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FIRST PLACE

Travelling with Yellow Mary

Gullah Culture, Migration, and the Sensory in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

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> …[T]o understand a culture, past or present, we should endeavor to understand how a society feeds itself. It is the ubiquity and everydayness of eating that makes understanding it historically so important. The taste and flavor of food play an important part in social relationships, and a food's taste can embody meanings well beyond what is put into the mouth (Fitzgerald and Petrick 2008:393).

This paper will examine ways in which foodways are created and sustained within Gullah communities, paying particular attention to the role of the five senses, especially taste, in the transmission and preservation of the culture. Gullah people are the descendants of slaves from the Senegambia region of West Africa who have created and sustained a unique culture, particularly on the Sea Islands of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, utilizing memories and rituals from Africa in combination with resources found in the Americas. I argue that much can be learned from the sounds, smells, touch and sights of food preparation as well as consumption. The following research questions are a guide: How is culture transmitted through food? What can be learned about gender roles, relationships, and power dynamics in Gullah culture through a sensory interrogation of foodways? What are some of the tensions around sustainable practices regarding Gullah foodways? How do the five senses, particularly taste, aid in the transmission and preservation of foodways?

To explore the connections of food and culture retention, there are two approaches of discovery applied here. First, this paper conveys the power of film and/or popular culture to create fictional referents for culture and society. Second, this paper explores the role of women in the elaboration and sustenance of Gullah culture, particularly through the fictional character of Yellow Mary in Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust*. This film, produced in 1991, tells the story of the Peazants, an African-American Sea Island family preparing to come to the mainland in 1902. Viola Peazant and Yellow Mary Peazant, are both natives of Ibo Landing and grandchildren of Nana Peazant. Ibo Landing is a fictional depiction of the portion of the South Carolina Sea Islands the Peazants call home. Yellow Mary and Viola are accompanied by Trula, Yellow Mary's lover and traveling companion and Mr. Snead, a mainland photographer who will document the Peazant family's last day on Ibo Landing. Yellow Mary and Viola, who have spent time on the mainland, are returning to Ibo Landing to spend time with their family on the eve of the family's departure from their island home of origin. The film illustrates the

tensions between tradition and assimilation experienced by families during the Great Migration at the turn of the 20th Century.

By investigating Yellow Mary's travels away from Ibo Landing, a fictive space in Gullah culture, as well as what drives her to return home, this project is invested in an exploration of taste and the sensory, sustainability [1] of culture and cultural identity, and migratory patterns of Gullah people from the Sea Islands. It argues that Yellow Mary assumes the role of what scholar Anita Mannur refers to as a "culinary citizen," asserting her place on Ibo Landing through nostalgic memory (see Mannur 2007). It demonstrates how Yellow Mary is operating as a diasporic body, creating a framework for the larger narrative of migration within the film.

To begin to answer my previously stated research questions, I utilize ethnographic evidence to help explain the relationship between sensuality, food, and cultural identity, including the varied tensions that surround our relationships to and around food. To place the sustainability of food back into a conversation around feminist cultural criticism I use Audre Lorde's theorizing uses of the erotic (Lorde 1984). The lens of sensuality helps to sharpen the image of sustainability that links people to the land, and the land to the past. As an illustration of the tension, movement, and sensuality around food I analyze how food operates in film and literary texts. In particular, I attempt to contextualize the character, Yellow Mary, from *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991) as a diasporic body who cites food as a pull factor toward home. To aid in the contextualization I unpack gumbo recipes from the Lowcountry to see what sensory elements Yellow Mary may have been missing from gumbo outside of Ibo Landing, and discuss how Dash's use of sensory elements such as sounds, gestures, images, and performances, are critical to understanding the history of Gullah people and culture.

Gullah Food, Culture, and Sustainability

Gullah people were not brought to the Americas; rather, Gullah culture was born in diaspora. There is some scholarly debate surrounding the reasons why the Gullah ended up on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (Littlefield 1981, Opala 1987, Carney 2002, Morgan 2004). It is clear, however, that enslaved African women from Senegambia and Sierra Leone were brought to Charleston and Savannah – and eventually sold to rich white planters on the Sea Islands – for their specialized knowledge of rice cultivation. These enslaved female rice planters were responsible not only for filling the coffers of white plantation owners by toiling in humid rice fields every day during the 14-month rice planting season (Morgan 2004:162), but also for educating enslaved males on the rituals of rice cultivation.

