



## **The Rediscovering of the Gullah Geechee Culture Through Its Cuisine!**

by **Roshan R. Varghese**: 2022 CTI Fellow  
David W. Butler High School

This Curriculum Unit is recommended for:  
American History: Honors and Standard  
Grades 10 and 11

**Keywords:** African-American History      English and Language Arts  
Science and Horticulture      Gullah Geechee      the Carolinas

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) and [Appendix 2](#) for North Carolina teaching standards addressed in this particular Curriculum Unit.

**Synopsis:** In its pursuit of development and progress, American history has disregarded the impact and influence of various minority groups and cultures. One of those groups that has suffered at the hands of time has been the Gullah Geechee culture of the lowcountry of the Southern United States. It is a hybrid culture developed by the enslaved peoples of West Africa brought to colonial America, by the tragic effects of the Triangular Trade and the Middle Passage. In an effort to communicate with each other, despite varying cultural backgrounds, along with the desire to disguise communications from slaveholders, the Gullah language mixed West African creole with English. However, the common denominator that bridged the Geechee people was food. Food has always been the link between generations, and within generations. And for the Gullah Geechee people, as their people have lost land and traditions to development and progress, it is their food that connects them to their past. From their origins of being expert cultivators of rice, to their foundations of cajun cuisine and “soul food”, the Gullah Geechee people have a proud and noble heritage. In this Curriculum Unit, our goal is to expose our students to the forgotten culture of the Gullah Geechee people, providing a powerful reflection of African-American culture that nearly all Americans, including many African-Americans are completely unaware of. Through resources such as the 1990s Nickelodeon’s family television series, “Gullah Gullah Island” and Padma Lakshmi’s “Taste the Nation” episode of “The Gullah Way”, we want to give insights into Gullah language, the Gullah food, and more than anything, the Gullah people. And if we are able to do that, we will be able to expose our students to the beauty of an important culture in the development of American history.

*I plan to teach this Curriculum Unit during the coming year, Fall 2022-Spring 2023, to 150-200 students in **American History: Honors and Standard, grades 10th and 11th.***

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## **Introduction: Rationale, School/Student Demographics and Unit Goals**

### **Rationale**

In its pursuit of development and progress, American history has disregarded the impact and influence of various minority groups and cultures. One of those groups that has suffered at the hands of time has been the Gullah Geechee culture of the lowcountry of the Southern United States. It is a hybrid culture developed by the enslaved peoples of West Africa brought to colonial America, by the tragic effects of the Triangular Trade and the Middle Passage. In an effort to communicate with each other, despite varying cultural backgrounds, along with the desire to disguise communications from slaveholders, the Gullah language mixed West African creole with English. However, the common denominator that bridged the Geechee people was food. Food has always been the link between generations, and within generations. And for the Gullah Geechee people, as their people have lost land and traditions to development and progress, it is their food that connects them to their past. From their origins of being expert cultivators of rice, to their foundations of cajun cuisine and “soul food”, the Gullah Geechee people have a proud and noble heritage.

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### **School/Student Demographics**

David W. Butler High School is one of the thirty-two high schools within the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System, but the only one located within the town limits of Matthews. Opened in 1997, Butler High School was named in honor of David Watkins Butler, an outstanding mathematics teacher at West Charlotte High School who tragically lost his life in a house fire while attempting to save his family. During the 2011-12 school year, Butler High School was designated as a "School of Distinction with High Growth" and one of only seventy-two schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to meet all the AMO targets. The school also met twenty out of the twenty goals for the 2011-12 academic year fulfilling all the federal guidelines for the No Child Left Behind Act. From 2014-2016, David W. Butler High School was recognized by U.S. News and World Report as the #1 high school in CMS and the 5th highest rating in North Carolina. The graduation rate was at 91.6% in 2014-15, 92.7% in 2015-16, and 93.1% in 2016-17, reflecting a 1.5% growth in the last 2 calendar years, and 3.5% higher than the graduation rate among all Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Out of the current student enrollment of 2133 at David W. Butler High School, the racial/ethnic breakdown is, as follows: 37% white, 30% African-American, 22% Hispanic and 5% Asian, with 51% of the student population male and 49% female. 10% of students are assisted through the

Exceptional Children (EC) department, 7% are assisted through the English as a Second Language (ESL) department by being classified as having limited English proficiency (LEP), and 8% of students meet the requirements to be classified as academically gifted (AIG). Twenty-five students at Butler High School are also federally classified as McKinney Vento, meaning that they currently do not possess a residence and are homeless. Of those numbers, 43% and rising, subscribe to free/reduced lunch requirements, due to economic hardships and disadvantages, and are classified by CharlotteMecklenburg Schools as economically-disadvantaged.

### **Unit Goals**

Over the course of this Curriculum Unit, educators and students will be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the foundations of the Gullah Geechee culture?
- What are the primary foods eaten and consumed by those within the Gullah Geechee culture?
- How do those that consider themselves to be Gullah Geechee today, maintain their historical legacy?
- How valuable is food and crops, to maintaining that historical legacy?
- Why are so many Americans unaware of the historical legacy of the Gullah Geechee culture?

