful of all the inquiries made into the prevalence of African survivals on Georgia’s coast. He had effectively proven that West African linguistic patterns had survived chattel slavery. The fact that Turner had identified a survival that could be scientifically verified distinguished his research from Moore’s and Parrish’s. Moore and Parrish looked for an African essence in coastal

⁵⁸¹ Turner, lx.

⁵⁸² Turner, 2-42.

⁵⁸³ Turner, 42.

⁵⁸⁴ Turner, 255-257.

⁵⁸⁵ Turner, 191 & 199. These terms are still used by Sapelo Islanders.

Georgia blacks, an “essence” that they assumed animated all black people (but were most pronounced among Gullah people), which was ultimately unverifiable.

Turner’s findings promised to restore dignity to coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks. Since the first published discussion of the Gullah dialect in 1908, researchers, scholars and observers had assumed that the distinct speech patterns used by coastal blacks were nothing more than a mark of their primitiveness and intellectual inferiority. Ambrose Gonzales, a Gullah folklore collector wrote:

Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullah seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and enriched it with certain African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that was gradually adopted by other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia.⁵⁸⁶

According to Gonzales, the dialect was the product of blacks who were “careless of speech” and who had “clumsy tongues.” At first, he wrote that blacks in the region had “enriched” the speech of wealthy colonists with “African words,” but just a few sentences later wrote the opposite. Gonzales explained that enslaved Africans quickly relinquished his “jungle-tongue” and explained that enslaved people “seem to have picked from the mouths of their African brothers not a single jungle-word for the enrichment of their own speech.”⁵⁸⁷ Ambrose’s assessment of the Gullah dialect is consistent with the view of black and African peoples that were prominent during the Victorian period. The advent of Modernism had, at least, attempted to replace this purely denigrating view of blackness with an affirming view of black folk. Franz Boas and his students, Alain

⁵⁸⁶ Turner, 6.

⁵⁸⁷ Turner, 8.

Locke and the New Negro vanguard had pushed for a new imagining of Africa and black people's African heritage. They called for a new view of the black-African connection, and Lorenzo Dow Turner carried out that mission. Turner's Gullah dialect was reflective of a people who had held on to the words and naming practices that gave meaning to the world that their forefathers conceptualized.

During the 1930s, a picture of Sapelo Islanders began to form in the minds and imagination of researchers and journalists, and they projected the image of the Sapelo Islanders that they made to the world. In W. Robert Moore's imagination, Sapelo Islanders were human relics, primitive remnants of the enslaved Africans who populated Georgia's coast. The *National Geographic Magazine* "Staff Man" found in Sapelo Islanders an unchanging folk, bound by an African essence. Lydia Parrish's Sapelo Islanders were musical and magical—eternally connected to their African ancestors through the gift of musical exuberance and spiritual insights. Lorenzo Dow Turner made a new Gullah. In his mind, Sapelo Islanders, and the other coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks' words held the mystery to the African origins of American blacks. Turner's Sapelo Islanders were not made by slavery, they were made by an identifiable African past. Together, Moore's, Parrish's and Turner's minds and imaginations made Sapelo Islanders Gullah.

More important is the fact that the view of Sapelo Islanders that emerges in Moore's, Parrish's and Turner's work reflects 1930s intellectual and cultural preoccupations. The connection between Sapelo Islanders and African culture, language and spirituality was constructed through a series of intellectual formulations and

negotiations that were tempered by popular discourses in and outside of the academe. Soon, the federal government would fund research that would institutionalize the fantasies and theories that outsiders had about Sapelo Island blacks, making African survivals among them a fact, and a permanent part of America's racial, cultural and ethnic tapestry.

Chapter 5

Drums and Shadows: The Federal Writers' Project Explore Coastal Georgia Blacks and Join in the Making of Sapelo Island's Authentic Gullah Folk

“The funeral rites of the modern Negro, in so far as they include casket, flowers, music and religious services, are obviously borrowed from his civilized environment. But the strange practices that color the coast Negro's death and burial, barbaric pageantry, and the unrestrained mourning are products of his forgotten years in the deep wilderness of Africa. Ages past, his forefathers accompanied death and burial with superstitious practices taught to them by voodoo priests.”

-Mary Granger, *Studies of Negro Survival Types in Coastal Georgia*

What Mary Granger Did Not See

By the time Mary Granger, the white woman who authored the most widely referenced study on African survivals in coastal Georgia, came to Sapelo Island for the first time in 1937, life for Sapelo Islanders had begun to change dramatically. The Great Depression left Howard Coffin in millions of dollars of debt, forcing him to choose between saving his Sea Island Resort and holding on to his private Sapelo Island paradise. Coffin chose the resort over Sapelo Island, and hired a broker in Atlanta to find one of the few white men in America whose extensive riches cushioned him against the impact of the Depression, and invited him to Georgia's coast to tour Coffin's property.⁵⁸⁸ Richard “R.J.” Reynolds was just twenty-six years old when he began to entertain the prospects of purchasing Howard Coffin's Sapelo Island holdings in 1934.⁵⁸⁹ Reynolds, the heir to a tobacco fortune, was looking for a private hideaway, and Coffin's oasis seemed like the perfect fit. Just five years earlier, Reynolds served five months in jail in

⁵⁸⁸ Buddy Sullivan, *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater: The Story of McIntosh County and Sapelo Island* (McIntosh County, Georgia: McIntosh County Board of Commissioners, 1990), 655-656

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Britain for manslaughter—he struck and killed a man while driving drunk while travelling in Europe, so he needed a refuge from the watchful eyes of news reporters.⁵⁹⁰ So, in 1934, R.J. Reynolds purchased Coffin’s Sapelo Island holdings for \$700,000, which was only ten percent of the property’s value, and spent an additional \$50,000 dollars to buy Coffin’s luxury yacht.⁵⁹¹

R.J. Reynolds did not take possession of the island right away, and when he did in move into the “big house” in 1936, he primarily used the island as a seasonal vacation home, leaving white island managers to oversee the island’s operations in his absence. He retained all of Coffin’s Sapelo Island industries, and focused most of his attention on updating his new mansion: Reynolds installed a heating and cooling system in the big house, built an indoor pool, constructed a bowling alley in the basement and hired a muralist to paint tropical scenes on the mansion’s walls.⁵⁹² He made some changes to the Quadrangle building (guests and white worker’s quarters) too: he had a movie theater built on the building’s second floor.⁵⁹³

While R.J. Reynolds readied his island hideaway for his opulent lifestyle, Sapelo Islanders adjusted themselves to the series of changes instituted by the island’s new white patriarch. Emmett Johnson went to work for his new boss right away. Ronister Johnson reported that his father built Reynolds’ 61-foot passenger and utility boat, the *Kit Jones*, but he did not get credit for building the boat used to transport passengers, mail and

⁵⁹⁰ The following *New York Times* articles reported the details of the accident and the murder trial: “Reynolds on Trial for Manslaughter” July 23, 1929, “Three Doctors Aid in Reynolds’ Defense” July 31, 1929 and “Reynolds Guilty; Gets Five Months” August 1, 1929.

⁵⁹¹ Sullivan, 657.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 675.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

supplies for Reynolds.⁵⁹⁴ Instead, a Norwegian boat carpenter, Hulga Spar, was noted as the mastermind behind the *Kit Jones*'s construction.⁵⁹⁵ Surely Johnson's new boss was pleased with his work and ranked him high among his most valuable employees, but working for Reynolds may have placed Emmett Johnson and his family at the center of tensions that were budding between Sapelo Islanders. Reynolds' occupation of Sapelo Island deepened a growing divide between the Sapelo Islanders who worked at the big house, the people who worked in the fields and maintained the roads, and the people who held on to their economic independence by farming and fishing for profit. Cornelia Walker Bailey, the daughter of the woman that W. Robert Moore photographed—Hettie Walker, wrote "It wasn't too different from what took place in slavery days when the black people working around the Big House grew to think that they were more important than the people working in the field." Bailey explains: "the people on the South End lived nearer the Big House so they were the ones who usually got the jobs as maids and cooks in the mansion house or would work in Reynolds' mechanic shop, carpentry shop or dairy". She remembered that the people who lived on the island's north end, the descendants of the men that formed the William Hillery Company to secure black land in Raccoon Bluff after the Civil War "did hard physical work like maintaining the roads on the island."⁵⁹⁶ One Sapelo Islander explained "If you didn't work for Reynolds, you could not be trusted" because the threat of being fired could not be used to control you.⁵⁹⁷ Perhaps some Sapelo Islanders had begun to accept the reality that Bilali Mohammed

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 677.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ Cornelia Walker Bailey, *God, Dr. Buzzard and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geeche Talks About Life on Sapelo Island*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 114.

⁵⁹⁷ Interview with Paul Walker, June 4, 2009.

embraced during the antebellum period: working for powerful whites yielded greater benefits than did resistance. But the “benefits” that came along with working for Coffin or Reynolds were few, and they did not include a pathway out of poverty nor did they furnish methods to secure their ancestral lands.

Reynolds’ occupation of Sapelo Island provided plenty of provocation for black resistance. During much of the 1930s and 1940s, R.J. Reynolds “acquired” large tracts of land owned by Sapelo Islanders, moving the bulk of the island’s residents into Hog Hammock. One journalist describes Reynolds’ land acquisitions, and writes “he consolidated the scattered black communities on Sapelo Island into one at Hog Hammock, thus enabling him to gain clear title to other areas.”⁵⁹⁸ Reynolds’ efforts to “consolidate” black land holdings on the island were achieved through unscrupulous maneuvers that enabled him to control most of the land on the island.

Reynolds acquired land through a series of land swap schemes and other maneuvers designed to secure large tracts of land. He took advantage of the fact that many family properties had been passed down through generations without legal deeds and titles, islanders had little access to money for lawyers, and many of the island’s residents were dependent on Reynolds for work. Even more disabling were the dangers inherent to blacks resisting white authority in the Jim Crow South. Sapelo Islanders reminisce about Reynolds’ “land swap” scheme. R.J. Reynolds took over black land holdings on the islands’ south end by promising residents new homes. Cornelia Walker Bailey wrote: “He offered to build new houses in the community for a few families in Shell Hammock...they turned out to be cheap, little preassembled-type wooden houses

⁵⁹⁸ Buddy Sullivan, 677.

with a very inferior grade of wood that didn't hold up well.”⁵⁹⁹ Sapelo Islander Ruth Hillery Johnson's parents lost their Shell Hammock property in the “land swap.” She remembered the day that her father marked a lengthy contract that Reynolds's lawyers presented to him with an “x.” She reported that her father was told that he could move back to Shell Hammock once renovations to the area were made, but the verbal agreement between R.J. Reynolds and Gibb Hillery was not honored, nor was it reflected in the contract.⁶⁰⁰

At times, R.J. Reynolds commissioned his island managers to use intimidating tactics to force land sales. Cornelia Walker Bailey remembers the day that the white island manager “Cap'n Frank Durant” came to her family's home in Belle Marsh to pressure her father to move to Hog Hammock.⁶⁰¹ The visit began with Cap'n Frank suggesting that Hicks and Hettie Walker's children would fare better in Hog Hammock because they would not have to walk so far to school. Then he promised Hicks Walker free lumber if he built a new house in Hog Hammock and even told him that R.J. Reynolds would continue to pay him on the days that he took off from work to build the house. When Hicks Walker declined Reynolds' offer, the island manager responded “‘Well Hicks, you know it'd be too bad if you lose your job and have to go to the mainland and your family have to fend for themselves.’”⁶⁰² The prospects of economic banishment from the island and leaving his family behind was too horrible for Hicks Walker to consider, so he moved his family to Hog Hammock.

⁵⁹⁹ Bailey, 261.

⁶⁰⁰ Interview with Ruth Hillery Johnson, August 8, 2002.

⁶⁰¹ Bailey, 97.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, 97-99.

Despite the fact the R.J. Reynolds single handedly minimized black land holdings on Sapelo Island, some islanders remember him fondly. Betty Johnson Cooper, Emmet Johnson's granddaughter had different memories of R.J. Reynolds. The Reynolds that she remembered was generous: he hosted big Christmas parties and gave the island children toys, and gave every family a gift basket on Thanksgiving.⁶⁰³ But Cornelia Walker Bailey remembered him differently: "There were people on the island that worshipped him but he called us 'his people' in front of guests and that irritated me."⁶⁰⁴ Bailey described Reynolds as a "lazy millionaire we did all the work for. He was always walking around with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other; he threw lavish parties for his guests and he had a whole string of wives."⁶⁰⁵ Even as R.J. Reynolds handed out gifts to the descendants of the newly freedmen and freedwomen who fought hard to retain land on Sapelo, he simultaneously ripped from their hands their ancestors' highest freedom aspiration.

Mary Granger did not notice that Sapelo Islanders were victims of a massive land loss campaign, nor did she observe that their lives were constricted by Jim Crow racism. She was not interested in exploring the harsh economic realities that the islanders faced under R.J. Reynolds's regime. Granger came to Sapelo Island to hunt down African survivals, and the allure of their Africanness blinded her to everything else that contributed to the lives of the Sapelo Islanders that she interviewed. Mary Granger's Sapelo Islanders were the real life equivalents of the dark voodooists imagined in migration metropolis newspaper reports, and were as exotic, backward and strange as

⁶⁰³ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper, April 9, 2010.

⁶⁰⁴ Bailey, 258.

⁶⁰⁵ Bailey, 259.

were Julia Peterkin's Blue Brook Gullahs and the Charleston, South Carolina Gullahs depicted in the 1935 musical *Porgy and Bess*. When she published the study of African survivals commissioned by the United States federal government, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among The Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940), R.J. Reynolds, and the white power structure that he was a reflection of, would not factor in her reading of Sapelo Islanders' lives.

This chapter will explore the establishment of the Federal Writers' Project and the incorporation of black people and common folk themes in its works. A brief biography of Mary Granger and the series of negotiations and debates through which the *Drums and Shadows* study was crafted will also be presented in this chapter. The chapter will conclude with analysis of the weight of Granger's work in the construction of Sapelo Islanders' Gullah identity.

The Federal Writers' Project Joins the Hunt for African Survivals

Far away from Sapelo Island, Georgia, the impact of the Great Depression initiated a wave of changes that laid the path for Mary Granger to hunt African survivals in the black communities on the island. The Great Depression took its toll on the nation, and federal authorities scrambled to develop relief programs that would benefit American citizens as well as jump-start the economy. The result was an unprecedented number of programs and agencies designed to employ American citizens and stimulate the economy. In 1935 the Works Progress Administration, the largest New Deal agency, was born. The agency oversaw government-funded projects that engaged in activities ranging from building bridges and highways, clearing slums, to rehabilitating rural areas and reforestation. While most of these projects offered employment to manual laborers, the

demand for aid for American artists, writers, educators and intellectuals was a rallying cry that the Works Progress Administration eventually addressed.

The Writers' Union demanded that the federal government include their members among the list of America's laborers stricken by the depression. The union staged a strike in New York in 1935 and demanded that they too, be included in federal relief programs.⁶⁰⁶ The fact the government had already established the Public Works of Art Project under the Emergency Civil Works Administration opened the door for government patronage of the arts. But designing a relief program to employ America's writers was challenging: defining and identifying real "writers" was a tricky enterprise. Historian Monty Noam Penkower explains, "At no time could the number of 'unemployed writers' in need of relief be obtained, since that term could cover just about anyone who lifted pen to paper."⁶⁰⁷ Yet, key figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt, and literary and theatre powerhouse Henry G. Alsberg, pushed for the development of a relief program for America's writers and as a result the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established in 1935.⁶⁰⁸ Alsberg was appointed the chief project administrator, and at its height, the FWP employed over 25,000 Americans.⁶⁰⁹ The FWP served the nation by producing tour guidebooks of the nation's communities, compiled local histories, documented regional folklore and recorded interviews with ex-slaves.

⁶⁰⁶ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 1-7, and Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 36.

⁶⁰⁷ Penkower, 11.

⁶⁰⁸ Mangione, 8 and Penkower, 19.

⁶⁰⁹ Mangione, 4.

America's literary preoccupations during the 1920s and 1930s were inextricably tied to Modernist intellectual and cultural trends. Accordingly, the Modernist influence significantly defined the nature of the FWP works and the intellectual orientation of many of its leading writers. Key FWP officials were liberal leftists, social scientific theory enthusiasts who embraced Boasian anthropology as well as the idea that cultural pluralism was central to the American identity.⁶¹⁰ Historian Jerrold Hirsch argues that federal project officials such as Henry G. Alsberg, Sterling Brown, John Lomax, Benjamin Botkin and Morton Royse "did not intend to be merely bureaucrats. They saw themselves as part of a larger cultural project."⁶¹¹ The FWP was a definitive Modernist enterprise that sought to recast America through its works and challenge the simple Victorian dichotomy that dominated the American imaginary prior to the advent of American Modernism.

While some historians argue that the Great Depression hastened the demise of the Harlem Renaissance, the "vogue" for "Negro themes" that took shape during the Renaissance found fruitful expression in the FWP works.⁶¹² Consequently, black Modernist writers benefited from government patronage of their works. Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Katherine Dunham, Willard Motley and Zora Neale Hurston were able to pursue black themes in writings that were sponsored by the FWP.⁶¹³

⁶¹⁰ Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 2-13.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹² Hutchinson, 437.

Nathan Huggins argues that the depression ended the Harlem Renaissance in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), and David Levering Lewis makes the same argument in *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1979).

⁶¹³ Mangione, 124-256.

However, representing black authenticity and exploring black folk life remained controversial for black writers. Similarly, when white Federal Writers took up the task of documenting black American life they tended to employ the Modernist Primitivist lens and depicted blacks as exotic subjects.⁶¹⁴

The burgeoning depression era preoccupation with the plight of the “common man” and the subsequent popularity of “documentary expressions” also significantly impacted FWP works. The celebration of wealth and the wealthy that captured much of the nation’s imagination during the 1920s quickly gave way to the inclination to represent and document the common man’s experience and human tragedy caused by the Great Depression. The desire to reflect back to the nation human documents and the lived experience of America’s working class spurred the popularity of common man vernacular literature during the 1930s.⁶¹⁵ The experiences of the “common man” were communicated through dramatic photography and descriptive narratives in texts. Artists like Dorothea Lange, and writers like the FWP’s own W.T. Couch, are just two examples of 1930s artists and intellectuals that tried to reflect “the feel” of the country in their works.⁶¹⁶ The “documentary motives” of artists and writers during the 1930s involved a mission to focus attention on the America that few noticed.⁶¹⁷ Consequently, 1930s documentary subjects were largely “proletarian,” and the rise of European interest in the “folk” and the connection between the “soil and self” further encouraged American

⁶¹⁴ Hirsch, 14, 125-129.