Recent scholarship argues that many of the Gullah are descendents of West African slaves, primarily those from Sierra Leone and other parts of the Senegambia region [2] which is part of the "Rice Coast" of Africa (Beoku-Betts 1995, Carney 2002, Gabaccia 1998). [3] Many of this captured group who were originally destined for the Caribbean were later brought to the Atlantic Sea Islands, in theory because they were thought to have knowledge and skill in rice production. Slaves aboard British ships were also brought to Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia, which were main ports of the northern

British slave trade, and very close to the Atlantic Sea Islands. In early colonial America, British colonists recognized the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia as fertile ground for rice cultivation, but lacked the specialized knowledge for growing rice in semitropical conditions (Beoku-Betts 1995, Littlefield 1981, Carney 2002). As Littlefield points out, "Being familiar with a crop, however, is a different matter from being familiar with the cultivation of a crop" (Littlefield 1981:77). Arguably the British colonial landowners were not only knowledgeable enough to realize the potential for growth of rice in the region, but also that they had a skilled labor source at their disposal. Some early colonial planters desired domestic slaves who had experience working for whites in Africa and knowledge of English. As Margaret Washington Creel points out in A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs: Of course most Africans possessed no rudimentary English and had no experience with white society. Their value was a long familiarity with planting and cultivation of rice and indigo, the quality of which was said to have surpassed that grown in Carolina…Thus while Upper Guinea Africans may have been preferred because they were tall and considered more manageable, evidence also suggests a more sound explanation: knowledge of agriculture made these Africans particularly sought after in coastal Carolina (Creel 1988, 36).

Creel's point about the captured peoples armed with agricultural knowledge creates a picture of Africans on the Sea Islands as more autonomous than those enslaved in the cotton belt: an autonomy enabled by the remote location of the Sea Islands. [4] The Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, particularly St. Helena Island, Lady's Island, and the town of Port Royal in Beaufort County, are Gullah country. This area is very close to Hunting and Fripp Islands where Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) was filmed. *Daughters of the Dust* provides an illustration of ways in which food is ritualized in Gullah culture. Ritual is present in the actual cooking of food, but also in its preparation. Women create community while peeling potatoes, preparing rice, and boiling crabs, much like women in the rice fields of Sierra Leone constructed community while fanning and pounding rice. [5] *Daughters of the Dust* centers on a Gullah family on the fictive Ibo Landing in South Carolina at the turn of the 20th century. The matriarch, Nana Peazant is unhappy that some of the younger family members want to leave Ibo Landing for the mainland in search of a new, more successful life. She begs them to hold onto their history and their roots by repeatedly reminding them that they owe their ancestors their every breath. The Peazant family lives without electricity, running water and other "mainland" American luxuries of that era, but producer and writer Julie Dash exposes a self-sufficient familial operation. Members of the Peazant family are clothed well, and they eat well. They rely on a mixture of African and Christian spiritual traditions, as well as faith in one another, to maintain their relationships with one another, as well as with their ancestors, tradition, and culture.

Much like the characters in *Daughters of the Dust*, the five Gullah women whom I interviewed in 2009 discussed their relationship with food. The information obtained through these interviews fleshed out the history of Gullah cuisine and initiated a discussion about the sensory elements of Gullah foodways (White 2009). The words and stories of Ms. Eleanor Barker, Ms. Grace Thomas, Ms. Louis Williams, Ms. Sue Hilton, and Ms. Ellen Taylor [6] will inform this paper. [7]

My interview with Ms. Thomas speaks directly to issues of sustainability, as well as to the importance of the senses in Gullah foodways. Ms. Thomas is a local on St. Helena Island who returned after many years in Atlanta to live on the same dirt road where she grew up. She spends her days working in Beaufort County schools and her spare time preparing the land around her beautiful home for certified organic farming. [8] She explains that the Gullah have always been known for eating with the sun and the moon, meaning they eat what the land provides at certain times of the year. As an organic farmer herself, she argues that organic is not always the best choice. Rather, it is more important to eat locally. Now, she says, the common consumer can purchase strawberries at all times of the year from California; however, she questions our tendency to pay more for out-of-season products that we enjoy, especially when the carbon footprint is greater because of travel. While it may be healthiest or most traditional, not all Gullah people are economically or geographically able to eat organic – or even fresh – fruits and vegetables.

Gullah ties to the land are articulated through the sensuality of harvesting, labor, and taste. Not only does sensuality in this context mean the pleasures of taste, but can also be read in the common traditional phrase "eating with the sun and the moon," shared in an interview by Ms. Thomas. Literally speaking, this phrase simply indicates that people eat under the sun and by the light the sun gives for crops to grow, and that the moon cycle tells when these crops are ready to be harvested. But a sensual reading touches upon the feeling of warm sun as you walk through your garden or the cool light of the moon as the day ends. This pushes beyond the structuralist reading of sustainability as a cycle of material preservation and into a reading of sustainability that seeks to preserve the cultural poetics of everyday life.

