

After Sherman

A FILM BY JON SESRIE GOFF



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE

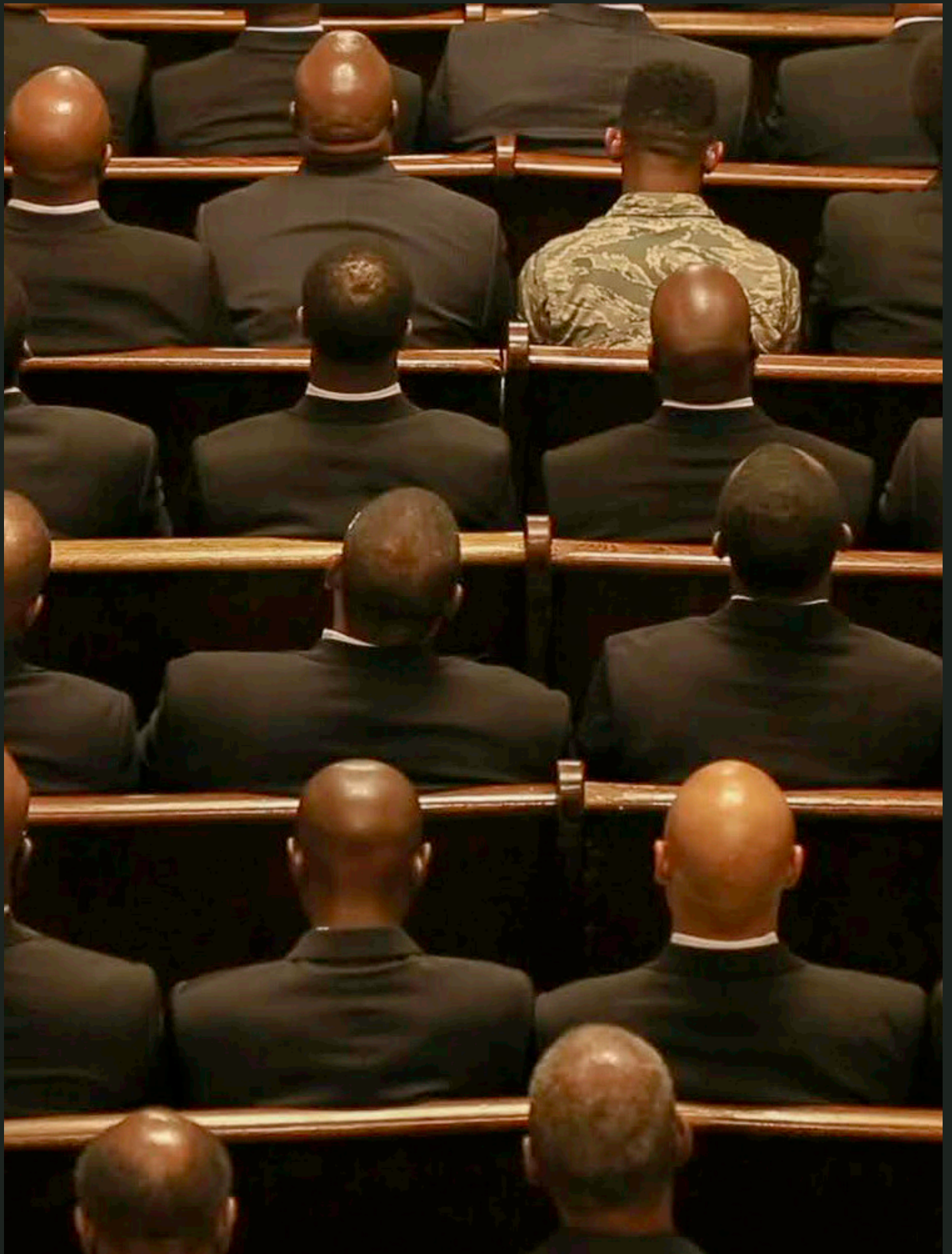




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Film Summary



Filmmaker Jon-Sesrie Goff returns to the coastal South Carolina land that his family purchased after emancipation. His desire to explore his Gullah/Geechee roots leads to a poetic investigation of Black inheritance, trauma, and generational wisdom, amidst the tensions that have shaped American history. In the wake of recent Southern violence, *After Sherman* is a reclamation of Black life and space.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *After Sherman* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities in the art of storytelling and story-sharing.