⁶¹⁵ William Stott, *Documentary Expressions and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1-44.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

writers and artists to look more closely at both the poor urban and poor rural American experience.⁶¹⁸

The cultural and intellectual influences that shaped the FWP and the works that it produced were not reflective of the sentiments of all government officials and Federal Writers. In fact, the FWP was constructed and directed by members of a small, elite literary, artistic and academic vanguard. Many conservative government officials were disturbed by what looked like the FWP's intellectual preoccupation with the "suffering proletariat."⁶¹⁹ The attention that FWP officials and works paid to blacks, Native Americans, working class whites and folklore raised suspicions about Communists in the ranks of the agency.⁶²⁰ A Republican Congressman from Texas, Martin Dies, accused the agency of disseminating Communist propaganda, and constantly attacked the FWP, and called for the program to be disbanded.⁶²¹ Dies' claims were taken very seriously, and as a result FWP writers were forced to sign affidavits that declared that they were not Communists.⁶²²

Conflicts also arose between FWP's key officials and local-state writers over how to represent race and class differences. While FWP's national leaders had a relatively cohesive view of how they imagined race and class, local writers often held views that varied significantly from FWP administrators. Historian Jerrold Hirsch explains that "The contrast between views of the national office and members of the state units indicates that the ideas of the national FWP officials, while reflecting the New Deal

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 55.

⁶¹⁹ Mangione, 216-265.

⁶²⁰ Mangione, 4.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Penkower, 225.

ethos, did not represent the variety of views regarding race...that could be found among the general population and that were present among Federal Writers.”⁶²³

Despite the conflicts and controversies that the FWP inspired, the possibility that the agency’s local guidebooks and histories might stimulate domestic tourism proved to be reason enough to sustain the agency.⁶²⁴ The guidebooks that the agency produced were designed to create a sense of the uniqueness of each featured community, which would in turn promote the development of a domestic-automobile-tourist industry.⁶²⁵ FWP officials also agreed that by establishing the uniqueness of America’s peoples and communities would inspire rediscovery and broadening of the American identity.⁶²⁶

Jerre Mangione, who was employed by the FWP, concluded that the Project, “was a freak enterprise, a strange creature of the Depression created by a special breed of men and women.”⁶²⁷ However, the works produced by this “freak enterprise” carried a double authority: the “factual” information that Federal Writers presented in each study was substantiated by federal government sponsorship.⁶²⁸ The FWP also mapped out American social and racial categories and presented their conclusions as uncontested truths. So, when local-state Federal Writers were armed with guidelines from the national office for conducting interviews and collecting folklore that advised them that “leading citizens of towns are not always the best source of lore,” they had already begun

⁶²³ Hirsch, 111.

⁶²⁴ Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (University of Mississippi Press, 1999) 6.

⁶²⁵ Hirsch, 84.

⁶²⁶ Hirsch, 101.

⁶²⁷ Mangione, 373.

⁶²⁸ Bold, 3.

engineering the stories about the America that they wanted to introduce to the nation.⁶²⁹

Federal Writers were instructed to seek out “an old cook, washerwoman, gardener or other retainer of some long-established family.” FWP writers’ guides explained that “Oldest residents, close to the soil,” were ideal interview subjects “because... circumstances have cut them off from education and progressive enlightenment.” This type of American became the best source for local lore, legend and superstition.⁶³⁰

After Federal Writers read the manual, ideas about American folk and folk culture already began to form in the writers’ imaginary. The “truth” that they recorded took shape within dominant ideas about the folk and were further filtered through each Federal Writers’ beliefs about race and class. Federal Writers took these interview manuals into the field, and sought out the most authentic folk that each region had to offer America’s racial, social and cultural tapestry. Mary Granger was one such writer, and she found in coastal Georgia’s blacks a folk culture worthy of FWP’s examination, and her study would permanently seal Sapelo Islanders in the nations’ imaginary.

Mary Louise Granger: A Federal Writer

Mary Granger was born in Savannah, Georgia July 8, 1897 to well-to-do Savannah socialites. Her father, Harvey Granger was a successful real estate developer whose contributions to Savannah’s development earned him considerable wealth and prestige.⁶³¹ Granger’s father was so well respected in the city that when he died the

⁶²⁹ “Folklore and Customs” Writers’ Guide, Federal Writers’ Project File Box A7, Library of Congress, page 2.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁶³¹ Interview with Harvey Granger, Jr., June 30, 2009.

county honored him by naming the bridge that crosses the Ogeechee River after him.⁶³²

Mary Granger, Harvey Granger's eldest child, grew up in close proximity to the blacks who lived in Savannah. Surely she saw black domestic workers and black laborers moving in the back ground of her privileged life, but she would not become curious about their African heritage and cultural traditions until she was nearly forty years old.

Mary Granger's affluent background afforded her the opportunity to receive a first class education in the North. She attended St. Mary's Preparatory School in Peekskill, New York.⁶³³ After graduating from preparatory school in 1917, Granger was admitted to Barnard College where she majored in English.⁶³⁴ In 1921, Mary Granger continued her studies in English at Columbia University and received her master's degree.⁶³⁵ She taught English Composition and Dramatics at Hunter College in 1925 and even displayed her artwork in a painting exhibition while in New York.⁶³⁶ During the years that Granger was a student at the two institutions that bordered Harlem, the advent of American Modernism, the vogue of black themes and increased interracial activity in New York had already begun to take root. During these years, Franz Boas was also a dominant intellectual force at both Columbia University and at its all female counterpart, Barnard College. Even though Granger did not take anthropology classes while studying at Barnard and Columbia, it would have been hard for her to avoid the growing bohemian

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Mary L. Granger's Barnard College Occupation Bureau card, Barnard College Archives.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Mary L. Granger's Barnard College Occupation Bureau card, Barnard College Archives and the article "Hobbies Keep Her Busy: She Has No Time for Boredom," *Savannah News*, May 19, 1963, section 2E.

fascination with black life and culture. Granger's family members recall that she "hung out with the literary and academic crowd in New York," and that she returned to Savannah with a distinct liberal attitude about race.⁶³⁷

Once Granger returned to Georgia after an extensive period of international travel to India and Europe, it became clear that the Modernist energy that permeated the literary, artistic and academic crowds in New York City remained with her. Mary Granger came home with a new perspective, one that developed as a result of her interactions with New York City intelligentsia, and it seemed that she had learned as much in her social interactions as she did in her course work. Granger's return to Savannah was undoubtedly hastened by devastating effect that the Depression had on her family.⁶³⁸ Harvey Granger lost everything in Depression and had to move his family to a rented house in the Savannah to accommodate heavy financial losses. Harvey Granger's plans to build a great sub-division and hotel in Savannah came to a screeching halt once the stock market crashed.⁶³⁹ Consequently, Mary Granger would be the only one of Harvey Granger's children to receive a college education.⁶⁴⁰

In December 1932, a package arrived at Mary Granger's home on East 47th Street in Savannah. The package included a letter and a sixteen-page pamphlet from the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta, Georgia.⁶⁴¹ The letter's author, R.B. Eleazer wrote to Granger: "In response to your request, I am sending material hastily gotten together. With a little more time and more definitive knowledge of your needs I

⁶³⁷ Interview with Harvey Granger, Jr., June 30, 2009.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Mary L. Granger's Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 321.

could have done a much better job...”⁶⁴² Eleazer continued, and lauded the Commission on Interracial Cooperation’s successes: “You may think it worthy of note that the interracial movement, which originated in Atlanta in 1919 is generally recognized abroad, as well as in this country, as the most significant contribution that has yet been made in the field of race relations.”⁶⁴³ While the specific nature of Mary Granger’s request to the Commission on Interracial Cooperation is unknown, and seemed to be unclear even to R.B. Eleazer, the pamphlet that he sent her was clearly designed to highlight the achievements and contributions of black Americans to the nation.

“America’s Tenth Man: A Brief Survey of the Negro’s Part in American History” was published by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and written R.B. Eleazer.⁶⁴⁴ The title of the pamphlet is explained on the first page: “Of the total population of 122,000,000 in the United States in 1930, 11,891,143 were of African decent, or approximately one in ten. This ‘Tenth Man’ is not a newcomer or an alien. His ancestors began to arrive hundreds of years ago with the early settlers.”⁶⁴⁵ The pamphlet discussed the introduction of American slavery, and posited the thesis that blacks brought much of their African culture with them to America: “Did these slaves come to America empty-handed, or did they have some heritage of native endowment and skill, and even of civilization?” Eleazer answered the question by pointing out that Africans were among the first humans to smelt iron, which perhaps explained the dominance of black

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Mary L. Granger’s Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 321.

blacksmiths in the South during slavery.⁶⁴⁶ Eleazer also pointed to black folklore and music for evidence of valuable African survivals: “These Africans brought also a fund folklore and a distinct gift for music.” In the pamphlet, Eleazer argued that white writers like Joel Chandler Harris should not be credited for “the pleasure these stories have given us...” and instead argued that the “ ‘Uncle Remuses’ who brought them to us from their African homes” should be acknowledged as the true proprietors of black folklore.⁶⁴⁷ He argued that black music, like spirituals, ragtime and jazz were the only “American” musical forms: “Music critics say that these are the only distinct contributions America has made to the music of the world.”⁶⁴⁸ While Eleazer’s read of black contributions in terms of folklore and music hinged on the popular belief that there was in fact “innate” black qualities, he did suggest that intellectual aptitude was also an innate black characteristic: “There was Lahmne Kebby...who back in Africa, had been a well educated and trained school master.”⁶⁴⁹ The pamphlet applauded Phillis Wheatly’s work, Benjamin Banneker, black Revolutionary War heroes, several black teachers and preachers, and the academic accomplishments of leaders like Alain Locke.⁶⁵⁰

Ultimately, “America’s Tenth Man” sought to link black American contributions and accomplishments to their African past. This was a distinctly Modernist reading of black people’s Africanness. Upon reading the pamphlet, Mary Granger would have directly encountered a view of black’s Africanness that was wholly unpopular in the Jim

⁶⁴⁶ Mary L. Granger’s Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 321. “America’s Tenth Man: A Brief Survey of the Negro’s Part in American History” p.4.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 5-13.

Crow South. The very suggestion that black people's African heritage was the source of their highest accomplishments reflected a radical rejection of the Victorian racial hierarchy. Perhaps under the influence of the pamphlet, Granger composed several unpublished writings that suggest that there was a small window of time during which she embraced the sentiments expressed in "America's Tenth Man," and began to document and raise questions about racial inequality in the Georgia.

Mary Granger composed several unpublished drafts of short essays on black life and race relations in Georgia.⁶⁵¹ The drafts do not include any information that indicate who her intended audience was, but the documents do strongly suggest that Mary Granger had spent some time grappling with racism and inequality. One essay tackled educational inequities Georgia. In the essay, Granger cited a series of statistics that pointed to staggering disparities in educational outcomes between whites and blacks in the state:

The worst feature of the situation is the fact that in about three-fourths of the counties schools school funds sent to the counties by state, on the basis of the number of Negro children of school age, are diverted in considerable part to the support of white schools, in addition to all the local tax money, which comes from Negroes as well as from whites.⁶⁵²

In another essay that described that status of blacks in Georgia, Granger approached the relationships between blacks and landownership: "In 1928 the Negroes of Georgia owned 1,444,294 acres of land with an assessed value of \$13,491,117. They also owned city real estate valued at \$24,776,311..."⁶⁵³ In the last essay draft, Granger wrote about

⁶⁵¹ Mary L. Granger's Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 607.

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Mary L. Granger's Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 607.

lynching in the state. “From 1882 to 1930 inclusive there were 508 lynchings in Georgia, 474 victims being Negroes.”⁶⁵⁴ She noted that, “In number of lynchings during this period, Georgia ranks second, Mississippi having had 545.”⁶⁵⁵ Granger explained that the decline of lynching in the state should be attributed to the efforts of white women: “The white women of the South who have been mobilized in a crusade against lynching through the efforts of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.”⁶⁵⁶

While Granger’s essay drafts do not directly communicate her personal reactions and sentiments about the atrocities that the works describe, the very composition of the essays suggest that she wanted to raise awareness about the consequences of racism in Georgia. Yet, despite the fact that Mary Granger had been exposed to an affirming view African survivals, and had struggled to come to grips with institutional racism and racialized violence in her home state, her work with the Federal Writers’ Project’s Savannah Unit would show very little evidence of her familiarity with these issues and ideas.

Mary Granger had to secure work to help her family during the Depression years. Granger, a woman who remained unmarried her entire life, could no longer depend on her father for monetary support, nor could she rely on the success of the one novel that she published, *Wife to Pilate* (1929), to secure her financially.⁶⁵⁷ For Mary Granger, the opening of the Federal Writers’ Project’s Savannah Unit office could not have come at a better time. She was appointed the supervisor of the Savannah Unit. It is likely that her

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ Mary L. Granger’s Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Collection Number 607

⁶⁵⁷ Interview with Harvey Granger, June 30, 2009.

academic background, the fact that she published a novel (which made her a “real writer”), and her family’s reputation in the city guaranteed her appointment as the leader of the Savannah Unit. She supervised more than twenty employees at the Savannah Unit office.⁶⁵⁸ Among her employees were newspaper and radio writers, poets, cartographers, law students, clerical workers and typists that acted as secretaries, editors, abstractors, research assistants, supervising clerks, typists and research fieldworkers for the Federal Writers’ Project.⁶⁵⁹ Granger was the foremost authority at the Savannah Unit office, and she harvested that authority and led her staff in a quest to document the region’s uniqueness.

Mary Granger and the National Federal Writers’ Project Office Negotiate the Africanness of Coastal Georgia Blacks

Mary Granger led her staff through the near completion of six projects. The Savannah Unit spent eight months assembling the *Savannah Guide* (1937) that “portrays a verbal picture of the city of yesterday and today.”⁶⁶⁰ Granger’s description of the guide’s chapter on “Negro life” reveals traces of “America’s Tenth Man’s” influence: “Not the least interesting is the chapter on Negro life and history written by the Negro workers on the project, revealing the important part that the Negro has played in the

⁶⁵⁸ Mary Granger’s Papers, Georgia Federal Writers’ Project-Savannah Unit 1940 Brochure, Georgia Historical Society, Collection number 1308, Folder 30.

⁶⁵⁹ Mary Granger’s Papers, Georgia Federal Writers’ Project-Savannah Unit 1940 Brochure, Georgia Historical Society, Collection number 1308, Folder 30, p. 2-9.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

progress not only of Savannah but the entire South.”⁶⁶¹ The Savannah Unit conducted a historical survey of Chatham County plantations, archiving legal documents and family records from forty plantations.⁶⁶² Granger’s office also compiled a photographic essay of Savannah and collected Chatham County historical maps.⁶⁶³ Yet, none of these projects would garner as much attention as the Savannah Unit’s study of African survivals in coastal Georgia.

Mary Granger knew that an African survival study would attract attention, and she probably hoped that attaching her name to a survival study would make her famous. After all, she only needed to pay attention to the career of her fellow Barnard College alumnae Zora Neale Hurston to realize that the voodoo-African survivals link had become a popular topic. Similarly, Franz Boas’ other student, Melville Herskovits, made his anthropological mark championing African survivals theories. Granger could not help but be aware of the popularity of and sensational appeal of African fueled-voodoo tales that ran in migration metropolis news papers, featured in Broadway shows and in movie theatres. Surely, she knew that just three years before she began African survivals hunting on Georgia’s coast, W. Robert Moore had introduced *National Geographic Magazine*’s readership to the exotic Africanness of coastal Georgia blacks. The success that Pulitzer Prize winner Julia Peterkin earned for her Gullah tales she published during the 1920s and early 1930s, as well as the popular excitement generated by Peterkin’s 1933 ethnographic report on South Carolina Gullahs, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, inspired Mary

⁶⁶¹ Mary Granger’s Papers, Georgia Federal Writers’ Project-Savannah Unit 1940 Brochure, Georgia Historical Society, Collection number 1308, Folder 30, p. 3.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Granger to conduct her own study on blacks. Granger was so stirred by *Roll, Jordan, Roll* that she cited the study several times in the “Studies of Negro Survival Types In Coastal Georgia” manuscript.⁶⁶⁴ It is also possible that the pervasive nature of African survivals described in the “America’s Tenth Man” pamphlet stuck with Mary Granger and motivated her to explore African retentions among local blacks. More important still was the fact that the national FWP office instructed their writers to include “folklore” and “folk customs” in state guides, and specifically instructed Federal Writers to document “superstitions” as evidence of folk culture.⁶⁶⁵ According to Granger’s calculations, the strange African derived spiritual practice of coastal Georgia’s Gullah folk was the ideal case study through which national FWP expectations could be achieved, and provide her personal success.

As the Savannah Unit supervisor, it was Mary Granger’s job to secure state and national FWP administrator’s support for each project. Granger described the project approval process in a Savannah Unit FWP brochure:

Material is assembled under a plan approved by the National office of the Writers’ Program. After approval by State and National offices this material, checked, verified, and edited, is ready for publication. Sponsor or Publisher assumes publication costs.⁶⁶⁶

While the *Savannah Guide* moved smoothly through the state and national approval process and was published by the University of Virginia Press in 1937 as a part of the

⁶⁶⁴ Mary Granger, *Studies of Negro Survival Types in Coastal Georgia*, National Archive and Records Administration, RG 69, WPA, P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2. Granger cited from Peterkin’s non-fiction study *Roll, Jordan, Roll* on pages 13, 42, 43, 46, 50, 52 and 59.

⁶⁶⁵ Folklore and Customs” Writers’ Guide, Federal Writers’ Project File Box A7, Library of Congress, p. 2.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

American Guide Series, the *Drums and Shadows* study proved to be the most controversial and contentious project that emerged from the Savannah office. The “Studies of Negro Survival Types In Coastal Georgia” manuscript, that ultimately became *Drums and Shadows; Survival Studies Among The Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940), barely survived national FWP administrator’s scrutiny.

National FWP officials had good reason to be concerned about the accuracy and legitimacy of the Savannah Unit’s African survivals study. During the 1930s, a very fine line separated African survival studies from essentialist race fantasies. Distinguishing authentic and distinct black cultural traits was a difficult task given the pervasive nature of racial stereotypes that had been presented by whites as biological truths in the years before the 1920s and 1930s. Even more daunting was the fact that during the 1920s and 1930s, popular ideas about the relationship between blacks and their African ancestry were so heavily concentrated around a secretive spiritual primitivism that almost everything that onlookers observed about black life was attributed to a persistent African essence. W. Robert Moore’s and Lydia Parrish’s insistences that every activity that Sapelo Islanders concealed from whites was absolutely African in nature, and even the fact that their attempts to conceal their activities were interpreted as an “African survival,” is a perfect example of the messy nature of survivals hunting. Additionally, the precarious relationship between the “observed” and the “observer” further complicated African survivals hunting. The racial and social location of the “observer” significantly shaped how he or she understood what they observed. Moreover the “observed” responded to the racial and social location of the “observer,” and tailored their responses to inquiries according to the benefits or risks associated with the

researchers position in society. Yet, the fact remained that in the 1920s and 1930s southern blacks were just a few generations removed from their West African progenitors, which guaranteed that they had retained some vestiges of the West African culture. Lorenzo D. Turner's systematic, scholarly research proved that if done properly, African survivals studies could reveal an African influence on black culture. The left leaning, social scientific minded, Boasian, Modernist FWP officials were conscious of all these issues, and as a result, they subjected Granger's survival study to extended scrutiny and debate.