Local sustainability is key to the maintenance of Gullah culture, and is also the cornerstone of Ms. Thomas' farming philosophy. To keep her organic farm (certified since 2007) alive – both literally and figuratively – she has welcomed people from the island to buy a share, and whenever she harvests she makes boxes of produce and doles them out to shareholders. [9] This operation became the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Beaufort County, South Carolina and remains the only organic CSA (The Summer of Food (Part 2) 2011). Through her farm and the CSA, Ms. Thomas keeps the produce from the land moving and a fair number of families stocked with her fresh vegetables and fruits. This system is similar to the way that she, as well as most of the women I interviewed, grew up. Ms. Thomas explains that the way she learned to farm as a young child involved the community working as a team with the land. The Gullah way of farming combines respect for the sun and the moon with an understanding of the relationship between human beings, animals and the earth. [10] Ms. Thomas argues that people gain energy from feeling dirt under their fingernails. There is a sense of accomplishment and harmony with nature after an honest day's work in the fields, but this work also promotes an understanding of the power of the land and those who cultivate it. She mentions that many older Gullah people volunteer to work in her field to feel at one with nature. Ms. Thomas attributes contemporary Gullah health problems to a break with tradition and ritual as a result of convenience:

> I have found that having the farm that a lot of the elderly in the CSA want to work on the farm because it is peaceful, a way to unwind. Stepping out here everything is

> lifted. Our Gullah forefathers and those who passed before us felt the same way, felt that connection, knew that they were there to take care of the land, not destroy it (Thomas 2009).

Ms. Thomas believes that to care for the land is to care for the self and the community, but it is important to note that not all Gullah people and those living on the South Carolina Sea Islands value the same sustainable methods. While it may be healthiest or most traditional, not all Gullah people are economically or geographically able to eat organic or even fresh fruits and vegetables. They may similarly wish to preserve Gullah culture, but may not have the means, the time, or the desire to invest in eating locally, producing their own food, and adhering to traditional culinary preparations.

When asked about what she ate during the winter months as a child on St. Helena Island, Ms. Thomas said that her family ate a wide variety of winter greens – collards, kale, mustard, and turnips – but also subsisted on the surplus of vegetables they canned or processed in August. Canning – also known as jarring, because the vegetables and fruits are put in jars – is an all-day process. Tomatoes and okra are a popular canning combination, as are figs, which can also be dried. Anything that comes out of the field can be canned. The ritual of canning insures that the family's cupboards will be stocked for the winter with healthy food. "It's knowledge. You don't see it much anymore. I think I canned maybe two and a half jars this season. And for convenience I froze them but it has a different taste. Vegetables from a jar taste like they just came out of a field," she says (Thomas 2009). Whether it is knowledge, ritual, or simply necessity, it is evident that Gullah women, like many rural women, have a skill set which sets them apart from contemporary consumers who rely on chain grocery stores such as Kroger or Harris Teeter. Their respect for the earth and vast knowledge of its uses provides them with a means of survival and a source of power.

Food provides a double victory for Gullah women, via preparation and cultivation. Not only is tilling the ground satisfying, but you know you are also going to end up with fresh food. There is an added bonus of preparing delicious dishes out of food that you have grown or caught in the wild, as Ms. Thomas explains:

> When you taste Gullah food it's with such pride and with such love that they put in the food that when you take a spoonful you can feel it… They know that if they put all that they can put into that pot of lowcountry boil, frogmore stew or whatever it was, or a gumbo, they know that when you take that first bite of it, that first spoonful that you are not going to put it down. It just gives them a feeling of self worth and well-being (Thomas 2009).
>
> I asked her if she felt the same way about what she produces from her farm and she was quick to admit a similar satisfaction. After a successful harvest in 2008 she was told by one of her shareholders, "'So and so says that she ain't going to buy anything out of the store anymore.' Can't get any better than that. Like when a family member

> goes fishing and they bring it back to the house to clean it. It doesn't get any better than that" (Thomas 2009).

Again, Ms. Thomas offers a romanticized view of sustainability. While food plays a central role in the development of cultural identity, it can also be a contentious topic. [11] However remarkable it is to participate in a spiritual system of reciprocity where people get energy from the earth and follow the moon harvesting cycles, we must also be mindful of those on the Sea Islands who get their energy from Red Bull and follow the harvesting cycles of Publix, a southern grocery store chain. While not all Gullah people represented in this study may feel refreshed by day's work in the fields or the crunch of an organic apple, it is likely that the majority could agree that food draws people together for better or worse.

Power, Food, and Culinary Sensory Communication

To further illustrate the sensory power of food, I argue that the power and fulfillment felt by Gullah people, especially women, when close to the earth is what Audre Lorde refers to as the erotic. For Lorde: [T]he erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves (Lorde 1984:53).

Lorde calls women, particularly black women, to hone in on what brings them unadulterated joy. Finding the erotic within ourselves increases our capacities to create and for interpersonal communication, which arguably leads to sustainable relationships with others and the self. Lorde contends that to refuse the erotic any deep feelings is the same as committing an act of violence toward ourselves: "To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd" (Lorde 1984:59).

Similarly, in Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power, Psyche Williams-Forson demonstrates how food is a site of power and a catalyst toward identity formation for black people, particularly in her focus area: Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolina Lowcountry. To discuss the empowerment of enslaved populations is tricky, and Williams-Forson succeeds particularly because she argues that power is heterogeneous in nature, not limited to a single area of society and thus implicit in the process of sharing cultural norms and values. From this perspective power can be defining oneself through exploration – and can be fun! (Williams-Forson 2006:6).

