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WEES GONNA TELL IT LIKE WE KNOW IT TUH BE:  
CODED LANGUAGE IN THE WORKS OF JULIA PETERKIN AND GLORIA NAYLOR

by

CRYSTAL MARGIE HILLS

ABSTRACT

This study employs African American literary criticism and critical discourse analysis to evaluate Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). These women write stories of African American life on the Sea Islands through different prisms that evoke cultural memory within and outside the texts. Peterkin, a white Southerner, writes as an "onlooker" and "pioneer" of fictional Gullah culture; Naylor, a black Northerner by birth, writes as an "outsider" to Gullah culture, although a veteran of African American Southern heritage.

The authors' hybridity produce different literary voices. A close examination of their discourse conveys a coded language pertinent to understanding the historical, social, and political conditions portrayed through their texts.

This study will examine their discourse to prove that Julia Peterkin's, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, takes ownership over the Gullah experience rendering stereotypical characterizations promoting hegemony; while Gloria Naylor's, *Mama Day*, resurrects Peterkin's view rendering multi-dimensional characterizations that legitimize the authenticity of Gullah culture and aid in its preservation.

INDEX WORDS: Dialect, Gullah, Sea Islands, Julia Peterkin, Gloria Naylor, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, *Mama Day*, African American Literature, Southern Literature, Critical Discourse Analysis

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CRYSTAL MARGIE HILLS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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August 2008

## DEDICATION

*A know fa sho dat cause ob oona pray an de hep wa come from de Sperit ob Jedus Christ,  
all dat wa done happen ta me gwine ton out fa set me free.  
~Phillippians 1:19*

I dedicate this thesis to my loving family, natives of Charleston, South Carolina and descendants of the Gullahs, and to my supportive friends. It has been through your constant prayers, words of advice, and motivational zeal to put my faith in God and “keep pressing forward” that I have endeavored to retrace my history and produce a written document to support the preservation of my culture, Gullah culture. Practically and personally speaking, this thesis could not have been completed were it not for your patient support. Anything I have done or will do is richer because my family and friends are in my life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout the writing of this thesis I have been influenced by the insight of many. And I cannot conceive of having completed this project without their support and generosity. First I would like to thank Dr. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett who graciously answered my call when searching for a director. Dr. Marsh-Lockett read and guided me through all my revisions. Words cannot express my gratitude for her patience and generosity in sharing her ideas and expertise on African American literary criticism.

Of the many scholars who have influenced my thinking for this undertaking, Dr. Mary Zeigler is at the forefront. I especially thank Dr. Zeigler for her invaluable comments as she opened my eyes to the world of discourse analysis and she forced me to interrogate language and language politics which consequently led to my deeper understanding and appreciation for Gullah culture and language.

Finally to Dr. Kameelah Martin-Samuel, I truly admire her resolve and professionalism. She accepted the call when asked to join my thesis committee and it was undoubtedly her insightful comments that elevate my prose and personal thought process to the level of professional scholar.

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# WEES GONNA TELL IT LIKE WE KNOW IT TUH BE: CODED LANGUAGE IN THE WORKS OF JULIA PETERKIN AND GLORIA NAYLOR

## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND

#### Gullah Culture

African Americans who live in the Low Country regions of South Carolina and Georgia, the coastal lands, are commonly referred to as Gullahs or Geechees<sup>1</sup>. “The Low Country, which consists of the Sea Islands, is the swampy Southern coastline, and a wide and fertile arc of coastal plain stretching up to a hundred miles to the interior” where rice cultivation was the primary cash crop in the mid 1700s (Opala 1). The Gullahs were originally slaves brought from West Africa, and like all slaves they endured hardship, abuse, and injustice during the period of African slavery in America. Conversely, due to their isolation<sup>2</sup> and numerical strength on the Sea Islands, a chain of barrier and tidal islands that span from North Carolina to Florida, free from the strict governance of white slave owners, they were able to maintain their native traditions, beliefs and skills, giving rise to a culture and language different from slaves elsewhere. Gullahs had to cultivate larger plantations, which led them to the development a “task system” that gave them a greater sense of pride and empowerment than slaves in different regions. Under the task

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<sup>1</sup> Gullah and Geechee are interchangeable words for this unique group of Africans brought from the Rice Coast regions of West Africa to the southern coastal regions of America. The exact origin of the words are unknown but “Lorenzo Turner attributed “Gullah” to Gola, a small tribe on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border. Gullahs also call themselves “Geechee,” which Dr. Turner attributed to the Kissi tribe (pronounced geezee) which inhabits a large area adjoining the Mende, where modern Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea converge” (Opala 20).

<sup>2</sup>The climate of the coastal areas increased the spread of tropical diseases to which the Africans had a resistance and their white masters were extremely vulnerable. White planters eventually moved away from the rice fields leaving a few white managers who were assisted by talented and trusted slaves (Opala 8).

system each slave was given a specific assignment and once completed they enjoy their time off. Pollitzer notes “this time off, rather than the work day alone, shaped and preserved [. . .] Gullah culture” (95). During their time off the Gullah elders would impart relics of African cultural history to the younger generations in the form of cooking, basket weaving, quilt making, and storytelling (Goodwine *Ibo Landing*, 138). Gullahs are known for preserving more of their African linguistic and cultural heritage than any other black community in the United States. This study is therefore intended to contribute to the preservation of a dying culture, Gullah. This study will briefly trace the development of Gullah culture and discourse forms to assist in the analysis of its representation in the works of Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor. The intent of the study is to produce a reference for literary and discourse analysis, as well as for African American cultural assertion, reclamation, and affirmation, to broaden pedagogical perspectives and applications for Gullah natives.

To meet the intent of this study, it is first necessary to explain the significant features of Gullah culture and discourse forms as they are used by Peterkin and Naylor. The elements of the culture that are pertinent to this study include: family and community relationships, matriarchy, religion, and conjure or roots. Kinship for the Gullah people extended beyond the nuclear family of a single conjugal relationship it also included the extended family of consanguineous relationships. This type of extended family provided social cohesion in Gullah communities (Pollitzer 130). For Gullahs “divorce is rare, and marriage relatively stable, but it may be common-law, recognized in the community rather than formal and legally sanctioned” (130). Within Gullah families it is not uncommon for the husband to have multiple families where the wife is left to rear the children alone, for women to have children out of wedlock, nor for these illegitimate children to be reared by other family members--all without a stigma (130). The

responsibilities of the Gullah women gave them autonomy and garnered respect from other community members. “Elderly females or ‘mammies’ functioned as matriarchs who taught children proprieties and family lore,” an important part of Gullah heritage (130). Knowledge of an individual’s family and cultural history is significant in the preservation of Gullah history and could determine if a native would receive a spirited or dispirited welcome from other community members (131). For the Gullahs, “kinship, along with religion, provides social order [by identifying the elders], ethical direction [through imparting of cultural values], economic succor [by working together to make profits], emotional security [by supporting each other in spite of “delinquent” behavior] and land ownership [which is secured and passed down by families] for Gullah communities” (131). To the Gullah’s sense of pride and community, love of home and family, Christianity added the cohesion needed to develop a homogeneous and inspired group of people.

Gullah sermons embrace the oral practice of call-and-response which arouses and excites parishioners. Church service with the incorporation of music further incites parishioners to join in signing, clapping their hands, swinging, swaying, and moving their bodies in worship, as the felt the presence of the Holy Spirit (135). The way Gullah people perceived the difference in their faith and that of white people is expressed by Sam Polite, a Praise House elder on St. Helena Island as, “De Buckra [white people], deys got de knowing of the whys and hows of religion, but dey ain’t never got de feel of it yet. I think God ain’t have much respect for no kind of religion without de feeling” (qtd in. Pollitzer 137). Polite’s comment stresses the disparate forms of worship between blacks and whites and how one race can perceive the other’s form of worship as improper. Just as Polite perceives worship without feeling as improper, some whites view the worship of other divinities as pagan or acts conjure (138). In Gullah culture there is no

clear delineation between religion, magic, and healing. A prominent figure in West African religion, with counterparts on the Sea Islands, is the medicine man. Endowed with special knowledge of herbs and healing, for spiritual or health reason, this diviner learns the signs of the unknown, conveys mysteries, settles disputes, gives guidance in daily affairs, and induces various incantations to help or harm individuals (138). Besides these internal or community centered rituals, the element most obvious to outsiders of Gullah culture that has assisted in its survival is its unique language forms--marked by distinct rhythms, tempos, and stresses (107).

### **Coded Language**

Gullah discourse forms evolved on the Sea Islands from the need for communication, and it has helped the Gullah people endure the harsh reality of slavery. Unique in lexicon, syntax and intonation, Gullah language created a lasting bond of understanding among the slaves. For Gullahs, an inflection in the voice, or a change in tone, could convey to a fellow slave or another free black a thought to be hidden from whites. As Joyner notes, in addition to sly intonations “proverbs also conveyed subtleties and ambiguities that contributed to the survival of the people as they translated them into meaningful metaphors in their new environment” (209). Even with meanings obscured, songs, stories and prayers kept dreams of a dimly remembered past alive. Turner notes that “like dance, a motion of head, body or limb, and the meaning it conveys, can be transported overseas and over time” (163). It is remarkable that, even after efforts to erase African history from the lives of African Americans, in the twentieth-first century, Gullah people continue to imbue cultural meaning through body language. For example, a Gullah child enacts the Kongo gesture of *nunsa* when rebuked for wrong-doing they turn their head to one side to avert their mother’s gaze and purse their lips in denial and rejection (Turner 163). A more widely recognized body gesture enacted by older black women is arms are akimbo and both

hands on the hips, called *pakalala* in Kongo, which proclaims one is ready to accept the challenge of the situation (163).

These examples demonstrate how Gullah people have retained many of their native customs which in America has helped to form their distinct coded language. In this culture, something as simple as a basket name,<sup>3</sup> known only within a family survived in America, providing a continuing link with the familiar gods, events, places, and traditions from Africa. Quilt making also conveys hidden messages through color patterns and symbolism, for instance, “red indicates danger, conflict, passion; blue repels bad spirits; white suggests innocence and purity” (180). For slaves on the Underground Railroad, quilts contained coded messages to aid in their successful escape. Even burials have its set of rituals imbued with special meanings to accomplish a range of things, from helping the soul pass to the afterlife to allowing the living to receive messages from the dead (185). The Gullah naming practices, quilt patterns and colors, and burial rituals echo a distinct heritage that relies on codes to communicate which reinforces ties to Africa.

The African American oral tradition is also filled with coded language in the form of directness or indirectness<sup>4</sup>. Folklore on the Sea Islands, re-created with gestures before an attentive audience, preserved African memories, relieved the monotony of slavery, and permitted a sly jab at white masters. For example, the Ber Rabbit tales from Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina tell of a rabbit that was caught by a man, whom we assume is white, in his peanut patch.

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<sup>3</sup> Basket names are nicknames given at birth which are used in the home and among friends and acquaintances. “Gullah people preserved African methods when giving English nicknames to children” which usually indicated an unusual occurrence at birth (Turner xli).

<sup>4</sup> “Direct discourse is marked by the absence of collaboration and the sense that speakers and audiences rely on each other for meaning” (Morgan 52). “Indirectness occurs when cultural actors recognize talk as symbolic of ideas, values and occurrences that are not directly related to the present context” ( 24).

The man threatens to punish Ber Rabbit in various ways but objects after Ber Rabbit shows no fear of the punishment. Finally, the man proposes to throw Ber Rabbit into the briarwood patch which Ber Rabbit adamantly protests. Seeing this reaction the man immediately throws Ber Rabbit into the briarwood patch but unbeknownst to the man Ber Rabbit was born and raised in the briarwood patch (Pollitzer 158). Folktales such as Ber Rabbit that remained relatively obscure to white slave owners represent ingenious survival techniques adapted by African Americans. The multitude of culturally distinct forms of discourse which allowed Gullahs to retain connections to African while concealing meanings from whites gave added impetus to their survival.

The African American experience in America has been a constant endeavor to survive and maintain some sense of individuality which the Gullahs have successfully accomplished through distinctive forms of discourse. Two additional forms exercised throughout the African diaspora include signifyin(g) and literary dialect. To further facilitate the analysis of coded language in Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* and Naylor's *Mama Day* the following definitions are provided to explain the aforementioned discourse forms. Beginning with signifyin(g) also known as the "trope of tropes" because of its ability to redefine existing literary tropes.

### **Signifyin(g)**

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifyin(g) Monkey and the Language of Signifying(g)*, comments that "the language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as Signifyin(g) black difference" (66). Not only are blacks signifyin(g) difference, but they are creating a subculture where only community members are able to decode the intended meaning of the discourse. In this sense, blacks figuratively play with both spoken and body language to produce innovative discourse forms that

are not easily decoded by individuals outside the discourse community (Gates 69). Gates cites Roger D. Abrahams definition of Signifyin(g) which reads, “the name Signifying Monkey” shows [the hero] to be a trickster, ‘signifying’ being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at “direction through indirection” (qtd. in Gates 74). From this definition the words “trickery” and “indirection” are important in understanding the use of signifyin(g) by blacks. For blacks trickery signals the intent to deceive and indirection describes the intent to circumvent known language to confer obscure meanings. The extended definitions of signifyin(g), as defined by Abrahams, which help in the evaluation of the cited texts includes: “the ability to talk with great innuendo; to carp, cajole, needle, and lie; the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point; speaking with the hands and eyes; and a significant mode of verbal masking or troping” (75-76). Signifyin(g) encompasses a wide range of discourse forms which require an understanding of these forms to accurately interpret black discourse, black interaction, and black texts.

These distinctive discourse forms, of coded language, were not taught in schools but imparted orally or visually during community interaction. Learning outside of the formal classroom is an important concept in Gullah culture because as Marquette Goodwine, in *Gullah/Geechee: Africa’s Seeds in the Winds of the Diaspora*, notes formal education received by Gullah/Geechees was:

‘Training’ into a particular way of thinking [. . .] for the various processes put forth under the guise of education over the years [. . .] contributed to generations of Gullah/Geechees being taught to deny their African heritage. The process of stripping the Africans of their actual names, their language,

their traditions, and spiritual practices were all part of a system of indoctrination [. . .] put in order to take a group of human beings and convince them they were no longer people, but simply slaves [. . .] ‘niggers.’ [. . .] to give a group that consist of a number of ethnic groups one name and then when they take on the name Gullah or Geechee to get them to believe that it means that they are ‘backwards’ and ‘ignorant.’ (109)

The coded language forms adopted by Gullah people allowed them to reclaim, affirm, and reassert their existence while navigating within their discourse community and secretly within the dominant discourse community. Through the use of these various discourse forms Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor write stories in literary dialect of African American life on the Sea Islands from within different prisms that evoke cultural memory from within and outside the texts.

### **Literary Dialect**

Literary dialect, defined by Minnich as “the written attempt at representing social, regional, or other types of spoken linguistic variation,” is a technique to subvert or sustain various meanings (xiv). Rickford and Rickford, in *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (2000), pose the question “Does dialect literature limit or liberate” (38) the progress of African Americans and what is its effect on a text for the reader? The purpose of representing African American speech in literature has long been a point of contention among black literati; and to understand the importance and reaction to the purpose of literary dialect, it is necessary to digress and evaluate the use and reception of the literature at the center of this discussion during the 1860s and 1880s. Early representations of black voice were constructed by white authors for humor and eventually to function as “a kind of white blackface,” where African Americans were



stereotyped linguistically in order to relegate them to the social position of “other” or inferior (Minnich 12). Critics Garvin Jones and Michele Birnbaum identify Joel Chandler Harris (1880) and Mark Twain (1867) as writing for the political reason of creating racial hierarchies of speech that helped define the social order after Emancipation which places blacks at the lowest status (Minnich 10). Later, Charles Chesnutt (1887)<sup>5</sup> and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1892)<sup>6</sup> emerged among the first black writers to represent African American speech in their work. While Chesnutt was lauded for his use of dialect, Dunbar received harsh criticism for the use of the same conventions. Houston A. Baker Jr. raises an important point. He writes that Chesnutt ‘is differentiating between the demands of his market and his own views, offering what may look like a work belonging to the plantation tradition but is rather ‘a world of sounds and sweet airs that resonate with . . . transformative power’(qtd. in Minnich 15). Contrary to such positive reviews, James Weldon Johnson (1922)<sup>7</sup> harshly criticized Dunbar for trivialized and misrepresented depictions of African American which perpetuate “the plantation tradition” of former white writers (12). Critics identify the coded language in Chesnutt’s work as that which seeks to change perceptions of African American while Johnson’s simply reinforces negative stereotypes of African Americans.

During the Harlem Renaissance (1920s and early 1930s), because of prevailing stereotypes, African American writers attempted to reclaim the use of dialect to create lifelike representation of language. However, critical reactions were not always favorable, as in the case

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<sup>5</sup> Chesnutt’s short story “The Goophered Grapevine” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

<sup>6</sup> Dunbar’s first collection of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, published.

