

Material Memory Season 3, Episode 6 “Sankofa”

Transcript

Narration: Hello and welcome to Season three of Material Memory. I am your host Sharon M. Burney. This stop on our HBCU Library Alliance tour takes us to Columbia, South Carolina, where we will be in conversation with Wanda Scott Kinney of [Benedict College](#) and its fascinating Mather School Collection. We will continue our exploration of this culturally rich community in conversation with Porchia Moore, assistant professor of museum studies at the University of Florida, who will discuss the richness of the Gullah Geechee Corridor.

Let’s hear from Benedict College’s archivist, Wanda Scott Kinney.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: My name is Wanda Scott Kinney and I bring you greetings from the great state of South Carolina, the capital city, Columbia, where Benedict College is located. I have been employed at the institution for 40 plus years. I am presently the coordinator of the Archive Center. I stem from a small town about 25 miles east of here, Eastover, South Carolina. I am a graduate of Benedict College; I graduated in 1980, so I'm pretty much home grown to the community and the area.

Sharon Burney: You've spent your entire professional career with Benedict College, correct?

Wanda Scott-Kinney: Pretty much, pretty much.

Sharon Burney: Tell me a little bit about Benedict College.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: Benedict College was founded in 1870 by [Miss Bathsheba A. Benedict](#) and she also had the purpose of educating students and training and providing opportunities for students. At the time, in the 1870s, it was right after the war, and you know we didn't have as many resources and things that were available for the freed slaves at the time. So, it opened doors.

Narration: Benedict successfully acquired the archive of another school founded during this era, whose story mirrors that of Benedict and many other HBCUs that emerged at this time.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: The Mather School Collection is one of Benedict college's special collections. And this collection happens to depict Mather School, which is one of the first schools in South Carolina that was organized for the children of freed slaves. The collection came about to Benedict when the school became defunct in 1968.

Sharon Burney: Can you give me a brief history about the Mather School?

Wanda Scott-Kinney: Mather School was founded in 1868. Their founder is Miss [Rachel Crane Mather](#). She traveled from Boston, Massachusetts to Beaufort, South Carolina, or Port Royal, South Carolina, where the school was established. Her intentions were to establish a normal school to train teachers and preachers and to educate those people who were recently free.

Narration: The Mather School was founded only two years prior to Benedict College. Both institutions were established during the height of the Reconstruction Era by White Christian widows from New England. The Reconstruction Era was the period following the Civil War when the former confederate states were reintegrated into the Union, and 4 million formerly enslaved Black people were to have been granted emancipation. Outrage over emancipation led to Black Codes legislation in the South, and the subsequent passage of the Reconstruction Act of 1867 further fueled the violent backlash of the newly formed Ku Klux Klan. It was in this environment in which Rachel Crane Mather sought to establish her school.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: When she got there, she found things to be somewhat different. She found pretty much a deprived area where people were lacking the basic necessities of life such as water, food, clothing; health conditions were bad. And it kind of took a back door to her initial purpose of establishing that normal school. The American Missionary Association had initially sent her there and they were assisting and providing funds, but the funds were primarily earmarked for educating the students. It wasn't for helping the students who were disadvantaged or deprived of the basic economic necessities of life. So, she had to take on a new direction, and of her own accord, she took her own funds, she bought a 20-acre tract of land, built—initially she started out with two cottages and the materials that the cottages were built out of were the former Union barracks materials from the war.

Narration: And Wanda credits her for seeing it through.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: I thought it was just so profound that she actually took it upon herself to, I mean, you know, the average person could have actually just dropped the ball and went and said to the association that, "Hey, I can't handle this," but she actually did that on her own. And she actually got the financial support and the assistance from some friends and others who were interested in the area, and they provided a means and the school operated for years, years and years, but there was a greater need of course, with finances and the economic impact of the things that were happening at the time.