This understanding of power is indicative of Williams-Forson's tone throughout the text. She does not perpetuate a narrative of victimization, but rather uses the examples of oppression to create an alternative narrative of resistance and self-actualization through food.

In Gullah culture, the kitchen is a classroom in which empowerment is taught, albeit indirectly. Food is revered as a blend of old and new traditions and as a crucial element in maintaining and disseminating Gullah traditions. In the foreword to her cookbook My Gullah Kitchen (2006), Eva Segar credits her mother and grandmother for teaching her how to cook. They allowed her to observe their methods and "play cook" alongside them in the kitchen. Segar came to cook on her own rather simply: One day, Mother came home and said, "Sister, you was home all day. How come you didn't put on the rice? And why didn't you boil the beans or peas or something?" So I went from "play cooking" to cooking for ten or more people just about every day. I've been cooking ever since (Segar 2006:9).

In Segar's case, cooking was taught by example. She mentions watching her mother and grandmother, but does not indicate how much of the teaching, if any, was done verbally, through recall or through written recipes. Segar also fails to mention how the process of cooking is often wrought with frustration, burned dishes, and failure to replicate tastes and memories, all of which may cause cooks to abandon traditional processes or develop new methods. [12]

The passing on of Gullah heritage occurs through a kind of ritual presence, not just through stories. Many of the women I interviewed remember pulling a stool close to the stove to watch their mothers, grandmothers or great-grandmothers cook. The act of watching an elder cook is also an education in proper relations of authority and respect. Children learned to yield to the women in the kitchen who were in charge of the stove. Watching the techniques and ingredients used by these women often allowed Gullah children to be ready to help when called upon. In "We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah," scholar Josephine Beoku-Betts shows that both inside and outside the kitchen, Gullah women take very seriously "the task of transmitting cultural traditions to a rapidly declining younger generation" (Beoku-Betts 1995:550). Passing on tradition requires not only hard work on the part of tradition bearers, but also the willingness and receptivity of younger generations. To help transfer her knowledge of farming processes and love of the land to Gullah children, Ms. Thomas has implemented an internship program for school-age children on her farm. The students earn a small stipend in exchange for working in the fields, delivering CSA baskets to members, and whatever other jobs are needed to maintain her farm. According to an article written by the Coastal Conservation League, "What they really get is a good old fashioned course in hard work, not to mention newer lessons, like money management and job application skills" (The Summer of Food 2011). Ms. Taylor also began a new tradition on holidays such as Christmas in which her grandchildren help her to prepare the large family meal from start to finish – from the harvesting of vegetables and fruits and the dredging for oysters, to dressing whatever meat is on the menu (Taylor 2009).

Ms. Hilton distinctly remembers frying chicken with her mother at age four; this is her first memory of helping in the kitchen. Before that, she would watch from afar, much like Ms. Thomas who learned a great deal by watching the women in her family prepare food over the years (Hilton 2009). As a vegetarian, Ms. Thomas has learned to replicate the taste of favorite Gullah foods such as Hoppin' John and red rice by replacing the pork with lots of onions, garlic, and a special spice blend she created.

“The key to it is the taste buds,” she explains. “My taste buds are still in tune to the taste buds of how my mother cooked and how I cooked before I became a vegetarian. So when I cook I am going to get as close as I possibly can” (Thomas 2009). She has been able to come so close to the taste of traditional recipes that she has even fooled her brother. At a recent dinner he remarked, “Ah, Sis, that was so good, I almost didn’t miss the meat” (Thomas 2009).

There is more to cooking from memory than is evidenced by Ms. Thomas’ claim, judging by the information imparted in other interviews, as well as various Gullah cookbooks. A multi-faceted sensory curriculum goes into the development of such sensitive taste buds. Years of watching, listening, smelling, touching, and tasting have provided the culinary education for Ms. Thomas and countless Gullah women. Many people can likely relate to certain foods feeling like home, but not all can replicate such dishes perfectly. Beyond cooking for oneself, it is also very difficult to find “home” in familiar dishes when traveling, in exile or simply when the person with whom you associate certain dishes has passed on. In “Exiled at Home: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Many Post-Colonial Conditions” (2001), Catherine Cucinella and Renee R. Curry argue that [n]o collective "home" – whether geographical, familial, sexual, marital, religious, or racial – exists for the women characters in *Daughters of the Dust*. They constantly occupy the many varied post-colonial positions of exile while negotiating moves between "homes" old and new (Cucinella and Curry 2001:199).

Adding to this argument, I contend that the women in *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991). are also searching for home through food or culinary techniques, much like my informants and their families in Beaufort County.