In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively. The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted as invitations to “bear witness through deep listening, as an inspiration for transformative dialogue.”

Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your groups needs and interests. Using community agreements (see the next section) or facilitation agreements, where a group discusses and decides on how best to foster conversations which center critical thinking, equitable contribution, and generative engagement from all involved.

Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.

AN INVOCATION FOR AFTER SHERMAN
BY MICHELLE LANIER

You've come here seeking water, it appears, or perhaps it is salt.

Maybe you're following the lunar pull of tributaries into marshlands, into barrier islands, into ocean waves that remember the boats that carried the old ones.

Here is a moment wet with memory and stew, rainwater and blackberry wine, baptism water and indigo water, oysters and ocean water, and sometimes, sometimes blood, which is also its own salt and sea.

What I know is this: Like Jon, the scribe of words and light who birthed *After Sherman*, you were called to this place.

And so we meet.

What more can be said of the places and people called Gullah and called Geechee? What more is even safe to reveal to those who don't know?

In *After Sherman* and its discussion guide you are offered what may be a primer for some, a reunion for others, and a mirror for others still.

You will leave this place knowing some about Black souls carried across the ocean, building a world of survival, even as they lay in their own primordial mud.

You will see and hear the ceremony of world making and remaking by Black coastal souls across time and generations.

There is power in your choosing to witness such determined uprisings.

There is an uprising in the mouth, through Gullah Geechee language and food, and the calling out to the unseen realms of Spirit. There is an uprising in the hand, through the carving out of rice beds and A.M.E. churches and tabby houses and the sewing of bulrush, sweetgrass, and pine. There is an uprising in the feet, through the shouting in rings, walking on back roads (Daufuskie) and city roads (Charleston). There is an uprising in the souls too, in the rooting down of family land, the grieving of the dead and the feeding and fending for the living.

Like the tide, the phases of the moon, and the seasons of hurricanes and tourists, this uprising of water and Black souls happens over and over again, carrying us back and somehow forward at the same time.

As you navigate these waters, you have some choices to make.

You may certainly engage in a deep and endless intellectual inquiry into the history of Gullah Geechee history, culture, topography, and diasporas. In this case, there are guiding questions and significant research offered up for your journey, both in *After Sherman* and in this discussion guide. (The reference section is full to overflow with decades of insight into the deep and dynamic stories of Gullah Geechee people.)

You may also seek a more visceral or spiritual relationship to this work, which may be found here too. At one point you will be reminded to breathe. Not unlike the first act of the baptizers and midwives, we will invite you to breathe.

No matter which tributary you choose you will still land in the sea. Changed from the viewing and the listening, we hope you will be called to uprising too.

How to rise.

First, come gently to these wetlands and coastal cities of memory and futurity. Even those of us with ties to these physical and cultural spaces, let us proceed with care. Second, listen with respect, maybe even awe. Pay close attention to the moments and modes of ongoing subjugation, objectification and extraction of land and culture. Consider resisting the lure of exploitative practices. Only you can determine what that looks like for you. It may mean that you decide not to purchase ancestral Gullah Geechee land away from living Gullah Geechee families, but instead support efforts to resist further land loss. Perhaps you will resist the desire to put Gullah Geechee culture in a tidy, touristic box and instead walk with deference in shared spaces where you might encounter the practices of Gullah Geechee cuisine or musical and material culture. Maybe, especially if you are a Gullah Geechee descendant, you will go home, check on the elders, see about the land, and draw nigh to the places that birthed you. That's exactly what Jon-Sesrie Goff did on the road to and through *After Sherman*. No matter the road, be beckoned to rise, like the water.