Sometime during 1936, Mary Granger began hunting African survivals among black communities in coastal Georgia. She left her Savannah office and the confines of the white world, accompanied by research assistants and began her journey into the shadowy world of black coastal Georgians. She interviewed several blacks, and observed their ceremonies and caught glimpses of their lives and recorded her findings. In the draft, Granger did not include any specific information about the locales that she visited, nor did she identify the people that she interviewed. Instead, she wrote about coastal Georgia blacks as she understood them—purely from her perspective, unmediated by scholarly analysis. She furnished lengthy footnotes that cited works written by white African missionaries in order to substantiate claims that what she saw among coastal Georgia blacks was in fact African in nature, making behaviors, rituals, qualities and traits that she observed authentic African survivals.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁷ Savannah Unit, Federal Writers' Project, "Studies of Negro Survival Types In Coastal Georgia," National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 69, P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

The manuscript began with a note on the importance of conducting African survivals research in coastal Georgia. Granger explained that while many books had been written to describe the “folk customs of the Negro,” coastal Georgia blacks presented a unique opportunity for researchers: “in this section where primitive people have been more or less racially distinct the field is so wide that intensified study in special areas still reveals valuable information.”⁶⁶⁸ She pointed out that “the Negro of this section is perhaps closer to his native Africa than any other in this country.”⁶⁶⁹ It was certainly true that during the 1930s, many black communities in the American south had been established for generations, going far back into the antebellum period, and perhaps even to the first slaves in family lines to come to America. However, Granger’s assessment of their Africanness was not grounded in specific black-African correlates, but instead, originated in her own fantasies about the inherent qualities associated with blackness that she learned as a part of her own racial indoctrination as a white woman in America.

The manuscript was divided into six sections. The first section titled “Background of the Coastal Georgia Negro” described the history of blacks in the region from the inception of the slave trade through Reconstruction. Here Granger attempted to trace the “African” to “black” transformation in the region, describing the slow and steady introduction of the African to civilization. At the end of the section, the point during which the “African” to “black” transformation was near complete, she concluded: “Like his white neighbor, he works for his home, his church and his country. To many

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

movements for the betterment of humanity, he is a generous contributor.”⁶⁷⁰ While Granger’s conclusion appears to have elevated coastal Georgia blacks above the realm of the simple primitive, and even suggests that whites and blacks were near equals, the next line reveals the slippery nature of the Modernist Primitivist. Modernist Primitivists dangerously teetered the race line, sometimes falling on the side that reflected the Victorian view of blackness, and sometimes falling on the side that reflected a Modernist view of blackness. “Yet, despite his social and economic advancement, like members of other races, he responds under excitement to the fundamental racial trait of his African heritage.”⁶⁷¹ She continued, “It is these natural reactions that link the educated Afro-American citizen to his African forebear and to the humbler type of Negro, still primitive in his outlook.”⁶⁷²

The inherent, quasi-biological “racial trait” that Granger argued could be triggered in even the most educated, “civilized” blacks consisted of the belief in superstition, spirits, voodoo doctors and voodoo rites, as well as the demonstration of unrestrained emotional displays, musical exuberance and a childlike disposition.⁶⁷³ This was Mary Granger’s conceptualization of African survivals, and this view was reflected throughout the manuscript. In each section, Granger pointed out what she understood to be remnants of the voodoo-fueled African character. She wrote about black “Ceremonies” in coastal Georgia: baptisms, marriages and burial rites and she identified them as being uniquely African. A section of the manuscript was dedicated to black

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 11.

“Superstitions and Beliefs,” the Gullah dialect, a catalogue of songs and interviews with ex-slaves.⁶⁷⁴

Mary Granger’s assessment of coastal Georgia black’s “ceremonies” were rooted in her belief that black traditions, even when they were Christian in origin, revealed a superstitious, voodoo-fueled African character that was cultured by African ignorance. “Hence from the beginning, ceremonies were the outward expression of the inward awe the Negro felt before forces he did not understand.”⁶⁷⁵ Unlike Melville Herskovits, Granger did not imagine that within the African context “ceremonies” reflect a cosmology equal to the formulations through which Europeans conceptualized reality. Nor did she assume, as Herskovits had, that the presence of non-European forms of expression in black religious ceremonies reflected a sophisticated negotiation of distinct worldviews. Instead, she surmised that “the Negro unconsciously injected into Christian service certain ceremonial survivals of a pagan past.”⁶⁷⁶ She explained that coastal Georgia blacks, “under the emotional stress of conversion...or when moved in the presence of death that the Coast Negro reverts once more to his primitive instincts.”⁶⁷⁷ She pointed to “shouting” as an example of this reversion, and described the phenomenon as a “common barbaric survival of an African heritage.”⁶⁷⁸ Similarly, she linked black baptisms to “his African love of ostentation and pageantry,” and declared that songs sung

⁶⁷⁴ Savannah Unit, Federal Writers’ Project, “Studies of Negro Survival Types In Coastal Georgia,” National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 69, P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

during baptisms “the rhythm of his singing, his loud simple ecstasy, and his unrestrained emotionalism are the pagan heritage of his jungle background.”⁶⁷⁹

Granger found coastal Georgia black marriage ceremonies to be equally primitive. In particular, Granger was struck by the prevalence of “voodoo superstitions pertaining to nuptials.”⁶⁸⁰ Granger wrote that brides wear traditional white, but “she probably has a ‘lucky dime’ tied around her ankle.”⁶⁸¹ As for the groom’s voodoo accessories, Granger wrote: “The groom, too is guarding against evil with an amulet in the form of a watch or a luck ring.”⁶⁸² She also noted that coastal Georgia blacks “kept his childlike capacity for pleasure in happy occasions and a love for color and splendor.”⁶⁸³ Even the wedding reception reminded Granger of an African ritual scene: “As the musicians cast off the borrowed beat of the white man’s music and pour out strange rhythms from the past, the dancers create barbaric steps, jerking their bodies and clapping their hands with hilarity.”⁶⁸⁴

Granger’s description of black burial rituals clearly reflected the dominant view of black voodoo rites embodied in the voodoo craze. She argued that there were elements of black funerals that coastal Georgia blacks “borrowed from his civilized environment,” like “casket, flowers, music and religious services.” But Granger also observed what she understood to be “strange practices that color the coast Negro’s death and burial.” Among these “strange practices” that Granger presented as evidence of the “barbaric

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 27.

pageantry” that marked black funerals was “unrestrained mourning.” Granger characterized black people’s grief expressions as “products of his forgotten years in the deep wilderness of Africa. Ages past, his forefathers accompanied death and burial with superstitious practices taught to them by voodoo priests.”⁶⁸⁵ Salt sprinkled on the stomachs of dead corpses, “set ups with the dead” designed to keep “ju-ju” from stealing the body, children passed over graves to keep them from dying, and salt and ash placed under coffins to prevent fatal illnesses from spreading were noted as primitive African survivals.⁶⁸⁶

The “Superstition and Beliefs of the Coastal Negro” section was almost an exact replica of the numerous voodoo reports that ran in migration metropolis newspapers. Mary Granger analyzed what she believed was the black propensity toward being fearful and superstitious: “With the beat of the jungle drums still sounding faintly in his ears, the black man finds himself still bowing before forces he does not understand.”⁶⁸⁷ Mary Granger’s coastal Georgia blacks shielded themselves from dangerous spells and evil spirits by consulting with “Root and Conjure Doctors,” who like Julia Peterkin’s character Daddy Cudjoe, lived “apart from the others in an isolated or wooded section.”⁶⁸⁸ These “witch doctors in modern guise” furnished coastal Georgia blacks with amulets and charms, and “hold sway over a large percentage of their superstitious fellowmen.”⁶⁸⁹ She identified Graveyard dirt, Lucky Hand Root, Five Finger Grass, and

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 29-34.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 46.

Adam and Eve Root as just a few of the elements used by voodoo doctors to aid their clients attempts to avert or inflict harm.⁶⁹⁰

Granger paid little attention to the Gullah dialect, and even less attention to the “Gullah” label. “As has been stated previously...the Negroes of this section are known as Gullah, and their dialect rightly or wrongly termed Gullah.”⁶⁹¹ Like Guy B. Johnson, John Bennett, George Phillip Krapp (whose work she cited) and the other researchers that Lorenzo D. Turner sought to prove wrong, Mary Granger invoked the “baby talk” thesis and concluded that the dialect spoken by coastal Georgia blacks was a garbled form of English. She noticed that these black Georgians often used words that: “appear to have derived from an entirely alien source.”⁶⁹² But she never seems to entertain the possibility that such words might be African survivals, and instead concludes that the Gullah dialect derived from obsolete forms of English words.⁶⁹³

The entire “Studies of Negro Survival Types In Coastal Georgia” manuscript was nearly one hundred and forty pages in length, and maintained the same basic thesis and belief about African survivals throughout. While some of the practices and beliefs that Granger pointed to could have derived from scraps of African cosmology, her ability to analyze and contextualize these possible survivals was hampered by her lack of scholarly training and her personal prejudices. Granger’s only “knowledge” of the West African culture came from problematic missionary reports, and her observations were tainted by her own view of blacks inherent inferiority. Oblivious to the manuscript’s problems,

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 45-68.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 74.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 74-75.

Mary Granger was excited about the work and eagerly sent it off to the state FWP administrators in July 1937 for approval.⁶⁹⁴ But right away, signs of FWP administrative resistance to the project surfaced. The Georgia state FWP office administrators were uneasy about signing off on Granger's survival study so they instructed her to submit the draft to Sterling Brown, the national administrator responsible for editorial work on all FWP projects involving black life.⁶⁹⁵

Sterling Brown was the only black Harlem Renaissance writer who was able to parlay his success as a poet into a federal administrative position with the FWP. Brown was both a seasoned writer and an accomplished academic. Brown graduated from Williams College and received a graduate degree from Harvard University in 1923. A champion of black folklore studies, he was one of the early black pioneers of the artistic use of black dialect in literary works. So, when black leaders pressured Henry G. Alsberg to appoint a black scholar knowledgeable about literature and black history to oversee FWP projects involving black people, Sterling Brown was identified as the best candidate for the position.⁶⁹⁶ In 1936, Sterling Brown left his position as an English professor at Howard University to accept the appointment as the FWP Editor of Negro Affairs.⁶⁹⁷ Working with a small editorial staff that consisted of two Howard University

⁶⁹⁴ Letter from Carolyn P. Dillard, Georgia State FWP Director to Mary Granger, July 15, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ Joanne V. Gabbin, *Sterling Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (University of Virginia Press, 1994), 67.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid.

researchers, Brown took on the near impossible task of ensuring that FWP Writers “accurately” represented blacks in their works.⁶⁹⁸

Mary Granger was confident in her study and did not shy away from having it reviewed. In a letter that she sent to Samuel Tupper, Jr., the Georgia State Director of the FWP, she welcomed Sterling Brown’s review of her manuscript, and even asked that Henry G. Alsberg read the manuscript too.⁶⁹⁹ She also indicated that she was thinking ahead and sent the manuscript to the University of Georgia and the University of North Carolina for possible recommendations for publication.⁷⁰⁰ In August 1937, Granger got her wish. Sterling Brown traveled to Savannah and reviewed Granger’s manuscript during his visit. While Granger had welcomed Brown’s assessment of the work, she was most likely disappointed to find that he thought the work needed an entirely different thesis as well as suggested that she read several books to develop a more rounded view of the subject.⁷⁰¹

Despite the fact that Brown had reservations about Granger’s study, he took a copy of the manuscript back to Washington for further review.⁷⁰² On August 18, 1937, Brown wrote the Georgia state FWP administrator, Samuel Tupper, Jr. and reported: “I have submitted it to Mr. Alsberg, with my recommendation that the project to study the

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁹⁹ Letter from Mary Granger to Samuel Tupper, Jr., July 19, 1937. July 15, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁰¹ Letter from Samuel Tupper, Jr. to Sterling Brown, August 14, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁰² Letter from Sterling Brown to Samuel Tupper, Jr., August 18, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

coastal Negroes of Georgia be approved.”⁷⁰³ Somehow, Brown managed to digest Granger’s stereotypical presentation of coastal Georgia blacks and their African progenitors and decided that the project was worth pursuing. However, Brown’s approval was conditional: “I suggested that the work be descriptive more than anthropological, advancing the arguments that I discussed with you.”⁷⁰⁴ He knew that the study had not involved the scholarly rigor required in order to make anthropological claims about African retentions. At best, Granger’s manuscript could be curtailed into a simple description of black folk practices in the region. Tupper did not resist Sterling Brown’s conclusion, on the contrary he acknowledged his lack of expertise in the area, and wrote to Brown: “I did not feel qualified to pass on this work.”⁷⁰⁵

Mary Granger’s confidence in the merits of her study gradually gave way to impatience with the national bureaucratic review process. She was ready to move forward with the study, collect more information and pursue publication options. To that end, she sent five letters to Sterling Brown between September and November 1937, inquiring about the status of the project as well as seeking Henry G. Alsberg’s opinion of the work.⁷⁰⁶ Tired of waiting for Alsberg’s review and Brown’s written comments, and anticipating some resistance from the national office to the her study, Mary Granger sought out other academics to support her work.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ Letter from Samuel Tupper, Jr. to Sterling Brown, August 24, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁰⁶ Letters from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

Sometime in October of 1937, Granger sent her manuscript to Lorenzo D. Turner's nemesis, Guy B. Johnson, and W.T. Couch at the University of North Carolina. While Guy B. Johnson had gone on record and denied African retentions in the Gullah dialect in his book *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island* (1930), he quickly became a strong supporter of Granger's study. He encouraged Granger to move forward with her study, and wrote to her: "Of course, we know in a general way that African survivals are relatively insignificant when set up against the total culture which Negroes have borrowed from us," but concluded, "it would still be interesting to know exactly what has survived from Africa and how it functions in Negro life."⁷⁰⁷ Clearly, Johnson's use of the word "us" was an acknowledgement of the fact that he and Mary Granger, both white, shared some common culture that blacks did not. She had found in Johnson a white ally who appreciated her "first hand" descriptions of "Negro revivals, baptisms, weddings, funerals and conjuring practices."⁷⁰⁸ Johnson also understood that the very popularity of voodoo fueled African survivals would easily make Granger's work publishable: "I have no doubt that there will be sufficient usable material to form the basis of a publication which should have wide appeal."⁷⁰⁹ W.T. Couch, on the other hand, was less enthusiastic about what he read in Granger's manuscript: "some material in the manuscript is valuable, and if properly prepared, publication would be justified."⁷¹⁰ Couch's lukewarm endorsement included words of caution: "You should, of course, pay careful attention to

⁷⁰⁷ Letter from Guy B. Johnson to Mary Granger, October 13, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Letter from W.T. Couch to Mary Granger, October 25, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2

any critical suggestions you get from Mr. Johnson.”⁷¹¹ Couch recognized that Mary Granger was an untrained amateur social scientist tackling a complicated topic.

Although the two University of North Carolina social scientists gave the project mixed reviews, their letters revived Granger’s confidence in her survivals study. She promptly forwarded their comments to Sterling Brown, and made clear her annoyance with the national office’s slow movement on her work: “We still have received no general criticism on the manuscript. Please let me know if you have another address then the Federal Writers’ at which I can reach you more directly.”⁷¹² Sterling Brown remained calm in the face of Granger’s bold inquiries, apologized for the delay, and reassured her that although he was very busy, “I do intend to send down full comments on it shortly.”⁷¹³

Armed with Guy B. Johnson’s endorsement and tired of waiting for national FWP administrator’s approval, Mary Granger continued to conduct field research. Even though she visited twenty back communities in coastal Georgia, Sapelo Island was the only community that she wrote about in her correspondences with Sterling Brown. On November 10, 1937, Granger wrote to Brown, “I have just returned from three days at Sapeloe Island. I regret more than ever that you were not able to get there on your Darien trip. It is simply unbelievable, even to me. I do hope sometime...you will get down here

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, October 27, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷¹³ Letter from Sterling Brown to Mary Granger, October 30, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

again.”⁷¹⁴ What exactly had Mary Granger found to be “unbelievable” on Sapelo Island? Perhaps she was taken back by the scenic landscape, or more likely, she was shocked by the islands’ relative isolation. Whatever the cause of Mary Granger’s awe, she would make every attempt to feature Sapelo Islanders in her work. Sterling Brown echoed Granger’s interest in the island in his reply to her letter, “I hope that I shall see the coastal sections again, and this time really get to Sapeleo.”⁷¹⁵

In November 1937, Sterling Brown gave Mary Granger permission to proceed with her research. He wrote: “Mr. Alsberg stays so busy with the rush of manuscripts in pre-final form that he told me to advise you to go right ahead with your plans...”⁷¹⁶ But later correspondences would prove this clearance to have been made in error. Henry G. Alsberg did not read Granger’s manuscript until February, and only read it after the two scholars that Brown sent the manuscript to delivered scathing reviews of the study to the national FWP office.

E. Franklin Frazier and W.O. Brown were both students of Robert E. Park, sociology professors and Sterling Brown’s colleagues at Howard University. Surely Brown thought it prudent to seek out the opinion of two prolific and well-respected scholars on the manuscript. After all, Brown was uneasy about the manuscript, but it is likely that his own love for folklore studies encouraged him remain optimistic that the flaws in Granger’s work could be remedied. Yet, black leaders had lobbied for his

⁷¹⁴ Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, November 10, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷¹⁵ Letter from Sterling Brown to Mary Granger, November 18, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷¹⁶ Letter from Sterling Brown to Mary Granger, November 18, 1937, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

position at the FWP to ensure that stereotypical caricatures of blackness did not receive credibility as a result of being published in a government sponsored work, so Sterling Brown had to be sure about his decision. E. Franklin Frazier's and W.O. Brown's critiques did not eliminate Brown's anxieties: but instead, they exacerbated them.

By 1938, E. Franklin Frazier's anti-African survivals position had been clearly articulated in the academic world. Melville Herskovits' work had not managed to sway Frazier on the African retentions thesis and Mary Granger's work only confirmed his suspicion that African survival hunters relied on simple, reductive, essentialist notions about racial distinctions in order to make wild declarations. Frazier's first criticism of Granger's study was about her representation of black speech: "I have a feeling that the dialect is not authentic."⁷¹⁷ Yet, Frazier did not find this to be the most troubling aspect of the study. Most objectionable to Frazier was Granger's thesis that primitive African cultural traits had been transmitted to America. On this he wrote, "It has been extremely difficult for specialists in the field of anthropology to secure evidence which would substantiate this thesis," and concluded that "The authors of this manuscript seemingly have no conception of the problems involved in this type of research."⁷¹⁸ Frazier was not at all convinced that the African parallels for coastal black superstitions cited in Granger's footnotes were legitimate: "Of course such a procedure is nonsensical. Many of the superstitious practices found among these people are characteristic of folk people all over the world."⁷¹⁹ He suggested that Granger read a study titled "Social Origins and

⁷¹⁷ Letter from E. Franklin Frazier to Sterling Brown, February 1, 1938, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

Social Continuities” that explored superstitious beliefs and practices of white college students to disabuse her of the notion that what she found was “African.”⁷²⁰ Frazier also suggested that the project be put in the hands of a real social scientist: “if money is going to be spent for the purposes of determining African ‘survivals’ among Negroes in America, it should be given to competent anthropologists.”⁷²¹ In the end, Frazier concluded that “This type of work merely tends to emphasize certain stereotypes which have grown up in America concerning the Negro.”⁷²²

W. O. Brown’s critique of Granger’s characterization of coastal Georgia blacks and their Africanness was as caustic as Frazier’s. W.O. Brown, a white southerner, echoed most of Frazier’s critiques. He also believed that Granger was not qualified to conduct survivals research “The problem is technical and complex, beset with pitfalls even for the scholar and highly hazardous for the lay student.”⁷²³ He argued that any researcher hoping to make such a discovery should be well read and trained in history, anthropology and African cultures.⁷²⁴ W.O. Brown was also disturbed by the fact that Granger’s own stereotypical assumptions were prominent throughout the manuscript. He explained that her use of the phrases “innate primitive instincts,” “primitive emotion,” “unrestrained emotionalism,” “frenzied emotions,” “jungle fervor,” “jungle background,” and “pagan heritage” were problematic.⁷²⁵ According W.O. Brown’s reading, Granger’s use of stereotypical explanatory phrases spoke more about her than they did about her

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

⁷²² Ibid.