### **Content Research**

The Gullah Geechee people of modern times are the descendants of Africans brought via the slave ships of the Triangular Trade and the Middle Passage. Their heritage traces back to tribal groups in western and central Africa. Upon arriving in the “New World”, these proud people were forced to work on the plantations in coastal areas of the southern United States, primarily in the newly-founded colonies of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. As many waterways that parted the land made travel to the mainland difficult and rare, this forced separation perpetuated these enslaved people to blend their tribal languages with European English and do everything they could, in attempting to maintain and sustain the arts, crafts, religious beliefs, folklore, rituals, and food preferences connected to their tribal African roots.<sup>1</sup>

As descendants of Africans, who came from the rice-growing region of West Africa, appropriately called the “Rice Coast”, these Gullah Geechee descendants were forced to work on the rice, indigo and cotton plantations of the lower Atlantic coast. The unique and distinctive culture that formed, as a result of the nature of their enslavement on these isolated island and

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<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress. <https://guides.loc.gov/gullah-geechee-history>.

coastal plantations, could be easily identified in their arts, crafts, foodways, music and language, as each of these specific areas encouraged the preservation of deep African roots.<sup>2</sup>

The language of the Gullah Geechee is a unique language spoken today, in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, but can be heard as far south as Florida. Many have identified it as having similar characteristics as other creole and cajun languages. The language (and its respective dialects) began as a simplified form of communication among people who spoke many different languages among the diverse African ethnic groups that were enslaved. The vocabulary, grammatical roots and contextual nuances come from both African and European languages. And it is the only distinctly African-American creole language in the United States of America, as it has been able to influence the traditional vocabulary and speech patterns of the Southern parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

The Gullah language, known in Georgia as just “Geechee”, is technically known as an English-based creole language, or a language form indicating that it blends the language of the European colonizers with the African enslaved. As stated, it was created when peoples from diverse African backgrounds found themselves thrown together, as part of the transatlantic slave trade, and were forced to have to communicate with each other, despite the lack of cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties. Through extensive research, it has also been deduced that there is a strong connection between the Gullah language and the Krio language spoken in the West African country of Sierra Leone. The native language of the Krios, or the descendants of freed slaves, is not only the national language of Sierra Leone, but the most commonly spoken tongue. It is believed that the word “Gullah” either derives from the word “Angola”, as many transatlantic enslaved peoples originated from the southwestern part of Africa, or possibly from the word “Gola”, which would indicate a specific tribal group, that were located on the border of the modern day countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia.<sup>4</sup>

The Gullah Geechee people have always possessed a rich oral tradition of storytelling. Animals and people play specific roles in the beloved familial stories that have been passed down from generation to another. It was not uncommon to also include God, as well as the importance of spirits. Gullah Geechee fables and tales often centered on wild animals taking on the personalities of human beings. And in a similar fashion to the “trickster tales” of other African tribes and people groups that neighbored them, these fictional characters would consistently find themselves in outlandish, but always funny, predicaments.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/the-gullah-geechee/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/the-gullah-geechee/>.

<sup>4</sup> Gullah: Hilton Head Island. <https://www.hiltonheadisland.org/gullah/stories-and-recollections/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gullah: Hilton Head Island. <https://www.hiltonheadisland.org/gullah/stories-and-recollections/>.

Due to their relative isolation on the sea islands of the lowcountry, the Gullah Geechee were permitted more self-sufficiency and freedom. As a result, their newly-created language and fable/myth traditions continued to evolve and adapt, and subsequently, providing an opportunity to endure for a significantly longer timeframe than their contemporaries on the mainland. This “miracle of isolation”, as historians have deemed it, has allowed the Gullah Geechee people to continue to embrace their traditional ways, even as time has progressed forward into the 21st Century.<sup>6</sup>

A rich heritage of African culture was brought to the United States of America, as a result, of the ancestors of the Gullah Geechee people. From art, foodways and music, they were able to pass their talents onto their descendants. As a result, these products that were created and designed for their basic ability to survive from day to day, have now become the arts and crafts of the modern Gullah Geechee people. These items include making cast nets for fishing in the Atlantic waters, weaving baskets to collect locally-grown agriculture and sewing clothing and usable textiles for comfort and warmth. The music of the Gullah Geechee people were deeply rooted in the music traditions brought over by those enslaved Africans to the Americans, and how the torturous conditions of slavery defined their very existence. And musical genres that are popular today with young people such as hip hop, rhythm and blues and jazz, have found that their influence and evolution came out of the music of the Gullah Geechee people. But not only those, but gospel music, spirituals, ragtime and soul can trace their roots to the areas of the lowcountry.<sup>7</sup>

The artistic talents of the Gullah Geechee people not only represent their culture, but provide stories for their people. This uniqueness of style is rich in the traditions of Africa. The art reflects the strength and resilience of the people and provides the necessary images that an African storyteller would depict on how life is or was. It even allows the context to answer the most-often asked question of Gullah Geechee art, which is why people are portrayed without discernible facial features. As expected, the roots dwell in the hardships of the transatlantic slave trade. As enslaved peoples, the Gullah Geechee were stripped of their individual personalities. But, they refused to have their spirit seized. So as a result, the faceless images are an accurate desire of Gullah Geechee artists to emphasize not only the perseverance, but the will to survive of their people, regardless if it might undermine individuality and specificity.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is Gullah Geechee art helping to make bridges to the past, it is also helping to preserve modern Gullah Geechee traditions. As art is sold to patrons, the profits and proceeds are being used by artists to hold onto generational heirs property. Heirs property has been passed down from one generation to the next, most often without having proper documentation of ownership

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<sup>6</sup> Gullah: Hilton Head Island. <https://www.hiltonheadisland.org/gullah/stories-and-recollections/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/the-gullah-geechee/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lowcountry Gullah: <https://lowcountrygullah.com/gullah-art/>.