In Witness,

Michelle Lanier

Daughter of the Cape Fear and Savannah Rivers, who was and is Gullah loved.

OPENING GROUNDING EXERCISE

Since *After Sherman* illuminates the sacredness of land, kin, and culture, consider starting your discussion time with the following question:

What sacred things have you brought with you to this moment?

Share if you feel comfortable. If your discussion gathering is rather large, you may wish to divide into smaller groups of two or three people to participate in this sacred sharing activity.

Next, invite the larger group to take a moment for three deep breaths before moving on to the rest of this discussion guide.

Participants

Jon-Sesrie Goff film's director + multidisciplinary artist, curator, arts administrator, educator, and social change instigator

Rev. Norvel Goff Sr. Jon's father, minister/pastor/reverend [figure out which is best], president of the NAACP in both the Connecticut state chapter and the Rochester, NY local chapter; presiding elder of the South Carolina 7th District of the AME Church

Alphonso Brown licensed tour guide for the city of Charleston, owns and operates Gullah Tours, author of *A Gullah Guide to Charleston*

Elijah Heyward III executive producer, "scholarly advisor, sounding board, and friend"; scholar of African American history, popular culture, religion, & contemporary Gullah/Geechee culture

Matthew Raifford served until recently as the program coordinator and associate professor of culinary arts at the College of Coastal Georgia, frequent presenter at food and wine festivals throughout the country

Ann Marie Goff Jon's father, minister/pastor/reverend Jon's mother, married to Rev. Goff

Norvel Goff, Jr. Jon's brother



Key Issues

After Sherman is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Gullah: An Identity Revolution
- Ancestry & Communal Power
- The Charleston Massacre
- Gullah Diasporas
- Water & Land as Witness
- Climate Change & the Gullah Coast
- Language, Tradition, Story
- Experimentation in Film
- Spirituality
- Gullah Futures
- Heirs Property

MEANINGFUL EXCERPTS/ DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The below excerpts are from a discussion between *After Sherman* director Jon-Sesrie Goff and executive producer Elijah Hayward, along with folklorist and scholar, Michelle Lanier. Each section of discussion excerpts is followed by a series of questions. All are an invitation to bear witness through deep listening, as an inspiration for transformative dialogue.

We recommend reading the excerpt aloud with your community once or twice and following-up with the questions that stem from the excerpts.

Gullah Identities & Diasporas **00:24:30**

Jon: I think the pride thing that people talk about within the Gullah Geechee community and space is something that is antithetical to popular narratives of Black self-identity, you know, like, that it's this stain or sin, you know, that people have to work through and work out of, and I think it's very interesting to affirm that that, you know, is not the origin for most people, regardless of their cultural background -- if they're coming from a place in which they are loved, valued, and respected.

Discussion prompts:

- Do you have any personal connections to, or prior knowledge of, Gullah Geechee culture? If so, what are they?
- What cultural traditions or expressions did you learn about or perhaps were reminded of from watching *After Sherman*? Consider everything from material culture, relationships to kin and environment, foodways, music, and faith.
- How does the film help you to think about Gullah Geechee culture as complex and nuanced?

Ancestry & Communal Power

01:01:30

Michelle: Let's talk about how the film opens up an awareness to heirs' property, I'm still meeting people who do not know what heirs' property is, never heard of it, have no understanding of, oh, that's why in some parts of Hilton Head you see a lot of trailers. That's one of the reasons... because that's how... that was one of the ingenious ways that Black folks who want to live in a traditional kind of compound formation, they found that loophole that said as long as it could be moved, even if you didn't have direct, you know, clean and clear title to land -- which you need to build a brick and mortar house that is connected to the land -- that if it was on wheels, you could live there and that's one of the reasons you see that throughout Gullah community is compounds of families that will squeeze as many trailers as they can on a small piece of property to maintain that tradition of being able to be in close proximity. And when I

tell you that tradition is still there and strong... the last time I was with my people in Hilton Head, I witnessed a toddler being carried by a teenager from one trailer to another so that they could go get something to eat and spend time with the elder.