⁷²³ Letter from W.O. Brown to Sterling Brown, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

subjects: “Her thinking is a strange mixture of traditional stereotypes about Africa, primitive people and Negroes, with a dash of Southern sentimentality. This thinking is itself a fine example of ‘survivals.’”⁷²⁶ He further argued that if one believes Granger’s logic then: “coastal Georgia Negroes turn out to be Africans in an American setting.”⁷²⁷ W.O. Brown challenged Granger to consider the “American context of the coastal Negro,” and insisted that there were social and economic realities that factor prominently into their lives.⁷²⁸ This was certainly the case for “set-ups” with the dead and the use of herbal remedies, or “roots,” as medicine. Sapelo Islanders reported that bodies of the deceased were kept at home because they did not have undertakers and funeral homes, and that the expense involved with seeing a doctor, as well as the time it took to travel to the mainland, made herbal remedies and “set-ups” popular.⁷²⁹ Finally, W.O. Brown suggested that if Granger studied poor rural white folk, “she might be less impressed by the uniquely African nature of the coastal Negroes.”⁷³⁰

Clearly E. Franklin Frazier’s and W.O. Brown’s critiques reflect their anti-African survivals intellectual orientation, but their rejection of the possibility of the African survivals in Granger’s manuscript was also a reaction to the stereotypical nature of her study. After E. Franklin Frazier and W.O. Brown pointed out the problems and errors in Granger’s study, Henry G. Alsberg would not endorse the study in its current form. On February 16, 1938, Alsberg sent Sterling Brown a memo in which he stated

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Ibid.

⁷²⁹ Interview with Paul Walker and Catherine Hillery.

⁷³⁰ Letter from W.O. Brown to Sterling Brown, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2

that he completely agreed with W.O. Brown, “I think the attempt of this manuscript to trace coastal Georgia Negro Folkways and superstitions back to the African jungle is strained, far-fetched and unscientific.”⁷³¹ There were obvious problems with Granger’s study, but Alsberg had another motivation for insisting that Granger change the scope of the study. He did not want to anger the black constituency that forced him to create a special position to ensure that black people were accurately represented in FWP works. Alsberg decided that Mary Granger had to abandon the African survivals thesis, but instructed Brown to seek out the opinion of a respected folklorist before notifying Granger. However, Sterling Brown did not pursue a third opinion on the manuscript, instead he sent Granger a letter outlining the manuscript’s problems and forwarded W.O. Brown’s and E. Franklin Frazier’s letters to her.⁷³²

After waiting for months to hear from the national office, Mary Granger refused to accept criticisms of the project that she had grown so passionate about. Almost as soon as she received the letters from the national FWP office, Granger fired back a rebuttal to the obvious rejection of her work. First, she attacked Sterling Brown for having misled her to believe that if she made the changes that he suggested and continued to revise the manuscript, the national office would approve the project: “we have been revising the manuscript according to your suggestions along these very lines since last August.”⁷³³ Next, she explained that she had already edited out much of the material that

⁷³¹ Memo from Henry G. Alsberg to Sterling Brown, February 16, 1938, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷³² Letter from Sterling Brown to Mary Granger, February 24, 1938, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷³³ Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, February 28, 1938, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

W.O. Brown and Frazier objected to, but refused to eliminate the African parallels in the footnotes: “But for this type of study which is not trying to prove anything (as you and I both agreed), I see no reason why travelers’ reports, missionaries’ diaries, etc., should not be taken as truthful accounts.”⁷³⁴ Then, Granger challenged W.O. Brown’s and Frazier’s knowledge about “pure Negro” communities. She demanded to know if either scholar had ever traveled to coastal Georgia. Granger continued her attack in a follow up letter to Brown, in which insisted that some individuals would never be satisfied with her study no matter what she did: “this kind of thing will not be pleasing to radicals who wish to ignore cultural inheritances.”⁷³⁵ Granger continued and explained that other types of black intellectuals that would welcome the work: “I believe that a group of creative artists who are interested in a cultural African renaissance will be highly interested—so, for the pique of one we could possibly have the approval of the other.”⁷³⁶ She also reminded Sterling Brown that Guy B. Johnson maintained that her project was worthy.

Granger’s rebuttal reveals much about the way that she understood race and racial distinction. The proclamation that she was not trying to “prove anything,” is a clear declaration of how little she understood about the way that racial difference had been constructed in America. During the 1930s, the very association between any aspect of black life and Africa automatically conjured a specific set of meanings and “proved” something about the inherent nature of black people. Similarly, the fact that she did not understand that missionary reports could not be taken as authoritative accounts of West

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, March 25, 1938 National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷³⁶ Ibid.

African life: the missionaries' view of the people they observed, which were tempered by their beliefs and expectations, illustrates that she did not understand the way that "race" worked. Furthermore, the question that she raised about W.O. Brown's and E. Franklin Frazier's familiarity with "pure Negro communities" also speaks to assumptions made about the impact of education, and more so, "civilization" on blacks like E. Franklin Frazier. Like Lydia Parrish, Mary Granger had come to believe that educated blacks were ashamed of their own Africanness and would stop at nothing to stamp out Africanness in blacks. From this vantage point, "pure Negro communities" were imagined to be authentic, and closest to a true black essence, something that a black scholar would have to abandon in order to operate in the civilized world. What made Frazier and W. O. Brown "radical" was that they rejected the belief that there was a fundamental difference between whites and blacks, and embraced the belief that the only difference between blacks and whites were socially constructed. This was a position that Granger obviously did not agree with.

Granger's rebuttal also revealed an interesting phenomenon. Granger was right, black artists had demonstrated a marked interest in their African heritage. Zora Neale Hurston, Cuntée Cullen and Langston Hughes all invested considerable artistic energy in representing their African ancestry in their works. Eldzier Cortor, a black painter that worked for the Federal Arts Project during the 1930s and 1940s, was specifically interested in the relationship between the Gullah and their African connection. Cortor won a Guggenheim fellowship to fund his travels to coastal South Carolina and Georgia to paint nudes of "Gullah" women and black women in the Caribbean.

Stuck in the awkward position of having originally endorsed the project, Sterling Brown had to maintain a strained relationship with Mary Granger to see the project to completion. Beginning in the spring of 1938 through the publication of *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among Georgia Coastal Negroes* in the spring of 1940, Brown and Granger exchanged unenthusiastic letters and tended to the details of the project. Recognizing the tense divide between herself and Brown, Granger recruited other scholars to work with, and advise her on the project. Granger's University of North Carolina supporters introduced her work to the famous folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett, and he offered his advice and made suggestions on the manuscript.⁷³⁷ Melville Herskovits' involvement in the project was inevitable. While an intellectual alliance between Guy B. Johnson and Melville Herskovits was unlikely, both scholars were convinced that Granger had tapped into something special, and joined in support of Granger's work in the region.⁷³⁸ Herskovits read Granger's manuscript and gave her information about African cultures. Somehow, Herskovits was able to ignore the glaring problems that her study presented. Perhaps the fact that Granger was conducting the very same research that he had suggested be collected in eight years earlier was the reason that he supported her study. Charles S. Johnson, one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, also advised Granger on the manuscript.

⁷³⁷ Letter From Granger to Sterling Brown, July 28, 1938, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷³⁸ Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, August 20, 1938, letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, September 16, 1938, letter from Samuel Tupper to J.D. Newsom, August 21, 1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

Even though the project moved along, and Granger made numerous changes, reducing the study to a series of interviews with supplemental African parallels in the appendix, the chief FWP folklore administrator, Benjamin A. Botkin did not like the manuscript. Botkin explained: "A rereading of the manuscript confirms the impression of a rather disjointed and desultory piece of work in which description, editorial comment, and interview are jumbled together in a feature story fashion..."⁷³⁹ He also complained that Granger's interviewing technique was bad and revealed prejudices.⁷⁴⁰ Botkin found almost no value in the work: "At present we have a series of loosely connected local color sketches, each of which is more or less a hodge-podge of chit chat and gossip, with leading questions and often misleading answers."⁷⁴¹ He too suggested that Granger look for European parallels for local superstitions.⁷⁴² Unlike Botkin, Sterling Brown continued to waver on the work. He contended that Granger had been right, African survivals could be found in the region, but rejected voodoo as evidence of a unique regional survival. He wrote, "conjure, herb-doctoring, etc., can be found in Harlem, Chicago, Los Angeles."⁷⁴³ National FWP officials agreed that the manuscript was inherently flawed, but they each had different ideas about what those flaws were. One FWP national reviewer even suggested that Granger needed to revise the manuscript

⁷³⁹ Memo from Benjamin Botkin to Sterling Brown, January 1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

⁷⁴³ Sterling Brown's "General Criticism," August 16, 1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

so that it read more like Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*.⁷⁴⁴ However, in the end, they agreed to compromise. The FWP needed to publish books in order to justify the agency's existence. One of the final editorial reports read: "If there is still disagreement among the various editors and consultants as to these technical details, they should, and we believe, can be settled by compromising differences in the interest of a successful book."⁷⁴⁵

The relationship that Granger established with Guy B. Johnson and the University of North Carolina did not prove to be helpful in getting the manuscript published. The University of North Carolina Press told Granger that it would be at least three years before they could get to the project.⁷⁴⁶ Finding a university press or independent donor willing to publish the work was hard given the economic climate. At one point Granger even reached out to Sterling Brown, asking for help in trying to convince Atlanta University to publish the study. She wrote to Brown, and explained why it would fitting for a "Negro university" to support the project: "I feel so strongly on racial heritage and especially on the fine things that are to be found and should be preserved in Negro culture."⁷⁴⁷ The Atlanta University subsidy did not materialize, but the University of Georgia decided to publish the study.

Drums and Shadows and Sapelo Island

⁷⁴⁴ Memo from John C. Rogers to Benjamin A. Botkin, December 21, 1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁴⁵ "Editorial Report On State Copy," January 9, 1940, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁴⁶ Letter from Samuel Tupper to Henry G. Alsberg, July 17, 1939, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

⁷⁴⁷ Letter from Mary Granger to Sterling Brown, March 11, 1940, National Archive and Records Administration, Record Group 69, WPA P1-57, Entry 28, Box 2.

After nearly three years of offering coastal Georgia blacks sweet rolls, tobacco and old clothes in exchange for interviews, and negotiating with state and national FWP officials, *Drums and Shadows* was finally made available to America's reading public in the spring of 1940.⁷⁴⁸ The interviews that Mary Granger and her staff conducted in the communities of Old Fort, Tin City, Yamacraw, Frogtown and Currytown, Springfield, Brownville, Tatemville, White Bluff, Pin Point, Sandfly, Grimball's Point, Wilmington Island, Harris Neck, Pine Barren, Darien, St. Simon Island, St. Mary's Island, and Sapelo Island were featured in the book. The book included forty-one documentary photographs featuring Granger's subjects and local crafts. Photographers Muriel and Malcolm Bell, long time friends of the Granger family, photographed Granger's subjects, hoping to replicate, yet improve upon the sort of haunting images that Julia Peterkin and photographer Doris Ulmann presented in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.⁷⁴⁹

Her methods were consistent with national office FWP guidelines for collecting folklore, Granger sought out the oldest and least educated residents in each community. She explained that this group was vital to her research because "Young and middle aged persons, reticent before strangers, appear dubious and suspicious." She wrote that younger coastal Georgia blacks "profess great knowledge of conjure and superstitions, but they hasten to say that they 'sho ain't gonuh tell nobody' what they know about these

⁷⁴⁸ Photographers Muriel and Malcom Bell described the strategies that Granger used to gain the cooperation of coastal Georgia blacks in their 1986 forward to the study. Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, (xxx).

⁷⁴⁹ Muriel and Malcolm Bell's "Photographer's Note." "We had seen the Julia Peterkin-Doris Ulmann collaboration...and resolved that our photographs of the Negroes would be as sharply focused as had been our Savannah houses." (xxx).

things.” Granger found older blacks, like Shad Hall and Katie Brown to be “more loquacious, enjoy relating their beliefs and customs to willing listeners.”⁷⁵⁰

In each locale Granger and her staff asked local residents about hoodoo and conjuh, roots, drums, ghosts, animal sacrifices, burial rituals, witches, charms and amulets. For each category, readers could find a parallel among the Ibo, Tshi-speaking people, Dahomean, Yoruba, Bantu, Ewe, Ibibio, Ashanti, Mandingo, Hausa and Bakongo people of West Africa in the appendix.⁷⁵¹ Granger assigned parallels for Gullah folklore to lore uncovered around the African Diaspora: Haiti, Jamaica and the Bahamas were listed as having similar beliefs, practices and folklore.⁷⁵²

Granger heeded national FWP administrators’ warnings and did not directly describe the “survivals” named in the book’s title as “African,” but she did not alter her imaginings of coastal Georgia Gullah folks. Granger’s conclusion about survivals on the Georgia coast focused on the “fact” that “sorcery is still practiced. Modern root doctors, visited frequently by their superstitious clients, perform mystic rites and promise to work miracles and cures.” Granger described coastal Georgia blacks as being superstitious and fearful voodoo practitioners: “Many coastal Negroes view adversity not as the workings of fate but as the revenge of a personal enemy brought about mystic working of the conjure doctor.” She wrote, “His imagination continues to crowd his world with spirits,

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁵¹ Mary Granger, Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among The Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 195-249.

⁷⁵² Ibid.

both good and evil. Spirits of the departed are still believed to make frequent visitations to the earth are as real to this type of Negro as his next-door neighbor.”⁷⁵³

Clearly, Granger’s conception of “African survivals” and coastal Georgia black’s “racial heritage” had not changed. Even though Melville Herskovits had advised her, her writings show little acceptance of the idea that voodoo practices were survivals of a valuable West African cosmology. It seems that much of what she recorded was reported for entertainment. For example, in Old Fort Granger asked residents if they believed in witches and “conjuh.” “At the mention of ‘cunjuh’ the old woman lit her pipe, smiled pathetically, and shook her head. As the blue smoke curled upward, she told of having been conjured and of how it changed her whole life in a few short weeks.”⁷⁵⁴ Like Parrish, Granger, wrote about the secretiveness of Gullah people and noted that quite frequently she found a voodoo doctor concealed underneath an unassuming demeanor. Fifty-year-old Evans Brown was one such “voodoo doctor.” Granger described Brown with the same dramatic feel communicated in metropolis voodoo reports: “To see him going daily about his duties as janitor of the West Broad Street Negro School, no one would suspect unusual powers at work beneath his good-natured exterior.” She continued, “Yet he not only said that he believed absolutely in the supernatural but proudly asserted that he could work magic himself.”⁷⁵⁵

It may seem that Granger traipsed in and out of black communities without a sense of dangers lurking among dark voodooists, but in fact, she noted the warning Fred Jones’ gave her was among the most memorable exchanges she recounted. Mr. Jones

⁷⁵³ Ibid., xlv.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid., 30.

“sternly forbade us to discuss conjure”, he asked “ ‘Dohn yuh know,... dat yuh might bring trouble on yuhsef?’”⁷⁵⁶ Jones did not deter Granger. She reported testimonies of respondents that born with the “caul” and could see the dead and the future. She interviewed witch doctors that made conjure bags and could cast spells as well as conjure victims. She reported stories told to her about Africans who took flight to escape enslavement, midnight harvest ceremonies guided by mystical drums, ring shouts, conjure specialists who could transform themselves into animals and animal sacrificed to rid the living of the dead. Granger was told about secret baptismal rituals and the purpose of gravesite decorations and shrines.⁷⁵⁷ When *Drums and Shadows* is read with in the context of the 1920s and 1930s voodoo craze, coastal Georgia blacks seem less exceptional, and more like figments of the nation’s imagination.

Granger distinguished Sapelo Island from the other communities that she visited. She described Sapelo Islanders economic and living conditions matter-of-factly: “Many lead an easy carefree life which consists chiefly of fishing, crabbing, and cultivating a small patch of garden, while others engage in regular employment at the sawmill or in company offices.”⁷⁵⁸ Surely the Sapelo Islanders who resisted the tide of economic domination by the island’s white patriarchs by maintaining their independence would not describe their existence as “carefree.” The fact that Granger concluded that islanders’ constant struggle with “poverty” was a “carefree” existence reveals her racist and primitivist orientation. The primitivist did not view primitives as being concerned with

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁵⁷ Mary Granger, Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among The Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 195-249.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid., 159.

anything beyond their base desires. In the minds of whites like Mary Granger, the aspiration to accumulate wealth, obtain meaningful work, and the desire to secure land, property and rights were beyond the primitive. Granger could not imagine that Sapelo Islanders, like other coastal Georgia blacks, were consumed by anything except root work and superstitions. As far as she could tell, black-white relations on Sapelo Island were peaceful and in their proper order. After spending three days on the island that doubled as R.J. Reynolds' private hideaway, Granger decided that the island was different from other places in coastal Georgia. She wrote: "Living an isolated existence, these Negroes have preserved many customs and beliefs of their ancestors, as well as the dialect of the older coastal Negro."⁷⁵⁹

By the time Mary Granger came to Sapelo, Katie Brown and Shad Hall had become veteran Gullah informants. They were among the first elderly Sapelo Islanders that she sought out, and were featured in her book. Photographs of Katie Brown and Shad Hall were included among the other documentary scenes from coastal Georgia. Granger asked Sapelo residents the usual set of voodoo related questions, and Katie Brown, responded "I an know bout conjuh...I heahs bout spells on people, but I ain seen um."⁷⁶⁰ Shad Hall, on the other hand, told Granger that he had seen people bury conjuh bags under their doorsteps and tie rags on gates to protect their homes.⁷⁶¹ He even told Granger that during his grandmother's time, animals were sacrificed during "set-ups": "Dey kill a wite chicken wen de hab set-ups tuh keep duh spirits away...she alluz keep

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 167.

wit e chicken fuh dat in yahd.”⁷⁶² Both Katie Brown and Shad Hall did report to Granger that they had seen “shadows” (ghosts).⁷⁶³

While Katie Brown and Shad Hall had given Granger a few supernatural tales, one elderly Sapelo Islander refused to fuel Granger’s fantasies about superstitious blacks. Julia Grovornor snubbed Granger’s voodoo questions. Granger described Grovornor: “Julia, very black, tall, gaunt, was slightly hostile and suspicious and disinclined to talk.”⁷⁶⁴ Grovornor told Granger, “No’m, I ain know nuttun. Ise feeble-minded. I bin weak in head sence I small chile. No’m, I ain know nuttun bout witches. I ain know nuttn bout root doctuhs. No’m, I ain nebuh heah uh cunjuh. No’m, I ain know nuttun bout spells.”⁷⁶⁵ Julia Grovornor eventually gave in to Granger’s inquiries when she stumbled upon a topic that she liked—her Muslim grandparents.⁷⁶⁶ Grovornor had decided that talking about her ancestors was acceptable and told Granger about the two old “Ibos,” Hannah and Calina Underwood.