and deed. Most likely, the original purchaser (i.e. an enslaved man) did not have a will, in order to pass the property legally to their descendants. As a result, now a hundred-plus years later, the original purchaser might have potentially hundreds of heirs who might claim ownership rights, despite lacking a physical title or deed. This lack of proper documentation has created legal loopholes for the Gullah Geechee people, who according to a 2006 sociological report, have lost over 14 million acres of family and cultural property in the coastal lowcountry, since the end of the American Civil War (1861-1865). And sadly, due to the complexities of title and deed legality, only slightly over 1 million acres of land purchased by the original Gullah Geechee people remains in the hands of the rightful descendants and families.<sup>9</sup>

Gullah Geechee musical history can be explored in the popular music of today, by simply visiting the island churches of the coastal lowcountry. Many of the songs sung by those in the pews continue to be about not losing hope in the tough days. They speak of finding not only spiritual freedom, but actual freedom in the circumstances. For example, the same songs that speak of being free, also speak of not being overwhelmed by despair. The earliest Gullah Geechee songs and hymns all were built on a communal call and response. This would allow a leader to call out a directive, and the congregation, in return, would respond with the appropriate response.<sup>10</sup>

The First African Baptist Church, the oldest Gullah Geechee congregation on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina, was the site where the very popular Negro spiritual, “Kumbayah” was recorded. Other popular church hymns, like “Michael Rowed A Boat Ashore”, “I Want to be Ready”, “Walk Together Children” and “Traveling Shoes” all have their origins in the call and response traditions of the Gullah Geechee people. All of those famous tunes connected those oppressed by slavery, allowing them to effectively communicate, by understanding the double meanings involved. From the sun-drenched fields to the Sunday morning pews, these work songs and church hymns, continued to evolve into the ragtime and jazz of future decades, and that is still adored and performed today by everyone, from military bands to community brass bands.<sup>11</sup>

The principles of Gullah Geechee culture can be found in the American jazz of today. The culture’s mentality of diversity and inclusivity allows everyone the opportunity, through their musical talents, to say something, while everyone else listening, has the opportunity, in kind, to respond. And the dancing that accompanies jazz music has its roots in the Gullah Geechee culture, as many dancing movements were called “Geechee”, as a nod to the Gullahs who

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<sup>9</sup> Lowcountry Gullah: <https://lowcountrygullah.com/gullah-art/>.

<sup>10</sup> “The Sound of Gullah Culture”: Hilton Head Monthly.  
<https://www.hiltonheadmonthly.com/news/bluffton/1763-the-sound-of-gullah-culture>.

<sup>11</sup> “The Sound of Gullah Culture”: Hilton Head Monthly.  
<https://www.hiltonheadmonthly.com/news/bluffton/1763-the-sound-of-gullah-culture>.

originally danced these movements. Also, the wildly popular dance, the Charleston, is a reference to Charleston, South Carolina, the modern-day capital of the Gullah Geechee culture.<sup>12</sup>

The traditional Gullah Geechee diet consisted of vegetables, fruits, wild game, seafood and livestock that they could find in the coastal lowcountry. That was paired with items that were imported from Europe and items that were imported from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. Among those African fruits and vegetables were okra, rice, yams, peas, hot peppers, peanuts, sesame seeds, sorghum and watermelon. Native American food such as corn, squash, tomatoes and berries, were also incorporated. But nothing held more value than rice. It became the staple crop for not only the Gullah Geechee people, but also for the white population in the coastal lowcountry.<sup>13</sup>

Due to their location on the coastal waterways, the heritage of Gullah Geechee cuisine is largely dependent on fish and seafood as a primary food source. However, research has suggested that African-American fishermen consume larger amounts of fish, compared to everyone else, potentially exposing them to higher environmental contaminant levels. As a result, major misperceptions have existed between fish consumption advisories, especially in regards to pollution. Thus, the need to provide the fishermen of the Gullah Geechee culture, clear health messages will promote more informed choices about fish consumption. If these messages are made with culturally-g geared emphasis, this will help to minimize the potential exposures that may occur with environmental pollutants.<sup>14</sup>

The Gullah Geechee people also made sure to continue traditional African cultural practices, by making sparse available rations go a long way, by supplementing any-newly caught fish and game, with leftovers preserved from butchering and communal stews with their neighbors. All Gullah Geechee homes continued to apply African cooking methods and seasonings, and sometimes, those techniques were carried over into plantation kitchens. And since plantation cooks and chefs were primarily enslaved African-American women, much of what Americans refer to as “Southern cuisine”, actually comes from the creativity and labor of enslaved cooks and chefs, inspired by their Gullah Geechee heritage.<sup>15</sup>

However, due to their lack of exposure to those on the mainland, the credit that the Gullah Geechee people are aptly deserving of, has often been neglected. Assimilation is a tricky concept. When a culture quickly adapts, they are often ridiculed for discarding their heritage too

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<sup>12</sup> “The Sound of Gullah Culture”: Hilton Head Monthly. <https://www.hiltonheadmonthly.com/news/bluffton/1763-the-sound-of-gullah-culture>.

<sup>13</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/>.

<sup>14</sup> National Library of Medicine. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24737279/>.