00:28:02

Jor: Yeah, I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, but I am, by birth right through my father, a Georgetonian, which is the, towards the north of the state of South Carolina on the coast, where the county directly north of Charleston. And so, ancestrally, I'm a Goff and a Manigault. My grandmother was a Manigault, and both of those families came from the North Santee community, which is on the border of Georgetown and Charleston. And then it gets really complicated going back the generations right after and prior to emancipation. The land in which we've inherited is in the North Santee community, comes down through the Singleton family, but those Singleton's are... were married into the Manigaults, who came from Charleston. The Singletons came from Cat Island, which is a barrier island off the coast of Georgetown County, but then you have family in Beaufort, and a lot of folks on Johns Island right after emancipation and moving back and forth between those places. So, my ancestor born in like the 1830s, who was a minister in Charleston, he was born in Beaufort. The other ancestor who purchased a land in North Santee started churches from Georgetown County, North of Georgetown, all the way down to south of Charleston. So, there's always been movement up and down Highway 17, as I've been able to see going back to the late 1700s.

Discussion prompts:

- What stories of the filmmaker's familial and communal lineage will continue to live with you? What Gullah memories will you carry from viewing this film?
- How does the notion of ancestry impact the filmmaker's aesthetic choices in the film? Consider not just the cinematography of and the symbolism in the film, but also the soundscapes of *After Sherman*.
- How does *After Sherman* inspire you to think about your own ancestral stories or perhaps the ancestral stories of the lands you have called 'home?'"

Water & Land as Witness

00:26:00

Elijah: So, I'm from Beaufort County. As we all know, Beaufort County is made up of about 60 islands, some inhabitable, some not. My mother's side of the family is from an island, in particular called Coosaw Island, an island that didn't have a bridge until maybe the 60s, and that really helped to nurture the notion of community that I'm a product of. One institution on the island, the church, the community center, my father spearheaded being built. So, that's like, that's my mom's side, it's home, it's a big part of where I'm from. My dad, on the other hand, grew up in Sands Point, [ANI] just across the bridge or the river from Coosaw, and that's a very, you know, similarly distinct area but doesn't have the same sense of residence by way of the island notion of, you know, fishing and that kind of thing, and the nature of codependence I think that really engendered from my mom's side. And then broadly, Eddings Point, and that was called Frogmore, St. Helena Island, that's the deeper extension of my mom's side.

So, I would say those are my three big family hubs in Beaufort: Eddings Point (my great grandmother, her family), Sands Point (my dad's side), and then Coosaw (my mom's side, where she was raised and born). And yeah, as you said, I think that's kind of a real important thing to kind of foreground, so I'm really happy that you kind of raised that because I think Gullah experience is really distinct, it can be urban, it can be rural, you know, based upon your context, but in Beaufort, in particular, given the waterways and the ways in which that kind of created both distance and connection, by way of tradition, it's a really, a beautiful thing to experience that shaped, you know, who I am.

01:10:30

Jor: I got to take my cousin or my daughter to the salon my cousin owns in Georgetown to get her hair braided over Labor Day weekend and I realized that my cousin Blair... or my cousin Sonia, Sonia Blair, has, you know, touched the heads of my grandmother, my aunt, my mother, me, my daughter, you know, and I just thought that was amazing and, and so Sonia's hair salon is next door to our cousin Lamar's fish and chips spot, you know, across from a distant cousin's funeral home, you know, around the corner from the churches our families built. And so just again, the idea of stepping into a space in which, you know, you're welcome, you are remembered, and you are known before you know yourself. And so, to land, I think another subtle thing about the land and landscape in the film that is not explicit, but certainly a visual survey of the churches in my father's district, down between Charleston and Edisto Island. And, and that's important because the AME Church is one of the largest landowners in the state of South Carolina. And what does that mean in terms of, over centuries now, building a sense of a bedrock within the community for continuity for mutual aid and other things? And so that is ways in which land usage is sort of backgrounded in the film, but certainly foregrounded