Like other rural, impoverished people, the Gullah have simple cooking techniques. Technology was limited on the Sea Islands until the mid to late twentieth century, when the areas began to attract wealthy builders, vacationers and retirees from other parts of the United States. The Sea Islands, such as St. Helena Island and Daufuskie, were relatively untouched by “outsiders” through the beginning of the 1980s. Bridges were not considered a necessity until wealthy white northerners identified the Sea Islands as a prime spot for vacation. Gullah food was not cooked in stainless steel Kenmore ovens from Sears or chopped on Corian countertops. Food was raised, hunted or trapped by people on the island and prepared using water from a hand pump (Robinson 2003:4). Cookbook author Sallie Ann Robinson grew up on Daufuskie Island in the 1960s and 1970s and had to take a boat to the nearest grocery store. She writes in her cookbook, Gullah Homecookin’ the Daufuskie Way:

> Most of our food came from the land – and water – around our tin-roofed home. We tended a big garden, four seasons of the year in Daufuskie’s mild weather. We raised chickens, hogs, and cattle in our yard. We gathered berries and trapped or sometimes shot animals in the woods. We fished, crabbed, shrimped, and picked oysters. We didn’t always have a lot, but we always had enough (Robinson 2003:4).

Cooking for Robinson was the bringing together of the fruits of a day’s physical labor. “Food is life. And the way we lived, life was gathering, growing, and preparing food” (Robinson 2003:12). Culinary

tradition was more than the passing on of recipes; it was a transmission of knowledge of farming, hunting, and fishing. The preparation called for creative energy. Robinson's writing is about growing up in the mid to late twentieth century, but the ingredients and preparations she enjoys are rooted in slavery times, as enslaved women molded old traditions from Sierra Leone with new resources found in America. Enslaved women had to be creative in the kitchen and recipes were passed down. Taste is a matter of opinion and arguably, in the case of the Sea Islands, tradition. The preservation of Gullah culture, then, involves not only the cultivation of certain culinary skills, but also a particular sense of taste. The construction of Gullah culture is a sensory experience, in which all senses are engaged.

Coming Home

Ms. Thomas came home to St. Helena Island not intending to stay, much like Yellow Mary *in Daughters of the Dust*. Both women claim not to have had good food while they were away. Ms. Thomas described her many years in Atlanta where she disregarded her Gullah culture and did not allow familiar foods and traditions to sustain her:

> I was into my African culture and that African culture superseded my Gullah culture [13] … Every now and then a word would slip out and people would ask where I was from, but it was something intangible that I kept that was eating at me and making me want to come back (Thomas 2009).

Dash's character, Yellow Mary comes back after approximately ten years away from Ibo Landing to a less than warm homecoming. She arrives with store-bought cookies in a tin and eschews verbal cuts from her female relatives about her lack of involvement in the kitchen only to articulate her desire for home-cooked food a short while later. While Yellow Mary is chatting with her female traveling partner, Trula, and her cousin, Eula, in one of the trees close to the beach, Yellow Mary says that she hopes the women are making gumbo. She looks back toward the spot on the beach where a group of women are preparing the picnic food. You can almost see her smelling it or even feeling it in the air. Yellow Mary says, "Y'know I sure hope they're fixing some gumbo. It's been a long time since I've had some good gumbo. (Looking up at Trula) I had some in Savannah, you know, but they didn't put everything in it. I haven't had some good food in a long time" (Dash 1992:122).

Food takes on many meanings in this scene. [14] It is sustenance, memory, ritual, and most poignantly, lesbian sexuality, as Yellow Mary's gaze is directed toward Trula when she says that she has not had good gumbo in a long time. Trula is Yellow Mary's light-skinned traveling companion. In an interview with bell hooks published in *Daughters of the Dust*: The Making of An African American Women's Film (Dash 1992), Dash explains that in her research for the film she found that prostitutes of that time, which Yellow Mary is, were involved with other women. Their significant others were often women, yet their customers were usually men. Dash comments, "in developing Yellow Mary's character [I] realized that she, as an independent businesswoman would not be traveling alone. In fact, she would have a significant other" (Dash 1992:66). Given the sexual relationship between the two women, I argue that Yellow Mary's comment about gumbo has two meanings. First, she is hungry for a familiar, home-

cooked dish. Secondly, Trula no longer provides her with what she desires sexually or in terms of a home and what that location implies, for example comfort, family, and stability.

Leading into her comment about gumbo, Yellow Mary mocks the traditions and backwardness of Ibo Landing, as if to create distance between herself and the land only to wish her way back onto it. In her essay "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora" (2007), Anita Mannur writes:

> The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures…Discursive and affective aspects of food are valued over their symbolic and semiotic meaning in nostalgic narratives that negotiate the parameters of "culinary citizenship," a form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food (13).

Yellow Mary is arguably assuming the role of culinary citizen in this instance, asserting her place on the island through nostalgic memory.

