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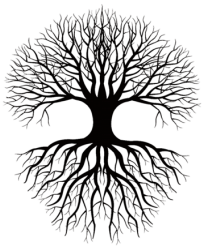

Be Here Now: The South is a Portal

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A queer Black girl re-imagines the South Carolina lowcountry as a portal for the fusion of Africana (Gullah Geechee) and Indigenous identity, spirituality, resistance, and ways of knowing. An estimated 40-60% of enslaved Africans entered America through the Charleston, SC port; their descendants' cultural continuity resulting in the evolution of Gullah Geechee culture. What wealth of knowledge can we uncover when we consider South Carolina -- the 2nd richest slave state in the nation, and the birthplace of the Secession -- as a portal, and convergence point of Africana and Indigenous knowledge, ways of being, magic, and possibility? Interpreting the lived experiences of Africana and Indigenous people in South Carolina, through Afrofuturist and Womanist/Black Feminist lenses transform ideas about The South, who we are, and what we are capable of.

Here in Georgetown County, a rural Gullah Geechee community situated between Charleston and Myrtle Beach, I witnessed the leaves change on the tree across the street from my house. Over a couple of days in March, I watched them transition from burnt orange-golden-red to a bright, vibrant yellow-green. I'd been so still. So ritualistic in my rising each day to sit on my front porch and just Be, that the colors had changed before my eyes.

There's something about The South that encourages stillness. A slowing down. An enforced presence. A soundless voice whispering, *be-here-right-now-you-ain't-got-nowhere-else-to-be*. A version of reality I recently realized is quite African. The notion that this present moment is all there is. And from right here, I have access to infinite timelines.

The *be-here-now* calls me to the dock at Winyah Bay. No matter where I live on the coast, I always find the water. Or maybe it finds me. I sit cross legged on the dock, face to the sun, breathing in the scent of the saltmarsh as the International Papermill pumps puffy white clouds of smoke into the sky nearby. There's peace on the water. Renewal. Spirit is here.

Centuries before enslaved Africans in Georgetown produced a third of the country's rice, and South Carolina became the wealthiest state in the Union, the first documented arrival of, and resistance by Africans on this continent happened here, where I live, near Winyah Bay.

In June 1526, Spanish colonizer Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón arrived on the coast of present-day South Carolina (likely the Peedee River, or Winyah Bay). "Distributed between his 6 vessels, were five hundred Spanish men

and women, one hundred enslaved Africans, six or seven dozen horses, and physicians, sailors, and several Dominican priests."(1)

Hardly anything is known about these enslaved Africans. Where they came from, what languages they spoke. What were their names? Who were their people? What songs did they sing? To whom did they pray? Did the cypress swamps and marsh grass smell familiar? Did the hot, sticky, damp air cling thick to their skin, creating a sick sense of deja vu? Did they notice where the various rivers coalesced, and did the spirals remind them of the truths they knew? Could they find any peace on the water?

What we do know is that in November of that same year, the surviving Africans abandoned the Spanish settlement, fleeing to Indigenous communities, committed to a life free from European bondage. They set fires, wreaking havoc and destroying any chances of the colony's survival.(2) Their escape and resistance is noted as the first African slave rebellion in what is currently the United States of America.

Black. Gullah Geechee. Southern. Queer. Woman. My own identities converge and coalesce like the rivers named for the Indigenous folk who lived and loved here before me. Each day is a practice in embracing all my parts. A revolutionary act in a world that champions everything I'm not. A system crafted in my opposition. When I be on that water, some days matching the waves with my tears, I breathe in deep. Take up all the space. Close my eyes and commit to living free. Conjure up a reality where no parts of me are considered a contradiction. Where the boundaries of the crooked room(3) melt away, and my existence isn't something I have to explain. That *be-here-now* called me to practice self-love on land rich in resistance, self-determination, and freedom. I believe the South is a portal. An opening. A point of convergence for all of the lives, love, magic, and timelines that came before.

A hundred years after the slave rebellion near Winyah Bay, enslaved Gullah Geechee folk near Charleston revered, feared and honored water spirits they called Simbi. Like their Kongo ancestors who regarded Simbi nature spirits as integral to the spiritual landscape, Gullah Geechee people believed the Simbi had joined them from Africa, and could inhabit any body of water--protecting its natural environment and anyone who lived nearby. Simbis "functioned as the chief intermediaries between the physical 'land of the living' and the spiritual 'land of the dead.'"(4) Lowcountry Africans knew Spirit hadn't forsaken them in this foreign, familiar space. Spirit was present wherever they were. Life didn't end at death, it simply began again. And the water was a place of refuge, a charm for regeneration, a technology of communication and transport, and a link to all the lives and love that proceeded.