<sup>7</sup> In the preface to Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), he begins with a sympathetic but still strongly critical analysis of black dialect poetry.

of Zora Neale Hurston's first play "Color Struck" which appeared in a 1925 issue of *Opportunity Magazine*. Unpredictable reactions left writers who ventured into dialect writing at the whim of critics, who sometimes jeopardized the writer's professional careers and personal reputations by offering unfavorable critiques. Toni Morrison, Nobel Laureate (1993), voices her feelings on dialect literature in the following quote: "I want to show the beauty of our language, its rhythms, its metaphors, [and] its poetry. Our people speak beautifully, with the rhythms of the Bible, or sermons. But they were told they could not speak, which is often how cultures are marginalized" (Mori 18). Morrison's words reflect her desire to project the true voice and spirit of the African American race; realizing an individual's voice represents his or her freedom and equality. Furthermore, her position shows the progression of the black race from one that is defined by others to one that embraces, accepts and defines itself.

Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor vibrantly write in dialect; they share their histories from a woman-centered point of view that reinserts female speaking voices in an ongoing process of self-healing and communal reclamation. Their language, or "voice," explores the resilient bond created in African American culture through the use of various forms of language. "Voice" represented here will focus on the interplay among the following definitions from David Holmes's *Revisiting Racialized Voice* (2004): "(1) the Romantic sense of authorial presence, (2) a disenfranchised individual's or group's sociopolitical right to speak, and (3) literal voice, including standardized speech and aspects of the African American oral tradition"(2). Before analyzing Peterkin and Naylor and their subsequent texts on Gullah culture, it is necessary to evaluate the critical analyses that exist on these topics to ascertain where this study fits within the context of literary and discourse analysis.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study evaluates the coded language in the works of Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor to reveal their personal understanding, reception, and interpretation of Gullah culture. This literary review begins with Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1938) and is followed by a review of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1993). A chronological review of their work places each novel in the context of the time which aids in understanding its ulterior purpose and public reception.

### Julia Peterkin

Julia Peterkin began writing sometime before her forties when encouraged by Alfred A. Knopf "to weave the stories [sketches from the "Reviewer"] together to facilitate the publication of [a] book" (Thompson 99). This effort resulted in a short story collection, *Green Thursday*, published in 1924, which was "widely praised as giving voice to the blacks. Even black critics could not tell if the author was white or black, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recommended the book" (Barrat). *Green Thursday* marked the beginning of a promising literary career for Julia Peterkin and within nine years she published five full-length novels: *Black April* (1927), "the first genuine novel in English of the Negro as a human being" which "established Peterkin as an authority on black folklore;" *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), which won the 1929 Pulitzer Prize in fiction--after much dissention amongst the selection committee and a revision of the qualification criteria--was later adapted into a Broadway play featuring Ethel Barrymore in black face; *Bright Skin* (1932), which dealt with the black migration to the North, also noted as "Peterkin's most sophisticated treatment of the African American Experience;" *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1933), a sociological study of Gullah culture;

and her last major work, *A Plantation Christmas* (1934), a sentimental account of a Southern Christmas (Williams xi; Barrat; Williams xiii).

Peterkin's works have received minimal critical analysis. Of what there is, the work of authors like Susan Williams, Dean Thompson, Debra Beilke and Priscilla Leder evaluate Peterkin's life and its subsequent correlation to the thematic concerns in her works. This type of evaluation has received the most attention. Jan Kreidler evaluates Peterkin as a trickster writer because of the cross cultural content in her works. Scholarship also exists by writers like Nghana Tama Lewis whose primary analysis is that of Peterkin as a "White Black Writer."

Among those scholars who have tried to reclaim this relatively obscure writer is Susan M. Williams. In her biography of Julia Peterkin, *A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* (1997), Williams seeks to analyze Peterkin's dichotomous life both lived and transcribed in her fiction. Williams's scholarship seeks to incorporate an accurate biography of Peterkin into the literary canon and explore Peterkin's life within the context of gender and race, which stringently shaped not only personal behavior but also the literature of the time. Williams shows that Peterkin led a very complicated inner life, which substantially shaped her writing; her work became her outlet to vent aggression toward her familial dramas and societal oppressions. She theorizes that Peterkin donned the "mask" of African American characters to address issues in her personal life that she would never have been able to explore if she had created white characters, being "raised to believe that women should not express strong emotions" (xii). Williams successfully interrogates the text and Peterkin's life to expose gender and race issues concealed in sketchy plot summaries and critical analysis that proves Peterkin's fiction is influenced by autobiographical trends.

While working at Converse College, in Spartanburg, South Carolina (Peterkin's alma mater, 1896), Thomas Landess, a critical commentator on Southern poets and fiction writers of the twentieth-century, became interested in the life and works of Julia Peterkin. In his work *Julia Peterkin* (1976), Landess conducts a close textual reading of Peterkin's major works, analyzing her narrative style to elucidate "errors of her classification with local colorists and Old South apologists—categories [Peterkin] regarded with contempt"—and reclaim a place for Peterkin's works in the literary canon (Landess *Preface*). Landess purports that Peterkin does not deal with the socio-political undercurrents of the time in her works, but rather seeks simply to portray the human experiences of Gullahs (Preface).

H. Dean Thompson, at the time a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University, wrote *Minerva Finds a Voice: The Early Career of Julia Peterkin* (1987) for his dissertation. According to Thompson, *Minerva Finds a Voice* "examines Peterkin's struggle in voicing her thematic concerns during the early years of her career" (v). Thompson, like his predecessor Landess, purports that Peterkin has been misread and mis-analyzed as an Old South apologist; but through an exploration of autobiographical sketches, short stories and several discarded drafts of the author's first novel, Thompson undertakes the daunting task of clarifying Peterkin's distorted image and limning who the writer truly was.

In her article, "Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*: Breath, Birth, Boundaries," Priscilla Leder, like her contemporaries, focuses on the connections between Peterkin's life and her novels. Through her personal analysis and using the work of other critics, specifically Debra Beilke and Paul Goldstein, Leder pushes previous criticism a step forward into the twentieth-first century and labels *Scarlet Sister Mary* a feminist primitivist novel where females claim autonomy from patriarchal rule. According to Leder:

Peterkin reflects this paradox in her protagonist, Mary Pinesett, who achieves a feminist autonomy and defies patriarchy by the primitive female means of repeated childbearing. Peterkin sustains the contradiction between feminist assertion and escapism through a vision of the plantation as a self-contained world where women yield power through their connection to the life cycle. (65)

Leder's treatment of this subject once again substantiates the claims of her predecessors, mainly, that Peterkin's characters served as a mask for her own emotional conflicts (75).

Jan Kreidler, in her article "Reviving Julia Peterkin as a Trickster Writer" (2006), attempts the eponymous pursuit. Unlike Leder, Kreidler notes that the terms "regionalist and primitivist" have hampered Peterkin's image; but when viewed as a trickster writer, "Peterkin's fiction secures a legitimate and unique place in American literature because of its revolutionary depiction of African Americans" (468). Kreidler defines "tricksters" as: "Authors [whose] lives and work cross cultural boundaries and confuse the distinctions set by the presiding dominant institutions. [. . .] scholars are referring to the spirit of cunning and duplicity necessary to survive in a hostile cultural landscape, where one must navigate between two cultures" (469).

For the purpose of this study, Kreidler is identified as one of the first critics to attempt to revive the works of Julia Peterkin through an analysis of the trickster trope, an Africanism. According to Gates, the "Signifying Monkey" is the "New World figuration" and "functional equivalent" of the Esu trickster figure of African Yoruba mythology (5). Gates elaborates that, "Esu's literature [like that of Peterkin] concerns the origin, the nature, and the function of interpretation and language use 'above' that of ordinary language. Esu is the figure of the meta-

level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation” (6). The definition of the Esu trickster figure is consistent with Peterkin’s dual identity and the Gullah culture which she represents in her novels. Modern African American literary criticism has turned the trickster figure into one example of how it is possible to overcome a system of oppression it. As alluded to earlier in the example of the Ber Rabbit, similar stories of small animals who outwit bigger ones are common throughout Africa and have continued to inspire people of African descent across the diaspora (Pollitzer 159).

Finally, the evaluation of the “White Black Writer” depicted in Nghana Tamu Lewis’s article, “The Rhetoric of Mobility, the Politics of Consciousness: Julia Mood Peterkin and the Case of a White Black Writer” (2004), applies the most direct evaluation of racial, social and political consciousness in Peterkin’s novels and in its reception--which will prove useful in this study of her work. Here, Lewis addresses “the intricacies of Peterkin’s relationship with H.L. Mencken; the aesthetic politics of her novels; and her enduring reputation as a White Black Writer” (589). The aesthetic politics, which emphasize white dominance through the proliferation of negative images of blacks, are of particular interest to Lewis when he analyzes why Peterkin’s novels depicting white life fail miserably as opposed to the remarkable success of those depicting black life. Differing from his contemporaries’ view of Peterkin as a “realist,” Lewis sees her as a modernist: “because truths represented in her work reveal as much about her status as a white modern Southern plantation mistress struggling in the immediate ... context of the political and social realities of the early twentieth-century America as they do her black subjects” (590). Through an analysis of Peterkin’s comments, her position as plantation mistress, and her public persona as writer, Lewis concludes that Peterkin’s writing reflects

“personal opinion—rather than a real representation—of black people and black culture and black influence on her life as a white Southern woman” (591).

Although Landess claims Peterkin as “an authority on black culture,” with works lauded as “true representations of the Gullah people,” the circumstantial critical analysis to support both proclamations is absent. This study is grounded on the understanding that Julia Peterkin is not an authority on black culture and that she renders inaccurate representations of the Gullah people. Lewis states, “few—if any—examiners of Peterkin’s life and writings have acknowledged or endeavored to explore [the writings’] multiple implications” (591). Scholarship on Peterkin’s work is only beginning to approach the multiplicity of racial, social and political intricacies it encompasses, not to mention the discourse and psychological analyses that are also applicable for an exhaustive review of Peterkin and her works. Like previous evaluations this study will also evaluate Peterkin’s life to draw a correlation to her work. In addition, however, this study will extend the scholarship on Peterkin’s *Scarlet Sister Mary* by evaluating its intrinsic correlation to Gullah cultural assertion, reclamation, and affirmation. An analysis of Peterkin’s discourse will further prove that Peterkin does not have the cultural acumen to accurately interpret the Gullah people’s discourse but because of “white privilege”<sup>8</sup> she takes ownership over the Gullah experience to promote hegemony.

On the opposite end of this analytical spectrum is Gloria Naylor, a late twentieth-century novelist, whose works have received a plethora of critical analyses. It may seem ironic that the novelist, Julia Peterkin, who began writing first, is the subject of fewer scholarly articles but

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<sup>8</sup> Also what W. E. B. DuBois, in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), calls “psychological wages” of whiteness describes advantages enjoyed by white people beyond what is commonly experienced by non-white people in the same social, political, and economic spaces.



considering the period in which Peterkin wrote, novels with African Americans as the subject were considered entertainment and not valued for their literary merit; therefore, they received minimal critical reviews.

### **Gloria Naylor**

Gloria Naylor's interest in literature began as a child after being encouraged by her mother to read broadly (Wilson 2). Naylor's adolescent years were turbulent. Political and societal events in 1963 (the civil rights movement and the assassination of Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy) fueled her volatile emotions, which her mother encouraged her to vent by writing in a diary. She credits her "family's immediate Southern roots, her own Northern perspective, and to some degree her place as the oldest child" for her broad and critical view of the world," which later carried over into her short stories, articles, and finally novels (2).

In 1981, Naylor published a short story in *Essence* magazine, completed her undergraduate degree, and completed the manuscript for *The Women of Brewster Place*. All three accomplishments were not simple feats. They also speak to the tenacity and literary genius of Gloria Naylor which was recognized by her receipt of the 1983 American Book Award for *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Although the setting of *The Women of Brewster Place* is the North, the female characters hold fast to their Southern roots that provide the fortitude and resilience needed to survive in their new urban landscape (11).

Naylor's second novel, *Linden Hills* (1985), was also written at a time of immense academic pressure while she earned her M.A in African American Studies from Yale. According to Wilson, "during her first year [at Yale] Naylor found difficulty in reconciling her scholarly world with her creative world" and decided to continue in the program only "when the graduate

faculty agreed that her *Linden Hills* manuscript could serve as her thesis” (7). Similar to *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* is also set in the north with a slight, but necessary, Southern influence (11). After the publication of *Linden Hills*, Naylor gained confidence and truly considered herself a writer.

Naylor’s third novel, *Mama Day* (1988), the focal work for this analysis, as Wilson notes, “is set primarily in the south. It strives not only to reestablish the primacy of Southern [proximity] in African-American identity, but also to position African cosmology as a legitimate means of viewing the world” (11). Naylor wrote three subsequent novels after *Mama Day*: *Bailey’s Café* (1992), *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998), and *1996* (2005). For the purposes of this analysis, details on her final works will not be examined, but it is worthy of notice that they all maintain paradigms of southern and northern African American communal experiences.

Naylor credits Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* for giving her courage to consider a career in writing and tell her story. According to Naylor, *The Bluest Eye* proved to her that “barriers were flexible; at the core of it all is language, and if you’re skilled enough with that, you can create your own genre. [It also reaffirmed that] not only was [her] story worth telling, but it could be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song” (24). Naylor’s work which varies in literary appeal and is extensive in its vision has garnered criticism in diverse but sometimes converging categories including what Felton notes as: “African-American, feminist or [womanist], influence or intertextual, narrative or rhetorical methods, and popular culture” (1). This study seeks to evaluate Naylor’s use of coded language, in *Mama Day*, which not only extols her literary and discourse insight, but highlights Gullah culture and its intrinsic value to African-Americans. The review of existing scholarship contained herein will focus on those

taking an African-American, womanist, or rhetorical analytical approach in evaluating *Mama Day*. In many works, such as those presented below, these approaches will overlap.

Beginning with an African American theoretical analysis, Susan Meisenhelder writes “The Whole Picture in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” (1993), where she argues that “*Mama Day* narrates the love story of two black people from strikingly different backgrounds—George and Cocoa. Through their relationship, Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people” (113). This article resonates with some of the same ideas explored in this study, specifically, its reliance on various ways of knowing that are unique to black culture and its acknowledgement that Naylor’s work celebrates and situates black culture as central to an understanding of the text and life. Meisenhelder points out this distinct way of knowing and understanding in the following lines from *Mama Day*:

When one crosses over into that autonomous black world, the narrator early on warns the reader, such ways of imagining reality and ordering experience are simply insufficient: ‘It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge.’ (114)

This quotation sets the tone for interpreting the novel which is not based on a reader’s personal understandings of right or wrong but rather based on the interpretation set forth by cultural norms. For the purposes of this study, Meisenhelder’s article serves as the groundwork with which to expand the notion of language as presented in *Mama Day*, as a mechanism to not only

understand black culture, but specifically to understand and preserve Gullah culture. Language presented in the text provides a critical link between this unique American culture, Gullah, and its African roots, a link which overall expounds on African ways of knowing<sup>9</sup>, giving new perspective to a close reading of *Mama Day*.

Lindsey Tucker, in her article “Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” argues that “possibly as a result of this kind of representation [conjuring as represented in the works of Charles Chesnutt(1887)], Naylor seems to see the conjure woman as being in need of textual restitution” (144). Tucker credits African ancestry for the practice and practitioners of conjure, while exploring Eurocentric reception of this non-Christian practice. Tucker’s thesis aligns closely with the context of this study in its explorations of the influence of Gullah elders. Tucker’s quote from Margaret Washington Creel further emphasizes the African connection: “on the Sea Islands the Gullah elders are very similar to these ancient religious practitioners in their influence on their [African] communities” (146). Tucker expounds on this concept in her research by noting that “conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves” (146). By developing these arguments, this study will highlight the coded language and rare cultural variety in *Mama Day*, set on the Carolina Sea Islands.

This study connects the conjuring practice to discourse practices because across the African diaspora and specifically in the Gullah culture language is more than the spoken word.

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<sup>9</sup> John Tibbetts, “Living Soul of Gullah,” *Coastal Heritage* 14, no. 4 (Spring 2000). African ways of knowing provide an alternate means, abstract acknowledgement and spiritual beliefs, to arrive at the truth or understanding of situations.