is the fauna and flora because my composer, our composer, Tamar-kali, said it best, she said, there is something that almost feels Jurassic about the landscape at home, about these forests and knowing that many of them were cleared by hand by our ancestors and it's just, it is a unique, like, just landscape, the flora and fauna that is able to grow in the region, in the southern parts, southeastern part of the US. And so, I wanted to showcase that, I wanted to showcase the topography, the fact that it is the low country, it's at sea level, and wanted to give people a sense of that as well.

Discussion prompts:

- How is land a character in *After Sherman*? Describe scenes and elements that emphasize the power of place.
- How does *After Sherman* transmute narratives of resistance to and resilience in the face of oppression into a story of kinship and love across time?
- Have you ever visited, revisited, or returned to the lands and waters of the Gullah Geechee coast? How might this film impact the ways in which you interact with this or other African Diaspora landscapes.

Language, Tradition, & Story

00:09:03

Jon: The film has so many different origins. I think it's been a lifelong inquiry. Even dating to my first photography, black and white photography assignment in high school. It ended up being a documentation of old, dilapidated homes in my grandmother's neighborhood in Georgetown, South Carolina. So, there was always an interest in the space and its history and its landscapes. And then, fast forward many years later, when

my grandmother did transition, and passed this realm of life, we... I recognize -- she was probably 98 at the time -- and I just felt that something unique was leaving the world, was leaving my world and I had photographed her, but I had not recorded her using video or audio and what I was mourning the most was the loss of the tonal quality of her voice and realizing that I would never hear my name spoken in her Gullah Geechee dialect. And so, I wanted to both record and document -- starting around 2014 -- those remaining elders in my family who have retained the language and other cultural traditions, so that they can be preserved for future generations.

00:39:00

Elijah: I love that being Gullah is not a monolith. And I love that, you know, our cultural identity can show up in ways that are very nuanced, which in my mind is really important to how we sustain this cultural identity, to have room for all the ways in which you might express it. And I'm also really private in the sense that I'll be somewhere like, "Oh, you're Gullah! Speak Gullah for me" and I'm like, "No, I'm not speaking Gullah for you!" Because to me, it's like a performative thing that, you know, now I'm putting on a show, and that, to me, it's a really beautiful thing to maybe hear me talk to my grandmother... and when I speak to my grandmother, I sound very different because my dialect comes out in a very organic way that is hard for me to replicate, you know, on the spot. So it's a really fascinating thing that -- it's funny because my parents make fun of me because they say, I don't really speak Gullah or do it really well -- but just because of just the ways in which there was a generation of elders that said, you know, for you to make it in the world, you have to be able to speak this way, show up this way, and there's almost a disregard for different ways in which, you know, language and culture was sustained and shows up. So, there's a really beautiful reclamation happening now where it's now cool again to kind of own and kind of, you know, center

this, but I kind of missed out on this way that this shows up. And what's fascinating is I just recently went to an Indian reservation, where they're teaching language at tribal colleges as a way to kind of reinforce and reaffirm this very value set. And I was like, wow, would have been fascinating if when I was growing up, there was like Gullah class, or Gullah... you know, if it was centered as a language that was, you know, meant to be preserved and that kind of thing. It just wasn't the value set in the 80s and 90s, you know, back home, in that way. So, to me, it's been really fascinating to consider this Gullah Gentry dynamic, Michelle, that you've raised before, around how the culture shows up in ways that complicate this very static narrative. It's really cool to kind of determine how it has advanced to the arts and religion spirituality in ways that have, you know, continual import to the, to Black identity you know, writ large, but also how we each have the agency to determine how we live it out in ways that are really meaningful by way of connection.