Before Black Twitter and podcasts introduced me to Afrofuturism, my work on plantations called me to Sankofa. *Go back and get it. Look back to move forward*. Realizing that the past and future were as present as I was, I ditched linear-time years ago. In the Sankofa Sacred Burial Ground at McLeod Plantation Historic Site on James Island, SC, on the other side of Country Club Drive, tucked away in the remaining woods next to Wappoo Creek, there are headstones dating back to the 1800s.

Both Sierra Leone and Kongo customs influence Gullah Geechee spirituality and end-of-life rituals. During and after slavery, Southern Blacks buried their dead in heavily wooded areas, as the trees (particularly Ever-

greens) symbolized ongoing life. Whenever able, they also buried their dead near the water, believing it would carry their spirits back home.(5) Grave decoration, another Kongo contribution, meant burying the deceased surrounded by items that were significant to them while they were alive, in order to aid and comfort them on their transition to the ancestral realm. Many of these rituals declined with integration and assimilation into white society.(6)

Descendants of enslaved Gullah Geechee folks lived in cabins at McLeod Plantation until 1990--the year after I was born. The past is right up on you out there. I'd walk the grounds alone before my shift, picking up every broken piece of pottery and colonoware that caught my eye, and asking the ancestors to ground me. Hold me up. Fortify me against the onslaught of verbal defensiveness, confusion and violence my presence as a truth-telling free Black woman invoked in white tourists who visited plantations to marvel at the beauty of the landscape, and fantasize about wealth and excess generated by invisible, non-human others. Leading tours about the "transition to freedom" in the same timeline where a young Black girl is flung across her classroom by a school resource officer in the state's capital(7), and a white boy performs a massacre at Denmark Vesey's church, I felt like Dana in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. Tumbling through space and time by no choice of my own. Sometimes immobilized by fear. Back on a plantation questioning whether I matter at all, and if I ever have.

That's a whole lot to be present with. A lot to go back and get. And here in The South: in the dirt, water, trees, and people, that past lives alongside us. A constant companion, it's here whether we acknowledge it, recontextualize it, reconceptualize it, or not. Being a time-traveller *ain't no flowery bed of ease*, as my grandma would say. Messy, worthy; painful, brave. It's disorienting, yes. The dizziness, nausea, and ringing in the ears. The deja vu, echoing voices, exhaustion and aching joints. Waking up not quite sure where or when you are. Dimension-hopping ain't for the hard-hearted.

It feels right to me, though. More in alignment than trying to survive this crooked room without rhyme, reason, or foundation to grasp for. When looking at and loving myself now, through lenses of what was, and might have been, I uncover a deep, rich, expansive Blackness. Beneath layers of trauma and distorted, lost narratives are endless victories of resilience, experimentation, evolution, and world-building. When we came here, highly sought after for our technology-- armed with language, mysticism, love, rhythm, recipes, and know-how (just to name a few gems)--we were never meant to live free, or survive.

Yet we do both. And not without intention.

My African ancestors and their Gullah Geechee descendants didn't simply "retain" Africanisms, a narrative Ras Michael Brown claims robs us of our agency. No. They elaborated upon ancestral practices and wisdom while remaining spiritually connected to home, and each other. "For displaced Africans, the Lowcountry was not solely a place of captivity, but also an 'African conceptual space that connected the visible, physical domain with the invisible, spiritual realm."(8) An ongoing, active, intangible link between Gullah Geechee people, their African home, and their new home here. They took what came before them and adapted to their surroundings, evolving, and creating something new.

Maybe soundless voices whispered, *be-here-now-you-ain't-got-nowhere-else-to-be*. And *you-are-not-alone-we-right-here-witchu* . I believe the South is a portal. An invitation to enter and become re-acclimated with who we've been, who we are, and who we can be. A gateway to dimensions where we're already free.

On June 2, 1863, after a full year of strategic planning, General Harriet Tubman led an armed raid at Combahee Ferry in Beaufort, SC. Tubman and the 2nd Regiment South Carolina Volunteer Infantry--a Black infantry--destroyed millions of dollars worth of Confederate supplies and property, and freed over 800 enslaved Africans--Gullah Geechee people who had fled their plantations in anticipation of rescue.

As the Civil War blasted ahead, in the first state to secede from The Union, Harriet Tubman was freeing Gullah Geechee people in Beaufort, SC--my hometown. She believed so strongly in her freedom, and the freedom of her people, that she completely rejected the physical conditions that suggested otherwise. She chose freedom. She created freedom where it hadn't been. And when the opening came, the people were ready to go through. Taking no more than what they could carry, and no less than they believed they deserved. They, too, had prepared for, affirmed, and manifested their freedom.