It also encompasses body language and other forms of knowing (other forms of communication outside of written and spoken communication—intuition, nature, spirits). Finally, Tucker connects the act of conjuring to a communal voice, which the persona Mama Day embodies, to “succeed in demolishing the boundaries between omniscient and limited-omniscient points of view, even as the novel’s subject matter demolishes the boundaries between the mimetic and the magical” (144). This connection also supports this study’s exaltation of matriarchal positions, which are important for African American cultural assertion, reclamation, and affirmation. The role of matriarchs in African American communities began in Africa where the notion of mothering children not biologically born to an individual is a common and encouraged relationship. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Outlaw Culture*, recognizes the significant elements of West African culture that were retained by black women in America which gives authority to their roles as “othermothers” and strong maternal leaders (115-117). When African women were brought to America, they were stripped of their authority as a double minority (black and female) and relegated to a submissive role assumed by white women. This unconventional position which black women found themselves serving in destroyed a strong nucleus which served as the “backbone” for African familial success. Therefore, not until black women are reinstated into their proper positions as leaders will the African American race assert, reclaim, and affirm its position as different but equal. Broadening the scope of African American cultural assertion is the article by Helene Christol which makes a claim for African Americans to leverage the power of their language.

“Restructuring American History: Land and Genealogy in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” by Helene Christol makes a profound assertion by considering *Mama Day* from an Afrocentric point of view. Christol states that, “black authors can recapture their language and their power

by rejecting the India that Columbus thought he had found and by replacing white “official history” with their own stories” (159). “Official white history” is the history taught in America that credits European achievement for the founding of America while discrediting the contributions of all other nationalities. She argues that “topography and genealogy are the two essential elements that determine the stance of the narrative voice and allow Naylor to reconstruct a parallel black history, to reinvent America by subverting its historical and mythical elements” (159). The geographic location, on the Sea Islands, allows Naylor to place African Americans as the central founders and purveyors of their way of life which disregards “official white history.” Christol’s article, like this study, emphasizes language and its use in preserving and perpetuating African American culture. She states, “language itself may be the ultimate medium of effecting this metamorphosis [revival of familial and cultural past], language as the archive of history, a language forgotten but reinvented by the legends and tales, preserved in the conversations and dialogues between the dead and the living” (163). In referring to Christol’s analysis of language, I argue that Naylor’s language, descriptive of the oral tradition and signifyin(g), prescribes new meaning to the written words of the text and aids in the preservation of Gullah culture for those who understand this coded language.

Elizabeth Hayes’s article, “Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* as Magic Realism” asserts that ontological ways of knowing subvert western ways. This assertion of magical realism adds another element of communication to *Mama Day* that is practiced in African American culture and helps explain Mama Day’s matriarchal position on the island. Hayes defines magical realism as “a voice for long-marginalized, nonrationalists, allowing them to become subjects of their own story and not...objects of a...colonial text” (178). In this article, Hayes identifies Naylor’s use of magical realism as a way to write her own story and as an “African belief

system, animism, which was brought from Africa and has remained relatively pure in isolated African American communities, like the Sea Islands” (180). For animists “the universe was not silent; it spoke to those who knew how to listen” (180). Here again, this article notes the concepts of cultural homogeneity of the Sea Islands presented in *Mama Day* that reiterates the ideals of African ways of knowing that foster the key concepts of African American cultural assertion, reclamation, and affirmation that this study underscores.

In “The Only Voice is Your Own,” Gary Storhoff analyzes Naylor’s search to find a voice of her own. He writes, “Naylor’s quest for her own ‘voice’ is a central concern for most African American writers, discovered in the tension between the oral and the written modes of narration that is represented as finding a voice in writing” (166). But for Naylor this tension is resolved in her intent to produce a “speakerly” text which “imitated one of the numerous forms of oral narration found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature” (166). The “speakerly” text allowed Naylor to celebrate early black texts and revise classic white texts to produce an accurate depiction of Sea Island culture. This type of revision is the connection this study draws between Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor and their portrayal of Gullah culture through the use of a “speakerly” text. First, the work of Julia Peterkin has been reviewed for the salient issues of cultural dialect, but it lacks extensive critical reviews and has not been compared and contrasted with the work of Gloria Naylor to show the dichotomy in voice between the novelists. Gloria Naylor, in retrospect, has received extensive critical reviews, but the specific goals of preservation of community ritual and language are two elements that have not been evaluated independently in her works. Through a literary and discourse analysis, this study takes a fresh look at *Scarlet Sister Mary* and *Mama Day* to reveal a coded language that is pertinent to understanding the historical, social, and political conditions portrayed through their texts.

This study explores how both authors sought to find their voices which represent a transition to autonomy in their works centered in the Gullah culture. I argue that Peterkin, like other white writers of her time, takes ownership over the black experience to liberate herself, while only narrowly developing the characters through a Eurocentric lens. She does not recognize Gullah's definite Afrocentric characteristics and ways of knowing. As a late-twentieth-century writer, Naylor embraces her black experiences and situates her narrative on the Sea Islands to celebrate the richest connection of her culture to its African roots and African ways of knowing. In short, this study argues that Naylor rewrites her story to liberate herself and African Americans from white American hegemony; while Peterkin also writes her story to liberate herself but reifies white hegemony and perpetuates stereotypical views of African American culture. This study examines the use of discourse in Gullah culture as presented by Peterkin and Naylor. Like other Africans throughout the diaspora, Gullah people have also developed a unique discourse out of the necessity to bond, work, and ultimately survive. This study examines their survival discourse and its underlining meanings in *Scarlet Sister Mary* and *Mama Day*.

Gullah, a persevering culture, people, and language, is important to African Americans. Whether African Americans celebrate it or criticize it, it is evidence of their historical struggle. Gullah is a social, cultural, and political experience, grounded on distinct Afrocentrisms rather than on the fringes of Eurocentrism. Such a revelation develops questions that lead to new understandings of how humans react in verbal social situations, where identity is created by innovative discourse and existing cultural institution. An examination of Peterkin, in some ways an onlooker and "pioneer" of fictional Gullah culture, and Naylor a first generation regionally removed Southern African American, allows for an interesting comparison and contrast of the



literary methodology and discourse analysis employed by both writers to produce amusing narratives that are also very clinical representations of Gullah culture.

This study uses African American literary criticism, which “focuses on the recurring historical and sociological themes all which reflect the politics of black American experience,” to evaluate the following themes directly and indirectly in *Scarlet Sister Mary* and *Mama Day*: reclaiming the African past and presence; the quest for freedom from slavery and from other forms of oppression; the importance of black women’s community for psychological, physical, and economic survival; the role of religion in personal and collective survival; the importance of cultural heritage; and the importance of family and community (Tyson 385). Henry Louis Gates’s theory of signifyin(g) and Toni Morrison’s theory of the Africanist presence are utilized in these evaluations. In addition to African American literary criticism this study also uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to further evaluate the novels’ poetics.

According to Van Dijk, “critical discourse analysis is concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts” (4). In its methods, CDA draws heavily on literary theory, and the philosophy of language and communication. The CDA method used in this study is context analysis which seeks to unite and determine the relationship between the actual text, the discursive practices, and the larger social context that bears upon the text and the discursive practices (Bloor 26). This study uses CDA to show how social relations, identity, knowledge, and power are constructed through written and spoken texts to either aid or impede the preservation of Gullah culture.

Through African American theoretical analysis and critical discourse analysis this study will: 1) evaluate the role and intent of Peterkin and Naylor's use of an Africanist presence; 2) proffer discourse techniques to evaluate the use of Gullah in their works and question the nature of their poetics. This study will begin with a look at Julia Mood Peterkin, an early twentieth-century writer, who gained world recognition for her literary transcriptions of the life and dialect of a South Carolina Gullah community and then look at Gloria Naylor, a late twentieth-century writer, who reasserts African American voices for communal and ties to African culture.

## **CHAPTER II: Julia Peterkin's Insider-Outsider Voice in the Gullah-Geechee Community of *Scarlet Sister Mary***

Julia Peterkin's discourse will convey a coded language that is pertinent to understanding the historical, social, and political conditions portrayed through her text but before the text is examined it is imperative to examine her life which informs her frame of thought and consequently her writing. Julia Mood Peterkin was born in Laurens County, South Carolina, on October 31, 1880, twenty-three years after the ratification of the Emancipation Proclamation and twenty-five years after the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. These two profound events radically changed race relations in the United States of America, especially the Southern states where Peterkin was born and reared. Peterkin's mother, Alma Archer Mood, died shortly after Peterkin's birth leaving her in the care of her father. When Julius Mood left for medical school, he left Peterkin under the care of his parents who were Methodist circuit riders in Beaufort, South Carolina (Thompson 3). Peterkin remained under their care until she left for college (3). Distance did not preclude Julius Mood from remaining influential in Peterkin's life as he visited often. His visits allowed him to impart his personal values to Peterkin in hopes that she would adopt them.

Although Peterkin was left in the custody of her grandparents, it was customary during those times for middle-class white families to have black nannies; and the Mood household was no exception. Reared by a Gullah nurse, Julia's surrogate, "Mauma Patsy," taught her the Gullah language before she learned the standardized English of the South Carolina gentry, with whom her father closely related (Landess 16). Landess notes that, "in addition to their language, she also absorbed many of the customs, superstitions, and attitudes of the Gullahs; and, like many another Southern child of her era, she undoubtedly saw life with the double vision of one whose sensibilities are conditioned for a time by two separate worlds" (16). African Americans are noted for their "double consciousness,"<sup>10</sup> a trait Julia adopted. From her earliest years, she was able to adjust to her social surroundings; when with Mauma Patsy she spoke Gullah and when in the company of whites, she spoke standardized Southern English (16). Not only was Peterkin's life dichotomous in regard to language, but also her overall values. Although she was primarily in the presence of Mauma Patsy during her early years, Peterkin remained substantially influenced by her father and grandfather which reflected another dichotomy in her writing (16). For these reasons it is important to understand exactly who the Mood men were and what values they held, in order for Julia Peterkin's duality to be more fully understood.

Reared in Columbia, South Carolina, Julius Mood witnessed the atrocities of the Civil War including the torching of the city by General Sherman in February 1865. These events and the racist ideology of the South pervaded the life of Julius Mood. As a member of Wade Hampton's Redshirts—a white supremacy terrorist group—he used intimidation by gunpoint to

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<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), identifies the ability of blacks to project different social faces to adapt to the social setting as "double-consciousness."

prevent newly freed slaves from voting (Williams xii). Julius Mood goes on to state in an article entitled “Southern Independents: South Carolina, 1882,” that “the issue upon which every political struggle is fought are honesty versus vice; ignorance versus intelligence; Africanism versus Americanism” (xii). Julius’s words articulate racist views of “othering” blacks and setting whiteness as the standard of measurement. His racist views are eventually subversively reified in Julia Peterkin’s novels a decade later. It can also be inferred that Julius Mood’s sense of entitlement sprang from his ancestry, most identifiable is his maternal relatives, the Alstons, who were “among the wealthiest planters in South Carolina and had owned hundreds of slaves,” along with his position as a prominent physician (4). Julius Mood was not only a physician, but also an intellectual and cultural leader in the scattered community of the rural up-country. As such, he was the founder of the Fortnightly Club, a literary group that met to hear papers significant enough to be reprinted in *The State*, which served as one of two literary venues for South Carolina (Landess 16). Alongside these stately occupations, Julius Mood held fast to his supremacist ideology which he continually impressed upon his children.

Contrary to Peterkin’s father’s desire for her to remain in graduate school, Peterkin obtained a teaching position at Fort Motte, South Carolina, a rural farming settlement where the Peterkins were the most prominent in the profession. For generations, the Peterkins owned and operated Lang Syne Plantation, a pre-revolution holding famous for its rich land and its wise management. It is a coincidence that this plantation remained largely intact after attacks by Sherman’s Army and the economic hardships of Reconstruction (17). Soon after her arrival, Peterkin gained the attention of William Peterkin, the young plantation heir, and they were married in July of 1903. No stranger to the benefits of white supremacy, Peterkin was accustomed to receiving service from blacks, but her new challenge was rendering service to

blacks, all three hundred who lived on the plantation and cropped for shares. Williams notes that Peterkin was informed by the main house servant, Lavina (Vinner) Berry that weak mistresses who failed to “dominize” crumbled under the burden of their responsibilities. To be a successful mistress and win the adulation of her servants, Peterkin was expected to arbitrate disputes, assist in legal difficulties, provide healthcare and render material assistance (Williams 8-9). Peterkin was not prepared to rule over such a large estate, but with the help and guidance of Vinner and the other Gullah field hands who taught her to garden, ride a horse, fish, shoot, bake, sew, and season sausage, she soon embraced her role as “The Chatelaine of Lang Syne” (10). As chatelaine, Peterkin would not “dominize” the plantation, but she would become more in tune with its most intimate operations. Of Peterkin’s transition, Thompson writes: “Once (sic) Peterkin trained her senses and discovered what would become an important theme in her work-- what Frank Durham termed ‘the deceptive serenity of nature’—[ . . . ] she realized that the old place had played a trick on her: it merely made her one of its creatures whose destiny is bound up with everything else” (Thompson 37). When Peterkin learned her role as chatelaine and accepted the role of the Gullah people as providers and teachers, they began to allow her to share in their lives--the lives which Peterkin would appropriate for her personal benefit and fame.

Outside the landscape of Lang Syne Plantation, life projected a more harsh reality as Jim Crow Law set an unrelenting tone for society and literature. Blacks were pushing for more rights and whites were pushing back. In 1912, President Woodrow Wilson<sup>11</sup> attempted to re-segregate

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Woodrow Wilson, twenty-eighth President of the United States, came of age in the decades after the American Civil War, when Congress reigned supreme and corruption was rampant.

the government and remove blacks from federal offices, and the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915)<sup>12</sup> made its premier in Columbia, South Carolina. Prior to the publication of Peterkin's works based on Gullah culture, Thomas Nelson Page and Ambrose Gonzales were the prominent names in Gullah literature. In 1884, Page had established--to the righteous satisfaction of much of the South--a cozy picture of the faithful Negro recalling for his white audience images of the "contented and comic Negro," images that reinforce the debasing and dehumanizing stereotypes of blacks while elevating the position of whites. Page's paternalistic code granted the Negro the affection due a happy and loyal minstrel without offering the respect due a human being--a dichotomy which Page made all too clear near the end of his life when he observed that "four thousand years have not served to whiten the pigments of the Negro's frame, nor developed the forces of their intellect" (Thompson 53). Ambrose Gonzales, the editor of the *Columbia State*, adhered to Page's depictions and won local acclaim with, *The Black Border* (1922), a collection of Gullah tales. Specifically, Gonzales depicts the Gullahs as a primitive people and "regards their dialects as a hilarious mangling of the King's English" (Williams 41). With Page and Ambrose as forerunners, it is no coincidence Peterkin's human depictions of Gullahs drew stark criticism from her nostalgic white Southern readers, but were lauded by white Northerners looking for a fresh glimpse of the South. Having lived amongst the Gullahs during a time when she needed moral inspiration, Peterkin came to understand that "it is absurd to place all Negroes in one great social class, mark it colored, and make generalizations about its poverty, ignorance, [and] immorality. Negro individuals differ in character and mentality as widely as do people

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<sup>12</sup> D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" provoked great controversy for its promotion of white supremacy and its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan.

with lighter skins” (Peterkin, *Roll Jordan* 16). This type of understanding led Peterkin to break from tradition and treat black subjects seriously, as humans. And “unlike Gonzales, who deliberately used dialect to set himself apart from blacks she sought ways to dignify her characters without losing the tang of their distinctive language” (Williams 41).

*Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928) is the controversial Gullah novel which won Peterkin the 1929 Pulitzer Prize, marking her national fame. *SSM* tells of the life of a young brazen field hand, Mary Pinesett, who becomes sexually deviant after her husband abandons her. The novel details her “fall,” or sexual exploits, which result in nine children (eight of whom are illegitimate<sup>13</sup>) and her “rise,” which is gained through the confession of her “scarlet” sins. It has been substantiated by Mary Weeks’s living relatives that much of the plot of *SSM* was borrowed from Mary’s real experiences. Mary Weeks, Vinner’s granddaughter, and Peterkin shared a unique friendship. Peterkin claimed her as her best black friend (130), but Mary Week’s relatives would argue differently in view of the degrading additions (Mary having a child in the street) and blatant omissions (Mary’s Peterkin daughters<sup>14</sup>) to Peterkin’s novels. Mary’s family remained dismayed by Peterkin’s defense of her family and constant exploitation of their family. Mary’s family questioned, “What gave Julia the right to air their dirty laundry without revealing where the first stains came from?” (131). Sterling Brown notes, in “Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors,” that novelists search for the Negro in the “raw,” which they shape to suit a pre-determined purpose (187). For Peterkin, who is characteristic of such a novelist, Mary was that

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<sup>13</sup> In the text, all eight of Mary’s biological children were conceived out of wedlock. The only two fathers alluded to were Unex’s father and Mary’s husband, July, and Keepsie’s father who is never actually named but it was mentioned that he was from Poughkeepsie. The ninth child is not Mary’s but the illegitimate child of Seraphine, Mary’s daughter who got pregnant while away for school.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Weeks’ children, Bessie and Essie, were fathered by John Peterkin and Jimmy Peterkin (brothers of Willie Peterkin).