On Sapelo Island, Granger expanded her inquiry to include questions about Muslim slaves. Mary Granger could have easily learned about the islanders’ Muslim ancestry from either the *National Geographic Magazine* article or from Melville Herskovits, the man who first received Bilali Mohammed’s journal at Northwestern University. She asked Katie Brown and Shad Hall about Bilali Mohammed and recorded what Katie Brown and Shad Hall told her about their Muslim ancestor. They told her

⁷⁶² Ibid.

⁷⁶³ Ibid., 158-165.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid.

about Bilali's seven daughters and about his wives.⁷⁶⁷ They described his prayer rituals:

"Dey wuz bery puticulu bout duh time dey pray an dey bery reguluh bout dey hour.

Wen duh dun come up, wen it straight obuh head an wen it set..."⁷⁶⁸ They also shared with Granger their ancestors borrowed memories from Africa: "Muh Gran Hestuh say she kin membuh duh house she lib in in Africa."⁷⁶⁹

Despite all of the valuable and fascinating things that she had learned about Sapelo Island's Muslim ancestors, Granger's summary of her visit reverted back and focused on the relationship between Sapelo Islanders and voodoo. Sapelo Islanders, she concluded, shared superstitions prevalent among coastal Georgia blacks: "If an owl hoots on top of the house or near a house, it is supposed to be a sign of death...If a rooster comes upon the porch and starts crowing, it is a sign of death in the house. It is also considered bad luck to start a journey and turn back." Granger reported that Sapelo Islanders told her that "the method employed to ward disaster is to draw a cross where you turned back and spit on it." While these small discoveries confirmed Granger's thesis, the fact she did not find a voodoo doctor on the island must have been disappointing: "We are told that most of the island Negroes believed in root doctors, but that they imported them from the mainland. There were none on the island."⁷⁷⁰

Descendants of the Sapelo Islanders featured in 1930s studies similarly report that there were no "root workers" on the island, and said that those practitioners could only be

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid., 171.

found in mainland cities like Savannah and Charleston.⁷⁷¹ Nonetheless, Granger still pointed out that they all “believed” in conjuh, and for her, that was a significant piece of evidence of their racial heritage.

Granger may have been disappointed that she did not find an elaborate voodoo scene in the one place that she determined was most ripe for authentic survivals. Yet, she maintained that the people were unique, and concluded her Sapelo Island report with a description of its African feel:

The boat neared the mainland. Our trip was over. As we bade goodbye to our guide, we cast a look of farewell at the dim outline of the island. On the journey homeward impressions received during our stay on Sapelo crowded against one another in disturbing sequence...Faintly the echo of shouting rose and fell in the distance. The measured chanting of voices and pounding of feet seemed to follow us across the water.⁷⁷²

The “impressions” of Sapelo Island that stayed with Granger, the “shouting,” “chanting voices” and “pounding feet” all specters of the islanders’ undeniable African feel followed her across the water and would influence the perception of Sapelo Islanders for years to come.

Drums and Shadows was sparsely reviewed, and was equally praised and criticized. A *New York Times* reporter applauded the Savannah Unit for covering “fresher ground” by including locales like Sapelo Island and capturing its essence before

⁷⁷¹ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper and Paul Walker.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, 172.

“sophistication” comes to its people.⁷⁷³ The *Journal of Southern History* published a review of the work in which the reviewer argued that an attempt should have been made to uncover European parallels because, as is, the study’s reader is “left with an exaggerated picture of African culture on the Georgia coast.”⁷⁷⁴ Columbia University Anthropologist, George Herzog’s review also expressed the view that Granger’s work was exaggerated, but concluded that the study’s value exceeds its flaws: “Weighed against the wealth of new material the book offers, however, and the immediate glimpses of Africana on United States soil, its weaker points are negligible and the Project may well be complimented on a pleasant volume.”⁷⁷⁵

Drums and Shadows became a work of lasting historical and anthropological importance despite these mixed reviews. Just one year after Granger’s study was published, her work had already been used to bolster scholarly research; and the conflict and controversy, and compromises that shaped *Drums and Shadows*’ production were quickly forgotten by researchers who used the book as an authoritative source of information on the Gullah. In 1941, William R. Bascom, Melville Herskovits’ first graduate student, published an essay titled “Acculturation Among the Gullah Negroes” in *American Anthropologist*. In the essay, Bascom cited Granger’s *Drums and Shadows* study, referred to Sapelo Islanders as “Gullah” and included them in the short list of

⁷⁷³ C. McD. Puckette, “Sea Island Negroes,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1941.

⁷⁷⁴ J.P. Dyer, “Drums and Shadow Review” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 7, No.3, August 1941, 418-419.

⁷⁷⁵ George Herzog, “Drums and Shadows” *Social Forces*, Vol. 20, No.1, October 1941, 120-121.

locales in the coastal regions where “African elements” are most pronounced.⁷⁷⁶ In Bascom’s essay, it becomes evident that Granger’s amateur and problematic theories have become fact. More shocking is that he cited Julia Peterkin’s novel, *Black April* (1927) too. It is obvious that Bascom was a good student, because he carefully navigated the fact that most of the African survivals hunting in the region had not involved the rigorous investigation methods that Lorenzo Dow Turner engaged in. Bascom was careful to note that exact and specific African traits had not been found in coastal regions: “But even among the Gullah in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, where Negroes have been isolated as anywhere in the United States, resemblances to specific African tribes are very rare.”⁷⁷⁷ Yet, Bascom concluded that there are African survivals in Gullah communities, but that they were general, and not specific: “For the most part the similarities are to those elements which are common to West Africa as a whole—to the common denominators of West African culture.”⁷⁷⁸ In this way, the authentic Africanness and Gullahness of Sapelo Islanders was institutionalized as a vague, yet verifiable fact.

Since the publication of W. Robert Moore’s article in 1934, Granger’s study in 1940, Parrish’s song collection in 1942 and Turner’s linguistic study in 1949, Sapelo Islanders have been grouped and identified by a label that they do not use to name themselves—“Gullah.” When the descendants of Sapelo Islanders featured in 1930s studies were asked about the term “Gullah” they all rejected it, and insisted that it is not a

⁷⁷⁶ William R. Bascom, “Acculturation Among the Gullah Negroes,” *American Anthropologist*, Volume 43, No. 1, 1941, 43-50.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

word that the use to describe themselves. Paul Hillery Walker said that on Sapelo Island, among the blacks who live there “You never hear talk of Gullah...”⁷⁷⁹ Similarly, Betty Johnson Cooper said that she never heard anyone on Sapelo Island call themselves Gullah.⁷⁸⁰ Emmet and Emma Johnson’s son, Joe Johnson said about the term “Gullah,” “They makes the name.”⁷⁸¹ The “they” that Johnson identified was white people. Cornelia Walker Bailey echoed Johnson’s sentiment: “It was something thought of by white folks...In South Carolina, they say they always call themselves Gullah...In Georgia it was never Gullah, it was Geechee.”⁷⁸²

The identification of Sapelo Islanders as “Gullah” in scholarly literature, and Sapelo Islanders’ rejection of the term, reflects the gulf between the way that Sapelo Islanders see themselves and the way that outsiders have imagined them. The meanings associated with the “Gullah” label were constructed through a complex history, one that involved a myriad of influences and motivations. The noble quests for a venerable African ancestry, stereotypical depictions of a primitive people, the rejection of Victorian ideas about race and the institutionalization of the hunt for America’s own folk are all factors that contributed to the construction of Sapelo Islanders’ “Gullah” identity. W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo Dow Turner and Mary Granger each contributed to the collective image of Sapelo Island’s Gullah folk. While most of these works presented problems, they at least furnish for Sapelo Islanders’ descendants a repository of literature in which they can find their ancestors talking to researchers,

⁷⁷⁹ Interview with Paul Walker, June 4, 2009.

⁷⁸⁰ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper, April 9, 2009.

⁷⁸¹ Interview with Joe Johnson, July 1, 2009.

⁷⁸² Interview with Cornelia Walker Bailey, July 3, 2009.

dancing for them, telling them stories about distant ancestors and posing for pictures, as well as providing information about their ancestors that would otherwise be unknowable.

While outsiders were preoccupied with uncovering Sapelo Islander's African past, Sapelo Islanders were consumed with navigating complicated economic and racial terrain. Securing employment, educating their children, amassing wealth and securing their ancestral land had occupied their energies for generations. To achieve those ends, they would do whatever was necessary. Eventually, it would become necessary to pick up the "Gullah" identity and put it on to secure their economic survival and stage the last stand to win back their vanishing ancestral lands.

Chapter 6

Re-working Roots: Black Women Writers Use *Drums and Shadows* Interviews with Sapelo Islanders to Re-imagine and Re-make the Gullah

*“Praisesong for the Widow started with a place I came across, this place called Ibo Landing in a book entitled *Drums and Shadows*... That’s how *Praisesong* began, with that folktale.”*⁷⁸³

-Paule Marshall

Mary Granger was the last researcher to visit Sapelo Island during the 1930s. Decades would pass before researchers, writers and journalists once again, visited the island. Several factors caused the decline in interest in Sapelo Island’s Gullah residents after Granger visited. As the 1940s began, World War II had become the nations new preoccupation. And after the United States entered the conflict in 1941, new emphasis and value was placed on a collective effort to defeat a common external enemy, and as a result the vogue of depicting Americans as fragmented, distinct communities of racial “others” waned.⁷⁸⁴

While World War II captured the imagination of many American writers, journalists and scholars, the revitalization of the black struggle for full integration, civil rights and human dignity during the 1950s also made the hunt for African survivals, the vogue of Negro themes and the uniqueness of the Gullah less attractive intellectual and artistic subjects. In the 1947 article, “The Negro and the American Dream” published in

⁷⁸³ Paule Marshall interviewed by Melody Graulich and Lisa Sisco, “Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall,” *NWSA Journal*, Vol 4, No 3, Fall 1992, pp 292-293.

⁷⁸⁴ Hirsch, 212-237 and Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1-11.

Phylon, Charles I. Glicksberg, a white English professor at Brooklyn College, called for an end to African survivals hunting. He wrote: “If Negroes in the United States have no intention of ‘returning’ to Africa, why then this furor about African culture and African Art?”⁷⁸⁵ Glicksberg rebuked Melville Herskovits’ retention theory and argued that it undermined black efforts to be perceived and treated as equal to whites. “Does not such a theory tend to revive the exploded fallacy of ‘racial character’ and ‘racial inheritance’? Such doctrines reinforce popular stereotypes that the Negro is basically African.” Glicksberg posed a poignant question: “If he still carries within him the cultural survivals of his racial ancestry, what hope is there of ever assimilating him within the American cultural pattern?”⁷⁸⁶

The logic presented in Glicksberg’s writings was also the philosophy of Civil Rights leaders—the impetus of the movement was to demonstrate the equality of blacks to whites and mitigate differences between them. Civil Rights leaders had to rebuke notions of racial inheritance and distinction in order to establish the “equality” of blacks and whites. The 1940s also saw the rise of colorblind racial liberalism, which asserted that there was no difference between races. While this new manifestation of American liberalism seemed promising, the simplistic conclusion that eradicating white-on-black prejudice would easily stamp out inequality obscured the complex entanglement of race, class and economics in American society.⁷⁸⁷ Never the less, this new discourse of race in

⁷⁸⁵ Charles Glicksberg, “Negro American and the African Dream,” *Phylon*, 1947.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 324-325.

⁷⁸⁷ Carol A. Horton explores the rise of racial liberalism in *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2005). Horton examines the complex relationship between race, racism and liberalism in American history. She posits that 1940s post-war racial liberalism is embodied in Gunnar Myradal’s 1944

America left no room for discussions about the Gullah and their unique connection to their African progenitors.

The Civil Rights movement's war on Jim Crow racism during the 1950s and 1960s made great strides in addressing institutional markers of American racism, but blacks continued to face discrimination and oppression. During the mid-to late 1960s, a new group of black leaders emerged to combat *de facto* Jim Crow and the racial discrimination that persisted despite the long fought battle for equality. The young black leaders of the Black Power movement, some of whom were active in the Civil Rights movement, rejected what they believed to be the failed assimilationist policies of Civil Rights leaders, and initiated a new strategy for black resistance. The Black Power movement and its leaders instigated direct challenges to the white power structure, encouraged black separatism and emphasized the greatness of black's African ancestry as a tool designed to disassociate themselves from their white oppressors and encourage a nationalist race pride. The Black Power movement leaders' agenda and methods were shaped by a host of complex ideas and phenomenon. Decolonization theory and the failures and triumphs of the civil rights movement were among the influences that led Black Power leaders to determine that before blacks could work closely with whites they must first develop a strong internal leadership and sense of nationalism born from the knowledge of black history.

an *American Dilemma*-which argued that racial discrimination stood in opposition to the nations most cherished ideals (121), and contends that this new racial liberalism obscured the complex dynamics that constitute racial and economic inequality in America.

While the leaders of the Black Power movement who represented numerous organizations had distinct political, economic and social objectives, the movement also inspired cultural changes and intellectual trends among its adherents. For instance, African Americans who subscribed to the “black power” ideology articulated by the leaders of the Black Arts and Black Power movement embraced and enacted this new African-rooted race pride, using their bodies as sites of discourse: they wore natural African hairstyles and African styled-clothing.⁷⁸⁸ The black nationalist aesthetic tradition that was born during this period called for a new imagining of black and African people, black history and black culture. The Black Power Movement’s leaders challenged African Americans to learn about and embrace their African past, as well as to study the struggles of their ancestors and contemporary counterparts throughout the African Diaspora. Much like the members of the New Negro intelligentsia who insisted that restoring black people’s pride in their African heritage was the key to improving black people’s self esteem and undermining racism during the 1920s and 1930s, Black Power activists looked to the African past for a restored sense of their race’s self-worth and value. Black Power activists believed that blacks people’s liberation from oppressive racism would not be achieved solely by institutional or economic changes. On the contrary, they asserted that the creation of a nationalist sensibility fostered by “knowledge of self” (the black-African self) was key to liberation. A good example of the importance of history to these activists is the black history study groups from which

⁷⁸⁸ William L. Van Deburg, *A New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 198.

early chapters of the Black Panthers evolved in California.⁷⁸⁹ These study groups read both Melville Herskovits' and E. Franklin Frazier's work. Despite the fact that the two scholars and their theories were largely at odds, young Black Power activists were able to extract from their works ideas and theories that furthered their re-conceptualization of the black experience. Most important to these activists were Herskovits' African survivals theories, and Frazier's critique of the black bourgeois, which they combined and added to the array of intellectual influences from which they crafted their ideology. Black Panther historian Donna Jean Murch explains: "Although Herskovits' work received a cold reception initially, *Myth* became very influential... the anthropologist helped to provide historical logic for a reinvigorated, anticolonial Black nationalism."⁷⁹⁰ They embraced both scholars' works, using Herskovits' research to fuel their imaginings of a glorious African past, and their fantasies about enslaved blacks who were defiant and determined to hold on to their African traditions despite chattel slavery. Frazier's studies were equally important to Black Power enthusiasts. Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), a study that attacked the black middle class for what he understood to be their complacency in the face of Jim Crow racism, helped young black study group members craft anti-assimilationist rhetoric.⁷⁹¹

Black Power activists also demanded that academic institutions on every level of the American educational system begin to fully incorporate black and African history and

⁷⁸⁹ Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 86-87. Murch explores the study groups organized by students at Berkley and surrounding colleges in the California university system.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

arts into its curriculum. The Black Studies movement emerged largely as a result of this push. Student protests and sit-ins forced colleges and universities to establish academic programs that explored the black experience in Africa and in the African Diaspora.⁷⁹²

During the late 1960s scholars, students and Black Power activists and enthusiasts combed the annals of African history, black history and black culture looking for evidence of black people's historic resistance to oppression; blacks' experiences during slavery; the greatness of ancient Africa; and the retention of African culture in black communities throughout the Diaspora. Black Studies activists' insistence that there was a unique black experience that needed to be examined and explored shifted race discourse back to the idea of racial distinctiveness. Their efforts resulted in the reappearance of the black folklore and survivals studies conducted during the 1920s and 1930s. Within the context of black nationalist-black aesthetic discourse, African survivals re-emerged as the quintessential evidence of a distinct black cultural tradition that derived from Africa, and the Gullah, once again, surfaced in response to scholars' and black studies students' interest in the connection between black Americans and their African past.⁷⁹³ This shift

⁷⁹² Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

⁷⁹³ For clear evidence of this, see the *Journal of Black Studies* special edition dedicated to Sea Island culture. In the volume, numerous writings about the uniqueness of Sea Islanders appear. One article in particular, written by Janie Gilliard Moore a native Gullah from Yorges Island, South Carolina, "Africanisms Among Blacks of the Sea Islands" explicitly identifies the turbulent years of the Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Study movements as motivating factors in the rediscovery of the Gullah. Moore wrote: "With Civil Rights Movement, Blacks became more concerned about their ethnic roots and authenticity—their African heritage and culture. Thus arose the desire to relate to everything which is African. And so it came about that new attention is focused on the Sea Islands. For we are that unique group of people who constitute the remnant which has maintained the

set the stage for Sapelo Islanders to re-emerge as subjects of scholarly and artistic interest.

This chapter examines the way that black women writers, influenced by the Black Studies movement, used Mary Granger's writings about black Sapelo Islanders in their fictional works and transformed the Gullah from 1930s "beloved primitives" to "beloved African American ancestors." I will analyze Toni Morrison's, Paule Marshall's Gloria Naylor's and Julie Dash's use of 1920s and 1930s Gullah research, and more specifically, 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Islanders' interviews in their writings. This chapter explores the persistence of 1920s and 1930s Gullah researchers' preoccupations in the works of black women fiction writers as well as analyzes the new interpretive lens that black women brought to Modernists Primitivists' fantasies about the Gullah and the changing meanings of African survivals.

Black Women Writers Discover Sapelo Islanders

The renewed interest in black culture and African survivals that resulted from the Black Studies movement produced new works built on 1920s and 1930s folk culture and survival studies. One example of the resurgence of interest in black folklore and folk past is Alice Walker's resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston's works in an article published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1975. Walker's "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" discusses both Hurston's fiction and anthropological work, and the article helped to revive interest in Hurston's writings and the folklore that she documented. Two years after Walker's article was published, Lawrence Levine's landmark study *Black Culture and Black*

highest degree of evidences, of ethnic authenticity of African cultural continuity" (468). *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (June 1980), pp. 467-480.

Consciousness: Afro- American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom (1977), an intellectual history that traces shifts in black folk thought and expressions in order to reveal the ways that blacks imagined themselves and the oppressive society in which they lived, was published. In the study, Levine referenced folklore and practices recorded in Mary Granger's *Drums and Shadows* and Lydia Parrish's *Slave Songs from the Georgia Sea Islands*, more than twenty times to bolster his arguments, and Levine featured "sea island" blacks as proprietors of sophisticated and complex intellectual formulations that articulated resistance to white supremacy.