Closing 2019 and bringing in the new decade, my family and more than 50 others--many Black Americans, and many Gullah Geechee--travelled throughout the entire country of Sierra Leone in 10 days. The never-before-done Research Study Tour, facilitated by Fambul Tik, focused on Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. It served to connect African-descended people with their ancestral family and home; and to address Sierra Leone's involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This was the fourth trip in a legacy of organized Gullah Geechee homecomings to Sierra Leone since 1989. My parents missed the first trip 30 years ago because my mother was pregnant with me.

From Lungi, to Bunce Island. Makeni to Old Yagala. Magburaka to Freetown. And Bo, Kabala, and Senehun Ngola. Village after province full of brilliant, beautiful Black people. People who looked like me, my loved ones, and folks in Southern communities where I've lived. The tones and inflections in the Mende, Temne, Krio and other languages we heard spoken everywhere reminded me of the nuance and musicality of Gullah Geechee spoken in different communities throughout the Corridor. "Innit?" in Charleston. "Enny?" in Beaufort. "Crack ya teet" meaning "smile" in Beaufort and Georgetown. "Krak teet/Crack ya teet" translating to "speak" in Savannah and St. Helena. (We even speak in present-tense).

The *be-here-now* is thick in Africa, too. And it ain't just the time-difference, 90 degree weather, steep, rocky-dirt roads, or the massive crowds of people in the market and on the streets, leaving little room for "personal space." It was like I moved into an alternate universe. Ocean. Rivers. Mountains. White butterflies everywhere. *Them be the ancestral spirits welcoming us home*. Cotton trees so big they could cradle Johns Island's Angel Oak up in their branches. An "enforced presence" is what I called it. I had no choice but to be in the now. Witness. Breathe. Feel. Take in. Dagara Shaman and healer Malidoma Somé says our intuition is the platform where the past, present, and future meet. The same is true about Africa, and The South. The timelines collide, and my sense of self stretches to new lengths. I learn to trust that what I know and how I know it is rooted in something ancient and infinite.

Clarity rushes in like a wave as I watch Nakia Wigfall, a 7th-generation sweetgrass basket maker from Mt. Pleasant, SC weaving baskets besides Temne women making *shuku blais* -- a very similar coil-method basket using marsh-grass. Many Black Southerners, Gullah Geechee in particular, know that sweetgrass basket making is something folk "brought over from Africa." To see it being done alongside African people in real time is the delicious actualization of an Afrofuturist dream. There in Rogbonko Village, descendants of Sierra Leone--domestic and abroad--engaging in a community technology that crossed time, space, and endless ocean. If the practice hadn't been elaborated upon for the last four centuries, how would we have made this connection? It was as if the ancestors who ensured the continuation of the beautifully meticulous process knew we'd be here to witness this one day.

Connecting Africana people across the diaspora is integral to imagining otherwise. Building new worlds. Finding new suns. Nothing about America makes any sense when we remember how vast we are, and that we pre-exist it.

I see cemeteries covered in trees in Freetown--a crisscross allusion to the heavily wooded Black cemeteries I see back home. Oh, and it's disrespectful to the dead to point at burial sites. I hear this in the Lowcountry and in Salone. At Kent Beach, I see graves buried right on the ocean. Headstones and tombs honoring many different faiths. All present together.

Clearly Sierra Leoneans aren't burying their dead by the water to ensure their spirits return to Africa, which is what I'd once believed about the practice in an American context. There must be an entirely unique and indigenous relationship with water, death, home, and Spirit. A relationship Gullah Geechee people continued to cultivate throughout bondage, and into the early 20th century.

The *be-here-now* in Africa is not without distortion. A familiar otherness I feel in my body, even in the sea of-Black faces. Nearly eight generations and a continent removed from slavery, I find the presence of patriarchy, rigid gender norms, and the homophobia they incite no less disillusioning. Predating European colonization, these traditions and mores restrict air-flow, movement, and possibility. Like a Summer sun that don't let up, or go down. Smoldering, suffocating. Sweat stings the eyes, the tongue is dry. Too exhausted to move forward, or even think about moving. *Can I live?* Queer. Black. Woman. Descendant of Sierra Leone. Even in the place-where it supposedly all began, there are obvious roles I am restricted to, and boundaries I am not expected to exceed. Parts of my whole are still considered incongruent.

I breathe in deep, face the sun, and remember that I came before these notions, too.