<sup>15</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/>.



easily. When a culture is resistant to change, they are often ostracized for not confirming to mainstream values. Because the Gullah Geechee people stayed mostly to themselves, rather than assimilate into the wider Southern society, they held onto unique customs and ways of living. And sadly, these were either lost, abandoned or forgotten, outside the space of where the majority of them inhabit today. Due to the Great Migration of African-Americans, voluntarily and forced, along with the expanding diaspora of Africans globally, it is becoming more and more difficult to trace ties back to lowcountry coastal areas of the American South, leaving many to never experience a culture, that not only includes mouthwatering cuisine, but also the beautifully-sounding Gullah Geechee language, a Creole dialect that mixes European English with the tongues of Africa.<sup>16</sup>

For Gullah Geechee cuisine, the worthiness and the depth of flavor is found in the importance of grains. And the most important grain was rice. A base ingredient in nearly all Gullah Geechee dishes, rice was so widely used that the Gullah Geechee people would characterize themselves to be rice experts. And they have every right to make that assertion, having cultivated the crop for more than three thousand years along the “Rice Coast of Africa”.<sup>17</sup>

For the average American diner, it would not be difficult to see the similarities between the cuisine of the Gullah Geechee with that of the Creole cuisine of Louisiana. However, there are specific details that cause the two cuisines to vary. For example, the main dishes of Gullah Geechee cuisine often include rice and the local seafood that is in season, but also other grains are consistently used, like millet and benne seed. Okra, tomatoes, braised vegetables and stewed greens are always found close by to the ingredients already listed. As a result, Gullah Geechee dishes are thick, hearty, savory and for all intents and purposes, the heartbeat of Southern cuisine. And all families will appreciate that while the cuisine of the Gullah Geechee people is high class in quality, it does not require fancy cutlery or high-end reservations to fully immerse oneself in its uniqueness, creativity and essence.<sup>18</sup>

However, there have been stereotypical associations placed on Gullah Geechee cuisine. That is because of its history as a cuisine created by and for enslaved people. As a result, it has often been dismissed as a food for a lower-class clientele. And subsequently, it can easily be appropriated by those in the majority and beyond. Crops such as okra, peanuts, cantaloupe,

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<sup>16</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

<sup>17</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

<sup>18</sup> Southern Kitchen:

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watermelon, that are automatically associated with the American South, are not often credited to the Gullah Geechee people.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the biggest name in Gullah Geechee cuisine is Chef BJ Dennis. Mr. Dennis, who hails from Charleston, South Carolina has become an ambassador to Gullah Geechee cuisine and heritage. He travels all around the country, displaying his exquisite talents, all tracing back from his Gullah Geechee roots. Sometimes, he will venture to the wealthy golf resorts of Hilton Head Island, cooking fine dining experiences for many guests, who had never eaten, let alone heard of Gullah Geechee cuisine. And he is quick to point out to these diners, ignorant of his culture and background, that the fried chicken and macaroni and cheese that they associate with Southern cuisine, is not the heartbeat of the American South. But instead, the heartbeat of the American South is the cuisine of the Gullah Geechee people.<sup>20</sup>

Often that lack of knowledge for many Americans, including those that grow up in the American South, is because there is no reference point associated with Gullah Geechee cuisine. For example, Chef BJ Dennis did not fully comprehend how important and vital the food that his grandparents served him was to his culture and heritage. However, as he got older and acquired new experiences, he learned that the food of his family, of his people, was not only the basis of all cuisines in the American South, but the entire dietary systems of the New World. With that understanding, he developed a pride for his culture and its foodways, and that embrace has not withered.<sup>21</sup>

As Chef BJ Dennis and other Gullah Geechee chefs are expanding their influence, they are helping to overcome one of the greatest hindrances to the appreciation of Gullah Geechee cuisine: the difficulty of the American people to find it on their restaurant menus. If one grew up in the Southern United States, they may have some experience with tomato-based okra soup, which has similarities to roux-based gumbo, winter greens and other standard dishes. However, due to the isolated nature of the Gullah Geechee community, it has not been easy to find authentic Gullah Geechee cuisine. It does not help, due to economic hardships, that many Gullah Geechee restaurants have closed down, limiting the availability of such healthy and delicious cuisine. And with so many products and restaurants appropriating Gullah Geechee cuisine as

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<sup>19</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

<sup>20</sup> Southern Kitchen:

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<sup>21</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

their own, the identity and history of the Gullah Geechee people continues to lose its value in the larger American society.<sup>22</sup>

Fortunately, in the last few years, there has been momentum rising up, among the mainstream media, to highlight Gullah Geechee cuisine culture. Hopefully, this will continue to crack open the door, and make more Americans aware of and appreciate the delectable goodness of the Gullah Geechee people. In Beaufort, South Carolina, a Gullah Geechee visitors center has opened. In Columbia, South Carolina, a new Gullah Geechee restaurant, Daufuskie Gullah Bistro and Piano Bar has opened. Reports on the effects of climate change on the lowcountry coastal islands, inhabited by the Gullah Geechee people, have been highlighted by the Weather Channel. The Charleston, South Carolina jazz band, Ranky Tank hit the top of the Billboard charts, with their self-titled debut album of traditional and spiritual songs. Even Harvard University created an exploratory course on the Gullah Geechee language, and its popularity in enrollment has created a desire for future courses.<sup>23</sup>

There is a belief that if visitors to Charleston, South Carolina venture just outside the city limits, they will find so much of what the Gullah Geechee culture has to offer. They will find garlic crab/shrimp or one-pot purloo at Ravenel Seafood. And the hope is that when these diners start experiencing more Gullah Geechee cuisine on their restaurant menus, they will connect to Gullah Geechee restaurant owners, who will expose them to the past, present and future of the Gullah Geechee people.<sup>24</sup>