Discussion prompts:

- How does *After Sherman* contend with the power of stories shared across generations? Consider, in particular, the filmmaker's relationship with his father.
- What is the effect of hearing a multitude of Gullah voices, accents, and language traditions? What do you make of the filmmaker's choice not to subtitle Gullah elders with speaking traditions more aligned with an African Diaspora creole?
- What Gullah Geechee traditions did you learn about or perhaps get reintroduced to through the film?

In the Spirit: Gullah Faith Practices

00:48:08

Jon: Another origin story for the film could be that I want -- that I tell frequently -- is that I wanted to make a narrative about a story my Aunt Angeline Goff Ford [AN4] told me when I was a kid that captivated me and captured my imagination. She said, when she was young, probably eight, nine years old, she got really sick. And so, she had a high fever, no one knew what was going on and everyone was worried. Come to find out, you know, she had, her parents had already lost another child that I don't even think my dad knew about when they were younger. But so, my grandfather was instructed to go see Dr. Buzzin[AN5] , like a root doctor in the country, to find a remedy, a way to break this, this fever and this sickness, and it kept progressing to the point that one night my aunt saw a cousin who had recently died, and other family members, and the cousin had asked her to come play with her. And this is I guess, when my grandfather thought enough was enough, and so he followed the instructions of the root doctor which were a couple of rituals, including going out to the graveyard with the shotgun and cursing the dead and telling them to leave her daughter alone. And then you have my grandmother, Viola, who was a devout Christian, Southern Black Gullah woman who prayed every day, who prayed to her God and her savior. And to me, the question was, which magic broke the fever? which one healed her? was it the root magic that my grandfather performed or was it what one would call, you know, just Christian worship and prayers of my grandmother? And I'd like to think that they're one in the same and... but for me, I think it's the fortitude and the strength and the resilience and the consistency of the spirituality of Black women that has sustained me personally, that has sustained my family through its hardships over generations And then the idea of pastoring and knowing that I come from many generations of ministers, including my father, and having witnessed firsthand that none of that pastoral care or leadership or congregational growth or structures

could exist without the presence and work of my mother, who was the first graphic designer I knew, because she made the church bulletin. You know, going back to when it was a typewriter, to when we got a word processor to computer to when the clipart was cut out to when it was printed shop. You know, like, all of this was done by hand by my mom, and usually other women. And so, in recognizing that the labor in the vineyard and in the community is often, you know, led, despite the figurehead being male, it's usually led by women. And so, my spirituality and my faith formation is a direct result of the faith of Black women.

Discussion prompts:

- The notion of a spiritual realm is central to Gullah Geechee culture. Can you identify ways in which *After Sherman* demonstrates a spiritual aesthetic through editorial choices? Consider the filmmaker's use of experimentation.
- What spiritual practices of Gullah Geechee people do you recognize or maybe personally relate to?
- Nine worshippers were massacred by a White supremacist, at Charleston's Mother Emmanuel AME Church, on June 17, 2015. How does this tragedy shape the narrative of *After Sherman*? How does the filmmaker use his art as a balm.

Gullah Futures

00:53:56

Jon: My editor Blair McClendon [AN6] had asked early in our process of working together, what does the film sound like? Like not who's the narrator but what does the film sound like? And I said, it sounds like a Black woman like, like my grandmother. It sounds like an old Geechee Gullah woman. And so, that is the voice of the film, the literal voice of the film is, to me, the voice of a woman.

film is, to me, the voice of a woman. But the ways that it shows up visually, I would say... in Yemaya, in the water itself, in which the film begins, you know, we come from the water, we come from this divine feminine energy that has the power to nurture and the power to destroy, the power to heal, the power to create, the power to provide safe passage, the power to drown you, you know, and that's from which we sprung. ... [the power of women] shows up... it shows up in my mother being the one who tells the direct truth in terms of the difficulties of the aftermath of the shooting. Miss Ruby Martin and her quiet yet fierce resolution that that we are caught in a vicious cycle of violence in this country, you know, and, and in the way in which one doesn't have to rage to be powerful and defiant. I think that's how the power of women and the teachings of women show up explicitly in the film. And Elijah's cousin Viola Smalls, who is reading a portion of the film, Sherman's field/filled orders [AN9] alongside my father. I think having her voice in there is also important and powerful because when you hear decrees, like you think of kings and soldiers reading it out, and I think it's important that we had her voice in there as well.