Narration: Rachel Crane Mathers was committed to making this school work, but even so, the Mather School ran into problems that are all too common when people or organizations from the outside come

into communities to assist. Often, the problems that charitable organizations want to solve aren't the problems that the communities prioritize. In this case, they needed food and shelter far more than an education. This lack of understanding led the project to be under-budgeted. And even after her friends pitched in, they still didn't have enough funds. It took the labor of the formerly enslaved people the school was serving to make the Mather's school sustainable. More on that from Wanda:

Wanda Scott-Kinney: I think one of the interesting things that I found when I did research on the Mather School was that they came up with a sales house. And the sales house, I guess if you look at it in today's language, it can be referred to as an endowment. The sales house kind of provided the means for their financial support. Her friends from up north as well as the churches and the community persons would bring barrels of clothing and other items like furnishings, and they would sell it back to persons in the community and the funds from that would help to grow the school. They did that for years and years and years. So that's how the school actually survived.

Narration: With this financial strategy, the Mather School survived, but not without challenges.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: When I was researching some of the Mather School history, interestingly enough, it connected and tied me with the great Sea Islands hurricane back in the eighteen hundreds. So, we see that some of the same things that happened back then are pretty much happening now. I think we are getting them probably on a more frequent [laugh] basis than back then but they had to go through and encounter some of the same things. So, when you make a comparison of what happened back then how they survived and how we are surviving we are both challenged with things that are not of our own making but it's just things that we have to feel out and create a way of "how do we get through this," or "how do we do this?" Well, we have to make it happen. And they did, so we have to make it happen (laughter).

Narration: Wanda is all too familiar with many of these challenges. Many Black schools have been under-resourced since their founding, and at Benedict, they are still dealing with this legacy.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: HBCUs are somewhat challenged in terms of coming up with the means by which to preserve our holdings and our collections. We have a rich and abundant collection of things that need to be preserved in order to create an understanding of where we come from, how we've survived. HBCUs—when you take up the infrastructure of the archives and the libraries—we are in need, dire need, of funds to assist with the preservation and conservation of all our collections because if you don't keep pace with time then, you lose that.

Narration: Despite centuries of Black schools being systematically under-resourced, Benedict College survived. Although the Mather School closed its doors in the 1960s, its legacy has endured. The campus

is now home to the Technical College of the Lowcountry, which positions itself as [continuing the legacy of the Mather School](#), and while not an HBCU, serves a diverse mixed-race student population. Meanwhile, the school lives on under the careful care of the Benedict College archives.

[Music]

Narration: The Mather School was in “Lowcountry,” a region of South Carolina that Charleston and Benedict College border.

Sharon Burney: Explain to the audience about Lowcountry.

Wanda Scott-Kinney: Whew—I guess when you think of the Lowcountry you're dealing with the area from on the ocean side where Charleston, Beaufort, Summerville—all those different areas down there exist and then you think other languages that come out of there like the Gullah language and different things of that nature.

Narration: The Lowcountry of South Carolina is a unique place, where the descendants of West Africans who were enslaved in the Sea Islands have retained their culture for over 150 years. Lowcountry is home to [the Gullah people](#). The name is believed to be derived from the word *Gola*, an ethnic group of people from present day Sierra Leone and Liberia who were known for their rice growing. The Gullah Geechee language is an English-based Creole derived from the dialects of their diverse West African lineages. No place is as associated with the [Gullah culture](#) as the islands and region around Charleston, South Carolina. You can't understand Benedict as an HBCU without understanding the culture of Charleston and the Lowcountry.

At this point I'd like to introduce [Dr. Porchia Moore](#). Porchia is assistant professor of museum studies at the University of Florida.

Porchia Moore: I was raised in Columbia, South Carolina, born in Columbia, South Carolina, but my ancestral home is in the area that we call the [Pee Dee](#). So, if you think about the shape of South Carolina, it's literally sort of shaped like a slice of pizza. And at the very top of the pizza is the area that we call the upstate and in the middle is the Midlands where I was raised. Right below, that is what we call the Pee Dee. And then we get into the Lowcountry. So, parts of the Pee Dee and down into the Lowcountry are the Gullah folks, right? And so that's my heritage.

Narration: Porchia's realization of her Gullah roots required time, perseverance, and re-education in a system that promotes cultural miseducation.