I argue that Yellow Mary is operating as a diasporic body, creating a framework for the larger narrative of migration. Her voiceover at the beginning of the film sets the tone: "I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the barren one and many are my daughters. I am the silence that you cannot understand. I am the utterance of my name" (Dash 1992:75-76). The words Yellow Mary utters are adapted from the Nag Hammadi Scriptures, a collection of thirteen ancient codices discovered in upper Egypt in 1945 and previously thought destroyed. The selection Yellow Mary speaks from is titled "Thunder, Perfect Mind" drawn from writings dealing primarily with the feminine deific and spiritual principle, particularly with the Divine Sophia (The Nag Hammadi Library 2011). According to the Gnostic Society archives, the Divine Sophia – or Holy Wisdom – desired most intensely to know the origin of her own creation (The Nag Hammadi Library 2011). Perhaps Dash is very deliberately placing Yellow Mary in the role of Divine Sophia as she returns home to Ibo Landing to rediscover her origin.

What can be learned about Gullah culture, as well as migration and diasporic bodies, from listening to and watching Yellow Mary navigate the space of Ibo Landing after some time away? She is someone who has left the island and stayed away for ten years. The notes in Dash's screenplay (1992) list Yellow Mary as working for a family near Edisto Island, South Carolina, which in the present day is not very far north from the fictional Ibo Landing. At the turn of the 20th century and before the advent of bridges, Edisto Island was considered the mainland. According to the screenplay, when Yellow Mary became pregnant in the late 19th century, she lost her baby, so she used her available breast milk to nurse the white children of the Edisto Island family. When Yellow Mary traveled with this family to Cuba to look after the babies, she was assaulted by their father. According to the screenplay her travels have taken her to Edisto Island, Cuba, and Savannah where she could have easily found rice-based cuisine. What was missing in the gumbo that Yellow Mary ate in Savannah that caused her to crave the gumbo of

home? Gumbo recipes from Beaufort County and Savannah do not differ greatly, but it is difficult to find two recipes that are alike. Dash writes:

> [She] was raised on Gumbo; in my house it was called Okra Soup. Gumbo has been described as the 'poor man's meal,' or a 'Saturday dish,' prepared when you emptied your refrigerator at the end of the week. As far as I'm concerned Gumbo is a luxury. It takes all day to prepare (to do it right) and the fresh okra required to make it can be difficult and expensive (Dash 1992:ix).

Many Gullah cookbooks, however, have okra soup and gumbo listed separately with very different ingredients. Virginia Mason Geraty's cookbook Bittle en'T'ing': Gullah Cooking with Maum Chrish' (1992) cites Okra Soup as a mixture of okra, fresh tomatoes, corn, onions, and seasonings, while the main component of her gumbo is smoked side-meat cut in such a way that each person will have several pieces (Geraty 1992:6). Geraty lived for many years in Edisto and now resides in Charleston. Jesse Edward Gantt, Jr. and Veronica Davis Gerald from St. Helena Island argue in The Ultimate Gullah Cookbook: A Taste of Food, History, and Culture from the Gullah People (2003) that gumbo begins with a brown gravy or roux, which Dash and Geraty's recipes do not include. Along with meat, Gantt and Gerald offer crabmeat, oysters, and shrimp as additions. Dash and Geraty's recipes seem to require a lengthy simmering process, whereas Gantt and Gerald's gumbo needs only twenty minutes to simmer before being ready to serve, which is likely due to the gravy acting as a thickener (Gantt and Gerald 2003:30). Searches for Savannah Gumbo return many links to celebrity chef, Paula Deen's recipe, which is similar to Gantt and Gerald's, but has more of a chicken base than smoked pig or turkey. Deen's also includes cayenne pepper, which the South Carolina recipes do not (Deen 2010).

Each of the aforementioned gumbo recipes was published in the latter part of the 20th century, so it is difficult to discern what components of a gumbo Yellow Mary wished for when she was away from Ibo Landing. As Janet Theophano argues in Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote (2002):

> Although recipes remain nearly unchanged through the years, each new cook adapts some recipes to accommodate altered environments and the changes in fashion, and invents new dishes. Change is constant. The accidental or deliberate modification takes place with the passing of each generation, with the movement of people from one location to another, with periods of crisis or scarcity such as war and natural disaster…Yet some recipes are not forgiving. Cooks may closely follow the original for the purposes of remembrance. To alter even an ingredient would disrupt the evocative, symbolic qualities of a dish (50).

Theophano's argument works as a foil for Yellow Mary or any consumer of food. Cooks may be the ones following recipes, but those who are not cooking are often looking for consistency, familiarity, and sensuality when eating specific foods. For example, in Ntozake Shange's novel Sassafras, Cyprus, and Indigo (1982), food serves as a bridge to home for Sassafras, Cyprus, and Indigo whether they are

making familiar recipes in an apartment in Los Angeles or New York or lapping up Mama's gumbo when they come home for Christmas.

> "Mama, the gumbo is ridiculous." Sassafras was eating so fast she could barely get the words out of her mouth. "Mama, you know if I told them white folks at the Callahan School that I wanted some red sauce & rice with shrimp, clams, hot sausage, corn, okra, chicken & crab meat, they'd go round the campus sayin, 'You know that Negro girl overdoes everything. Can you imagine what she wanted for dinner?'" (Shange 1982:48).

Through Sassafras, Shange illustrates that food is nuanced. Taste is subjective, and the tastes, smells and feelings we crave may not be easily found outside of home.