Sheila Walker, an anthropologist I met on the trip, defines "Afrogenics" as "growing out of the histories, ways of being and knowing, and interpretations and interpretive styles of African and African Diasporan peoples."(9) There are things about us, the ways we speak, think and move, and our relationships to each other and our surroundings, that can only be understood when Africana people are considered the polylithic, polycultural rule, and not the exception, or a problem that needs to be solved. While my subjectivities are deemed deviant in one dimension; there are realities in which all of me is affirmed, and necessary.

In *The Spirit of Intimacy*, Sobonfu Somé says the Dagara people of Burkina Faso have no words for “gay”, “lesbian”, or “queer”. They do, however, have the word “gatekeeper.” People whose energies vibrate on particular frequencies are believed to be protectors of very important gates. These gates, or portals bridge the physical world with infinite other worlds, including the natural elements, and spiritual realms. Gatekeepers “have one foot in all the other worlds and the other foot here...”(10) Dimension-hoppers, if you will.

I be still, and visualize a world absent of hierarchies, and violent obsessions for control. Exhale, and picture the anxieties about my body, who it’s acceptable for me to love, and how it’s respectable for me to be crusting over and blowing away in a cool, caressing breeze. Unbound, jaw relaxed, shoulders away from my ears, I can focus on other kinds of power, transmutation, water rituals, and the portals my physical presence unlock.

Back in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, on the side of the Atlantic Ocean where I grew up, a narrative persists about how the intricate waterways kept us isolated on the plantations. This notion, argues Brown, “ignores the ability of African-descended people to actively form and transmit their own cultures.”(11) The story goes that in addition to the high numbers of Africans living on these plantations, and the frequent scarcity of white people due to prime conditions for malaria, the aquatic geography of the region isolated the enslaved; leaving them with no choice but to “preserve” their old customs in ways their landlocked, or city-dwelling counterparts did not. This interpretation is limited, however. The water presented barriers only if you were attuned to land travel, and vehicles requiring roads and bridges. People who have lived on and by the water have an entirely different experience.(12)

I witnessed this different relationship with water regularly in Sierra Leone. The beaches I visited in Lungi were filled with people of all ages. Entire communities fishing, shrimping, boating, swimming, making nets, and selling and bartering their catches. Kids running and playing in the waves. Brightly colored clothing, laughter, words exchanged quickly and with passion across the hot white sand. Just as much is said without speaking. The energy was palpable and electric. It wasn’t simply a leisure day at the beach. The ocean was their livelihood.

Historically, the waters surrounding the Lowcountry did insulate us from areas where white people were the majority. They did not, however, isolate us from each other, our African origins, or the spirits we believed governed and protected us. We been coming to the water since forever. In fact, close proximity to the water helped continue that spiritual and cultural transmission in ways we may not have been able to access otherwise. Access that is now systematically hindered by gentrification, tourism, development, private property, and “no-trespassing” signs.

I close my eyes and remember Spirit is everywhere I am. Whether right outside my door, or miles and miles away, the water, land, and every visible and invisible thing in between is sacred, connecting me to my ancestors, descendants, and infinite sources of power. To disrupt anti-Black narratives of the broken, passive, stagnant and pathological South, we need to only look inward, and all around. The foods we make. The things we plant, grow, and build with our hands. What we manifest with our minds and voices. Our rituals. The languages we create and speak. The songs we sing and pass down. The ways we move and hold our bodies.

The movements we organize. The liberation we affirm and manifest. The love we show ourselves and one another. The technology and resistance we be. All of this is ancient, timeless knowing. And we brought it all here. Wherever we are as African-descended people--The South, South Carolina, The Americas, The Atlantic world--is a vessel for this magic.

I know the healing found in my stillness is not just for me. Naw, this healing goes back, back. And forward, forward. A divine white light travelling across time and space, grounding grace, love and lessons in each timeline as it flows. Creating livable, liberated galaxies for previous and future generations to breathe easy, with more pleasure and joy.

There are gates I was created to open. Embodied knowledge my identities access. Only by embracing all of me, am I able to truly re-member, and tap into the portals I am guarding. In this moment of enforced presence, and increasing resistance, when it is clear that nothing is what it seems, nor can anything remain as it has been, I find comfort in the Black Southern wisdom rooted in our lived experiences. As the paradigm shifts and new ways of being are required, let us remember we descend from folks who transmitted spiritual knowledge back and forth across continents and oceans. Folks who manifested freedom when everything else said otherwise. We came before this system. And we are here now to imagine, manifest, and anchor in something new. Something true. Something epic.

The South is a portal. And we are the proof.

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