Porchia Moore: When I was growing up, we were sort of told about like, quote unquote “saltwater Geechees,” which back then was a very like, and I think in certain circles, it was a sort of derogatory term. Right? Um, but so when we thought about like the real Gullah people, we thought about folks who were Gullah, who spoke a particular way, who were connected by land and sea. And we were essentially the very same people who were also connected to those people by these big river systems in the Pee Dee. And so I grew up with a grandmother who taught me all these Gullah words and who had this really particular sound and tonality to her voice—she would always say things like, like “Ain't us beautiful,” or “Ain't us lovely,” or “Us getting ready to do whatever, whatever,” like she never, I probably, I don't think I ever heard my grandmother say, “we,” she always said “us” and she always talked about being an “ooman”—and not recognizing until I was, you know, in my twenties that these are not only Gullah words, but that I'm actually Gullah. Um, so I had to kind of contend with my own identity because, you know, we were sort of told that like, you know, “those saltwater Geechee,” although we were essentially freshwater Geechee they all connected, all traverse that same waterway.

Narration: The Gullah Geechee people have held onto the traditions and heritage from Africa perhaps better than any other Black community in the United States that has descended from ancestors who were enslaved. There's a reason why this community emerged outside Charleston, which can be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade.

Porchia Moore: One of the things that I learned, when we talk about, like, the middle passage is the really horrific reality of what we call the pest houses. Right? So pest houses were upon this really horrific route on the transatlantic slave trade, they would eventually end up at Sullivans Island, which essentially became this like port for all of what we now call America, right? United States. And those pest houses were basically the place where they would unload all of these folks to basically see who's going to live and who's going to pass away. So you can look at some of the records and see that, like the smell would be horrific and there'd be like dead bodies and whatever, whatever. And you know, many people call Sullivans Island the Ellis Island of the United States. Really, it's where almost everybody can trace themselves.

Narration: It's estimated that over half of Black people in the US today have ancestors that came through [Sullivan's Island](#) during the transatlantic slave trade.

Porchia Moore: When I think about that, that intersection, it's more to me than just like, oh, you know, Charleston is part of the Lowcountry or the Lowcountry is this geographic area. It's more to me than that, because it really is the place where these ships would come in. And then all of these people would be dispersed across the United States, you know, on these varying plantations and then, horrifically, some of them would then go on to Barbados or wherever. Right? So, when I think about the Lowcountry and its connection to like the transatlantic slave trade—I don't even have the right language for it sometimes, but [it's] this place that continues in real time.

Narration: Most of the enslaved people who disembarked at Sullivan's Island were taken to new ports to be sold, but some were enslaved right there on the barrier islands, or sea islands, where they were made to harvest African rice, Sea Island cotton, and other cash crops. During the Civil War, the White planters abandoned their plantations and the enslaved population found themselves alone on the islands. This isolation continued after the war ended, allowing the Gullah Geechee to develop a unique cultural community that retained much of their African heritage.

Porchia Moore: When I think about the locality of Sullivan's Island, you know, that's part of this beautiful system of barrier islands, that start from North Carolina all the way down to parts of Florida. Right? It's part of the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor. So, you know, when I think about people who are doing research and making these strong connections between what we call the Lowcountry, and then looking, being able to trace. You can see the iron workers, the basket makers, all of these specialized craftsmen who have the same exact lineage through Barbados and the rest of the Caribbean. So, yes, it is a portal.

Narration: A *portal* is the right word. This connection to our heritage before the middle passage is sacred, and so are the places where the culture and traditions were preserved. Benedict College sits alongside this heritage corridor, and whether it is explicit or not, there are ties between this HBCU and the Gullah Geechee community. Porchia herself has connections to the college going back to childhood.

Porchia Moore: I was actually Little Miss Benedict when I was one year old. I had this white frilly little dress. And my hair was sort of like wrapped in these little white ribbons. And I was in the gym, at like a basketball game. And I think I was Little Miss Benedict because my father worked at Benedict for a number of years, in an administrative capacity. So my memories of Benedict as an HBCU are that that was my first home because I would go and spend time in the library while my dad had meetings. And so I grew up literally in the library at Benedict College for the longest time until my dad changed careers. And the other thing I will say is I know for sure that I fell in love with history and African people, I didn't have that language, you know, that term diaspora then, but I know for sure that I was interested in this concept of whatever Africa was.