Within Gullah Geechee culture, religion and spirituality have always had a sustaining role. It has been pivotal to their family and community life, tracing back to enslaved Africans who were exposed to Christianity and its various traditions. In many ways, these incorporated beliefs meant much to them, as it corresponded effectively with their African system of values. These values included a belief in God/god, the desire to put community above individuality, a universal respect for elders, a perseverance of kinship bonds and ancestors, a respect for the incredible power of nature, and the honoring the continuity of life and the uncertainty of the afterlife. And as Africans were congregated on lowcountry plantations, into the hardships of enslavement, they

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<sup>22</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

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<sup>24</sup> Southern Kitchen:

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strived to maintain a praise house or small churchlike structure, where they would meet for religious services.<sup>25</sup>

The African-American church, driven out of the heritage of the Gullah Geechee African-Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, became the foundation for radical politics, a space for community and an opportunity to reconnect to African roots. For a long time, it was one of the last remaining strongholds for Gullah Geechee history and culture. As the American subculture with arguably the strongest present connection to West Africa, there is an incredible need to preserve history at all costs. The descendants of those enslaved peoples have done everything that they possibly can do to maintain strong ties to their West African languages, religion and culture, even in spite of their geographic isolation in the lowcountry coastal areas.<sup>26</sup>

Today, African-American churches are the most authentic warehouses of Gullah-Geechee culture and historical memory. In the lowcountry coastal areas, African-American Christianity and Gullah-Geechee heritage and history form a tightly knit, codependent relationship, so much that pastors will occasionally read out of Gullah Bible translations and women of the Church speak seamlessly between Gullah Geechee dialects and traditional English during Sunday services. Those women still sit in front pews wearing handmade scarves, to thwart against evil spirits, while they praise to the heavens with Biblical hymns and Negro spirituals. And after the services ended, the smell of spicy Gullah Geechee gumbo swept the church fellowship halls, as parishioners mixed their love of Jesus Christ with their love of being Gullah Geechee.<sup>27</sup>

The ritualistic and connective nature of the African-Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination helped preserve Gullah-Geechee traditions alive. The community continued to apply Gullah-Geechee sounds and musical traditions to hymns and singing spirituals. All sorts of instruments were used, allowing for accompaniments of lowcountry claps, blocks, cowbells and even laundry washboards. Worship would feature the traditional call and response, allowing for oral traditions to be vocally passed from the older generations to the younger generations. At the end of each calendar year, the tradition of “watch night” services would harken back to their ancestors, separated by time and distance across the Atlantic Ocean. For many of the Gullah

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<sup>25</sup> The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission.  
<https://gullahgecheecorridor.org/thegullahgechee/>.

<sup>26</sup> Black Youth Project:  
<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-gechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.

<sup>27</sup> Black Youth Project:  
<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-gechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.

Geechee people, it would feel like they were being enveloped and empowered by their very presence, in ways that they could not fully articulate.<sup>28</sup>

The manner to which the Gullah Geechee culture and African-American Christianity does not always make sense to most outsiders, but most Gullah Geechee people would argue that they have no desire to be defined by traditional Christianity, in the ways that they harken back to their oppression of enslavement. And since the church was the heartbeat of the maintaining of culture, it was vital to preserve that uniqueness. Despite living in the heart of the lowcountry coastal areas, Gullah Geechee history, religion and culture has rarely been represented through historical monuments. It is almost never discussed in public and private school curriculums. In that environment of intentional forgetfulness, the church was and is one of the only institutional spaces where a forgotten culture is protected, understood and practiced. It is more than a museum exhibit, but a living breathing testament to the resilience of its people.<sup>29</sup>

The Gullah Geechee people have a story as American as any other cultural group in the United States, if not more. As the American people continue to experience new things, they will become more aware of the full spectrum that is Southern culture and cuisine. And as they do, they will hopefully find the beauty that is the Gullah Geechee people, by realizing how invaluable modern appropriations are, and in return, value the true definitions of Southern heritage.<sup>30</sup>

### **Instructional Implementation: Teaching Strategies, Classroom Lessons/Activities and Assessments**

This Curriculum Unit will be broken down to consist of six days of instruction, followed by the formal assessment for this unit on the seventh day. Arguably, it could be compressed into a shorter time frame, but to provide students enough depth, as well as a thorough review, it is vital to follow the designated pacing suggested. It is suggested that the instructor assign an overarching homework assignment, such as a unit qualifier, that would be due on the date of the formal assessment, as it will provide adequate practice for students as they learn the content throughout the duration of the Curriculum Unit.

The initial day of the Curriculum Unit will focus on introducing students to the components and terminology related to the Gullah Geechee people and African-American enslavement in the American colonies. Through an Enhanced Direct Instruction, the instructor will examine each of

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<sup>28</sup> Black Youth Project:

<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-gechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.

<sup>29</sup> Black Youth Project:

<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-gechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.

<sup>30</sup> Southern Kitchen:

<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-gechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.

these concepts, along with other relevant corresponding vocabulary. Students will then group off into pairs and/or trios, and complete a shared activity, creating flashcards and study tools about the various terms and vocabulary associated with Gullah Geechee people and African-American enslavement in the American colonies. It is advisable to end the class session with a 3-2-1 exit ticket on what was discussed in this particular class session, in which students submit their exit tickets as they are leaving class, with three things they learned about Gullah Geechee culture, two questions they still have about African-American enslavement in the American colonies, and one prominent theme about how the two concepts are intertwined with each other.