“Negro in the raw,” whom Peterkin manipulated as she saw fit. Williams suggests that the issues with Mary’s family could have been averted if the title character had a different name, but Peterkin insisted on the name Mary because of its semblance with Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene who both represent Mary Weeks at different stages of her life (131).

In 1929, the exploitation of Mary Weeks took its toll on her family and it was poetic justice when Peterkin and Mary’s friendship ended over a book cover photograph of Mary hauling water, with the washtub on her head and her two little grandsons by her side (131). The same iconic image that made both women famous has assumed a different meaning for Minnie Logan, Mary’s daughter, who viewed it as demeaning (131). As an independent, twentieth-century woman, Minnie found the photograph condescending; besides, “her mother no longer carried water that way, for white people or anyone else” (131). Her youngest daughter, Ruby Mae, insisted on suing but relented after considering the likelihood that the suit would not be won. Finally, at the demands of Minnie, Mary was moved to Columbia, South Carolina to reside with Minnie. The devastating psychological effects of Peterkin’s exploitation of Mary not only enraged her children, but also angered her grandchildren. Williams recalls how one of the grandsons pictured with Mary recalls her as meek, exploited, and terrified of white people. Her granddaughter paints another appalling picture when she states, “You’ve got to remember that long before my grandmother was ‘Scarlet Sister Mary’ she was ‘Raped Sister Mary!’”(132). As was typical of the relations between black women and their white masters, Mary would have been expected to comply with the sexual demands of her employer’s son; and she may have done so not only to avoid punishment, but also to gain certain material benefits such as better food and nicer clothes (132-33).



The concerns of Mary Weeks's family were revealed in personal interviews and other correspondence years after the novel was published but the public reception of the novel in 1928 was heavily documented. Herschel Brickell, wrote in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, the book "firmly establishes its author as an interpreter of Negro character" (Landess 31). Robert Herrick wrote in *The New Republic*, *SSM* was "something more than a novel--the revelation of a race, which has lived with the whites for hundreds of years, without becoming known beneath the skin" (31). Ben Wasson, in *Outlook and Independent*, recognized Peterkin's departure from the use of stereotypes, noting that, "her book is real because she realizes that people, be they black or white, are fundamentally alike" (31). Joseph Warren Beach, in *The Twentieth Century Novel*, found the *SSM* "entirely free from any flavoring of patronage, sentimentality, apology, [and] defense" (31). Another well-known portrayer of black life, Roak Bradford, wrote in a letter "*SSM* was even finer than *Black April*," another novel that he had regarded as nearly perfect (31). Such reviews naturally boosted sales, and the novel very quickly became a bestseller.

Although a bestselling author in 1929, Peterkin found herself the subject of a major literary controversy. The difficulty arose as the result of a decision by the Pulitzer advisory committee, in April of 1928, to change the qualifications for the prize-winning novel to accommodate diverse literary representations such as Peterkin's work. Originally, the award was presented to the work of fiction which "shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standards of American manners and manhood." In order to widen the possibilities for the selection board, the clause was altered to read, "preferably one which shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life" (Landess 32). Controversy arose over the fiction jury's first choice and as a result the award was rendered to the second choice-*Scarlet*

*Sister Mary*. Against the request of Mencken, her publisher, Peterkin accepted the award. A revised clause was suitable for *SSM*, since it certainly dealt with primary participants in “American life”—white purveyors and black workers—and explored an obscure aspect of American life. The personal lives of blacks were of little interest to many whites, but Peterkin’s upbringing led her to develop a special interest in their lives which proved to be dichotomous later in her life.

Reared in the home of her grandfather who held inconsistent views towards blacks and instilled with moral reasoning by her black nanny, Peterkin never developed a clear standard for the treatment of blacks, which is reflected in her novels. Peterkin might have felt an obligation to impartially depict blacks, but then ideals of white hegemony clouded her judgment and stereotypical depictions were rendered (Williams 5). Peterkin’s elevated status also complicated things. Because her father insisted that she maintain the highest standards of speech and behavior, her accommodating black narrative became a contentious point for Julius Mood and many white Southerners, earning her the title of traitor to her race (Williams x). Thompson notes readers were:

unsettled in one or all of several ways with Peterkin’s fiction: the raging or pathetically submissive Negro takes on a more human dimension to the mind accustomed to plantation or minstrel stereotypes; the smallness of man against epic and inscrutable forces unnerves the mind cushioned by a belief in man’s natural supremacy; and the power of God or superstition begins to acquire some credibility to the mind colored by doubt. (65)

Although Joel Spingarn, the leading white academic authority on black culture, excitedly proclaimed “nothing so stark, taut, and poignant has come out of the white academic South in fifty years,” Julius Mood did not echo his excitement, especially coming from within his staunch Southern household, and he remained one of Julia’s most severe critics (qtd. in Williams x).

Throughout Peterkin’s life she sought to please her father; and despite all the critical acclaim, her father failed to support anything she wrote (Landess 16). Julius Mood was a devoted Southern man who held fast to the culture of white male supremacy, which not only relegated blacks to the lowest realms, but also subjugated women. Peterkin’s subject matter, blacks and promiscuity, was not in keeping with the manner in which Julius Mood had reared his daughter. Because of the double standard her novels rendered, these portrayals could be viewed as attacks on white society. For these reasons, Julius Mood refused to support his daughter’s efforts.

Peterkin’s theme of promiscuity is not coincidental to her life as she and other town locals were aware of Willie Peterkin’s illicit relationship with Elizabeth Darby, also a local resident. As a result Peterkin dedicated *SSM* to her husband Willie, to send a message about his affair with Elizabeth. Outside of Mary’s blatant acts of jealousy that characterized Peterkin the scene in *SSM* where Cinder danced provocatively with July mirrored a scene from Peterkin’s life where Elizabeth danced openly with Willie (William 131). Her hopes that Willie would recognize his own behavior in the pages of *SSM* went unfulfilled. On the other hand, her father who was also sexually indiscriminate, understood that Julia was attacking the sexual double standard that tacitly gave men the right to stray, but declared promiscuous women abominations (Williams 133).

Contrary to formative accounts of Peterkin’s works, her life (upbringing and marriage)

and cultural milieu in which she operated were influential in her novels. The most recent criticism of her work was written in 1997. Even then the analysis fails to limn these effects on her work. This study analyzes how Peterkin's life not only influenced her writing in a conscious sense, but also how her dual moral foundation subconsciously influenced her discourse. Overall, an evaluation of *SSM* will expose Peterkin's racism, classism, sexism, and cultural divergence.

### *Scarlet Sister Mary*<sup>15</sup>

Scholarship on *SSM* only begins to approach the multitude of racial, social and political intricacies it encompasses, not to mention the linguistic and psychological analysis that are also applicable for an exhaustive exploration of Peterkin and her work. Through African American theoretical and critical discourse analysis this study will: 1) extend the research began by Lewis, in evaluating the role and intent of Peterkin's use of an Africanist presence; 2) proffer discourse techniques to evaluate the use of Gullah in her work to question the nature of the poetics. Research provided in this study includes the fundamental examination of this subject and is of primal importance if Julia Peterkin is to remain "an authority on black culture" and if her works are to continue to be lauded "as true representations of Gullah culture."

Peterkin, a white Southerner, writes as an "onlooker" of the Gullah community, and a "pioneer" of fictional Gullah culture. Undoubtedly, Peterkin has a connection with this community in which she was reared by a Gullah nanny. Moreover, as a Gullah plantation mistress, Peterkin had a rare access to this unique culture. The title, "pioneer of fictional Gullah culture" is a dubious title. While Peterkin does not overtly depict the racial overtones described

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<sup>15</sup> All references from *Scarlet Sister Mary* are quoted from the version listed in the bibliography; therefore, the title is omitted from the citation.

by other white Southern writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, I agree with A.J. Verdelle that although “Peterkin portrayed African Americans as people, [she] was stuck nonetheless in the racism of her day” (qtd. in Peterkin, *SSM* xxxii). The racism of the day, which continued to debase African Americans in less overt ways, permeates Peterkin’s stereotypical depictions of the Gullah people. Peterkin situates her novel in the Reconstruction Era, and the tone of the novel reverberates with the tone of the time---one filled with northern ambivalence towards slavery and Southern nostalgia for it. Sterling Brown in his article, “The American Race Problem as Reflected in American Literature,” credits Peterkin with “writing with sympathy of her characters, [while] deal[ing] little with social and economic hardships, showing tragedies caused by fate, or if made by man, springing from the violence of a primitive folk” (287). Peterkin’s failure to address issues of social and economic hardship, resulting from “invisible” white supremacy coupled with her primitive depiction of the blacks who live in the “Quarters,” demonstrates her biased view, which reinforces her privileged position as a white woman in a white dominated society. In *SSM*, Peterkin is consistent with Brown’s description of a white Southern author who dealt with Negroes under Southern terms of conciliation to keep the Negroes in their place. This type of white author believed that the Negro’s dilemma arose when the benefits of slavery were no longer available and they had to find a way to take care of themselves (“Negro Problem” 289).

Peterkin’s conciliation was not only in compliance with the Southern status quo, but also predicated upon her own understanding which reflects the autobiographical nature of this text. Verdelle notes that Peterkin struggled to find her place and voice in the white, patriarchal South and given the chance to only observe blacks, since she was not a member of that community, she dared to record “their” stories which deftly reflect her inner inhibitions (qtd. in Peterkin, *SSM*

xxviii). Peterkin, like “Mary, [the novel’s protagonist], does indeed construct her own society [through literature] after deliberately choosing ostracism from the one into which she was born” (Landess 81). Through the construction of African American characters and African American forms of language, Peterkin escapes her subjugated position as a woman in patriarchal society and reintroduces the insular Gullah culture to the wider American readership in an unconventional manner. A textual analysis of Peterkin’s use and nonuse of white characters or of white nonexistence, correlation of Gullahs to animals, depictions of the laboring and sexually available Gullah women, and depictions of the contented Gullah and romanticized plantation life will prove that Julia Peterkin is not an authority on Gullah culture. She, indeed, failed to represent accurately this culture in her texts. Logically, this analysis begins with Peterkin and the white presence in her text, but unlike the existing scholarship this study will analyze the underlining meaning of this presence.

### **Cultural Setting: White Nonexistence & Animalisms**

Does Julia Peterkin accurately depict Gullah culture and the lives of the African Americans by whom she was surrounded daily? This study provides examples to argue that Peterkin’s depiction is missing a key element--- her presence, the “White” presence! Peterkin acknowledged that her work:

goes by the name of a novel but a large part of it is fact [. . .]

I have lived among the Negroes. I like them. They are my friends,

and I have learned so much from them. The years on the plantation have

given me plenty of material, my life has been rich, so why try to improve

on the truth? [. . .] I shall never write of white people. Their lives are not so

colorful.” (xxviii)

Peterkin's statements require some reflection in order to interrogate "whiteness" in *SSM*. First, if her work is largely a factual recollection of her life amongst the "Negroes" then why is she not represented? And to represent herself as living *among* the Negroes, *on* the plantation, with her *friends*, portrays to readers a false sense of community, as if Peterkin herself worked, slept, and fellowshiped with her Negro workers. She further states that "*my* life has been rich, so why try to improve on the *truth*?" This statement refutes her comments to H. L. Mencken in 1921, at age forty-nine, that: "These black friends of mine live more in one Saturday night than I do in five years. I envy them, and I guess as I cannot be them, I seek satisfaction in *trying* (emphasis added) to record them" (Verdelle qtd. in Peterkin, *SSM* xxviii). Aldon Lynn Nielsen, in *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, argues "Hart Crane, e.e. cummings, T.S. Eliot, and many other twentieth-century white writers locate 'blackness' outside western cultural traditions. Nielsen emphasizes that this racist stereotyping serves an important role in reinforcing the existing belief in the superiority of 'white' aesthetics" (qtd. in Keating 906). This belief raises the question: Was Peterkin's life rich or does she take ownership of the black experience, like so many other white writers of the time, to purport her personal desires for autonomy and overall white supremacy? And whose "*truth*" is Peterkin reflecting? Is it her personal understanding as truth or is it her perceived understanding of truth revealed through relationships with her African American "*friends*?" Perhaps Peterkin's portrayal of truth is a clouded view of the true African-American, Gullah plantation experience. This skepticism is reinforced by "the social science phenomenon of 'observer's paradox' which states the mere presence of an outside observer is enough to restrict or alter a speaker's performance" (Turner xxxv). Thus, if Peterkin truly conceived of her Negro workers as friends and their actions and their comments in her presence as genuine, then she has been totally

deceived. Because Peterkin's novels reflect her observations of Gullah culture it is also logical to conclude that her literature reflects inaccurate depictions which were only a façade to appease a white audience. This façade is part of a larger survival technique forged by African Americans because as Morgan notes:

Southern segregationists attempted to control and regulate verbal interactions [. . .] between blacks and whites. These policies [. . .] considered certain forms of direct talk by African Americans to constitute claims regarding rights and status. Thus talk and interaction were constitutive elements of a system of inequity, and participants' social roles were partially constructed through conversation. In response to the demand that they have the attitude of someone who should be oppressed, African American culture and antisociety undermined the values, attitudes, and beliefs that the dominant society held toward them through the use of [. . .] indirectness. [. . .]. Thus the counterlanguage functioned to signal antisociety (black audience) and provided a means for a speaker to reveal a social face which resisted and contested the practice of racial repression. (256)

The Gullah people's use of indirectness evades Peterkin and white hegemony, allowing them to command respect in instances where they were supposed to be subjugated.

At best, readers can give Peterkin credit for her efforts at "trying to record them [Gullahs]" and although she does not confess it, at trying to "be them [Gullahs]." Reared to believe that women should not express strong emotions, Peterkin donned the "mask" of African American characters, according to Williams, to address issues in her personal life that she would



never have been able to explore if she utilized white characters (xii). We can, therefore, surmise that Peterkin used her literature to escape personal subjugation of gender and class restrictions of early twentieth century culture, and “live” a little, outside the strict bounds of white patriarchal society. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), concludes that “the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (17). Before we consider Peterkin’s use of the Africanist presence, we should analyze the quasi-invisible white presence in her text. This presence can be defined as “quasi” because although there are only vague references to whites in the text, by virtue of Peterkin, a white woman, being the author, the text is rendered through a white gaze.

Scholars such as Sterling Brown (1966), Henry Giroux (1993), and Toni Morrison (1992), who began the conversation of whiteness as a literary tradition, posit that “the most commonly mentioned attribute of ‘whiteness’ seems to be its pervasive non-presence, its invisibility. [They] associate this ubiquitous hidden ‘whiteness’ with an unmarked superiority” (Brown, “Negro Characters” 184). Jan Kreidler, in her article “Reviving Julia Peterkin as a Trickster Writer” (2006), defines a trickster author as an author [whose] life and work cross cultural boundaries and confuse the distinctions set by the presiding dominant institutions. [. . .] scholars are referring to the spirit of cunning and duplicity necessary to survive in a hostile cultural landscape, where one must navigate between two cultures (469). It can be inferred that Peterkin’s exclusion of white characters was her deliberate “trick” to gain entry into novel writing, a world virtually closed to white women. Peterkin gained entry by excluding white characters and more importantly providing “colorful” depictions of the Gullahs. A close reading of her work indicates that Peterkin outwardly appeared to be a devoted advocate and

supporter of the Gullah people and culture to garner the backing of the African American literary community, who at the time did not have much interest in or access to Gullah culture.

Positioning herself in this fashion tricked not only the African American community, but also the dominant white majority into viewing her as an expert on Gullah. This position all the while only continues to purport the dominant culture's ideology which is reluctant to see whiteness as a historical and social construction and that secures its power by refusing to identify itself (Keating 905). Instead of identifying themselves, Peterkin and the white dominated literati take ownership of the black experience, even in their apparent absence, and continue to profess white supremacy.

While the text is characterized by a nonexistent white presence, there are, nonetheless, three distinct references to white people in a dominant position, to be feared, amongst the host of Gullah characters. The first conversation about white people appears more than halfway through the novel with a reference to "white landowners that sent poison machines to kill the boll weevils that were destroying the cotton fields" (Peterkin 188). This designation clearly readjusts the social dynamics of the novel placing the inhabitants of the Quarters back in their place as subordinate to the white landowners. Until this moment in the novel, this predominantly black community has been portrayed as mostly self-sufficient and autonomous from white governance. This passage also alludes to the desire of the white landowners to keep African Americans bound to the land and the work of slaves. Although subtle, this one reference displays an important power dynamic, especially in America where land ownership denotes wealth, power, and independence.