Drums and Shadows was by far the most widely referenced Gullah study in the works of Levine and other practitioners of Black Studies. In referencing the work, these scholars seem unaware of the book's controversial past, and do not question the information in Granger's reports. In particular, Granger's interviews with Sapelo Islanders have captured scholars' attention. Instead of analyzing Granger's approach, anthropologist Robert Farris Thompson uses her interviews with Sapelo Islanders in *Flash of Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984) to establish the presence of Kongo cosmology in America.⁷⁹⁴ Likewise, historian Julia Floyd Smith cited *Drums and Shadows* in her study *Slavery and Rice In Low Country Georgia, 1750-1860* (1991) as evidence of an African-styled folk culture on Georgia's coast. William McFeely cites Granger's interviews in the history of *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk Into Freedom* (1994). Allan Austin uses *Drums and Shadows* Sapelo Islanders' interviews to reconstruct Bilali Mohammed's life in *African Muslims in Antebellum America* (1997),

⁷⁹⁴ Robert Farris Thomson, *Flash of Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 133-135.

and Michael Gomez similarly uses Granger's work to explore Sapelo Islander's Muslim past in *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (1998). Historian William Politzer does the same in his study *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (2005). Granger's reports also make an appearance in Philip Morgan's edited collection *African American Life in the Georgia Lowcountry* (2010). These works collectively illustrate the fact that Mary Granger's study, the most controversial of all of the 1930s Gullah studies, emerged as the most useful source of Georgia's Gullah folk. Each scholars' creative use of Sapelo Islanders' reports adds value and meaning to Granger's findings—meaning that complicates the heritage of a people who Granger simply imagined to be quintessential examples of black people's primitive nature.

While scholarly use of Mary Granger's Sapelo Island reports are substantial, the use of *Drums and Shadows* Sapelo Island research in black women's fictional works marks the most monumental shift in how the Gullah have been imagined. It is only fitting that the Gullah identity, which first gained popularity during the 1920s and 1930s within the fiction genre as a result of Julia Peterkin's writings, lives on in fictional works. But unlike Peterkin whose fascination with the Gullah in her midst was spurred by the popular fad of exploring America's own primitives, the black women writers who picked up the Gullah as fictional subjects during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s did so to restore a sense of race pride and ancestral lineage that they believed black people had lost.

The black women writers who re-imagined the Gullah in their works did so under the influence of the black nationalist and black aesthetic traditions dedicated to creating a unified vision of a black nation and promoted the presentation of affirming images of blackness in scholarly and artistic works. They also wrote under the inspiration of a

black feminist discourse that compelled them to grapple with their dual subjectivity as both black people and women.⁷⁹⁵ Literary scholar Cheryl Wall argues that the fictional works that black women produced after the advent of the Black Studies movement reveals a consistent desire to represent the past four hundred years of black history in the African Diaspora and reclaim lost parts of their lineage.⁷⁹⁶ This preoccupation was certainly evident in the way that Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor and Julie Dash re-imagined the Gullah in their novels.

The fact that Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash were entrenched in the academe during the years when the Black Power, Black Studies and Black Feminist movements had the most significant impact on the ivory tower guaranteed that their works would reflect the ideologies of these movements. Toni Morrison was a student during the Civil Rights movement and was a professor during the height of the call for black studies: she earned a bachelors degree from Howard University in 1953, a masters degree from Cornell University in 1955, and was teaching at the State University of New York and at Yale University during the 1970s. Similarly, Paule Marshall graduated from Brooklyn College in 1953, received her masters degree from Hunter College in 1955, and she also taught at Yale University during the 1970s. While Marshall and Morrison were pursuing literary projects and teaching at the university, Naylor and Dash were students. Gloria Naylor worked her way through coursework at Medgar Evers College and Brooklyn College, before beginning graduate studies in literature at Yale University in

⁷⁹⁵ Madhu Bhubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1-9.

⁷⁹⁶ Cheryl Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5-9.

the 1980s. Likewise, Julie Dash was a film student during the 1970s: she attended both City College and the American Film School before pursuing graduate studies at UCLA during the 1980s. At the very moment when black folklore and African survival theories were resurrected in the academe, these black women were navigating the complex racial terrain of a turbulent period during which questions of race, heritage, oppression, gender and Africanness were raised for scholars to consider. Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash would grapple with all of these questions in their fictional works, and 1930s Gullah reports would play a special role in the way that they responded to emerging ideas about the meaning of racial and gender identities.

When Mary Granger interviewed Sapelo Islanders during the 1930s she did not imagine that the practices that they described had any positive value within the modern context. Instead, she noted their superstitions as evidence of a primitive African impulse that handicapped blacks who were unable to resist their innate naïve racial character. But, when black women writers discovered Granger's conversations with Sapelo Islanders, they used the interviews to interpret and re-imagine the Gullah. From Granger's reports of "shadows," rootwork and conjuh, these black women writers crafted a new imagining of a mystical, magical, powerful African inspired Gullah folk culture which are evident in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1988), and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). The stories that these black women tell use the first representation of coastal Georgia Gullah folk that emerged during the 1920s and the 1930s and added new meaning to the identity. The "Gullah," as described by 1920s and 1930s journalists, folklorists and amateur anthropologists in search of authentic relics

of African culture in America, represented an exotic, ignorant, primitive vanishing “Negro type” doomed to extinction. Yet, when Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash mined 1920s and 1930s Gullah studies, sifting through the intellectual debris of a charged moment in America’s race-making history, and discovered Mary Granger’s study, their imaginations were ignited and new formulations of Gullah folk surfaced in their fictional works.

While Granger represented African survivals as a vanishing primitive orientation that was bred in ignorance and isolation, Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash read triumph, power and a cultural legacy that inspires a sense of pride and purpose in black Americans. In the imaginations of black women writers “African survivals” take on the new meaning given to survival studies that was born from the Black Studies movement. This new African survival discourse argued that African retentions reflect black people’s resistance to white cultural domination, and literally helped them to “survive” slavery. Lawrence Levine’s version of African retentions in *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* (1977) clearly communicates this new interpretation of survivals. Levine argued against the way that early African survivals enthusiasts characterized survivals among slaves as “quaint reminders of an exotic culture sufficiently alive to render the slaves picturesquely different but little more.”⁷⁹⁷ He argued that slaves brought with them from West Africa a world view “capable of withstanding the impact of slavery,” and they used this world view and the cultural expressions associated with it to survive slavery and articulate resistance. While 1920s and 1930s African survivals advocates in the academe like Melville Herskovits and Zora Neale Hurston took survivals seriously, they never asserted

⁷⁹⁷ Levine, 4.

that the traits that they explored had helped blacks to survive bondage and frame discourse about freedom and oppression. “Root work,” voodoo, and “conjuh” for white 1920s and 1930s observers like Mary Granger marked the cultural survivals of a powerless, unsophisticated, pseudo-African folk who lacked the moral fortitude derived from dedication to Christianity. But, when Marshall, Naylor and Dash re-imagined Gullah “root work,” voodoo and “conjuh,” practices that may not have existed as described in 1920s and 1930s Gullah literature, they found powerful black matriarchs propagating profound African cosmological principles and enduring wisdoms through which true freedom was secured. These black women writers were most likely unaware of the fact that all of the 1920s and 1930s Sapelo Island researchers, with the exception of Lorenzo D. Turner, drew significant inspiration for their version of African survivals from the voodoo craze, and imagined Sapelo Islanders according to popular views about survivals portrayed in the media. Still, black women writers fantasized about the prevalence and potency of these practices among the Gullah. In the minds of these black women writers the Gullah and their mystical arts and African ancestors become the sole group of *African* Americans to survive chattel slavery.

Toni Morrison was the first black female writer to incorporate details from *Drums and Shadows* in an imaginative literary work. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), the novel that propelled her into the position of a literary mastermind, Morrison uses elements of Gullah folklore and weaves details from *Drums and Shadows* into a larger tale set in the 1950s and 1960s about one black man’s quest into his family history that restores pride in his ancestry. Despite the fact that 1920s and 1930s Gullah themes are not central to the story that Morrison tells, her use of research from the period is indicative of how black women

writers would use the Gullah in their works. In the novel, *Milkman Dead*, *Song of Solomon*'s main character, is introduced to family lore about flying Africans by his estranged magical aunt Pilate Dead. Milkman's quest for gold sends him on a reverse migration to his family's ancestral homestead in Virginia, where he uncovers his family history that is embodied in the discovery of his great-grandfather's name.

The story of "flying Africans" can be linked to Mary Granger's *Drums and Shadow*'s study. While many 1920s and 1930s Gullah folklore collectors documented stories about Africans that escaped bondage by flying back to Africa, these tales were also recorded in several *Drums and Shadows* reports. Mary Granger's interview with Prince Sneed of White Bluff was one of many interviews in which stories about "flying Africans" were told:

Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabs wut wuzn climatize and he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an du dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say, 'Wat dis?' an dey say, kunka tambe, quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye.⁷⁹⁸

My gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slaves what wasn't climatized and he work them hard and one day they was hoeing in the field and the driver come out and two of them was under a tree in the shade, and the hoes was working by themself. The driver say, 'What this?' and they say, kunka tambe, quick like. Then they rise off the ground and fly away. Nobody ever see them no more. Some say they fly back to Africa. Muh gran see that with he own eye.

Morrison explained her attraction to this specific lore and the use of this tale in *Song of Solomon* in an interview that she gave in March of 1981: "There is a certain sense of

⁷⁹⁸ Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 79.

family I don't have. So the myths get forgotten. Or they may not have been looked at carefully...the flying myth in *Song Solomon*...is about black people who could fly. That was one of our gifts." For Morrison, this myth stood as one of the enduring myths that survived among her family: "That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It's everywhere—people used to talk about it, it's in spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking—escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*."⁷⁹⁹ In the novel, the myth of flying Africans has multiple meanings, but most important is that it was the "gift" of ancestry—Milkman was told that his great-grandfather Solomon could fly, and the story was critical to his transformation.

Naming was an important theme in *Song of Solomon*, and Milkman's discovery of his great grandfather's name can specifically be traced back to *Drums and Shadows*. Morrison explains that names play a unique role in the experience of blacks in America: "If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It's particularly problematic because it's not just *your* name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name?"⁸⁰⁰ Morrison describes the loss of family and tribal names as a force that produces trauma that results in a "psychological scar" in the black American psyche. So, in the novel, she uses the process of naming to move through Milkman Dead's story of ancestral discovery: "Most of the names in *Song of Solomon* are real, the names of musicians...biblical names...I also used pre-Christian names to give a sense of the mixture of cosmologies. Milkman Dead has to learn the

⁷⁹⁹ Toni Morrison, interviewed Thomas LeClair, "A Conversation with Toni Morrison: 'The Language Must Not Sweat,'" *New Republic*, (March 21, 1981).

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

meaning of his own name and the names of things.”⁸⁰¹ It is in Milkman’s discovery of his own ancestor’s name, which is listed in a song, sung by a group of children, that Mary Granger’s report of an interview with Sapelo Island, Georgia residents is woven into the apex of Morrison’s novel. While Granger interviewed Katie Brown she asked Brown what she knew about her Muslim ancestor, Bilali Mohammed, Brown replied: “He hab plenty of daughtuhs, Margret, Bentoo, Chaalut, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima an Hestuh.”⁸⁰² Again, Granger asked Julia Grovenor, the woman who was resistant to Granger’s voodoo questions, about her Muslim grandparents, Hannah and Calina Underwood.⁸⁰³ Both Grovenor and Brown described what they remembered of their ancestor’s religious practices and recounted a cake that they made during Muslim holidays: “She make a funny flat cake she call ‘saraka’.”⁸⁰⁴ The fact that Sapelo Island Muslim slaves, Bilali Mohammed, and Hannah and Calina Underwood, were immortalized in written records, so that they could be rediscovered by black women writers, is largely due to the interest that 1920s and 1930s paid to African survivals. Morrison took these Sapelo Islanders’ remembrances of their ancestors and wove them into Solomon’s song:

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!⁸⁰⁵

Also in the song, is Morrison’s variations of the magical words that Prince Sneed said was used to make the Africans fly: “Come konka yalle, come konka tambee.”⁸⁰⁶ The

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² *Drums and Shadows*, 161.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 163.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid., 162.

⁸⁰⁵ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume 1987), 303.

variations in the spelling of names and words used in Morrison's novel do not obscure the origins of her inspiration. While Sapelo Island researcher W. Robert Moore cited what he described as islanders' "picturesque names" like "Julius, Ishmael, Caesar, Nero, and Balaam" to verify they were authentic relics of the primitive past, Morrison also finds in Sapelo Islanders names and words a link to a powerful past.⁸⁰⁷ Furthermore, Morrison's fixation on Sapelo Islanders names is rooted in the desire to recover and reclaim the virtues of the black past. Despite the fact that Mary Granger's interests in Brown's, Hall's and Governor's Muslim ancestors revolved around establishing the authentic Africanness of the survivals that her subjects described, Morrison found great value in the report. Brown's and Governor's memories of their African ancestors were invoked in Morrison's construction of Milkman's Dead ultimate transformation that was rooted in his discovery of his own ancestor.

Morrison's belief in the restorative power of black folklore and the discovery of black ancestry was, in part, inspired by Gullah remembrances. When Morrison read the stories that Brown, Governor and Sneed told Mary Granger, what she read settled in her imagination and were conjured in the writing of *Song of Solomon*. This was also true for Paule Marshall. Marshall explained in an interview that her novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) was inspired by Granger's *Drums and Shadows* study:

Praisesong for the Widow started with a place I came across this place called Ibo Landing in a book entitled *Drums and Shadows*, which was a series of interviews with some very old people who lived on the Sea Islands, off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Nearly everyone spoke of place on one of the islands called Ibo Landing. According to a story handed down over the years, a group

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., 303.

⁸⁰⁷ Moore, 253.

of Ibo slaves decided they didn't like the looks of America as they were brought ashore and turned around and walked back across the Atlantic Ocean. That's how *Praisesong* began, with that folktale.⁸⁰⁸

Marshall did not simply stumble on Granger's study, but sought out this sort of material for inspiration: "I'm also very taken with historical material."⁸⁰⁹ Marshall's description of *Drums and Shadows* in the interview was not entirely accurate. The study only focused on blacks in coastal Georgia, and while Granger and her staff asked many residents about "Ibo Landing," only one St. Simon resident, Floyd White, talked about it:

Heahd bout duh Ibo's Landing? Das duh place weah dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbuh to mahch back tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah. Dey gits drown.⁸¹⁰

Heard about Ibo's Landing? That's the place where they bring duh Ibos over in a slave ship and when the get here, they ain't like it and so they all start singing and they march right down in duh river to march back to march back to Africa, but they ain't able to get there. They gets drown.

White's Ibo's may have drowned, but in Marshall's imagination, the Ibos, like the flying Africans described in other interviews, made it back to Africa.

Praisesong for the Widow, like *Song of Solomon*, tells the story of an African American woman led to personal transformation by a magical matriarch back to their Gullah ancestral roots. *Praisesong for the Widow*'s main character, Avey Johnson is more than sixty years old when a dream about her deceased great-aunt Cuney leads her to

⁸⁰⁸ Paule Marshall interviewed by Melody Graulich and Lisa Sisco, "Meditations on Language and the Self: A Conversation with Paule Marshall," *NWSA Journal*, Vol 4, No 3, Fall 1992, pp 292-293.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid., 293.

⁸¹⁰ *Drums and Shadows*, 185.

connect with the powerful roots of her Gullah ancestry. Avey, a widow is on a cruise with friends when her great-aunt Cuney comes to her in a dream and encourages her to abandon the cruise ship, and embark on a life changing experience while in Grenada waiting for a flight back to New York. During her sojourn in the African Diaspora, Avey's encounters call up memories of summers that she spent on fictional Tatem Island in South Carolina. Marshall's fictional Gullah island is populated by blacks that perform "ring-shouts" and seek the consultation of the island's root doctor, " 'Doctor' Benitha Grant."⁸¹¹ Avey remembers an old Tatem Islander, Shad Dawson, whose house she and her great-aunt Cuney passed on their daily walk to Ibo Landing. Marshall's use of the name "Shad" was clearly inspired by Granger's interview with Shad Hall, whose memories featured prominently (which resulted in his striking portrait being included in the published study) in describing Sapelo Islander's African ancestor's traditions.⁸¹² On their visits to Ibo Landing, great-aunt Cuney retold the story of the enslaved Africans that escaped captivity and made it home:

They just kept walking right on out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they'd of got very far seeing as it was water they walking on. Besides they had all that iron on'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round they neck like a dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. And chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn't stop those Ibo none.⁸¹³

Marshall's version of the Ibo Landing story was a triumph that served as a way to link Cuney and Avey to their ancestors in victory instead of through tragedy. And Avey,

⁸¹¹ Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*, (New York: Plume 1983), 30-35.

⁸¹² *Drums and Shadows*, 158-172.

⁸¹³ Marshall, 39.

whose real name was “Avatara” was, an “avatar” that embodied the story and legacy of those who made it “home.”

Avey’s quest to get “home,” to New York, ultimately took her back “home” to her Gullah roots on Tatem Island. While trying to get home from Grenada, the patios she heard around her made her remember the Gullah dialect. She also remembered the power of the “Five Finger Grass that her great-aunt Cuney used to hang above the door of the house in Tatem to keep trouble away.”⁸¹⁴ Avey remembered that her deceased husband called “her behind Gulla gold” and was reminded by a local islander that she should pay homage to her ancestors because if she didn’t “they’ll get vex and cause you nothing but trouble. They can turn your life around in a minute, you know.”⁸¹⁵ The ancestral ceremonies that she encountered on the “out island” made her recall similar ceremonies on Tatem: “She had seen it once at the funeral of an old man her great-aunt had taken her to, a plate prepared with meat, greens and the inevitable rice and side dish of sweet potato pudding which had been the dead man’s favorite, resting on a small flower stand of a table next to the open coffin in the front room.”⁸¹⁶ Marshall could have easily drawn all of these practices from Granger’s reports about roots, charms and practices to placate the dead. Mattie Sampson told Granger “Dey hang Five Finguh Grass ovuh deah bed aw doeway tuh protec du whole house” from witches and spirits that visit in the night and Susan Maxwell told Granger that “Ebry night attuh duh fewnul I put food on duh poach fuh duh spirit tuh come git.”⁸¹⁷ In the end, Avey Johnson’s journey “home” was not

⁸¹⁴ Marshall, 67, 107.

⁸¹⁵ Marshall, 126, 165.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁸¹⁷ *Drums and Shadows*, 56, 143.

facilitated by a flight on an airplane, but was achieved by journeying back to memories of Ibo Landing and reclaiming her lineage and legacy.

Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1989) also centers on a homeward journey that invokes the essence of how the Gullah were imagined during the 1920s and 1930s. Naylor's novel takes place in a fictional Gullah island on the border of Georgia and South Carolina named Willow Springs. Naylor invokes the voice of an omniscient Gullah narrator that uses the Gullah dialect in telling different parts of the novel's plot. In the novel, Ophelia (whose "basket name" is Cocoa), a daughter of Willow Spring's Gullah community left the island to experience life in New York City. Ophelia returns to the island with her "citified" husband George to visit with her grandmother Abigail and grand-aunt Miranda (Mama Day) and is caught in the crossfire of a voodoo war which ultimately results in George's death.