On day two of the Curriculum Unit, the instructor will explore how the enslavement of African-Americans on American plantations led to the necessity to form new cultural norms. Ideally, the most effective approach to begin this lesson is through an Enhanced Direct Instruction, to which one may be able to explain all of the complexities of African-American slavery and its effects on those enslaved on Southern plantations. Attached is an effective Google Slides presentation of the context:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1APmmcApjW621rzTVO7rFCcKYpNmu23u1/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=109324334029832248389&rtpof=true&sd=true>. After the Enhanced Direct Instruction, students should complete an activity in Canvas, which is the designated learning portal, in sync with any of the corresponding handouts. Instructors have the academic discretion to choose which activity and handouts, they believe correspond well with the understanding of the causes and effects of African-American enslavement on the peoples affected, for the personalized needs of their students and their respective differentiations and accommodations.

On day three of the Curriculum Unit, the class session will focus on the specifics of the Gullah Geechee culture, including Gullah Geechee art, music, dance, cuisine and religion. As is suggested, the instructor should use an Enhanced Direct Instruction to do a deep-dive into the various cultural components listed previously. This will be followed up by an analysis, more specifically into how Gullah Geechee culture is portrayed to their children. It is recommended to use clips and extended scenes from the “Gullah Gullah Island” on Nickelodeon and “Searching for the Real ‘Gullah Gullah Island’” on YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl\\_BcAJNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl_BcAJNc)). To close the class session, students will free-write on what they have learned about Gullah Geechee culture from the clips provided, and how if they were children that grew up in the Gullah Geechee culture, how they would feel about how their culture was being portrayed through the clips provided.

On day four of the Curriculum Unit, students will explore the Gullah Geechee cuisine, being provided an over-encompassing overview of its complexities and specifics. The instructor should use an Enhanced Direct Instruction. After the completion of the Enhanced Direct Instruction, students will engage in whole class discussion, on similarities and differences between the cuisine of the Gullah Geechee and the cajun cuisine of New Orleans, Louisiana. The instructor should use scaffolding and spiral questioning to connect student answers and responses, to spur further discussion and thought. To close the session, students will complete a 3- 2-1 exit ticket, highlighting three things they learned about Gullah Geechee cuisine, two questions that they would ask to someone who cooks Gullah Geechee cuisine and one overarching theme connecting the entire lesson from start to finish.

On day five of the Curriculum Unit, the class will continue to explore Gullah Geechee cuisine. To begin, primary source documents will be used, maybe in the form of recipes. The instructor may choose to do a document-based question (DBQ) analysis, using multiple primary and secondary sources, and have students connect the various documents. Afterwards, the instructor will show Padma Lakshmi's "Taste The Nation" on Hulu, Season 1, Episode 4: "The Gullah Way"

(<https://www.hulu.com/series/taste-the-nation-with-padma-lakshmi-53d48a66-d254-4e4f-89a1-277ec6c57368>), and conclude the class session with a classroom discussion, based on what was observed over the course of the viewing.

On the last official day of the Curriculum Unit, day six, the instructor will begin review of topics and concepts for students, in preparation for their formal assessment on the Curriculum Unit in the following class session. In their academic student manual, various manual pages and graphic organizers will be used as a collective review of information. This will allow for choral response, as well as individualized input. For students that strive for multiple intelligence guided by visual skills, these activities are highly effective for their ability to understand and apply content. Finally, students will view "Gullah Geechee: The Man I Tried To Flee" by Ron Daise at TedX Charleston (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuWRaWGVNIM>), to close an over-encompassing Curriculum Unit on the Gullah Geechee culture. As the class session is ending, the instructor will remind students of their formal assessment in the next class session, including the submission of their overarching unit qualifier, thus they should prepare accordingly through various study skills.

Day seven of the Curriculum Unit is the formal assessment. It will feature a combination of multiple-choice, short answer and fill-in-blank questions. For honors and advanced placement students, essay questions may be added upon the instructor's discretion. Students will be expected to have adequately prepared themselves for this formal assessment, based on the previous six days' worth of instruction. Prior to beginning the formal assessment, students will turn in their unit qualifier, which was assigned on day one of the unit and is expected to be turned in at the time of the formal assessment.

Data from this formal assessment, from score analysis to question item analysis, will be used to assess the effectiveness of this Curriculum Unit, from a Common Core perspective. If positive data affirms the effectiveness of the unit, in correspondence with data-driven instruction, then other Curriculum Units could strengthen what has been previously prepared and utilized. If negative data shows a lack of comprehension and understanding by students, then the Curriculum Unit will be adapted and altered to highlight the Curriculum Unit's strengths and remedy the Curriculum Unit's weakness for future growth and development as both an educator and a practitioner.

### **Appendix 1: Teaching Standards:**

In correlation with the Common Core Standards (adopted by the state of North Carolina in 2010, to be fully implemented and operational within all of the state's classrooms by 2013) and the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for American History II (formerly United States History) and World History, this Curriculum Unit will individually meet the needs of honors,

standard and inclusion students, based upon their instructional needs using a series of differentiation techniques. Since North Carolina has just recently adapted the Essential Standards for Common Core within the last few years, the ability to fully connect the specific content to the required Essential Standard is much more difficult than it was to the previous Competency Goal and Objective, according to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.

As defined by the state of North Carolina, the purpose of the Common Core Standards is to strengthen academic standards for students, as they were developed by national experts with access to best practices and research from across the nation. Despite the uniformness amongst states that Common Core has brought, it has been highly speculated within North Carolina, that the state will choose to withdraw its participation within the consortium so please be mindful that these Essential Standards may not be existent upon your usage of this Curriculum Unit, as early as 2015-2016. Please reference [www.NCPublicSchools.org](http://www.NCPublicSchools.org) for updated information, in regards to the state's curriculum, within these specific disciplines.