Narration: In some ways, the Lowcountry is important to Black people in the US for the same reason that HBCUs are so important to us—because they celebrate and retain what is ours.

Porchia Moore: I grew up in communities where we learned by speaking to one another through storytelling. So if you meet my dad, he's going to tell you like 1,000,001 stories that are gonna be funny, that are going to be powerful, that you are never going to forget. The ways in which people talk in the Lowcountry, specifically, it's very lyrical. It's beautiful. Again, it's based on, like, a shared wisdom. And that's actually how I understand what museum work actually is and needs to be. It needs to be this commonality of, like, a universal sort of understanding about the ways of knowing that have nothing to do with whiteness, that have nothing to do with White politics, that have nothing to do with White

references, but everything to do with the affirmation of ourselves. Right? And so, when I think about the work that I do, how I'm always referencing ancestors and how I am informed by my Gullah roots and my Gullah heritage, you tell things in a particular way so that the information can be passed on.

Narration: Yet the unique and vital heritage of the Gullah Geechee people is at risk.

Porchia Moore: So I would say that the first issue is the climate change, the environmental issues. And the second, and I don't know if it's the same, sometimes I think it's the same, but the horrific gentrification. I'm talking about, the gentrification is just straight up violent. There's no other language that you can use. So when I was a little child, we would go to Charleston because my grandfather had a, a great uncle who lived in Charleston, named Uncle Maycock, who was over a hundred years old. And it was a special thing, cuz I love Charleston. Like, visually as a child, it just felt like home. It was so— it just called— every ancestor just called me. Right? I always felt like alive in that space. You would see these little rickety stands that would have Gullah people, selling baskets, beautiful dark-skinned men and women selling these Gullah sweet grass baskets for as long as the eye can see, and people would pull over and, you know, haggle for a basket. Now, not only you're not gonna hardly ever see a stand, but you're definitely not going to see the people, because they have now been relegated to a place that's now called Sweetgrass Pavilion, where they basically have been sort of pushed almost like the ways in which native Americans were pushed onto reservations.

Narration: As Porchia mentioned, gentrification has been the driving force behind the displacement of the Gullah people.

Porchia Moore: The other thing is Mount Pleasant, Johns Island, James Island, all these places— Sullivan Island—have now basically been so priced out, that homes are like into the millions of dollars, for homes that used to be affordable. So they've raised the property taxes so sky high that whole generations of families have been forcibly removed because they can't pay the property taxes, right? So all of this marshland has now been transformed. It's been drained. But on top of it, these gated communities have popped up everywhere. So the gated communities overwhelmingly contain the original area where the sweet grass naturally grows. So now the sweet grass is harder to find because it's been destroyed. But also, if you can find pockets of sweet grass, it's behind these gated communities, right? So people try to jump a fence or go harvest at night or try to, you know, do things in secret and up in jail, end up fined. They lose their livelihood because there's no way for them to like easily or properly secure the sweet grass that used to literally be in their backyard.

Narration: The gentrification isn't limited to the housing market. We're also seeing a shift in strategy by the city of Charleston in how it approaches tourism.

Porchia Moore: If you look at the Charleston tourism board imagery, language, marketing for the last, however many decades, you would see a Gullah person's face, often a black woman, pumping out and

promoting Sweetgrass baskets. So you'd see the Gullah face connected to the industry of tourism in Charleston, right? Now, though, what they've done is they have switched to Charleston as a food city. But whose food, right? If you look at the traditional kitchens and restaurants in Charleston, you know, places where people make reservations months in advance, recipes came from Gullah people, cooks, kitchens, clean staff, Gullah people. Now for the first time in history, almost none of these kitchens have Gullah people, the recipes were never properly attributed to Gullah people.

Narration: The impact of all this has been disastrous for the unique and authentic culture of the city of Charleston.

Porchia Moore: And so now what is happening in the first time, I think in over 60-something years, they said, they're all, they're basically essentially almost no Gullah people living in the peninsula. So when you visit Charleston and you go to King Street and Meeting Street and all these places that are the majority tourist spots, traditionally you'd go, and it'd sound like you were in the Caribbean. You'd hear Gullah language. You'd hear people saying, "Boy, no!" you'd hear people talking. You feel like you're at home. It's very lyrical. Now, you almost won't hear it at all. And largely because the gentrification is so rapid and so violent that the people have been priced out and have been forcibly removed. It would take them—by public transportation, it would take them over two hours to get to any of these kitchens. So they can't get to these kitchens anymore. And the entire shape and functionality of the city no longer revolves around Gullah history, Gullah people, Gullah labor, none of it. So it's things like that where it's a continuous daily erasure.