Where Morrison and Marshall borrow from documented 1920s and 1930s Gullah folklore, Naylor imagines a new myth about an enslaved person that is able to escape their bondage. Willow Spring's residents are eternally connected to their slave past which is represented in the enduring myth of their common African ancestor Sapphira Wade. Sapphira is celebrated for using mysterious African magical powers and her sexual prowess to trick the island's plantation owner into freeing his slaves and deeding off his plantation to them. Her spirit is immortalized in a local multiple meaning saying "18 & 23" which is used to describe situations in which individuals are tricked, swooned or hexed. Sapphira Wade's legacy in Willow Springs extends beyond tales of her mythical life, but is captured in the resident's continued invocation of voodoo powers.

While *Mama Day* uses voodoo for good, Dr. Buzzard works roots for money and Ruby works a root that almost claims Ophelia's life.

For Naylor, the essence of the Gullah identity is the connection to their African ancestors and the magical quality of African spiritual survivals. While this assessment may at first glance seem to mirror the 1920s and 1930s reading of the Gullah, showing no trace of evolution, Naylor's work reflects a marked difference from the earlier depictions of Gullah voodooists. Naylor explains in an interview that *Mama Day* was inspired by the stories that her Mississippi migrant parents told about black women who "not only worked as quasi-traditional doctors, but who used roots and herbs and had supernatural kinds of powers."⁸¹⁸ Naylor also had a specific vision for the powerful women root workers in the novel: "I wanted as well to look at women in history, especially at women connected to the earth who could affect behavior."⁸¹⁹ The centrality of the relationship between women and power to Naylor's tale clearly echoes the feminist energy that permeated identity discourse during the 1970s and the 1980s. Ultimately, Naylor used "voodoo" to reflect her own beliefs: "When I got to *Mama Day*, I wanted to rest and write about what I believed. And I believe in the power of love and magic-sometimes I think they are one in the same. *Mama* is about the fact that real magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside our selves we can create miracles."⁸²⁰ While Naylor communicates a very personal understanding of "voodoo," she also reveals a nearness to 1920s and 1930s African survivals discourse that makes her decision to tell

⁸¹⁸ Gloria Naylor interviewed by Angels Carabi, "Interview with Gloria Naylor," *Belles Lettres* 7.3 (Spring 1992)5.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

a magical Gullah tale a logical choice: “When our people came to this country, they brought animism with them, what people used to call paganism. They brought their traditional beliefs, their traditional sense of religion. Then they made a coalition between what they brought and they found here as far as religion.”⁸²¹ Evident in Naylor’s explanation of the relationship between voodoo and blacks is the view of African survivals championed by Zora Neale Hurston and Melville Herskovits during the 1930s. What Naylor expresses as a “fact,” the idea that Africans brought with them to America a spiritual “animism” and made a “coalition” between their native religions and Christianity, suggests that in the wake of the Black Studies movement, Herskovits and Hurston won the survivals debate. E. Franklin Frazier’s arguments against African survivals theories lost their potency during the Black Studies movement: Black Power enthusiasts’ desire to recover their lost heritage made the possibility that all African culture had been destroyed during slavery an unfathomable prospect.

More than the personal allure of voodoo magic inspired Naylor to write a novel about the Gullah—she was also attracted to their relative “isolation” from the white world. For Naylor, Gullah communities represent the perfect black community. Naylor explained that Willow Springs “offers redemption through holding out the basic tenets that have kept the black community strong, which is a sense of history” she continued, “It’s sense of community. It’s sense of family. It’s respect for spirituality.”⁸²² Naylor’s imagining of a Gullah community clearly elevates this population of blacks from the position of backward primitives to conscious guardians of a distinct uplifting black

⁸²¹ Gloria Naylor interviewed by Tomeiko R. Ashford, “Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview,” *MELUS*, Volume 30, Number 4 (Winter 2005) 81.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 77.

tradition. Willow Spring's geographical location was also designed to achieve a higher symbolic meaning: "For me Willow Springs was to be the ideal black community. And that's why it is separated from the mainland. But there is a bridge where people can go back and forth. You know. No one's prisoner there...But the very island itself was to be a redemptive place."⁸²³ During the 1920s and 1930s, the distance between black Gullah islands and white dominated mainland communities was noted as the dynamic cultivated black ignorance and superstition and kept blacks in a primitive state, but in Naylor's imagination, the distance acts as a buffer against the brutality of white racism and serves to protect the black community.

The "distance" between life on the black Gullah island and life on the white dominated mainland also factors prominently in Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. Like Naylor, Dash conceives of the Gullah island as the place where black heritage, spiritual traditions and the black family remain in tact, while the mainland represents struggle and strife in the white world. Given that 1920s and 1930s Gullah researchers and writers largely ignored the racial power dynamics between islanders and whites, such as Howard Coffin, and R.J. Reynolds, it was easy for black women writers to imagine that Gullah islands were free from white domination.

In Dash's telling of a Gullah tale that draws on Sapelo Islander interviews, several members of the Peazant family make their final preparations to leave their Gullah island homeland in search of a new life on the mainland in 1902. The family's difficult decision to remain rooted in Peazant ancestral land or leave, and the return of two daughters that had already left, sets the stage for the drama that unfolded on film screens

⁸²³ Ibid.

in 1991. In this story, the rootwork of the Peazant family matriarch, Nana Peazant, links the family to their ancestral past and protects the family from unseen dangers that threaten them in their uncertain future.

Julie Dash, the daughter of South Carolina migrants raised in Queensbridge Housing Projects in New York, crafted this epic tale in search of her own family's story.⁸²⁴ Dash explained that "The stories from my own family sparked the idea of *Daughters* and formed the basis for some characters. But when I probed my relatives for information about the family history in South Carolina, or about our migration to New York, they were often reluctant to discuss it."⁸²⁵ So, in 1983 Dash took the funds that she was awarded from a Guggenheim grant and began conducting extensive research at the Schomburg Center for Research, the National Archive, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institute and the Penn Center and discovered 1920s and 1930s Gullah studies.⁸²⁶ Seduced by the new allure of 1920s and 1930s Gullah research, Dash wrote that she decided to use the Gullah in her telling of a black migration story because of their unique patterns of African cultural retentions:

The Sea islands of the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia became the main drop off point for the Africans brought to North America as slaves in the days of the transatlantic slave trade. It became the Ellis Island for the Africans, the processing center for the forced immigration of millions. It also became the region with the strongest retention of African culture, although even to this day the influences of African culture are visible everywhere in America.⁸²⁷

⁸²⁴ Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, (New York: The New Press, 1992), 1-5.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 6.

Dash's conclusion that the Gullah offer "the strongest retention of African culture" is evidence of the evolution of African survivals discourse from controversial "unproven theory" in the 1920s and 1930s, to a commonly accepted "fact" by the 1980s.

To replace the missing stories from her own family's lineage, Dash adopted the Gullah, and made them African American's fictive ancestors. Like the other black women writers who told Gullah stories, what she read in *Drums and Shadows* stayed with her. Dash mixed details from *Drums and Shadows* with her own imaginings of the African past that she longed for. As a result, she birthed a tale full of dynamic characters and a fascinating plot captured in the first feature film made by an African American woman in a theatrical release.

By 1987, Dash concluded her research and writing and headed to St. Helena Island, South Carolina with a production crew to begin filming *Daughters of the Dust*. Dash had plenty of help in her efforts to craft an authentic Gullah tale: she consulted with historian Margaret Washington Creel and Gloria Naylor worked as a production assistant on the film.⁸²⁸ When an interviewer asked Dash to describe the new film that she was working on, her own imagining of the Gullah emerged:

Daughters of the Dust is another period piece. It takes place at the turn of the century, and it's about a black family, a Gullah family. It's about the struggle to maintain their own family unity as a half of the family wants to migrate North and the other half wants to stay behind and maintain cultural traditions and beliefs. So it has a lot of mysticism in it and magic in it.⁸²⁹

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 7 & 10.

⁸²⁹ Julie Dash interview with Valerie Smith, January 15, 1989, "Interview of Julie Dash by Valerie Smith" in *Artist and Influence*, Hatch, James V. and Hamalian, Leo, eds (New York: Hatch Billops Collection, 1990), 32.

“Mysticism” and “magic” distinguish Dash’s Gullah from other blacks during the period. It is evident in Dash’s film that the magical and the mystical nature of the Gullah that was consolidated in 1920s and 1930s Gullah research, and in particular, in Granger’s *Drums and Shadows* study was a major force that stimulated Dash’s imagination.

Dash incorporated the names of people that were interviewed and discussed in *Drums and Shadows* in *Daughters of the Dust*. Like Morrison, Dash’s discovery of Bilali Mohammed, Sapelo Island Georgia’s famous African Muslim ancestor, left an indelible mark on her imagination. “I learned about Bilali Muhammed...He was in the Sea Islands during slavery, but by the turn of the century, his five daughters who were also Muslim, were still carrying on the tradition of Islam...So it was important for me to include him in the story...because he meant so much to me.”⁸³⁰ Drawing from Sapelo Islanders’ conversations with Mary Granger about Mohammed, and perhaps Lydia Parrish’s descriptions of Bilali too, Dash fashioned her own version of Bilali Mohammed named “Bilal”—a character who plays a prominent role throughout the film. In the film Bilal clings to his Muslim faith, teaching the younger generation of island residents his African born spiritual practice. Near the start of the film, Bilal is performing his morning prayer, and Dash’s instructions in the screenplay direct camera technicians to take a close up shot of “Bilal’s homemade KORAN and his hands in prayer.”⁸³¹

Shad Hall, the Sapelo Islander whose name is used in Marshall’s imagining of the Gullah past, is also invoked in *Daughters of the Dust*. Hall, like Katie Brown was one of Bilali Mohammed’s descendants. While his interview with Mary Granger also revealed

⁸³⁰ Dash, 37.

⁸³¹ Dash, 77 (screenplay page 3).

interesting details of his ancestor's African past and spiritual practices, it is likely that Shad Hall's portrait featured at the beginning of *Drums and Shadows* may have helped to seal Shad Hall in Dash's and Marshall's imagination. The 1930s documentary motives that influenced photography helped to make Shad Hall one of Granger's most imagined Sapelo Island subjects. Shad Hall's photograph is one of two photographs displayed that resemble intimate portrait photography. Unlike the other photographs of research subjects that place black bodies within a larger picture designed to cast them as a part of the natural scenery and landscape, Hall is the only subject in the portrait. The close up shot of Hall's face, and features are haunting: his closely cropped gray hair frames his face- smooth skin that defies his advanced age covers high set cheek bones, and his eyes are fixed in a gaze away from the camera, as if peering into a distant past. Perhaps it was this image of Hall that inspired Dash to name Nana Peazant's husband "Shad Peazant."

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The mystical and magical Gullah essence that Dash imagines in the film are also derived from 1920s and 1930s research. Eula Peazant uses a glass of water as a conduit to communicate with her dead mother through a letter that she wrote to her, and the spirit of Eula's Unborn Child narrates the film and is present, among the Peazant family throughout the movie.⁸³³ Nana Peazant sprinkles rice in order to be granted admission into the family cemetery where she ventures daily to visit her deceased husband Shad Peazant.⁸³⁴ Dash included a handwritten note in the script to remind the reader that the newspaper pasted on the walls of the Peazant home was there "to protect family from

⁸³² Ibid., 85 (screenplay page 11).

⁸³³ Ibid., 81 (screen play page 7).

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 85 (screenplay 11).

evil.”⁸³⁵ The script also includes directions that read: “Frizzled Chickens scratch their way in front of the shanty looking for conjure bags.”⁸³⁶ All of these elements are included in Granger’s study. In Granger’s reports, communicating with the dead was represented as a natural part of daily life for blacks in coastal Georgia. Mary Stevens told Granger “Duh spirits is ebryweah” and Elizatbeth Stevens added “Dey dohn hurt yuh none, jis walk long wid yuh an talk.”⁸³⁷ Katie Brown, of Sapelo Island, described rituals performed before entering the cemetery: “Dey say, ‘Fambly, we come tuh put our brudduh away in mudduh dus. Please let us tru the gate.’”⁸³⁸ Stories about magical newspaper and the protective instincts of frizzled chickens are also described Granger’s study.⁸³⁹

When Mary Granger unearthed stories about traditions used to honor the dead and folktales about flying Africans among coastal Georgia blacks, she presented them as exotic primitive local lore. But, black women writers found in those same stories a powerful tradition of ancestor veneration. The “bottle tree” that Dash imagines in the Peazant family yard is a good example of this translation. Dash describes the bottle tree in the screenplay: “Protecting the Peazant household from evil and bad luck. The bottles are of various shapes, sizes and colors. Sunlight radiates through the bottles, throwing a rainbow of hues across the Peazant family shanty.”⁸⁴⁰ Dash’s description closely mirrors Grangers account of her observations of a family cemetery in Sunbury: “Most of the

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 81 (screen play 7).

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 80 (screenplay page 6).

⁸³⁷ *Drums and Shadows*, 114.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁸³⁹ Ibid., 125, 129, 140, 171, 187, 194 and 48.

⁸⁴⁰ Dash, 86 (screenplay page 12).

graves were decorated with possessions of the departed persons. There are many glasses, bottles, and vases, most of which had been turned a shimmering purple from long exposure to the sun.”⁸⁴¹ Dash also weaves the narrative of protective ancestral spirits and ancestral knowledge that is communicated through folklore throughout her story. As was the case with Morrison and Marshall, Dash also imagines a sacred group of Ibos that used African magic to escape captivity and transport themselves back to Africa. Dash gives birth to the first visual imaginings of “Ibo Landing” in the opening scene. While Dash may have discovered the story while conducting research, it was Paule Marshall’s “Ibo Landing” story that moved Dash. Dash liked it so much, that she used Marshall’s exact prose as dialogue in the scene where Eula Peazant recounts the story of the Ibos to the Unborn Child.⁸⁴²

Nana Peazant’s rootwork plays a pivotal role in *Daughters of Dust*. Nana Peazant’s mystical charms act as a link between past and present wisdom, and she desperately clings to them despite her children’s growing doubts about the power of the talismans she makes. Because Nana Peazant chooses to observe ancestral traditions and wisdom, she is gifted with spiritual insight and knowledge. She is the only Peazant that can sense the Unborn Child’s spirit moving among them: “A great wind is blowing, Nana turns her face into the sweet wind and smiles. Nana senses the presence of the Unborn Child.”⁸⁴³ In the climactic scene, when the entire Peazant family is gathered at Ibo Landing, and tensions between the Peazants who want to stay and observe the old traditions and those that want to leave and abandon their past crests, it is Nana Peazant’s

⁸⁴¹ *Drums and Shadows*, 117.

⁸⁴² Marshall, 37-38, Dash, 67.

⁸⁴³ Dash, 99 (screenplay, 25).

construction of special “hand” charm that quells the conflict by fusing new gods with old gods to keep the family together. *Drums and Shadows* reports about “hands” identified the protective power of the charm. Clara Smith told a story about a “hand” that her aunt made, “My aunt destroy duh sacks an gie duh woman a good luck han tuh weah so no udduh root wukuh could hahm uh.”⁸⁴⁴ Peter McQueen said that “hands” were the only protection that one had against curses: “Only ting yuh kin do tuh keep from bein cunjuhed is to carry a han...Mos folks tote a han wid um.”⁸⁴⁵ Granger collected these stories about the power of “hands,” hoping to compile the sort of material that had become some entertaining in the popular culture, but Dash’s discovery of 1930s reports about “hands” provided her with the perfect symbol through which the central conflict of her story could be resolved. Dash calls the ceremony that Nana Peazant guides the family through to activate the “hand” a “ ‘A Root Revival of Love’ .”⁸⁴⁶ With Bilal by her side, her descendants in front of her, and the “hand” placed on top of Viola Peazant’s Bible, Nana Peazant says:

We have taken old Gods and given them new names. They saw it all here that day, those Ibo...This ‘Hand,’ it’s from me, from us, from them (the Ibo)...Just like all of you...Come children kiss the hand full of me..Take my ‘Hand.’ I’m the one that can give you strength.”⁸⁴⁷

One by one the Peazants come, some reluctant and some eager, and kiss the “hand,” igniting its power to keep their family from falling apart once they are divided by the waters that separate the island from the mainland.

⁸⁴⁴ *Drums and Shadows*, 42-43.

⁸⁴⁵ *Drums and Shadows*, 109.

⁸⁴⁶ Dash, 158 (screenplay 84).

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 159-160 (screenplay 85-86).

Re-working Roots

Toni Morrison's, Paule Marshall's, Gloria Naylor's and Julie Dash's personal searches for a meaningful African American past led them to the Gullah. What they found inspired them to create magical and powerful rootworking black matriarchs that reignite the mystical authority of African spiritual practices to heal the wounds of their descendants and instill an understanding of their ancestral lineage. Pilate Dead, great-aunt Cuney, Mama Day and Nana Peasant birth, from their mystical wombs, stories and spiritual knowledge that ultimately saves Milkman Dead, Avey Johnson, Ophelia and the Peasant family. Through these stories, Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash declare the power of black women to direct the forces of the universe.

These writers' rootworking women are all gifted with the keen ability to "see": they see the past and the future, the dead and the living and harvest the wisdom that this sight cultivates in order to save their descendants. When one considers the oppression that marked the condition of blacks in America, and the influence of both the black nationalist and black feminist discourse on black women writers, it makes sense that they imagined matriarchs who have the power to invoke forces that trump the power of American racism and sexism. Despite the fact that 1920s and 1930s Gullah researchers paid little attention to gender distinctions among the people that they studied, black women writers, inspired by the black feminist tradition, create a distinct relationship between black women and their ancestral past, making them guardians of tradition and the most skilled practitioners of mystical arts.

The invocation of Gullah folktales about flying Ibos and Ibo Landing also originates in black women writer's desire to uncover stories of "survival." While most

1920s and 1930s Gullah researchers perceived African survivals as relics of an African past, Morrison, Marshall, Naylor and Dash imagine these survivals as the literal “survival” of the black-self and African traditions despite chattel slavery. Stories about Ibos escaping slavery function as both stories that connect blacks to their African past and as testaments to the ability that blacks have to escape psychological bondage and return “home”. “Home” for the Ibos described in Gullah folklore was literally Africa, but in black women’s writings, “home” is the cognitive space in which blacks reconnect with their past and receive their spiritual inheritance and true sense of self which is defined by knowledge of their ancestors.

Black women writers’ re-imagining of details from *Drums and Shadows* re-creates the Gullah, elevating them from backward isolated research subjects and transforming in to the supernatural bridge that leads all African Americans “home.” Bilali Mohammed becomes the ancestors of every African American in search of an ancestor that resisted white cultural hegemony by passing down to his children sacred beliefs and practices. Each description of charms, rituals and African ancestors inspires the black imagination to contemplate coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks moving through an alternative power hierarchy in which they possessed the ability to command the forces of nature, talk to their dead and dictate the terms of their earthly experience. While Mary Granger’s study presented a problematic and controversial view of coastal Georgia’s blacks connection to the African past, what she recorded became an invaluable cultural resource for black women writers in the wake of the Black Studies movement. From this vantage point, black women’s discovery of the Gullah becomes much more than an anthropological encounter. Black women writers’ discovery of the Gullah was exactly

what black nationalist rhetoric called for: the realization of a magical self and long lost African beliefs and traditions.