The second reference presents the “white man” as both a condemner and a redeemer in the lines that read, “Big Boy told him it was a blind contraption made by white men and it would cut off a boy’s arm or leg as quickly as wire. God must have sent that white doctor from town to go deer hunting [. . .]. Big Boy got him to come and fix Keepsie’s leg” (195). In this passage, the white man’s contraption is used to make Keepsie fearful of farm machinery, but it can also be interpreted as a means to indoctrinate fear and white supremacy into a black male psyche at a young age resulting in obedient men. This is the same fear bell hooks recalls, as she explains, “black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, and the terrorizing. White people were regarded as terrorists” (qtd. in Keating 907). The second sentence in the quotation recognizes the white doctor as “God sent.” This places him in the highest revered position, as a purveyor of life and health, which plays on an individual’s sentiment, leaving the Gullahs in a position of complete gratitude toward the skill of this white man.

The final white reference in the text is the most substantial imposition of white dominance on African American religious beliefs. This passage details “a new law de white folks is made” prescribing new procedures for child birth which all the midwives must adhere to (209). This new law is a major concern to African American culture and specifically for the Gullah community, because of their isolation on remote islands, which renders the duties of midwives crucial not only to human life, but also to the matriarchal duties in these communities. “Si May-e” and “Budda Ben” both consider the idea of bringing a white woman, from up North, to teach this new technique to be quite absurd and against God’s will as Ben states:

White people are curious things. They pass laws no matter how fool  
the laws are, and put people in jail if those laws are not kept. People

had come into the world over the same old road ever since Eve birth  
Cain and Abel, and now everybody had to learn how to birth children  
a new way. It was enough to upset the whole world. (209-10)

The condemnation of a white man's idea is discourse forbidden to Peterkin as a white woman, since in some ways undermines the culture of her ancestors. This passage begs a subversive reading in that Peterkin was pushing the boundaries of social and political condemnation, and she signifies on the white community but still reinforces white power. This passage places whites in the supreme secular position of lawmakers and even in their ignorance blacks must obey or suffer dire consequences. The Gullah people are spiritual people who depend on God to correct their situations. Ben states, "White people try to be too smart. If they keep on messing in God's business and trying to change things from the way He meant them to be, [. . .], He would get cross and make Judgment Day wipe the whole world clean of them" (210). Because the Gullahs acknowledge God as the absolute judge, they seek solace through Him to cope with white dominance.

Although Gullah culture does not include a large white presence, that presence is still omnipresent in American society; and because of this, it is important to analyze this presence to fully ascertain Peterkin's role in her attempt to portray Gullah culture. Consideration of the white presence in *Scarlet Sister Mary* and its reoccurring dominant position leads readers to conclude that Peterkin perpetuates white supremacist ideology, which veils the true Gullah experience. Toni Morrison makes a similar point in her analysis of canonical United States literature where she maintains that this unacknowledged "whiteness" has created a literary "language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" (x). In conjunction with the problematic position of

whiteness in *Scarlet Sister Mary*, we should also examine the black presence in the text, which constitutes a majority of the novel. These major areas of evaluation include Peterkin's depiction of: 1) Gullah characters with animal characteristics, 2) the laboring and exotic black female, and 3) the contented Gullah and romanticized plantation life.

The use of animalisms is a suitable place to start since it is one of the oldest and most enduring stereotypes to dehumanize and degrade blacks. Describing blacks as having animal characteristics or mannerisms places them in a social status below humanized whites. In early scientific research blacks were commonly compared to monkeys. The size of their skulls and jaw bones, and the amount of hair on their bodies were a few of the areas compared. American slavery degraded Africans to that of chattel which is evidenced by the terms upon which they were traded and the manner in which they were transported. In Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV*, he clearly states that Africans are inferior to whites in reason, an idea which at the time arose from the belief that Africans lacked the mental faculties to make them full members of the human race (266). In this legal document, Jefferson also lowers the status of Negroes to that of animals when he writes "the circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?" (265). Based upon these classifications, professed by one of the founding fathers of the United States and those of many other racist and ill-informed individuals, whites no matter how low, brutal and degraded their situation, insisted upon their natural superiority (Brown, "American Race Problem" 276). Although Peterkin's setting is during the Reconstruction era and her characters were share croppers, it is clear that the plantation system in which she was reared indoctrinated her with notions of white supremacy and black savagery, resulting in a plethora of animalisms in her text which gradually get more horrific as the novel proceeds.

Common descriptors used to classify African Americans as animals include physical characteristics of bone structure (large skulls), thick lips, and woolly hair texture. Peterkin's descriptions do not stray far from these. In fact, she is very descriptive of all her major characters and animalisms are present. As early as Chapter II, Peterkin makes a comparison between Mary and the other Quarters' girls which reflect animalisms:

The girls Mary's age were much alike, with *slender, well-shaped bodies*, scarcely hidden by the plain skimpy garments they wore. They went barefooted all the week, but every Sunday morning, after undoing their black woolly hair and rewrapping it into neat rolls with white ball thread, they put on shoes and stockings and hats and Sunday dresses and went to church. Mary looked much like the others. (emphasis added)(SSM 15)

This description of the Quarter's girls presents the female body as text. Separating the body from the individual renders it a commodity and not human. Peterkin's reference to the girls being barefoot and having woolly hair commodifies the Quarter's girls and details two blatant animalisms of her time. This description bears resemblance to slave auctions or to livestock sales, where the body is described in such terms. The physical dress of the girls is a barbaric feature of primitive people; and the often overlooked general categorization of all blacks into a common stock reflected in her insinuation that all the girls look alike is also problematic.

The next animalism suggests a dog and master where one party, the dog, finds complete contentment in the mere presence of the other. This is the image drawn from the lines that read, "as soon as his feet were washed clean and cocked up on a chair to rest and Mary had put a pan full of good victuals in his lap, she sat on the floor beside him, happy to watch every spoonful he put in his mouth" (61). Lines prior to this sentence set the tone for the reunion between Mary

and July. Mary felt, “July’s coming home was the best time of the whole day” (60). These lines create an image of a master coming home from a long day’s work and finding an overjoyed, panting dog waiting for him at the door. As the master sits to enjoy his dinner, the dog happily sits by his feet, wagging his tail and gazing into his master’s eyes seeking attention. This image reinforces ideas of female subjugation; and although it could be an actual occurrence, it is not in keeping with Gullah culture, where women are known to be matriarchs<sup>16</sup> with familial and communal responsibilities. Such an elevated status would consume their time in such a way that idol adoration would be nearly impossible.

The next animalism, the most odious, is evident in another scene between July and Mary. Prior to their marriage, July cuts Mary’s earlobe as he has does to his pigs, claiming to mark her as his so he could identify her when she grew up (22). When Maun Hannah is made aware of his actions, she has Mary cut July’s ear in the same fashion to show they belonged to each other (22). This act marks a critical juncture in Mary and July’s relationship because it is on that night that he makes a promise to marry her (22). Comparable to acts of branding during slavery, this act not only exposes Mary, a woman, to the physical abuse endured by animals, but also illustrates battery at the hands of a man who supposedly cares for her, which makes the act even more savage. Mary’s acceptance of this act and July’s actions strengthens the argument that African Americans are savage brutes, accustomed to and receptive toward abuse and animal-like treatment. This argument also lays a foundation for the proliferation of animal-like treatment by

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<sup>16</sup> In Gullah families “the woman is the central and most stable member of the household. Elderly females or ‘mammies’ function as matriarchs who teach [the village] children proprieties and family lore.” “Matriarchy as practiced in the Low Country probably has roots in kinship patterns of African society but was molded by modern economic pressures into a new pattern that fulfilled the unique needs of the people” (Pollitzer 130, 133).

those of different races toward blacks. Irvin Cobb, a noted New York humorist and columnist best known for his stories of Kentucky local color, is quoted stating: "Ef you wants to perduse a piece showing a lot of niggers gittin' skinned, let it be another nigger w'ich skins em...an' whatever else you does don't mess wid no race problem" (qtd. in Brown, "Negro Race Prob" 287). Cobb's statement underlines a technique used by whites to produce degrading images of blacks that would not project an unfavorable image of whites.

The final culminating animalism confirms that although writing after Emancipation, Peterkin still emulates and reinforces slave ideology. The first page of Chapter One takes readers back to the slave market where white owners believe in their infinite superiority, that they had an influence over the genetics of their slaves, like in animal breeding, to create the perfect hybrid for subjugation. This is clearly portrayed in the lines that read, "The old owners of Blue Brook must have been careful to buy slaves that were perfect, for they built up a strain of intelligent, upstanding human beings, just as they bred race-horses and hunting dogs that could not be excelled" (11). Equating African Americans to animals has been a pervading stereotype for decades; and its perpetuation by a white twentieth-century novelist relays racist intentions to keep blacks in their "debased" place. To further strip black women of their dignified matriarchal status Peterkin depicts Gullah women as workhorses and sexually available.

### **Female Voice: Gullah Woman**

Analogous with Peterkin's animalisms are her portrayals of the community matriarchs as "the mule of the world."<sup>17</sup> This pejorative depiction of matriarchs contradicts the sentimentalist

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<sup>17</sup> In Zora Neale Hurston's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's grandmother remarks "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (186).



depiction of domesticity (white womanhood), as described by the cult of true womanhood, a traditional interpretation of gender roles that relegates women to the domestic sphere, with responsibility for husbands and children. Peterkin depicts the Gullah women as robust field workers, thus de-feminizing them in relation to the traditional Southern type. This depiction fulfills two important roles for the proliferation of the dominant ideology of what a woman is supposed to be. First, her description of the Gullah women's physique eases the reader's conscience in knowing that these women are robust--not feeble bodied--which endows them with more physical strength to accomplish outdoor tasks which are normally reserved for men. This description is also in contrast to the ruling archetype of the Southern woman. Second, the description debases the Gullah women in comparison to white women making the Gullahs less feminine and therefore, less desirable to white men. By negating the Gullahs, who do not measure up to white standards, Peterkin maintains and neutralizes a hierarchical social system and a dominant/subordinate world view (Keating 902). Mary, the novel's protagonist, constantly labors from the beginning to the end of the novel even through her pregnancy. The narrator tells us "Mary was heavy [pregnant], but many tasks to be done kept her days filled from morning until night" (64). Mary, like her surrogate mother, Maum Hannah, from an early age, "worked almost every day in the fields, picking cotton, stripping fodder from the corn, planting or gathering potatoes and peas" (14). Peterkin, cognizant that her privileged readers probably could not personally fathom the idea of field work, adds that Mary "never works too hard, for she could always stop and rest, or laugh and talk with the other field hands" (14). What Peterkin identifies as an opportunity to rest served as a mechanism that helped Gullahs uplift each other in ways that perhaps Peterkin did not fully understand. Such was the case with the image of the contented slave. The slaves, while conducting their daily field tasks, also used this time for

fellowship and sharing. The end of the day left little time for this type of communion, because there were still ongoing domestic chores which fell largely to women. Little personal time describes Mary's life, for she was up early in the morning fixing July's breakfast and dinner; then she diligently worked in the field all day picking cotton; then she went home to clean the house to prepare for July's return (59). With hectic days such as these, there was limited time for only one thing—fellowship. The Gullahs managed to accommodate this very important element of their lives.

Again, Peterkin strategically appeals to her reader's conscience assuring them that Mary, a representative of all Gullah women, is completely capable of completing the outdoor tasks, normally reserved for someone of greater strength. This strategic ploy is depicted by highlighting how Mary was basically reared or bred to complete these tasks with ease as illustrated the lines that read, "first a tin can full, then a small bucket full, until at last she could come up the hill with three full-sized buckets, all filled to the brim, one balanced on her head and one in each hand" (14). This image evokes the animal image of a camel or mule bearing pails of water. Later in the novel she lends further emphasis to the "normalcy" of the black woman as bearer of burdens when she writes, "field work was no hardship to her [Mary]. All her people before her had been field hands. She could guide it [a hoe] without thinking or with her thoughts on something else" (74). Although Landess purports that Peterkin does not involve the socio-political undercurrents of the time in her works and that she is simply portraying Gullah life, we should recognize that *SSM* covertly supports the old Southern apologists who viewed blacks as innately and spiritually ordained to a life of physical labor. Sociological conclusions support thoughts that: 1) human experience engulfs everyday experiences to include the socio-political current that would have a greater impact on a race that has been debased by economic systems

and 2) an individual interpretation of human experience is always seen through certain lenses that support that individual's understanding of the larger workings of power.

No one could argue that Peterkin was completely incorrect in portraying the Gullahs as field hands because the Sea Islands undeniably thrived as a result of their agrarian labor. Yet, the text's allusion to blacks not needing to learn to read underscores the uninformed thinking of the apologists that prohibited blacks from reading and led to further subjugation by those whites who knew that reading was a likely means of independence and equality for blacks. Peterkin shrewdly underscores the prevailing notion by showing how blacks respond to existing paradigms of power. Mary internalized a fear of literacy by equating the written word with the power of whiteness thus finding safety in orality:

Such things were dangerous. Keepsie ought not to tamper with them. Who could tell what book-reading might do to him. Spoken words are safer. If Keepsie would keep his ears open he could hear plenty of good wise talk. [. . .] Instead of reading all the time out of books [. . .] he would do better to learn how to read other things [. . .]. Book-learning takes people's minds off more important things. (96-97)

Although this passage refers to Keepsie, a male child, the words are spoken by his mother, Mary, who is consistently portrayed in the novel as a robust field hand. Peterkin's shrewd correlation, between the distrust in the inventions of white men and the intended purpose of these inventions for blacks, buttresses the history of mistrust between whites and blacks, dating back to the Atlantic Slave Trade. More importantly, the quotation reveals to a keen reader that Peterkin did not write in isolation from the world, as some scholars have inferred, but that she was cognizant

enough of the ways of the world to include Southern economic power in what is noted as a semi-fictional novel to proffer her personal views. A product of the agrarian South, Peterkin understood the power of Southern economics and what put food on her table---field labor. Peterkin thus uses her literature to reinforce white agrarian power constructions through the appropriation of the black female image and by presenting it as least threatening and most amenable to whites.

As if making the black female a “mule” did not ostracize her enough, Peterkin eroticizes Mary and thereby clearly differentiates her from white women to whom society ascribed the virtues of the cult of true womanhood (piety, purity, domesticity, and submission). Early in the text, the black female body is objectified in Peterkin’s description of “the girls Mary’s age [who] were much alike, with slender, well-shaped bodies, scarcely hidden by the plain skimpy garments they wore” (15). The description “well-shaped” is Peterkin’s instinctive and concealed comparison between the bodies of black women and white women. The description raises the question: what distinguishes a “well-shaped body” from one not “well-shaped?” Having attributed to black women the nicer bodies, Peterkin also reinforces the sexualized image of the black woman with the phrase “skimpy garments,” a sort of denuding. Identifying the black women in this stereotypical manner accomplishes two goals for white Southern women and white hegemonic ideology. First, it places the black woman on a lower status than the pious white woman, who in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature represents the epitome of a “true woman.” Second, it reifies the notion of black women being sexually available and tempting toward white men, thereby rendering the sexual violation of black women their fault as opposed to the fault of their violators.

The dancing African is another erotic depiction, which forges thoughts of wild and sensual movements by women who once again invites sexual exploitation. Peterkin's reference to Mary missing dancing, which is forbidden to her once she is baptized, teeters on the verge of exploitation by authors searching for "Negro life in the raw" (Brown "Negro Characters" 197). Brown describes this misappropriated person as,

a Negro synchronized to a savage rhythm, living a life of ecstasy,  
superinduced by jazz (repetition of the tom-tom, awakening vestigial  
memories of Africa) and gin, that lifted him over antebellum slavery,  
and placed him in the comforting fastnesses of their "mother-land."  
(“Negro Characters” 198)

Peterkin like certain authors found ways to transplant this “primitive/lustful” nature of blacks into any and every sphere of black life. The narrator concludes, “[Mary] missed dancing, and whenever she heard the big drum beating and the accordion wailing she felt sad, but shouting at prayer-meeting was pleasure and the old hymns and spirituals were beautiful” (17). What Brown notes as “a kinship between this stereotype and that of the contented slave, [where] one is merely a jazzed up version of the other” is manifested in the reverse for Mary for whom church meetings and spirituals supplant juke joints (Brown “Negro Characters” 198). This comparison of the black sacred to erotic secular spaces, binary opposites, not only debases the significant spiritual space, but also conveys Peterkin's distance from this very spiritual community, demonstrating her mere partial understanding of Gullah culture. As Brown notes, few observers saw these acts as a release from the troubles of this world for Negroes, the purpose that spirituals served in the days of slavery. As Brown further indicates, many, including Peterkin, conveniently interpret and appropriate phenomena to degrade blacks so that their own positions

will be elevated (Brown “Negro Characters” 198). An illustration of such degradation was Peterkin’s exploitation of the Gullah who provided labor for her prior to moving to Lang Syne and even then any labor conducted by Peterkin was solely for her personal enjoyment because the Gullahs took care of everything.