Narration: The impact on the Gullah people and their traditions has been devastating.

Porchia Moore: And the last thing I'll say, the thing that really makes me so angry, is that if you've been to Charleston at one point you might have in many years past seen the Gullah children. They would take the remnants of the sweet grass and they would make sweet grass roses to sell to tourists. They started telling the kids that they were being too aggressive with tourists. They weren't wanted anymore. They forced the kids to take a class--that I think is run by the city—to get a license, to do the cultural heritage work that they've already done that was passed down to them for the ancestors. And if a cop rolls up on them, they can say, "Where's your license?" And if they don't have a license, the cop pulls out his little pad and they start writing these citations. So they already start putting these kids in the system from the time they're like, not even 12. And so to me, that's like the, that's like the greatest violation of what is happening because these folks have relied upon their cultural heritage knowledge to feed them for generations.

Narration: There are people in the Gullah community who are pushing back against this and trying to educate the community about what's going on.

Porchia Moore: I wanna put into the space some names. So the first name is [Queen Quet](#), she's a designated Gullah queen. She's also someone who I think has done an excellent job of helping people understand about both [heirs' property](#) and environmental issues that are impacting Gullah way of life.

Narration: I asked Porchia what we can do to support the Gullah community.

Porchia Moore: I think we go back and get it. This is a, I think that's a perfectly timed question. You support [Gullah tours](#). I'm forgetting the brother's name right now. He's been doing [Gullah tours](#) for years. You support Black radio, right? That has Gullah-centered Black radio.

Narration: According to Porchia, you support the Gullah community and stewards of the culture, both past and present.

Porchia Moore: The reality is that we survived. For all the many millions of us that were taken from the continent, only a small portion of us actually survived. So we are the children, we are the descendants of those who made it. So it is our duty and our honor to immerse ourselves in whatever knowledge and wisdom that they were able to generate in their time.

[Music]

Narration: In our conversation, Dr. Porchia Moore kept coming back to the notion of Sankofa.

Porchia Moore: So Sankofa is, I wanna make sure I'm saying this correctly, it's part of the Twi language, uh, from the Akan people in Ghana. And it literally means to go back and get it, to retrieve the thing in the past that has relevance in the future. So it is making sure that there's no disruption between where we are and where we were in the past. Right? So we're gonna go back and get that knowledge from the past that helped us to not only survive, but to thrive, right? So you're talking about embedded ways of knowing, that wisdom that we need in order to continue to move forward in the present. And so all of the research that I've been doing and all of the lectures and the keynotes that I've been giving, I have been calling the moment that we're in now the Sankofa moment, right? Because we are going to, we are going now officially to go back and get it so that we can become whole.

Narration: [The Sankofa bird](#) is an important symbol of the African Diaspora; it represents the necessity to reflect on the past for the purpose of constructing a triumphant future. This theme of Sankofa reverberates in the dedication of Wanda Scott Kinney, who lived in the Mathers dormitory as a student at Benedict College, graduated to become the college's Registrar for over 30 years, and is now the archivist and cultural knowledge keeper of the Mathers Special Collection. The theme is powerfully expressed in the diligence and knowledge of Porchia Moore, as the wisdom of her Gullah grandmother

and family influences her commitment to examining the intersections of race, technology, and inclusion in cultural heritage spaces. This knowledge of Sankofa, which is reflected in the excellence of Benedict College, the fortitude of the Mather School history, and the unwavering culture of the Gullah Geechee Corridor, is a reminder for us all to learn from the past to ensure a just future.

[Music]

Narration: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about Benedict College, the Gullah people, and the Lowcountry, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we'll be talking with DeLisa Minor Harris of Fisk University, and we'll hear about its historical legacy of student protest, and the incredible story of the Jubilee Singers.

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I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.