Black women writers' romance with the Gullah that Modernist Primitivists made during the 1920s and the 1930s, once again transformed the meaning of the label. The long history of the Gullah label beginning with South Carolina slave advertisements, Ambrose Gonzales' folk tale collections and early linguistics research, to the African survivals hunting Modernist Primitivists on the Georgia coast during the 1920s and 1930s, has added to its lineage the creative fiction of black women looking to reclaim their ancestral legacy. From African savages during the Victorian period, to beloved primitives during the advent of American Modernism, to beloved African American ancestors in the years following the Black Studies movement, the "Gullah" have served to fill the needs of various groups' race fantasies for generations. Black women writers offer the Gullah to African Americans seeking to discover their lost heritage and power, and Sapelo Islanders would be among the American blacks who would accept their gift and use it in the fight for their homeland.

Conclusion

We Wear The Mask: Sapelo Islanders Try on the Gullah Identity

After Mary Granger's last visit to Sapelo Island, islanders went on with their lives as if she, and all of the other researchers who took their pictures and asked them questions, never came. Sapelo Islanders had made a significant impression on W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo D. Turner and Mary Granger. But all but Turner would be forgotten by islanders, and only a few of them would know the names of the published works that made their community famous. Life for Sapelo Islanders moved on. World War II took many of their sons off to war, and others left the island, joining the masses of blacks looking for a better life in mainland cities. The Civil Rights years would find Sapelo Islanders huddled around television sets, watching the war on Jim Crow. Despite the fact no "colored only" or "white only" signs hung on the island, which was comprised of a black majority, the white patriarchs who ruled the island had made them more than aware of their place in the Jim Crow south—so they celebrated the racial revolution that was taking place throughout the mainland.

By the 1970s several generations of Sapelo Islanders were forced to leave the island in search of jobs and educational opportunities in northern states, and in mainland communities in Georgia and Florida. The few industrial activities that once employed islanders were no more, and subsistence farming and fishing could no longer sustain them. Only a handful of jobs were available at the "big house:" when R.J. Reynolds died, the Reynolds' Foundation donated much of the land on the island to the state of Georgia, who turned the land they were gifted into a wildlife reserve. The Georgia State

Department of Natural Resources officials made a few jobs available to the islanders, but not enough to stop the steady flow of migrants who left the island in search of work. No municipal structure replaced the island's white patriarchs; instead the state stepped in to the "big house" and took over that role. Schools on the island closed, and as a result, Sapelo's children had to take a long ferry ride to and from the mainland each day to attend school. For a period of time during the 1960s, Sapelo Islanders' children were banned from using Reynolds' ferry to travel to school, so many families sent their children to live with their relatives on the mainland so that they could be educated.⁸⁴⁸ Sapelo Islanders were at the mercy of the island's white patriarch, and later the state of Georgia, for quick and reliable transportation on and off the island. For many, continuing to live on the island was impossible, so they left. The Sapelo Islanders that stayed knew it was time to fight, and the energy generated by the Black Power movement signaled that it was time to change their approach.

R.J. Reynolds' consolidation of black land holdings on the island was near complete by the time he died in 1964, but even from beyond the grave, his foundation continued to pursue black land. In 1975 Sapelo Islanders living in Hog Hammock organized themselves, retained three mainland lawyers and formed the Hog Hammock Community Foundation to protect their land from future sales.⁸⁴⁹ The organization made some progress in challenging the state and other interests seeking to occupy their land, but Sapelo Islanders and their descendants formed a second organization in the 1990s. SICARS (Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society) used funding from the

⁸⁴⁸ Interview with Betty Johnson Cooper, April 9, 2010.

⁸⁴⁹ Cornelia Walker Bailey, 275.

Reynolds Foundation to wage war to keep their land. The organization joined with universities and scholars, lawyers and politicians to secure historic landmark status for Hog Hammock, raise questions about the legitimacy of Reynolds' land acquisitions, establish zoning codes to fight black land loss and to keep Sapelo Island from becoming a resort community like Hilton Head, South Carolina.

Among the many tools that SICARS's rotating leadership used to fight land loss, the "Gullah" identity became one of their most powerful weapons. Arguing that Sapelo Islanders were a distinct people, with a unique history that was inextricably tied to the land, the organization and their mission gained national attention.⁸⁵⁰ Through SICARS, Sapelo Islanders were able to draw on the unique community characteristics described in 1920s and 1930s Gullah studies, and re-cast their significance as a people. The organization argued that Sapelo Island's Gullah folk would become extinct if their land was lost. As the popularity of Sapelo Islanders mission increased, and the popularity of the new image of the Gullah that black women writers crafted grew, a new ethno-tourist industry developed on the island.⁸⁵¹ Small groups of people from all over the United States and the world began to take interest in visiting Sapelo Island to have an encounter with authentic Gullah folk, so Sapelo Islanders created bed and breakfasts to accommodate ethno-tourists as well as to create a new income generating industry. Sapelo Islanders began to take an active role in defining themselves and their uniqueness.

⁸⁵⁰ The *New York Times* ran several stories about SICARS's plight, *Essence Magazine* featured the land battle, the *Star Ledger* and a host of other publications reported SICAR's mission.

⁸⁵¹ Andreas Heuser writes about "ethno-tourism" in "Memory Tales: Representations of Shembe in Cultural Discourse of African Renaissance" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Volume 35, September 2005, 362-387.

Cornelia Walker Bailey, the daughter of the woman who Moore photographed with the baby on her back, contributed a memoir about her life on Sapelo to the growing body of literature about the Gullah written by black women. SICARS also responded to growing ethno-tourist interest in the island and used it to generate more support for their land preservation efforts, and to raise funds. SICARS began hosting an annual “Cultural Day” celebration. The celebration features vendors selling Gullah crafts (sweet grass and palmetto baskets, fish nets, rag dolls, etc), shout song performances, spiritual song performances, Gullah cuisine, and Gullah dialect presentations.

While black people are not the only people who attend SICARS’s Cultural Day celebration, they make up the majority of participants and have a unique set of expectations for their visit to Sapelo Island. The scores of black people that come from all over the United States to attend Sapelo Island’s Cultural Day festivities are not looking for the primitive superstitious, musically gifted, virtually African backwards-black folk that W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish and Mary Granger found. They are looking for a “magical” place populated by mystical people empowered by a deep connection to their African ancestors. They are hoping to find Ibo Landing, or catch a glimpse of Bilali Mohammed’s ghost making prayer on the beach with his Koran in hand. Sapelo Island’s black tourists are looking for the “home” that Milkman Dead, Avey Johnson, Ophelia and the Peazant family found in their Gullah ancestry. They are looking for the new Gullah that black women writers made.

Sapelo Islanders’ fight to preserve and secure their ancestors’ freedom, their land, still rages and the fate of black land holdings in Hog Hammock is uncertain. More and more whites from surrounding mainland communities have purchased land from Sapelo

Islanders and their descendants, and have built expensive vacation and weekend homes on the island. Now, upper middle class whites are enjoying the island that had once been the private oasis of the wealthiest members of their race. Large luxury houses, built on tall stilts, dwarf the small, one level wooden homes that were built by Hog Hammocks' original residents. The rising value of land on Sapelo Island tempts black landholders to sell family properties—especially those who do not live there anymore. Some sell their ancestors' land to remedy economic hardships. Others consider selling their land because, the island is “changing.” But there are still a significant number of Sapelo Islanders and their descendants who rally their family members to preserve what is left of their ancestors' freedom.

To date, less than 60 black Sapelo Islanders live on the island year round. For some, this change in population signals the “extinction” of Sapelo Island's Gullah folk that W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo D. Turner and Mary Granger feared would come. Shad Hall, Katie Brown, Hettie Walker, Emma and Emmett Johnson and all of the Johnson's children have passed away. Many of their descendants have moved to the mainland, and most of them have never seen nor heard about the 1920s and 1930s works in which their ancestors are featured. Yet, the “vanishing” Sapelo Island Gullah folk whose uniqueness W. Robert Moore, Lydia Parrish, Lorenzo D. Turner and Mary Granger tried to capture will never vanish. They will continue to be re-made, and will re-make themselves, as they have been permanent fixtures in the American imaginary since Modernists and Modernist Primitivists “discovered” them in the 1920s and 1930s.

The story of how Sapelo Islanders became an authentic Gullah community is much bigger than the discovery of “ring shouts,” African linguistic patterns, and stories

about “shadows,” drums and rootwork—it is a story about race-making in America. The “Gullah” label was born from the American system of establishing white dominance by marking the and making “the other.” The construction of racial categories, and the meaning associated with racial categories, is at the heart of how Sapelo Islanders have been imagined by outsiders. From the first slavers who used the term to identify their chattel, to the Victorian era whites who used the term to describe the racial others around them, to the Modernists and Modernist Primitivists who hunted African survivals in coastal communities in the effort to define distinct authentic “black” characteristics, to the black women writers who tried to reclaim their Africanness, the Gullahness of coastal Georgia and South Carolina blacks has always been crafted through the interplay between fact and fiction.

The 1920s and 1930s Modernists and Modernist Primitivists whose studies expanded the Gullah label so that it included coastal Georgia blacks, and added spiritual primitivism to the list of characteristics that defined them, did so in response to contemporary conditions. Their interests in coastal Georgia blacks was certainly inspired by the changing view of Africanness initiated by the advent of American Modernism, and the subsequent African survivals debates that raged in the academe, as well as the backlash against Modernists’ attack on the racial hierarchy evident in the voodoo craze. Yet, it was the very idea of “modernity” that helped to construct the desire expressed by Sapelo Island Gullah researchers to uncover America’s own primitives. During the 1920s and 1930s, the period that marked the height of industrialization and technological modernization, finding “the primitive” became a natural preoccupation. The “primitive” and the primitive past that moderns assumed that they inhabited, were used as a gauge to

measure the successes of the nation. During the Modernists Primitivists' romance with the primitive, they did not question whether or not economic, social and political factors had locked their primitives outside of modernity. And blacks had, since the inception of race-based slavery in America, been cast as the most backward population in the nation, so it naturally follows that they became the nation's beloved primitives during the 1920s and 1930s.

Therefore, the emergence of Sapelo Islanders as authentic Gullah during the 1930s can be read as the outgrowth of the competition between writers and researchers to declare what the meaning of race, and blackness would be in the modern context. Although the Gullah were thought of as unique, they simultaneously stood as representatives of all black Americans' evolutionary past. W. Robert Moore and Mary Granger entered this contest seeking to demonstrate the innate primitiveness that stirred in blacks. Lydia Parrish tried to negotiate a middle ground: while she associated blackness with innate primitive gifts, she hoped that coastal Georgia blacks, with guidance could be taught how to "modernize" their primitiveness by exchanging it for capital. On the other hand, Lorenzo D. Turner entered this competition trying to prove that blacks were not ignorant and backwards, and had retained sophisticated African linguistic patterns. Yet, these complex motives and the negotiations through which the Gullahness of Sapelo Islanders was crafted would not survive. The only thing that would survive the 1920s and 1930s researchers' exploration of Sapelo Islanders is the belief expressed in black women's fiction and in Shaila Dewan's 2008 *New York Times* article—the belief that the islanders' community has an undeniable "African Feel."

Illustrations



Figure 1. Sapelo Islanders photographed at the “big house,” Howard Coffin’s mansion Christmas, 1913.

Images of America: Sapelo Island’s Hog Hammock (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009) 35



Figure 2. W. Robert Moore
Washington Post July 21, 1935

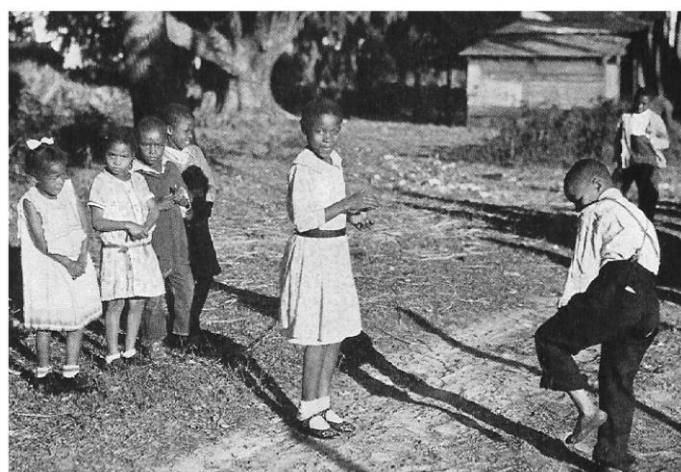


Figure 3. Isaac and Naomi Johnson
National Geographic Magazine 1934



Figure 4. Emmett and Emma Johnson's family pose for W. Robert Moore.
National Geographic Magazine 1934



Figure 5. Fred Johnson drives President Coolidge and Howard Coffin in the oxcart.
National Geographic Magazine 1934



Figure 6. Hettie Walker and baby photographed by W. Robert Moore
National Geographic Magazine 1934

Come to this GOLDEN ISLE
where it's Economy to play

SPANISH Grandees, the nobility of France, Colonial Planter and today the great names in the social and business life of America—through four centuries the Golden Isles of Gualo (of the coast of Georgia) have attracted the aristocracy of the world. Sea Island, the most favored—a land of live oaks, palms, fragrant pines, and sunny waters now offers the finest sports together with luxurious accommodations at the famous Cloister Hotel. American Plan from \$8.

Only 21 hours away, Seaboard, Southern, A. C. L. On Atlantic Coast to Highway. Savannah Line.

Here is one of the South's finest golf courses overlooking the sea—grass greens. A 60,000-acre hunting preserve; wild turkey, deer, quail. Fishing of every variety. Miles of bridle trails. Yachting sailing, boating. A new adventure every day. Most economical than stay-at-home-costs.

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THE CLOISTER
SEA ISLAND
Georgia

Figure 7- Advertisement for Howard Coffin's Sea Island Resort (*New York Times*, January 1, 1933 p. xx7)

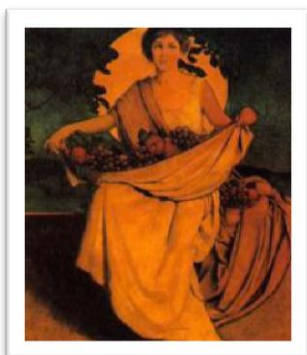


Figure 8. Maxfield Parrish's painting of his wife Lydia Parrish.
Figure 9. Lydia Parrish and two of her children.

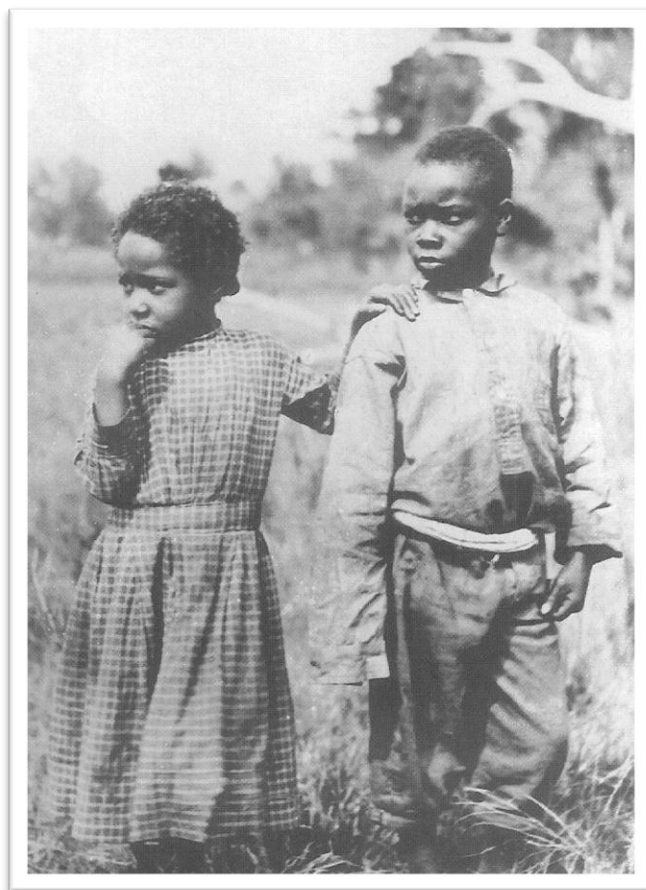


Figure 10. Isaac and Naomi Johnson photographed by Lydia Parrish
Images of America: Sapelo Island's Hog Hammock (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009) 35



Figure 11. Lorenzo Dow Turner



Figure 12. Mary Granger photographed in a Barnard College yearbook. (Courtesy of Barnard College Archives). **Figure 13.** Mary Granger photographed at her retirement party. (Courtesy of Harvey Granger, Jr.)

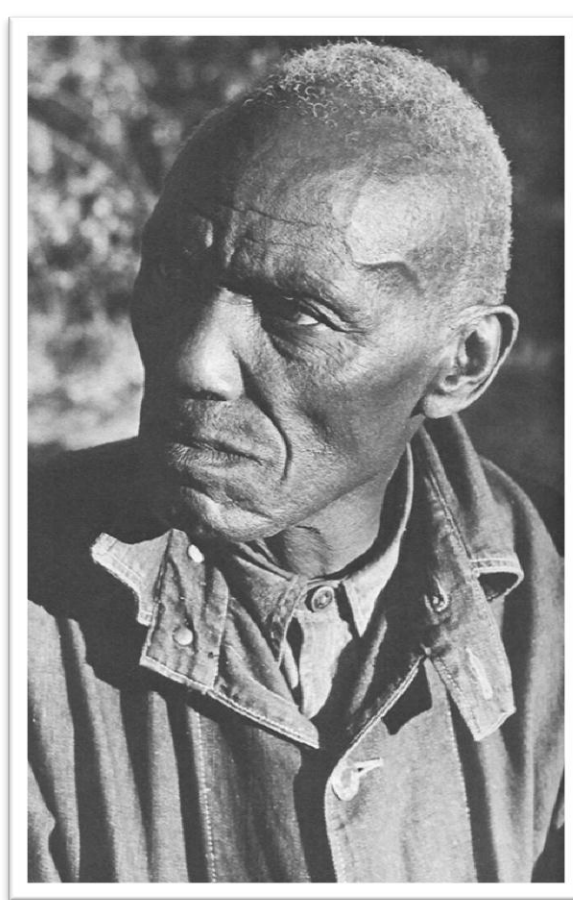


Figure 14 /Figure 15. Katie Brown and Shad Hall photographed by Muriel and Malcolm Bell for Mary Granger's *Drums and Shadows* study. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940)



Figure 16/Figure 17. Carved wooden crafts featured in *Drums and Shadows*. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940)



Figure 18. Melville Herskovits

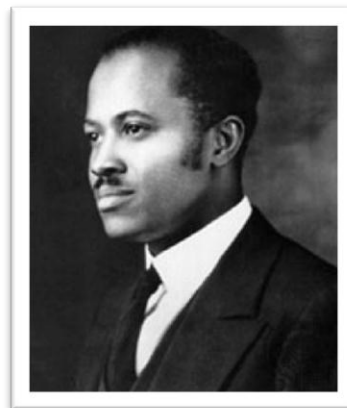


Figure 19. E. Franklin Frazier



Figure 20. Sterling Brown



Figure 21. Zora Neale
Hurston

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