Peterkin reincarnated herself through the persona Sister Mary Weeks, a sexual, independent, outspoken woman able to live her life according to her will. As a reaction to rejection or abandonment from the love of her life, July, Mary has multiple sexual relations with unnamed men resulting in nine children (eight illegitimate). As Landess notes, *SSM* is concerned with the conflict between church doctrine and natural instinct, with an emphasis on Mary’s relationship to the community (183). However, readers could contend that the primary source of tension is Mary’s relationship with the community, which is important to Peterkin’s white readers because in essence it is a relationship with their community and their men, who either condoned or shunned the portrayal of Mary as a sexually available female. Sterling Brown credits Peterkin for departing from the typical stereotypes of the time in *Bright April*, but readers may note that *SSM* is filled with stereotypes, the most dominant of which is the “exotic” and “primitive” female.

When these isolated attempts at negatively portraying black life failed to achieve the goal of reinstating slavery and blacks began to insist upon and prove they were equally human, whites employed their next strategy of depicting blacks as “contented” and plantation life as “romanticized.”

### **Coded Ways Unknown: Contented Gullah & Romanticized Plantation Life**

Peterkin undoubtedly takes ownership of the Gullah experience when she depicts Gullahs as contented and plantation life as romanticized. How else could she have made these inaccurate

personal observations without taking ownership to propagate her agenda? In Peterkin's representation, although life on the Blue Brook plantation did not offer much support for the free Gullahs, the "contented darkies" continued to live there, scarcely making ends meet (12). Contentment is an illusory depiction used by Peterkin and other whites during the Reconstruction period to portray "the joyous contentment of the slave in a paradisiacal bondage" (Brown, "Negro Characters," 183). This depiction of the happy slave, hopelessly unequipped for freedom, persisted as a cardinal principle for those whites wanting to resurrect slavery (Brown, "Negro Characters," 183). Brown identifies these depictions as "persuasive, because the romantic idealizing of the past will always be seductive to a certain large group of readers and the sincere unremitting harping upon one argument will finally make it seem plausible" (Brown, "Negro Characters," 183). Contentment, as viewed and used by whites, has a different meaning and perception for the Gullahs on the Sea Islands. According to the narrator of *SSM*, "the lack of roads and bridges afforded [Gullahs] little contact with the outside world, and so, instead of going away to seek new fortunes, new advantages, easier work and more money, they kept faithful to the old life, contented with the old ways and beliefs<sup>18</sup>, holding fast to old traditions and superstitions" (12). The autonomy and sense of community forged during slavery garnered a sense of pride and accomplishment for the Gullahs that made the Sea Islands less a place of torture and wrath and more of a home they were leery to depart. In Peterkin's Eurocentricism, she fails to acknowledge the deep-rooted ways of African culture that made life on the Sea Islands, "contented with the old ways and beliefs," a positive feature for the Gullah people.

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<sup>18</sup> Unconcerned with time, Gullahs are geared more toward the ideal of equilibrium, versus giving up their culture for production and progress (Pollitzer 4).

Predominantly in the Eurocentric view of life, old ways connote “backward views,” but in an Afrocentric view,<sup>19</sup> these old ways have sustained a people, lent wisdom and guidance for continued growth and a positive existence. Pollitzer reports that, “nowhere else in the United States did the African heritage of body and mind persist more than in these Sea Islands” (12)<sup>20</sup>. Inadvertently, the continuance of these old African ways persist on the Sea Islands, even into the twenty-first century, and within the world of literature to provide a link between African-Americans and their native land of Africa. With an understanding of Gullah culture, it is apparent that the “contented darkies” are truly a people confident and comfortable with who they are and where their future lies. This notion contradicts the picture presented by white authors wishing only to perpetuate, to the wider American public, the stereotype of a docile, needy “contented Negro.”

“Peterkin seems to misunderstand, or at best, underestimate, the intensity of fieldwork, of laundry, of bending, [and] tending [to] plantation crops,” says A.J. Verdelle in the foreword to *SSM*, because her work is filled with romanticized depictions of these laborious acts (xi). “To misunderstand” is to understate Peterkin’s ulterior intent. She portrays plantation work as enjoyable and effortless, “keep[ing] her Negroes in their place,” happily working her fields, tending to her domestic concerns, all while using the material of their daily lives for her literary endeavors. According to Peterkin’s portrayal, the Quarters’ women made their tasks enjoyable

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<sup>19</sup> Afrocentricism “views issues, themes, topics, and situations from the standpoint of African people, [ . . . ], as subjects of human experience and not on the fringes of European experiences” (Asante 10).

<sup>20</sup> David Moltke-Hansen notes in the foreword to Pollitzer’s, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, “they show more African influences in their self-expression, behavior, and beliefs than any other long-established large American population group” (xiii).



events, instead of the drudgery that it likely was, where they would gather and fellowship as they worked (15). As an outsider to the Gullah people and only as an observer of the culture, Peterkin misinterpreted and misrepresented the arduous day-to-day tasks conducted by the Gullahs.

Readers might not argue with Peterkin's perception of the women as cheerful--a superficial observation—however, their outward cheer does not remove the tediousness of the tasks. As an outsider, Peterkin was not sensitive to the position and obligations of a matriarch in the Gullah community and family. As an onlooker or visitor to this culture, Peterkin could see only the surface workings of the Gullahs, a vision skewed because of her Eurocentric lens used to decipher the meanings. Readers with a keen understanding of Gullah culture will attribute the frolic of washing clothes to unity amongst the women and children who get together weekly, not only to complete a familial responsibility, but also to uplift one another and express common sentiments. The task system under which they worked, assigning duties to the specific teams, encouraged the strong to help the weak, overall fortifying community relationships. Music also functioned in this manner as Pollitzer notes:

Music from Africa was retained among the Gullahs because it expressed feelings of joy or of grief, promoted physical and spiritual well being, provides escape from drudgery, molded the young and fostered a sense of community. Work songs coordinated tasks and made them lighter, and some secular songs brought relief through satire. (157-158)

The Gullah people resorted to their African culture to cope with adversity they were subjected to in America. Their coping mechanisms ranged from singing and dancing to church and communal gatherings.

The next example of romanticized work in *SSM* goes a little deeper to display more of the community rituals that surround laborious tasks. The narrator recounts:

Bright-turbaned women, deep-chested, ample-hipped and strong, bent  
 women with withered skin and trembling uncertain fingers, little gay  
 chocolate-covered children who played as they worked, moved in a  
 group up and down the long rows, laughing, talking, picking the white  
 locks of cotton and putting them in a crocus sacks swung from neck or  
 shoulder. (59-60)

Peterkin's physical description of the women portrays them as capable of bearing the burden of field work. She employs a tactic that plays on the reader's emotions making her feel less guilty or sympathetic towards the ills of post-slave life. Here she rationalizes the suitability of African Americans to conduct such tedious tasks even if they are women, the weaker sex. Her description necessitates a counter-argument here. The older women are described as "bent women," the result of years of cotton-picking and strenuous labor, which has left their bodies bent and their nerves bad--"trembling uncertain fingers." She also includes "chocolate-covered children," a positive description that appeals to the reader's appetite versus a description of sun-burnt children, a negative description that highlights the ills of slavery associated with extreme exposure to the sun. Overall the characters are depicted as pleasant, rather than suffering as a result of oppression and exploitation.

Peterkin's description of happy workers, laughing, and talking in groups as they pick cotton, is a guise to portray the workers as content with the tasks set before them. In the tradition of African American masking, however, the Gullahs outward portrayal is rooted back to the days of slavery where a guise is put on by the workers in the presence of the overseer to avoid reprimand. Readers can therefore assume the frolic described by Peterkin has nothing to do with secular contentment, but with spiritual contentment, because African beliefs and Christian principles taught Gullahs to bear their burdens inwardly and outwardly display a sense of peace, since the Supreme Being had control over their lives<sup>21</sup>. According to Verdelle, "Peterkin was impressed by the belief systems and the religious practices of plantation blacks" (qtd. in *SSM*, xvi ). Verdelle continues, "Peterkin observed that acquiescing to or ascending the burdens one faced was central to the beliefs of the community of Gullah people. [. . .]. [Peterkin] used the concept of burden bearing: she isolated it and translated it into the novel's action" (qtd. in *SSM*, xvi). Readers may agree that Peterkin observed burden bearing; but one can argue that she did not completely understand this act and its implications on Gullah life.

If Peterkin had such an understanding she would have given equal weight to depictions of both the laborious acts and community fellowships, but instead she substantiates her claim by elaborating on the laborious acts. Also, to portray a spiritual contentment Peterkin could have depicted a rest period for Mary, which God ordains for all mankind. Allowing Mary to rest informs the reader that Peterkin is aware of the fatigue experienced by her characters and not just

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<sup>21</sup> "The Gullah people adapted African beliefs to their own concept of Christianity in a dynamic and creative synthesis that helped them build a community of strength and solidarity that withstood the hardships of life" (Creel 10).

blatantly overlooking this need as if her characters were inhuman—characteristic of a “slave driver.” Scientific research proves that continual physical exertion will cause fatigue, but the Gullahs derived contentment from being in each other’s presence--a physical and psychological place where they could be true to themselves and strengthen each other through their trials and tribulations. Interpreting their happiness means decoding the community discourse, which is encoded in such a manner it could have only been decoded by “true” community members. For example, since Peterkin was only a bystander, she could not truly decipher the coded language of this community. She does not equate the laborious tasks of the black women as time spent in fellowship with one another. As a member of the dominant discourse community Peterkin is aware of and depicts in her novel, the protracted hard labor to which these black women were subjected.

Many scholars who have analyzed Peterkin’s work credit her for attempting to interpret accurately Gullah culture. However, we can also view *SSM* as a desperate attempt by Peterkin to make a name for herself as a white Southern woman, and claim the position as a principal purveyor of genuine Gullah life. Without the title of principal purveyor, Peterkin would be placed in the category with Joel Harris Chandler and Ambrose Gonzales as local colorists. However, as a purveyor of genuine Gullah life she would be set apart and gain national recognition. This type of recognition is what Peterkin sought even at the risk of her personal reputation and that of her family. Harold Thompson’s historical research proves that the novel is taken from the life of a Gullah native, but the story as rendered leaves out elements that would be pejorative towards whites, like the two unmentioned children fathered by Peterkin’s brothers-in-law. The novel once again, depicts a life misunderstood by an outsider. Verdelle notes that *SSM* is indeed a “stunning, beautiful, and memorable novel,” but the images clearly reinforce and re-

inscribe white supremacy; and although Peterkin felt she was rendering an unbiased depiction of Gullah life, she saw the world through the lens of white supremacy---a mark of internal racism---that impaired both blacks and whites (qtd. in *SSM*, xxiv). Toni Morrison states in *Playing in the Dark*:

in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. [. . .] the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even a generous liberal gesture. It is just this concept of literary and scholarly moeurs that has terminated the shelf life of some once extremely well-regarded American authors and blocked access to remarkable insights in their works. (10-11)

Earlier analyses of Peterkin's work ignore the issues of race; but a careful reading of *SSM* and scholarship on the novel reveals that a thorough examination of her "Africanist presence," as Morrison names it, enables readers to distinguish whether Peterkin wrote to be a purveyor of Gullah culture or to promote her personal desires. Peterkin reveals the winning humanity of the Gullah people whom she presumably loves and respects; however, she bears the misleading designation "interpreter of the Negro." The novel reveals elements of internal racism that permeate her text, and in essence misrepresent the Gullah people and culture. Readers will then agree with Sterling Brown when he writes of Peterkin, "if critics would refuse to call her the interpreter of the Negro, and realize that she writes of a very limited segment of life from a very personal point of view, they would do a service to her and to their own reputations" ("Negro Characters" 201). Julia Peterkin lived in a community filled with Gullah-Geechee folks but she was not a member of their discourse community and is therefore not an "interpreter of the Negro" nor the Gullah.

### **CHAPTER III: Gloria Naylor's Outsider-Insider Voice in the Gullah-Geechee Community of *Mama Day***

As a first generation regionally removed Southerner, Gloria Naylor was a product of a Southern home environment where she was privy to the coded language forms of African American culture. Naylor's upbringing coupled with the knowledge she gained from African American Studies equipped Naylor with the skill to decode and encode African American language forms to convey historical, social, and political conditions through her text. Naylor, like Peterkin, situates her novel on the remote Sea Islands, with all African American characters but Naylor's legitimate depictions of Gullah culture contradict Peterkin's stereotypical depictions. Naylor's resolve and literary success is a product of her Southern heritage and upbringing

Gloria Naylor was born in the midst of segregation to Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin Naylor on January 25, 1950. She was a voracious reader from an early age who would soon become a household name among other literary greats. Naylor's family grew up in the segregated South, but her life and works have a common theme of "transcending boundaries." First, her birth in the North marked a fresh start for her life, since her mother refused to rear her child in the segregated South, which offered little opportunity for educational growth and advancement (Wilson 1). Although Naylor grew up in New York, she recalls having a Southern home, eating Southern food, speaking Southern language, embracing Southern values, and living by Southern codes of behavior (Fowler 4). Stories of her family history were no different from other Southern blacks who experienced the ills of slavery and the post-slavery South (Fowler 1). A great revelation in Naylor's life and thinking were the stories of her "great-aunts and their exploits [that] helped shape Naylor's sense of unusual possibilities for female independence and

autonomy” (Fowler 1-2). Female independence and autonomy are two important reoccurring themes in her novels, all which reemphasize African American matriarchal responsibilities.

Naylor’s maternal family was fortunate to have enough money to buy two apartment buildings in Harlem, where various members of their family, to include the Naylor’s, would live at different intervals. Naylor recalls apartments “314 and 316” as a weekend mecca for family and friends to share stories and relax after a hard week’s work (Fowler 4). These gatherings also gave her a glimpse into Southern community rituals, and more specifically into the value of the spoken word or “Nommo.” It was here “Naylor learned that spoken language was more powerful because it could change the meaning of a given word or set of words with a mere shift in voice, inflection, or tone” (Wilson 5). It was not until high school that Naylor began to appreciate the written word and its ongoing struggle in echoing the richness of spoken language. At this juncture, Naylor began to understand the value of language as a powerful tool.

In 1963, after much deliberation, Naylor’s parents made a decision to move their family to Queens, New York, a more racially diverse area. This year marked a tumultuous time in the United States as it was a period of the civil rights reform. The country had also witnessed the assassination of Medgar Evers and President John F. Kennedy as well as the 16<sup>h</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Although she was only thirteen at the time, these events and her experiences in Queens increased Naylor’s awareness of racism in America. She recalls, “that’s when I first began to understand that I was different and that that difference meant something negative” (Fowler 5). Aware that her daughter was experiencing emotional discomfort with worldly and personal changes, Alberta gave Naylor a diary to capture her deepest feelings. It

was also around this time that the Naylor's began to teach their children to look within themselves for self-validation and to let no one place limits on them (Fowler 6).

The chaotic events described above and Naylor's emotional response to them led her to commit, after high school, to a seven year missionary excursion as a Jehovah's Witness. Through her missionary duties Naylor sought to further her understanding of people and life (Wilson 5). This commitment marks Naylor's second transcendence, where her life lessons came in the form of spiritual development. While witnessing, Naylor was sent back to her Southern roots of North Carolina and Florida, areas heavily populated with African Americans also a part of the slave trade which provided her with a true glimpse of Southern living outside of her family ties. Fowler notes Naylor's years of Witnessing further strengthened her value system and functioned as a period of gestation for her artistic sensibility (Fowler ii, 12). Her profound understanding and belief in spiritual realms is reflected in her novels through references to faith in things unseen and the importance of balance between man and nature. In 1975, Naylor realized she had reached her level of maturity as a Witness. In order to pursue her literary aspirations, she found it necessary to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses and pursue college.

Naylor then shifted into the literary arena with her first short story published in *Essence* magazine (1981) and, later, with six well-received novels to date, all which defy convention and relay the common African American experience. With her monetary advance for *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor decided to take a trip to Algeciras, in Southern Spain, with the expectation of feeling exhilarated and inspired as her white literary predecessors had experienced. Instead, she was harassed for traveling alone and returned feeling more disconcerted over the double standard forced on women. This experience led Naylor to truly



admire women who defied convention, not to the point of self-destruction, but for self-affirmation (Wilson, 6-7). Reared to be self-defining, Naylor adapted this attribute as a defining prototype in her novels. The three influential occurrences described above proved to Naylor she could be the master of her reality as an African American female just as white novelists before her had done. As master, Naylor trespassed over the defined boundaries of the literary field and carved out a niche, the rich tales of black women who will not be subsumed or completely defined by white American standards (Kelley xiii). *Mama Day* details the lives of such women.