01:16:59

Michelle: I love that talking about the land and the water leads us to talking about faith or spirituality or connection to these diaspora spiritual traditions that also leads us to talking about queerness. I'll just leave this for, you know, future people who engage this work, I am definitely looking forward to the day when there are more queer Gullah scholars, you know, really rendering visible and legible the notions of queerness in the Corridor. Because I do think there's this false messaging around just like Gullah, as you said, Elijah, Gullah is not a monolith, the way gender expression is in Gullah is not a monolith. And I think there's this false binary that we're seeing around hyper masculinity and hyper femininity and how we talk about Gullahness that doesn't seem to yet... those narratives have not yet truly emerged. Because I know a lot of Gullah

women who have strong masculine energy and the reverse is true as well, so I just want to say I'm looking forward to that work, creative work and research work emerging. So, I just wanted to put that out there.

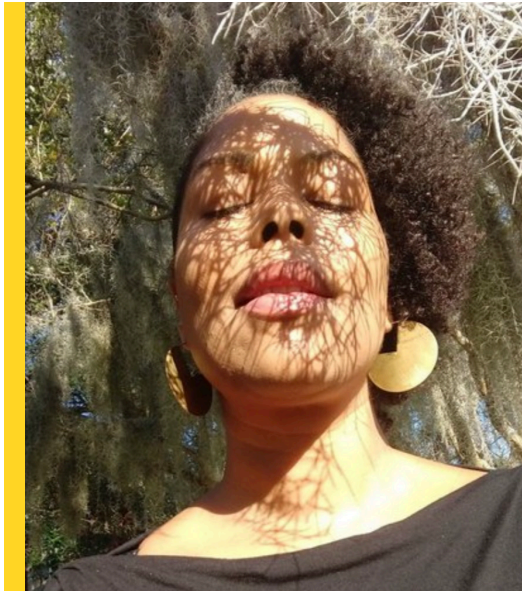
Discussion prompts:

- *After Sherman* invites the viewer to see Gullah Geechee culture as dynamic, complex, and ever-changing. How do you see the future of Gullah Geechee people referenced in the film?
 - What other futures could this film suggest for other cultures/diasporas in the U.S. and beyond?
- How has tourism and climate change impacted the communities featured in *After Sherman*? What examples of strategic resistance do we see in the film?
- How has this film opened your eyes to the ways in which legal systems, such as heirs property law, impact the sustainability of Black South communities?

AFTER SHERMAN RESOURCES:

On [the film's website](#), you will find a number of additional resources that the filmmakers compiled. These include: the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, the Penn Center National Historic Landmark District (St. Helena Island, SC), the Gullah Museum (Georgetown, SC), the The Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, and more.

Credits & Acknowledgments



About the Author, Michelle Lanier

Michelle Lanier is a renowned public historian, folklorist, keeper of memory, educator, filmmaker, and multi-genre author, rooted in AfroCarolina and inspired by the Global South. An experimental geographer, Lanier believes in the transformative power of land as witness. Michelle has served on the faculty of the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS) at Duke University since 2000. Her teaching led to work as a Documentary Doula (aiding the birth of films) most notably the award-winning *Mossville: When Great Trees Fall*, which she also executive produced. *Mossville* reveals a global south story of resistance to environmental racism and has been translated into five languages, screened on five continents, and chosen by the United Nations in an effort to raise awareness about the impacts of the climate crisis on the lives of people of African descent. As a proudly unionized adjunct fellow, at CDS, Michelle's pedagogy centers the ethics of ethnographic deference, reciprocity, and vulnerability. Through her current work as a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Department of Geography, Michelle is deepening her praxis of Black feminist and womanist cartographies through embodiment and the poetics of Black South commemoration.

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