This course will explore the overarching themes, trends, and concepts of our nation's history, including the development and evolution of the American system of government, the patterns and impact of migration and immigration, cultural development through the arts and technological innovations, relationships with foreign nations, and the role of both the individual and diverse groups in building the American story. Students in this course will be asked to investigate major turning points in American History to develop an understanding of multiple causation, to determine patterns of change and continuity, and to be able to compare multiple perspectives of the past. Rooted in inquiry-based skills, students will trace American development while learning to craft compelling questions, synthesize and evaluate evidence, develop claims, communicate ideas, and take informed action. Students will continue to build upon previous studies of American History, the fundamental concepts in civics and government, economics, behavioral science (culture), and geography taught in grades kindergarten through eight as they examine American history. As well-rounded, productive citizens, students will leave the American History course with both the knowledge and the skills to engage with the modern world by recognizing contemporary patterns and connections.<sup>31</sup>

**Essential Standard AH.C&G.2:** The student will be able to analyze the American political system in terms of conflict, compromise, and consequence.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.2.1:** The student will be able to distinguish decisions by executive, legislative, and judicial leaders in terms of resolving conflict and establishing compromise.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G. 2.2:** The student will be able to explain the development and realignment of political parties as reflected in key elections.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.2.3:** The student will be able to deconstruct changes in balance of power between local, state, and federal government in terms of conflict and compromise.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

<sup>32</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.



**Essential Standard AH.H.2:** The student will be able to evaluate the relationship between America and other nations in terms of national interests and global interdependence.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.2.1:** The student will be able to explain how economic, social, and political interests have influenced the direction of American foreign policy.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.2.2:** The student will be able to critique the extent to which American interaction with other nations has achieved national and global economic, social, and political goals.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.2.3:** The student will be able to distinguish the extent to which American foreign policy has advanced the interests of historically privileged groups over the interests of historically marginalized groups.<sup>33</sup>

**Essential Standard AH.H.3:** The student will be able to analyze various turning points in American history in terms of perspective, causation, and change.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.3.1:** The student will be able to deconstruct various turning points in terms of multiple causation.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.3.2:** The student will be able to use historical empathy and contextualization to deconstruct multiple perspectives of individuals and groups within various turning points.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.3.3:** The student will be able to critique the extent to which economic, social, cultural, geographic, and political factors of various turning points changed the American historical narrative.

**Clarifying Objective AH.H.3.4:** The student will be able to compare how competing historical narratives of various turning points portray individuals and groups including marginalized people.<sup>34</sup>

### **Additional Numbered Appendices**

**Essential Standard AH.B.1:** The student will be able to evaluate American identity in terms of perspective, change, and continuity.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.1:** The student will be able to critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of American exceptionalism.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.2:** The student will be able to critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of opportunity, prosperity, and crisis.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.3:** The student will be able to critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of oppression, stereotypes, diversity, inclusion, and exclusion.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.4:** The student will be able to critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of individualism and conformity.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.5:** The student will be able to explain how various immigrant experiences have influenced American identity.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.6:** The student will be able to explain how the experiences and achievements of minorities and marginalized peoples have contributed to American identity over time in terms of the struggle against bias, racism, oppression, and discrimination.

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<sup>33</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

<sup>34</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

**Clarifying Objective AH.B.1.7:** The student will be able to explain how slavery, xenophobia, disenfranchisement, and intolerance have affected individual and group perspectives of themselves as Americans.<sup>35</sup>

**Essential Standard AH.C&G.1:** The student will be able to evaluate the relationship between the American people and the government in terms of freedom, equality, and power.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.1.1:** The student will be able to explain how various views on freedom and equality contributed to the development of American political thought and system of government.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.1.2:** The student will be able to critique the extent to which various levels of government used power to expand or restrict the freedom and equality of American people.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.1.3:** The student will be able to explain how various individuals and groups strategized, organized, advocated and protested to expand or restrict freedom and equality.

**Clarifying Objective AH.C&G.1.4:** The student will be able to explain how racism, oppression, and discrimination of indigenous peoples, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups have impacted equality and power in America.<sup>36</sup>

**Essential Standard AH.E.1:** The student will be able to analyze the American economic system in terms of affluence, poverty, and mobility.

**Clarifying Objective AH.E.1.1:** The student will be able to deconstruct multiple perspectives of American capitalism in terms of affluence, poverty, and mobility.

**Clarifying Objective AH.E.1.2:** The student will be able to explain how the relationships between entrepreneurship, management, labor, and consumers have impacted the quality of life in American society.

**Clarifying Objective AH.E.1.3:** The student will be able to explain the causes of economic expansion and retraction and the impacts on the American people.

**Clarifying Objective AH.E.1.4:** The student will be able to compare how some groups in American society have benefited from economic policies while other groups have been systematically denied the same benefits.

**Clarifying Objective AH.E.1.5:** The student will be able to distinguish the role women and racial minorities have played in contributing to the economic prosperity of American society in terms of equity, equality, and mobility.<sup>37</sup>

**Essential Standard AH.G.1:** The student will be able to understand how movement, settlement, and expansion influenced American development.

**Clarifying Objective AH.G.1.1:** The student will be able to explain how environmental, technological, cultural, and economic factors influenced population distribution and patterns of migration and immigration.