Naylor's inspiration to write *Mama Day* came from her family. She recalls listening to conversations between her mother, who believed in occult powers, and her father, who was reluctant to buy into "superstition," and wanted to reflect this dual interpretation in the characters of Cocoa and George. Naylor wrote *Mama Day* from a desire to write about what she believed in--the power of love and magic. Naylor states, "*Mama Day* is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles" (qtd. in *Conversations* 121). Reared to believe that a person's greatest potential must first be realized within, Naylor wrote *Mama Day* as a testament to her belief in the potential of African American cultural assertion and reclamation.

As an African American Studies Ph.D., Naylor understood the connection of the South with its African roots; and she claims the South to be "the closest we'll ever come to Africa" (qtd. in *Conversations* 158). This fact, coupled with research done by leading linguists and anthropologists, i.e. Lorenzo Dow Turner, Melville Herskovits, and Charles Joyner, notes the coastal region spanning from Jacksonville, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida (also known as the Geechie/Gullah Nation) as having retained the most African features in language and

culture than any other community or sect in America. Fascinated by this culture and its intrinsic link to Africa, Naylor conducted extensive research on the culture and spent approximately three weeks on St. Helena Island in the home of a Gullah native so she could provide an accurate depiction. This visit gave her an inside look into the culture which she combined with her knowledge of Southern African American culture to create a provocative yet reaffirming novel. A textual analysis of Naylor's use of cultural memory and lineage, matriarchal presence, and conjure and other ways of knowing prove that Gloria Naylor celebrates African cosmology to liberate her characters from the veil of white hegemony that has distorted the significance of Gullah culture. In resurrecting such a culture through her characters, Naylor found it necessary to return to the southern isolated coastal regions, where African ways have remained relatively intact. These isolated regions allow Naylor and readers to evoke cultural memory that has sustained African Americans and Gullah culture since being brought to America.

### ***Mama Day***<sup>22</sup>

In accordance with African American and Gullah cultural norms which have helped to sustain their communities, Naylor's writing not only incorporates the African American tradition of call-and-response but is a response itself. The call was made by the white dominated literary arena of the mid-1900s, which depicted the dominate culture's reality and omitted the realities of African Americans, more specifically black women. The response was made by the scores of African American women involved in the black arts and black nationalist movements, like Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker and

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<sup>22</sup> All references from *Mama Day* are quoted from the version listed in the bibliography; therefore, the title is omitted from the citation.

Gloria Naylor, movements that deemed it time to represent accurately the realities which had sustained the African American community for decades. These women drew their inspiration and works from African American cultural memory which is a source of racial empowerment and houses knowledge and the wisdom of survival.

To evoke cultural memory in relation to *Mama Day* it is important to understand that this novel is not based on American principles. As the narrator stresses at the beginning of the novel, “America ain’t entered the question at all when it come to our land [. . .]. And we wasn’t even Americans when we got it—was slaves” (5). This statement and the remainder of the opening passage instructs readers in how to read the story correctly, which Tucker reiterates by stating, “to achieve a correct understanding, readers are cautioned, we must open ourselves to a distinctly African, distinctly female, angle of vision, in a sense, we must develop, like Mama Day, an ability to read signs [. . .] which is [. . .] an important component of African belief systems” (8). In essence you have to adapt cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of this communities discourse to understand the story and culture.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor deciphers the coded discourse of Gullah culture delivering multi-dimensional characterizations and settings that legitimizes the authenticity of Gullah culture and aid in its preservation. Outside of reading signs, knowledge of an individual’s grassroots or lineage is also an important aspect of this text and African American history. It is an African American cultural belief that, “you don’t know where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been” (Goodwine 80). Despite a past of subjugation and torture, African Americans have persevered. Through storytelling, they remain cognizant of their history and ensure cultural memory persists in younger generations.

### **Cultural Setting: Cultural Memory & Lineage**

*Mama Day* is a communal text that reconstructs and perpetuates Willow Springs, or more specifically the Day family's mythic past, in order to better understand the community's past and present it in a historic and ritual continuum. Here, Naylor creates a platform for readers to participate in celebration, in ritual, and in imparting the moral lessons of Gullah culture (Jackson qtd in Ervin 312). *Mama Day* is an attestation to cultural memory as it opens with a map of the island, the Day family tree, and Sapphira Wade's conditions of sale. These three items draw the reader into the history of this island and family who unconventionally recognizes a female as its head. The map of the island gives premise to the location, which again is the Southern location where blacks exemplified and retained the purest form of African cultural attributes of all descendants in American (Kly qtd. in *Legacy Ibo Landing* 20).

The Day family tree recognizes Sapphira Wade at the top and six generations later ends with Ophelia (Cocoa). The family tree also dictates the structure of the novel, with the tale of Sapphira Wade opening the novel and the story of Cocoa ending the novel. Moreover, the family tree recalls two important references for African American culture: lineage and religion. An African American's lineage is a very contentious topic. This is so because when Africans were brought to America their family nucleus was disassembled: fathers were sold to other plantations and children were taken out of the comfort of their mother's care. This savage treatment set out to destroy the African American family, but the Day family tree is a testament of the resolve of this unique clan that at times resorted to violence to secure their position as humans with inalienable rights. The story of Sapphira Wade Day's "18 & 23s" is such a testament. "18 & 23s" is the communities' coded discourse used in this reference to signal Sapphira's use of conjure which led to Bascombe Wade's death and the Days' subsequent land

ownership. It is a known fact that the Gullah people did not consent easily to slavery. As Kly notes, the Gullahs were among the first slaves to led successful and unsuccessful revolts against enslavement<sup>23</sup> (qtd. in *Legacy Ibo Landing* 20). A widely known Gullah folktale of revolt is the “Ibo Landing” where enslaved Africans who rejected the idea of slavery--when brought to the American shores--chose to march into the water and drown or fly over the water back to Africa (Pollitzer 147). This staunch rejection of slavery is reproduced in *Mama Day* in its allusion to Sapphira leaving by wind and Ophelia, Cocoa’s great-grandmother, leaving by water (152). The references to “leaving by wind and water” act as codes for an African American experience that may not be known by persons outside the African American discourse community, and they also help authenticate the cultural history of the novel.

The Gullahs were also very spiritual people. Considering Naylor’s history as a Jehovah’s Witness, the incorporation of the family tree in the preface is a deliberate biblical correlation. The tree both emphasizes the importance of religion in the lives of African Americans and alludes to Sapphira Wade’s God-like position in the community. As the narrator notes under the family tree, “God rested on the seventh day and so would she. Hence the family’s last name [Day].”

Naming is another important ritual in the African American community because Africans were stripped of their birth names when brought to America. It was common for a family group to rename itself when freed from the subjugation of whites. Sapphira does just that when she denounces the last name Wade and assigns her family the name “Day” which is also a coded

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<sup>23</sup> The revolts have been coined by Muriel Miller Branch as the “Gullah Wars.” These revolts refer to the ongoing and consistent Gullah resistance to enslavement as manifested not simply in insurgency but also in incendiary activities, poisonings, sabotage and flight (Goodwine 45).

term to strengthen the resolve of this family's lineage and set them as the final approving authority for community matters. Renaming the family does not negate the reality of slavery, which will always have a residual effect on the lives of African Americans, but it affords the ideation of power over the future. To reflect the reality of slavery, Naylor includes Sapphira Wade's "Conditions of Sale" or what may now be considered a bill of sales.

The presence of the Conditions of Sale allows Naylor to address the horrific reality of slavery that the dominant culture readily evades. Not wanting to remember their race was the main proponents of slavery and under their watch horrific acts towards blacks took place. For the sake of African American cultural memory, it is important that these acts are presented and addressed to include the sexual exploitation of black women, which the narrator addresses subtly by noting "some of my brothers looked like me and some didn't [. . .] in them times it was common to have a blue-eyed child playing next to his dark sister" (151). The Wade blood that ran through the veins of the Day clan draws resentment at times from Cocoa, but she is quickly reminded that she has the benefit of knowing her family line, which is unusual for African Americans of her time. Helen Christol notes that "establishing one's filiations, or one's genealogy, even if it implies uncovering a story of violence and rape, is a structuring and ethical process" which is necessary for African American cultural memory and affirmation (qtd. in Felton 162). The novel's remote setting is important not only for its African cultural memory but also to emphasis Naylor's Africanist presence in the novel.

To take it a step further, it is important to note that Naylor believes integration does not work--she cites the Civil Rights Movement as a testament of this fact. As a result, Naylor suggests that black people build grassroots organizations to help black communities that she projects in *Mama Day*. She goes on to state, "I believe assimilation can be extremely dangerous.

It does not exist in fact in America and to buy into it is to hinder your own psychological health” (qtd. in *Conversations* 108). Naylor’s concern with an individual’s psychological health comes from the façade of integration and equality that clouds the view of those who are subversively being discriminated against. Naylor’s understanding of this fact is acknowledged early in the novel when Cocoa makes a comment, in mixed company, about longing for the days when racial lines were clearly articulated—as seen with white versus black public facilities--instead of integration’s veiled claims of being an “equal opportunity agency” (19). This type of psychological thinking is what helped Naylor choose the setting of *Mama Day*, a segregated black community which draws its strength from its literal and figurative connection to its grassroots.

The Day family as well as the other Willow Springs community members know the story of their past and acknowledge their difference as their strength. Through communal storytelling, Naylor uses the narrator to chart the actual and mythical journey of Willow Springs residents demonstrating their escape and survival from the physical and spiritual clutches of slavery even despite the odds. Gale Jackson notes that this act of witnessing or storytelling is a ritual, a performance that remembers, encodes and perpetuates the possibility of that survival (Jackson qtd. in Ervin 315). The act of storytelling in the novel as a source of cultural memory garners pride. Although set in the late twentieth-century, Willow Springs residents are in no rush to assimilate with the wider culture from across the bridge and have remained self-sufficient and autonomous with their old practices. Naylor demonstrates--through the story of Reema’s son--that even when challenged by those who have embraced the wider white culture, their ways do not prosper in the black world of Willow Springs.

The story of Reema's son's pursuit to "put Willow Springs on the map" demonstrates the importance of imparting cultural memory to descendants so that they are not confused by hegemonic ideology that discredits other cultural distinctions. Neither Reema nor her son took the time to learn the important history of Willow Springs. This history would have helped her son decipher the ulterior motives of the taught ideology when he left for college to get what "supposed to be passing for an education" (8). Instead, he was gullible and produced a book that essentially called the Willow Springs' natives 'dumb.' The narrator notes,

Not that he called it being dumb, mind you, called it 'asserting our cultural identity,' 'inverting hostile social and political parameters.' Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside-down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English [. . .] while we kept on calling things ass-backwards. (8)

The denigrating thoughts about the Willow Springs residents are partially a result of Reema's son's lack of cultural knowledge which is not learned in schools but imparted orally or visually by elders.

The Willow Springs residents, confident in and aware of their history, use the example of Reema's son to substantiate their beliefs that the folks beyond the bridge have clandestine motives to discredit or take ownership over Gullah culture. As a result of this acknowledgement the residents understand the importance of reinforcing cultural memory so that when younger generations left for college they would remain aware of its significance. The passage above, presented within the first ten pages of the novel, also points to the importance of personal



investigation; if individuals simply accept the notions presented without an understanding of cultural differences, races will continue to be marginalized. The opening pages of the novel, with the strategic placement of the quoted statement, caution readers to interpret the novel by acutely listening to not only what is said but also what is not said.

White hegemonic ways of imagining reality and ordering experience are simply insufficient in Willow Springs, as the narrator states, “It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge” (3). “A whole new meaning to both them words” reflects the coded language that permeates *Mama Day* which requires a thorough understanding to this community’s discourse forms to grasp the underlining meaning of this text and its culture. The slave woman alluded to here is Sapphira Wade, Naylor’s epitome of transcendence as she claims freedom from slavery for her descendants, and land for those who had been taken from their native land. She also claims a top position in her community outside the bonds of patriarchy. The lineage of Willow Springs matriarchy is passed from Sapphira, to Mama Day, the oldest of Sapphira’s female descendants.

### **Female Voice: Matriarchy**

Matriarchy, an important aspect of African American life, is a paradigm on the fringes of Western patriarchal emphasis. Western ideology situates men at the head of society, therefore, relegating women to follow their lead. In African cultures the women take an equivalent position inside the home or community to positions assumed by men outside the home. Community matriarchs are the teachers that impart cultural memory to younger generations and Mama Day is the “Big Momma” of Willow Springs. She takes care of everyone on the island.

Mama Day constantly supports her community, ensuring they remain content with their agrarian way of life; however, she also serves as a bridge between the culturally different worlds of the mainland and the island. Mama Day embraces and exudes what Naylor defines as a “dualistic reality” which allows people of African descent to embrace both African and Western cultural norms. Dualistic reality allows Mama Day to converge African and Western thought patterns to find the equilibrium necessary to survive in America. One important aspect redefined under this reality is family. For African descendants, the definition of family extends beyond the nuclear family to include community elders and adopted cousins (qtd. in *Conversations* 108-109). This definition of family makes Willow Springs an intimate community with minimal crime as the narrator notes, “the folks here take care of their own, if there is a rare crime, there’s a speedy judgment. And it ain’t like the law beyond the bridge that’s dished out according to likes and dislikes, and can change with times” (79). As the community matriarch, Mama Day is a maternal leader who bonds with other female characters to help them garner a sense of pride and autonomy.

Naylor’s focus on the matriarch emphasizes the appreciation and celebration of strong black women in Willow Springs. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Outlaw Culture*, recognizes the significant elements of West African culture that were retained by black women in America which gives authority to their roles as “othermothers” and strong maternal leaders (115-123). As “othermothers” the women of Willow Springs are a constant source of support for one another through childbirth, child rearing, and in the adverse instances of miscarriages and marital infidelity. Mama Day’s role and respect in the community comes from her genuine concern for others and her knowledge of “roots or conjuring.” Her community interaction results in platonic friendships, or what Hurston calls “kissin-friends where women confide in their friends for

mutual trust, loyalty and understanding; where talk is real and purposeful” (Patterson 21). The concept of “real and purposeful talk” alludes to the bond that language forms between individuals of distinct discourse communities which, many times will include the coded language of that community. Bernice and Mama Day become kissin-friends when, outside of Ambush (Bernice’s husband), Bernice confides in Mama Day her desire to have a child. Mama Day then secretly shows Bernice techniques and gives her herbal medicine to help her become fertile. Child bearing is an important and revered aspect of African American rituals; and although every woman does not have children, it is a natural occurrence for them to parent the children of others as what this discourse community would call “othermothers.” Mama Day does not have children, but as the community matriarch, she understands Bernice’s position, being married and wanting to have a child; so even when Bernice’s mother-in-law fails to support her, Mama Day, her kissin-friend, is there to support her.

In addition, Collins asserts that female bonding is evident in an “ethic of caring” also derived from African culture (215). This “ethic of caring” embraces both familial ties and platonic friendships, which Cocoa demonstrates through her understanding of her unbreakable bond with Mama Day and Abigail when she tells George, “My bond with them was such that even if hate and rage were to tear us totally apart, they knew I was always theirs” (177). An “ethic of caring” allows black women to look beyond an individual’s offenses (the concrete) and continue to have faith in their unconditional mutual bond of support. Such positive identifiers for black womanhood are dismissed in the dominant culture’s interpretation and replaced by images of mammies and Jezebels, which only support the dominant culture’s systems of race, class and gender oppression (Collins 70-78). Naylor prudently renders affirming images that shatter debasing images of mammies and Jezebels, as those portrayed in Julia Peterkin’s *SSM*, to

present a reaffirming work that is centered on strong multi-dimensional women influenced by African tradition. Cocoa, Mama Day's great niece, is the epitome of such a woman, as she has evolved beyond the small town of Willow Springs, but has retained her cultural memory to remain grounded in Southern culture.

Through the character of Cocoa, Naylor presents the next generation of Day matriarchs. Cocoa represents transcendence and self-affirmation for all women, especially those from Willow Springs. She, keeping with Mama Day's role in the community, acts as the continuing link between Willow Springs and cultures far beyond the bridge. Her survival in the big city of New York proves that the "antiquated" teachings of Willow Springs remain applicable, even in the face of the dominant culture's impinging ideology. Although surviving in New York, Cocoa represents the contemporary African American woman who struggles to find success in capitalist America. The voice of Willow Springs serves as Cocoa's refuge; her letters from home and her routine visits are sources of affirmation that convey to her she is someone with a rich history and cultural background.