Yellow Mary's wish for good food and gumbo lead us to the larger feast scene in the film, which is conducted almost entirely without dialogue. The sights and sounds of food being passed and consumed assume center stage. The central role of food in Gullah culture, particularly in celebrations, is implied simply by watching the family prepare their plates and eat. Listening to the sounds of this scene is arguably more important than watching. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (1997) credits Dash for evoking suppressed signs and sounds of the past. From the beginning of the film, the viewer is presented with a mélange of Gullah culture through sounds, images, and performances. It is the attention to the nuances of rituals, styles, and especially the kinesthetics of gesture, which strongly evokes an Afrocentric visual memory making (Foster 1997:49-65).

Viewers are invited to migrate back to the Sea Islands at the turn of the century to witness common cultural practices that may have made their way north with some of the Gullah people who migrated. Foster's essay praises Dash for her creative use of time, space, and color to tell the story of the Peazant family, focusing on the film and filmmaker rather than issues of migration.

Dash offers the viewer the type of sensory experience that Fitzgerald and Petrick (2008) argue is important if we are to understand the history of a people and culture.

The Five Senses

The five senses are dramatically shown during the feast on the beach in *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991). There is no dialogue during this scene, but the viewer is able to imagine the savory smells of the food and see the pleasure of the people sharing a meal together. The wind is whipping and the tide is rolling out on the Sea Island as the Peazant women prepare a delicious meal for their family and visitors. All are all dressed well – white dresses and boots for the women and lightweight trousers, shirts and suit jackets for the men, suitable attire for that time. Nana Peazant is dressed in blue, the color of her indigo-stained hands.

Yellow Mary, Trula and Viola have on more sophisticated traveling clothes than the others, distinguishing them as people who have traveled away from Ibo Landing. The only sounds that can be

heard are the clinking of forks against ceramic plates, the crunching of corn on the cob, the shelling of shrimp and the cracking of blue crabs. No words are needed between family members as they pass plates back and forth between bowls and platters piled high with fish and tomatoes. Generations of sharing allow them to communicate seamlessly and silently.

This scene may be what Yellow Mary was looking for in her travels. The food that the Peazant family is enjoying was likely planted, harvested, caught, or shucked by some of their hands. They have created a sustainable life and home by working the land and also by passing on skills and traditions to one another. As the women prepared the food no recipes were read from a cookbook or even narrated. Yellow Mary could not find the good gumbo she was looking for because the gumbo she remembers can only be made by Peazant women or by people who have watched Peazant women make it in their way. This feast scene is demonstrative of the benefits of sustainability in terms of defining home for people. Ironically, just as the scene evokes home and sustainability, it also signifies the end of an era and the beginning of a new life for a certain number of Peazants on the mainland.

As we have seen, investigating sensory elements of history, people, and cultures can help us, pun intended, make sense of the world. Current scholarship is invested in the anthropology of smell, hearing, and movement, but least of all on taste (Sutton 2001:14). As we saw in the scholarship and in the film *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991), this paper is the beginning of an intervention I wish to make to illustrate the intersection between sustainability and the five senses, particularly taste and memory, using film, literature, and ethnography as investigative and theoretical tools.

Valuing all five senses can help to uncover how much of nostalgic memory is constructed from lived experience. What goes into the making of Gullah folklore? Where, how, and by whom are memories created and what role do each of the five senses play in the creation of memories? What are we missing in retelling Gullah history without a reliance on sensory experience? Is sensory experience the same as lived experience? These questions will continue to inform my future research. Gullah people, such as Ms. Thomas, assert that love and care can be felt in good food and it is arguably a cornerstone of sustainability for Gullah people. Veronica Davis Gerald, author of The Ultimate Gullah Cookbook maintains:

> Love is one of the best kept secrets but main ingredients in Gullah food. However, of all the ingredients, it is the most difficult to explain and to pass on in a recipe. For this reason, few books on this food culture attempt to give it consideration. Some call it cooking from the heart; others just call it 'luv'…Around the Gullah table, it is common to hear someone say, 'e put e foot en um dis time' or 'dey's a lot of luv in dis food.' Expressions such as these mean that the cook has put so much of her or his energy and spirit into the preparation of the food, that they transfer the food onto the recipient (Gerald 2003:19).

For the Gullah, food is more than a necessity for survival. It is life. Since the beginning of the Gullah existence food has played a major role in everyday life. Gullah food cannot be poured from a store

bought package. It must be prepared with love, and perhaps more importantly, with hundreds of years of ritual behind each stir of the pot and pinch of spice added.

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Notes

1. The most popular definition of sustainability can be traced to a 1987 UN conference. It defined sustainable developments as those that "meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED 1987: Section 3.27) http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm. At its core, sustainability means “the capacity for being continued; to endure; renewable” which ties directly into the theoretical fourth pillar of sustainability – cultural vitality. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) states, “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature…one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral, and physical existence” (Articles 1 and 3).