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<sup>35</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

<sup>36</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

<sup>37</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

**Clarifying Objective AH.G.1.2:** The student will be able to explain how geographic conditions and expansion have presented both opportunities and challenges in the development of America.

**Clarifying Objective AH.G.1.3:** The student will be able to explain the reasons for and effects of forced and voluntary migration on societies, individuals and groups over time.

**Clarifying Objective AH.G.1.4:** The student will be able to explain how slavery, forced migration, immigration, reconcentration and other discriminatory practices have changed population distributions and regional culture.<sup>38</sup>

### **Annotated Bibliography**

1. Black Youth Project:  
<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-gechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.
  - a. An effective understanding of Gullah Geechee religion, by understanding the meshing of African-American Christianity with the culture of the Gullah Geechee people.
2. Gullah: Hilton Head Island.  
<https://www.hiltonheadisland.org/gullah/stories-and-recollections/>.
  - a. A look into the effect that the Gullah Geechee people have on the lowcountry of South Carolina, especially in regards to cuisine and restaurants.
3. Library of Congress. <https://guides.loc.gov/gullah-gechee-history>.
  - a. An in-depth explanation of Gullah Geechee history and heritage, from the halls of the Library of Congress.
4. Lowcountry Gullah: <https://lowcountrygullah.com/gullah-art/>.
  - a. An exploration of Gullah Geechee art.
5. National Library of Medicine. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24737279/>.
  - a. The effects on Gullah Geechee health, from the consumption of caught fish and seafood in the lowcountry coastal waters.
6. North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.
  - a. The standard curriculum guide from the North Carolina Department of Instruction, especially in regards to American History, within the Social Studies.
7. Southern Kitchen:  
<https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-gechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.
  - a. A view of the value of Gullah Geechee cuisine, from the eyes of a food critic and reviewer, especially in regards to its future.

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<sup>38</sup> North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History.  
<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.

8. The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission.  
<https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/>.
  - a. An exploration into the culture and heritage of the Gullah Geechee people.
9. “The Sound of Gullah Culture”: Hilton Head Monthly.  
<https://www.hiltonheadmonthly.com/news/bluffton/1763-the-sound-of-gullah-culture>.
  - a. An exploration into Gullah Geechee music and dance.

### **Teacher Resources**

- 2022 CTI Seminar: “Carolina Cuisine: Understanding the History and Science Behind the Evolution of our Crops and Food” with Dr. Jeff Gillman and Dr. Ashli Stokes
- “The Carolina Trail” at University of North Carolina-Charlotte’s Botanical Gardens
- Padma Lakshmi’s “Taste The Nation” on Hulu
  - Season 1, Episode 4: “The Gullah Way”
  - <https://www.hulu.com/series/taste-the-nation-with-padma-lakshmi-53d48a66-d254-4e4f-89a1-277ec6c57368>
- “Gullah Gullah Island” on Nickelodeon
- “Searching for the Real ‘Gullah Gullah Island’” on YouTube
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl\\_BcAJNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl_BcAJNc)
- “Gullah Geechee: The Man I Tried To Flee” by Ron Daise at TedX Charleston
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuWRaWGVNIM>
- <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1APmmcApjW621rzTVO7rFCcKYpNmu23u1/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=109324334029832248389&rtpof=true&sd=true>
  - Slides #52-60
- <https://gullahtours.com/gullah/hear-and-read-gullah/>
- Black Youth Project:  
<https://blackyouthproject.com/black-church-isnt-one-dimensional-either-gullah-geechee-people-subvert-christianity-retain-black-history/>.
- Gullah: Hilton Head Island.  
<https://www.hiltonheadisland.org/gullah/stories-and-recollections/>.
- Library of Congress. <https://guides.loc.gov/gullah-geechee-history>.
- Lowcountry Gullah: <https://lowcountrygullah.com/gullah-art/>.

- National Library of Medicine. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24737279/>.
- North Carolina Standard Course of Study: American History. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/11820/open>.
- Southern Kitchen: <https://www.southernkitchen.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/22/heres-why-we-believe-gullah-geechee-cuisine-next-big-thing-southern-food/8059310002/>.
- The Gullah Geechee: Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/thegullahgeechee/>.
- “The Sound of Gullah Culture”: Hilton Head Monthly. <https://www.hiltonheadmonthly.com/news/bluffton/1763-the-sound-of-gullah-culture>.

### **Student Resources**

- Padma Lakshmi’s “Taste The Nation” on Hulu
  - Season 1, Episode 4: “The Gullah Way”
  - <https://www.hulu.com/series/taste-the-nation-with-padma-lakshmi-53d48a66-d254-4e4f-89a1-277ec6c57368>
- “Gullah Gullah Island” on Nickelodeon
- “Searching for the Real ‘Gullah Gullah Island’” on YouTube
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl\\_BcAJNc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofl_BcAJNc)
- “Gullah Geechee: The Man I Tried To Flee” by Ron Daise at TedX Charleston
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuWRaWGVNIM>
- <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1APmmcApjW621rzTVO7rFCcKYpNmu23u1/edit?usp=sharing&oid=109324334029832248389&rtpof=true&sd=true>
  - Slides #52-60
- <https://gullahtours.com/gullah/hear-and-read-gullah/>

### **Materials List**

- <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1APmmcApjW621rzTVO7rFCcKYpNmu23u1/edit?usp=sharing&oid=109324334029832248389&rtpof=true&sd=true>
  - Slides #52-60
- <https://gullahtours.com/gullah/hear-and-read-gullah/>