Cocoa's constant connection to family also reveals Naylor's motive in reclaiming autonomy over the African American female voice. Kara Holloway notes:

their return to the word as a generative source—a source of textual power that both structures story and absorbs its cultural legacy—is a return to the power of the word itself. It is a recovery of text through the literary and linguistic activity of recursion—a refocusing of meaning back to the semantic and syntactic structures that have assured the unity between meaning and source. (qtd. In Ervin 329)

Cocoa's recursion to Willow Springs is her source of power and strength. Naylor's recursion to Willow Springs is her strategic technique to impart African American female power and cultural legacy, which will insert the voice and affirm the history that the Western world has conspired to suppress and deny (Reed qtd. in Ervin 330).

### **Coded Ways Known: Conjure & Other Ways of Knowing**

In *Mama Day*, conjure equates to lineage and legacy which provides a way to recuperate histories and forge communities (Lorenz qtd in Stave 153). African Americans are known for having a rich and vibrant oral tradition which is the primary source for their history preservation. As alluded to earlier in this study, African American speech encompasses more than verbal communication. African American speech includes the coalescing of myth and cultural memory. Holloway notes that, in the texts of African American women, speech is a, "vehicle for aligning real and imaginative events in both the present and the past and for dissolving the temporal and spatial bridges between them. [. . .]. It is a dynamic entity that (re)members community, connects it to the voices from which it has been severed, and forces it out of the silence prescribed by a scriptocentric historicism" (qtd. in Ervin 331). For Gullahs, a diverse and innovative group of people, unspoken acts and abstract concepts constitute a form of community discourse. By decoding this discourse, Naylor adds depth to the Gullah characters and culture portrayed in her novel. Conjure, a form of intangible language or belief system, forms the premise for *Mama Day*. For the purposes of this study, conjure is evaluated as a form of metaphorical language. Naylor develops a binary between literal language and metaphorical language through signifyin(g) which allows her to communicate across and within cultural and epistemic boundaries" (qtd. In Stave 133).

Throughout *Mama Day*, Naylor challenges the beliefs of the characters and readers, weighing the sensibilities of their upbringing and African ways of knowing against western doctrine, which is based on visual logic. Facts or beliefs in the novel, although not blatantly verbalized, are not often challenged because it is situated upon a historic belief system, based on the memory of events experienced by an elder, which is passed down generations as known facts not to be challenged, but adhered to. This notion is contextualized when Naylor states:

Like Sapphira Wade's name is never literally said, but she is the guiding spirit for the island. And they know without quite knowing. So we're talking here about a historical memory, a racial memory, which I believe is perhaps as important as if not more important than a conscious memory. She does not live in the part of memory that we can use to form words. She goes beyond the conscious memory. (qtd. in Montgomery 58)

This type of unspoken acknowledgment is crucial for understanding the coded language of the text and Gullah culture. Not until recently has Gullah history and traditions been accurately captured in written form by the purveyors of the culture in efforts to negate texts from earlier period which misrepresented the culture. It takes skill and a keen understanding of all nuances of forms of Gullah language to accurately capture it in words; and even then it is not specifically what is said, but how it is said. African American speech communities are constructed by their historical, political, cultural, and social life. Whether using pitch or indirectness, semantic extension or grammatical reading, speakers imbue language with their historical, social, and cultural experience. These speech acts also reinforce the fact that African American language features and verbal repertoires occur within a cultural framework based on African and African American norms and practices. These language styles and practices combine to mark the

African American speech community as distinct across generation, gender, and class markers. This is the case with coded terminology of “18 & 23” in the novel which the narrator simply states “is just our way of saying something” (7). For a community member with an understanding of the community’s cultural framework the meaning of “18 & 23” was understood but for someone like Reema’s boy, not familiar with his cultural history nor willing to listen to those possessing cultural knowledge, misinterpretations are bound to take place. As he concludes, “18 & 23 wasn’t 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map” (7-8). This misinterpretation reaffirms Morgan’s notion that African American language “is neither simply a variety nor a style [nor just the words spoken], but a bold and elusive instance of the power of human beings to cultivate language in order to ensure that they have cultural and historical memory, control over their identity, and a way to reflect on and make sense of their daily lives” (7).

Outside the language that transcends understanding there is another aspect of conjure, the gift of “second sight” or interpretation, which Mama Day also embodies. Readers not in tune with their inner-being or intuition may call her interpretations a coincidence or superstition, but the Willow Springs community acknowledges these modes of understanding or coded forms of language as the gift of conjure or African ways of knowing. Mama Day can make sense of everyone’s daily life because of her unique gift of interpretation which allows her to read a person’s body language to attain the complete unadulterated story. The narrator notes that while viewing a television show, Mama Day would sometimes turn the volume off and just interpret the body language of the audience. Through the interpretation of body language, Mama Day is able to tell which ladies secretly gave up their babies for adoption, which fathers have daughters

making pornographic movies, and which homes were shattered by Vietnam, drugs, or divorce (38). The gift of interpretation is given to those who take the time to calm their daily lives and observe the world around them because interpretation tells a story before words can be spoken. Mama Day's gift of interpretation is described in the novel when a chill runs through her heart telling her that Cocoa is not bringing her husband to Willow Springs as planned, and when she feels the cool breeze on her face and the earth softening under her feet that inform her Spring is coming (138). Regardless of how simple these affirmations may seem to persons that rely on logic, they are respected and highly valued as ordained gifts in African culture.

Western ideology relegates conjure and alternate ways of knowing to the supernatural practices of primitive cultures; and it is, therefore, not of the esteem equated to Western medical developments and logic. Tucker claims:

Naylor is taking some risks with the subject, yet I argue that conjure addresses the undervaluation of African medicinal practices and belief systems, even as it comments on the subject of power—not only in relation to medicine, but also to ancestry, religion, and finally to language and signifying practices. (qtd. in Felton 143)

A key word in Tucker's quotation is "power." The desire to rein supreme has always been the driving force behind Western exploits including the Atlantic slave trade. In efforts to maintain Western hegemony, it is logical for Western thought to be placed in opposition to African thought. Having conducted research in African American Studies and Southern/ Sea Island culture, Naylor understood conjure as a thriving practice that provided viable answers to life's questions just as western practices have done. Hence, contrary to considering addressing conjure



as a risk, readers should consider Naylor “womanish”<sup>24</sup> enough to transcend western paradigms by accurately telling her story and portraying conjure, a contested Africanism, in the Gullah community of Willow Springs. Felton notes in African culture:

Conjurers are said to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjurer inherits their aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Conjurer women often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities, and conjurers are, almost without exception, especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight. (Felton 146)

Naylor understands the pejorative beliefs Westerners hold toward acts of conjure or hoodoo. To delineate the positive effects of conjuring Naylor situates Mama Day’s character and life giving conjuring acts against the other characters that also possess the gift. Dr. Buzzard exploits his conjuring traits for monetary gain and Ruby uses her conjuring traits for personal gain and evil doing. Dr. Buzzard represents the Western-embellished notion of conjure with his eerie attire and obscure housing/business location. Mama Day is not oblivious to Dr. Buzzard’s scams and warns him, “you fool these folks in Willow Springs, [by changing your name to imitate an actual conjurer] but you can’t change the fact that you still nothing but an out-and-out bootlegger and con man” (51). Ruby’s conjuring is not directly for monetary gain but to secure intimate

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<sup>24</sup> Referred to by Alice Walker in her definition of “womanism.” Walker uses the term “womanish” which comes from the “black folk expression to female children, ‘You acting womanish.’ Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (xi).

relationships with the men of Willow Springs. Although these characters use their gift of conjure for different purposes, some of which could cause harm, Mama Day still respects their position in the community and understands that because the other conjurers exist she must counter their wrong-doings.

To revive the conjure woman in Western thought, Naylor inscribes Mama Day with all the hereditary traits of African conjure women. Mama Day's mantle of power is established early in the novel where the narrator notes, "cause if Mama Day say no, everybody say no. There's 18 & 23 [conjure], and there's 18 & 23—and nobody was gonna trifle with Mama Day's, 'cause she know how to use it—her being a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade, piled on the fact of springing from the seventh son of a seventh son—uh, uh" (6). This statement alludes to the conjuring abilities of others in comparison to Mama Day's abilities but the narrator makes it clear that Mama Day's lineage makes her the most gifted. Although, Naylor legitimates conjure, she also acknowledges Western medical advancements for its benefits. In the scene where Bernice takes stolen fertility pills and becomes sick, the narrator states, "For years Miranda [Mama Day] and Brian Smithfield [a doctor practicing over the bridge] have had what you'd call a working relationship [. . .] But each knew their limitations and where to draw the line" (84). Naylor repeatedly "draws the line" in *Mama Day* to bridge two cultures that of Willow Springs (African) and across the bridge (Western).

Naylor formulates a novel that features a hybrid of African and American culture, the Gullah culture. Through her depictions, Naylor emphasizes the importance of cultural memory and lineage which allows her characters and readers to remain connected to their ancestry. She restores African American women to a central leadership role in their communities which is vital

for the community's affirmation and assertion. Finally, Naylor provides cultural knowledge to substantiate abstract occurrences which expose her characters and readers to new ways of interpreting life. Gloria Naylor understands the coded language of the Gullah culture and she represents her understanding through the discourse forms presented in *Mama Day*.

### **CONCLUSION: One Culture-Two Visual Prisms**

Within different literary periods, Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor redefine what it means to be women, as they vibrantly render different versions of Gullah culture. They share histories from a woman-centered point of view that reinserts female speaking voices in an ongoing process of self-healing for their communities and reclamation of a history and culture that could have well been lost. Because they write through different lenses, according to time and race, their speaking voices do not resonate with the same moral fiber. Furthermore, research does not convey acknowledgement of Peterkin's work by Naylor.

Julia Peterkin writes from an early twentieth-century white woman's point of view, which relegates Gullah culture to primitive cultures without a meaningful history. Conversely, Gloria Naylor writes from a late twentieth-century black woman's point of view, which resurrects what Peterkin has relegated. Naylor celebrates Gullah culture with representations of strong multi-dimensional characters influenced by African tradition. Naylor's representations are also defiant to Western ways of knowing and totally autonomous of white rule. The major themes in each work show each author's dichotomous view of Gullah culture. Peterkin's major theme, illicit sexual relations, negatively portrays Gullah women while Naylor's major theme, spirituality, extends the Eurocentric definition and celebrates African ways of knowing and spiritual practices.

Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor's contradictory depictions are a result of the lens through which they each place value on American life and consequently how they view African American cosmology. Peterkin's view is through a Eurocentric lens that looks for concrete examples to validate an individual's existence. Concrete validation, which is attained through individual capital gain and material wealth, is marginally attained in Peterkin's text and consequently she renders important aspects of the Gullah experience as insignificant. Conversely, Naylor's view is through an Afrocentric lens that seeks validation in both concrete and abstract workings. From an Afrocentric view, abstract validation is considered a more resilient source of validation because it requires a strong willed and confident person to situate his or her understanding in something they cannot see or touch. Naylor's view transcends Eurocentric limitations and redefines her reality of life on the Sea Islands, which allows her to maintain black cultural identity in the face of attempts by hegemonic forces to order, control and define black people.

Naylor presents Cocoa as a practical, multi-dimensional character able to abide in both the Eurocentric world across the bridge and the Afrocentric world of Willow Springs; but ultimately, Cocoa will have to decide if she will be the bridge and accept her lineage as the next matriarch of Willow Springs. Naylor's depiction of Cocoa liberates Gullah women, allowing them to exist in both worlds (Willow Springs and beyond the bridge). Conversely, Peterkin's work isolates the women on the island, depicts their way of life and understanding as insufficient which overall rendering flat, one-dimensional characters. Unlike Peterkin who negatively reflects conjure, against standards of Western spirituality, Naylor's belief in conjure adds an additional dimension to her characters and plot.

By reconstituting the conjure woman, Naylor subverts Western ways of understanding the black experience. Readers can therefore interpret *Mama Day* as a novel of transcendence from, subversion to, and signifyin(g) on eurocentricism. Naylor signifies on the Western notion that Sea Island culture and language were the result of ignorance and unyielding African ways. She remarkably recaptures the heart of the black experience in America by replacing “white history” with her own story, which celebrates African culture and the black woman. Naylor uses these racialized concepts to enact what Baker notes as a “unifying and forceful sign of difference in the service of the ‘Other’ [. . .] to reverse negative implications and use racial discourse in affirming ways” (qtd. in Keating 913). To use racial discourse in affirming ways allow readers to conclude that through the decoding and encoding of discourse forms Naylor reverses the negative stereotypes depicted in Peterkin’s work by resurrecting multi-dimensional characters with depth and intrinsic value.

The authors also address similar topics, but they render different interpretations. For instance, the role of church is addressed as central to an individual’s community standing and overall communal uplift in each novel. As an onlooker of Gullah/African American culture, Peterkin understands only the surface structure and workings of the church; therefore, she assumes the word of the church leaders is the final authority and she misinterprets or exaggerates the parishioners worship style. Peterkin’s misinterpretation creates shallow characters, dismisses the fact that the church leaders have faults, and mocks their religious practices which tend to be more interactive than other practices. As a member of the African American community, Naylor understands the internal workings of the black church and she places God as the supreme adjudicator, she places the church leaders on the same level with the parishioners, and she extends spirituality outside the realms of Christianity. Naylor’s treatment of spirituality depicts

wisdom as sent from God to each individual and not solely to the church leaders. This wisdom derived from God gives all community members a broader knowledge base and adds depth to their characterizations.

In *SSM*, community members were read out of the church, but because of the shallow characters or Peterkin's shallow understanding, all the community members agreed upon the release. Peterkin's community members do not have the acumen to make this determination on their own and simply follow the church leaders' judgment. Conversely, in Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, the community matriarch does not attend church services regularly and she voices her dissent about the decisions of the church leaders stating, "I think the Lord sits high and He looks low, Pearl. And sometimes. He's gotta look a little lower than other times" (94). This passage can be interpreted to mean, men think church leaders are above reproach, but it simply requires a thorough evaluation of them to reveal their faults. The ability for each individual to make decisions adds the human cognitive trait to these characters giving them more depth. From the presented examples it is obvious that both works seek to present an apparently favorable picture of Gullah culture. Unfortunately, the coded language of the culture itself and the coded language in the texts present two different interpretations, which the writers may or may not have been aware of, that may lead a reader to consider Peterkin's work racially biased.

This study has, therefore, analyzed two texts by two authors from different racial and cultural backgrounds to convey a coded language pertinent to understanding the historical, social, and political conditions portrayed through their texts. After a critical literary examination, readers should identify the hidden racial overtones in Julia Peterkin's *SSM* that can be attributed to what Brown notes as a technique to "keep the Negro in place." These racial overtones not only reinforce existing negative stereotypes, but they also conceal the true story

and value of Gullah culture. Gloria Naylor represents a generation of African American writers that have become more articulate and socially aware of the condescending depictions of black characters cultivated by preceding white writers. As a portrait of the African American Southern experience, Naylor's *Mama Day* is a powerfully more persuasive and authentic novel of African-American culture and its variations.

This study shows that discourse forms are social constructions used to “promote internal cohesion and provide an ethnic and national identity” (Schmid 9). Julia Peterkin uses Gullah culture and discourse to “other” African Americans which in essence situates whiteness as the standard of evaluation. Peterkin uses what Aldon Nielsen terms “frozen metaphors, or stereotypes of ‘blacks’ that reinforce an essentially racist mode of thought, privileging people of European descent while relegating people of African descent to an inferior position” (qtd. in Keating 906). Conversely, Naylor uses African American discourse forms to celebrate this unique and thriving African American culture. Naylor emulates Morrison as she “moves beyond language, even while working through it, to incorporate significance beyond the denotation of words, to render experience and emotion” (Rigney 7). Naylor's rendition of discourse is important in the depiction of Gullah culture because words are not always adequate in relaying the true story, it is sometimes necessary to rely on metaphysical understandings. To accurately interpret the works of Peterkin and Naylor critical discourse analysis is imperative to limn the source of discursive power.

Overall, through the evaluation of Peterkin's *SSM* and Naylor's *Mama Day*, readers are urged to read all texts critically to ascertain the racial objectives of the writer, whether to promote or denigrate. It has been customary for readers to explore racial texts of non-white writers while ignoring those of white writers, but to advocate African American cultural

assertion, reclamation, and affirmation that broaden pedagogical perspectives and applications for Gullah and African American English (AAE) speakers it is necessary to critically read blackness as well as whiteness. Having read and evaluated both “whiteness and blackness” in the texts of Julia Peterkin and Gloria Naylor, it can be candidly stated that Peterkin’s “mother tongue” lacks ownership and she fails to accurately aid in the preservation of Gullah culture. Conversely, Naylor takes possession of the “word” as a cultural and gendered legacy to aid in the understanding of Gullah culture and extend this understanding to foster understandings of other Southern African American cultures. Thus Naylor ultimately successfully bridges the gap between Eurocentric and Afrocentric thought all while celebrating blackness.



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