2. The Akan people from the Gold Coast of Africa were also targeted for shipment to the West Indies. They were often ring-leaders of slave resistance, both passive and armed. For further information see Mair 1975.

3. For further scholarly proof of the Gullah-Sierra Leone connection, see the following: Ely, Wilson, Jackson, and Jackson 2007; Opala 1987; and Shetterly 2006.

4. Much scholarship on Gullah culture has arisen in the past thirty years thanks to academics and others interested in contributing to the scholarly conversation. Judith Carney built upon the evidence of the importance of rice in Gullah culture noted by Daniel Littlefield by centering on the role of Gullah women in the cultivation of rice. Jennifer Morgan (2004) contributed her research on the commodification of women’s labor and reproduction on rice plantations. For a recent look at the overview of Gullah history and culture, especially on the Sea Islands, see Cross 2008, and Campbell 2008. Moutoussamy-Ashe’s Daufuskie Island: A Photographic Essay (1982) – published right before Daufuskie was infiltrated by contractors sent to build a luxury resort – provides a unique glimpse at life on the Sea Islands when the land was Gullah-owned.

5. See Family Across the Sea (1991), directed by Tim Carrier. A unique look at the ways Gullah communities and kinship ties were created and sustained under the brutal system of slavery can be found in Guthrie 1996.

6. The names have been changed to protect the privacy of the women interviewed.

7. It is important to note that the women I have interviewed do not represent all Gullah people when they speak of sustainability practices. In many cases they are exceptional rather than representative of the philosophies in practice on the Sea Islands. The majority of the women I interviewed attended college in the Northeast and three hold advanced degrees. Not all Gullah people are adopting organic farming practices like Ms. Reynolds due to cost, time, land use, etc.

8. According to Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, CA, “Organic farming refers to agricultural production systems used to produce food and fiber. Organic farming management relies on developing biological diversity in the field to disrupt habitat for pest organisms, and the purposeful maintenance and replenishment of soil fertility. Organic farmers are not allowed to use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. All kinds of agricultural products are produced organically, including produce, grains, meat, dairy, eggs, fibers such as cotton, flowers, and processed food products. Some of the essential characteristics of organic systems include: design and implementation of an "organic system plan" that describes the practices used in producing crops and livestock products; a detailed recordkeeping system that tracks all products from the field to point of sale; and maintenance of buffer zones to prevent inadvertent contamination by synthetic farm chemicals from adjacent conventional fields. Certified organic (e.g. Ms. Thomas’ farm) refers to agricultural products that have been grown and processed according to uniform standards, verified by independent state or private organizations accredited by the USDA. All products sold as "organic" must be certified. Certification includes annual submission of an organic system plan and inspection of farm fields and processing facilities. Inspectors verify that organic practices such as long-term soil management, buffering between organic farms and neighboring conventional farms, and recordkeeping are being followed. Processing inspections include review of the facility's cleaning and pest control methods, ingredient transportation and storage, and recordkeeping and audit control. Organic foods are minimally processed to maintain the integrity of food without artificial ingredients or preservatives. Certified organic requires the rejection of synthetic agrochemicals, irradiation and genetically engineered foods or ingredients. Since 2002, organic certification in the U.S. has taken place under the authority of the USDA National Organic Program, which accredits organic certifying agencies, and oversees the regulatory process. To find out more about the national organic certification requirements and organic program, please go to the USDA National Organic Program website www.ams.usda.gov/nop” (About Organic 2011).

9.Through the Marshview Organic CSA, locals are invited to invest a certain amount of money in Ms. Reynolds’ farm, which goes to costs associated with planting, harvesting, and the organic certification.

10. According to cookbook author and Daufuskie Island resident Sallie Ann Robinson, “There was a season for almost everything: a time to catch different seafood, a time to butcher the hog or cow, a time to plant and harvest each crop, a time for hunting each animal. Each nut, fruit, and berry ripened in its own time” (2003:77; See also Jenkins 2010:11).

11. See Williams-Forson 2006:80-113 for her article, “Gnawing on a Chicken Bone in my Own House: Cultural Contestation, Black Women’s Work, and Class.”

12. For further information on frustrations in the kitchen see Sharpless 2010.

13. Given the strong African influence in Gullah culture, it is interesting that Ms. Reynolds could so easily separate them into binaries. Many Gullah cookbooks refer to African roots of certain dishes. See Jenkins' Gullah Cuisine (2010), Robinson's Gullah Home Cooking, the Daufuskie Way: Smokin' Joe Butter Beans, Ol' 'Fuskie Fried Crab Rice, Sticky-Bush Blackberry Dumpling, & Other Sea Island Favorites (2003), and Gantt and Gerald's The Ultimate Gullah Cookbook: A Taste of Food, History and Culture from the Gullah People (2003).

14. Although food takes on many meanings in *Daughters of the Dust*, I am primarily invested in the lesbian sexuality and sensuality in the scene involving Yellow Mary and Trula, her traveling companion and female lover. These two characters illustrate sensual nature of food, place, and memory.

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