

Denmark Vesey: An Atlantic Perspective

by

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Abstract

Engagement in antislavery activism within a polyglot, imperial space required courage. The debate about what has come to be known as the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery continues to occupy an emotional place in the hearts and minds of Americans and non-Americans across race, class, gender, sex, and other self-identification and collective-identification lines. The novel approach that this study takes to the conspiracy situates Vesey and other Atlantic figures in the African diaspora as *creatures of the Atlantic*: he was a figure that this study seeks to connect to the Atlantic world, via Charleston, South Carolina, a city that was one of the cultural and economic centers of an expanding Atlantic market – one of the jewels of the Atlantic slavocracy or machine – a world of revolutionary sentiment and a world that was defined by the ever-changing landscape of freedom and enslavement in the revolutionary Atlantic world during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

What is novel about this approach, this Atlantic perspective, is that it works to establish a connection of circum-Atlantic dynamics to Charleston and to make the connection between the Denmark Vesey conspiracy and revolutionary nationalisms in the Atlantic world, specifically focusing on the emergence of Black nationalism and pan-Africanism as a part of a larger re-visioning of Denmark Vesey as an Atlantic figure whose story connects histories of nationalism in Africa and in the African diaspora. One of the most fascinating features embedded in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy is what it reveals about the circum-Atlantic world. The fact that Vesey's plot reveals the nexus or the originating nodes of pan-Africanism is a quite remarkable one. Vesey's case reveals that he and other Atlantic figures played instrumental roles in the creation of the African diaspora. The planning of operations of resistance based on ethnic affiliation, or gangs, is one of the elements that reveals that pan-Africanism was not the sole creation of modern Black intellectuals. Modern Black intellectuals *subsequently* articulated pan-Africanistic themes that had been expressed by earlier Black antislavery nationalists, such as Denmark Vesey.

The impetus or catalyst for what would later be understood as pan-Africanism and Black power ideology stemmed from the enslaved for it was they who worked clandestinely to forge Black identity and form community in the eighteenth century, which led to an explosion of pan-Africanistic antislavery activism as well as an emergence of nationalistic pioneers who formed Black communities in the Atlantic world on all sides.

You can't trust in love
But you can trust in hate
Love's a leaky boat full of unexpected holes.
Hate is the lifeline that you yourself throws
Slavery's the ocean freedom's a pond
Don't take much water to let you drown
Throw out the lifeline before its too late
You can't trust in love, but you can trust in hate.

—Paul Bowles, *Denmark Vesey*¹

... [E]ven some of our educated black leaders are afraid to make known to the nation [and to the world] how we exist. They become ashamed of us and tell us to hide our wounds. And many white people who know how we live are afraid of us, *fearing that we may rise up against them*.

—Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the U.S.*²

... [S]elf-estimates by the Negro are profoundly influenced by the attitudes of the white community. To use an extreme example, Denmark Vesey, a Negro who resisted slavery and led an insurrection in the effort to throw off the oppression, is a type which contradicts the assumption that Negroes are innately docile as a race and were content with slavery. In a sense, Vesey represents the spirit of independence for which the founding fathers of America are praised—an insurrection is merely an unsuccessful revolution. But Denmark Vesey is a symbol of a spirit too violent to be acceptable to the white community. There are no Negro schools named for him, and it would be extremely poor taste and bad judgment for the Negroes to take any pride in his courage and philosophy. There is, indeed, little chance for Negro youth to know about him at all.

— Charles Spurgeon Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*³

The bravery of hundreds of our ancestors who took part in slave rebellions has been lost in the mists of time, since plantation owners did their best to prevent any written accounts of uprisings. Millions of Black schoolchildren never learned about two great Black heroes in the nineteenth century, Denmark Vesey and Nat “The Prophet” Turner, who died for freedom.

—Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*⁴

Introduction

This essay is about one of those forgotten characters in the history of African Atlantic resistance to enslavement, Denmark Vesey. Engagement in antislavery activism within a polyglot, imperial space required courage.⁵ The debate about what has come to be known as the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery continues to occupy an emotional place in the hearts and minds of Americans and non-Americans across race, class, gender, sex, and other self-identification and collective-identification lines. *Great Gittin Up Morning* (1972) by John Oliver Killens and *Due Unto: Denmark Vesey’s Story* (2014) by Kevin F. Jones, for example, are novelistic biographies – fiction – on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. These fictional accounts explore many of the contours that more recent historical scholarship continues to debate about the foiled revolt.⁶

The novel approach that this study takes to the conspiracy situates Vesey and other Atlantic figures in the African diaspora as *creatures of the Atlantic*: he was a figure that I seek to connect to the Atlantic world, via Charleston, South Carolina, a city that was one of the cultural and economic centers of an expanding Atlantic market – one of the jewels of the Atlantic slavocracy or machine – a microcosm of revolutionary sentiment and a space that was defined by the ever-changing landscape of freedom and enslavement in the revolutionary Atlantic world during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. What is novel about this approach, this Atlantic perspective, is that it works to establish a connection of circum-Atlantic dynamics to Charleston and to make the connection between the Denmark Vesey conspiracy and revolutionary nationalisms in the Atlantic world, specifically by focusing on the emergence of Black nationalism and pan-Africanism as a part of a larger re-visioning of Denmark Vesey as an Atlantic figure whose story connects histories of nationalism in Africa and in the African diaspora.

The *processes* of the circum-Atlantic world that were adroitly described by Joseph Roach in his book, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, come to life in the Denmark Vesey saga. Vesey was a man of the African Atlantic world, a central, constitutive part of the larger region called the Atlantic world.

The *new* world that was invented on the oceanic stage that Roach describes/delineates in his genealogical narrative is one in which constant re-creations of the Atlantic theater emerged, characters at war with themselves and with their present and their memories, all of which were central elements that played a role in operationalizing the constitutive, porous cultural and material ingredients from which the polyglot theatricality of this new space called the Atlantic world – or the matrix connecting the Americas, Europe, and Africa – took modern form. Modernity was literally a product of the carnage that accompanied this expanded definition and geopoliticization of humanity. Europeans who crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean envisioned non-European environments as the nether worlds. “White Atlantic” cultural inventions transformed Amerindians, Africans, and the landscapes that they populated into what became constitutive, negative inventions that were constructed as the antitheses of Western normalcy. White Atlantic spaces became increasingly associated with the highest levels or accomplishments of civilization/civility ever created and enacted. According to its advocates and many of the victims of this history, modernity is a White Atlantic cultural invention that is saturated in violence.⁷

This approach is different from a traditional transatlantic approach. It was not just the mere fact of syncretic exchanges in the Atlantic theater that makes it a unique stage for an historical analysis of Atlantic societies. It was the creativity and inventiveness at play on the early Atlantic stage that circulated around these exchanges of cultural difference and productions of social fusion that compose the most remarkable data for analyses within this space where newness was inevitable, or so it seemed. The tension between memory and history – or memory and forgetting – were analytical elements that were central to, or components of, earlier circum-Atlantic approaches to performances of identities across identity lines.⁸

The task of writing about Denmark Vesey in the second decade of the twenty-first century is more than a chronicle of a foiled revolt against enslavement, more than an analysis of whether or not the spectacular character of state executions and punishments of alleged conspirators was legitimate or reflective of social anxieties, fears or terrors. And, just as importantly, this task is more than even a corrective to the paranoid legacy of late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century slaveholding Charlestonians’ misrecognitions in regards to allegedly innocent victims who were not, according to some scholars, in fact, engaged in clandestine antislavery tactics and who were actually wrongly interpreted by contemporaneous witnesses and/or accusers of being antislavery activists. The act of producing scholarship about this episode in Atlantic, African, and African American histories entails the task of revisionary writings and multiple re-readings, even as *repetitions* or reproductions of any narratives are never the same twice told, especially performances or reenactments of *tradition/s*.⁹

Disciplining one's self is critical to accomplishing any goal, and even with the most discipline, one does not always succeed, as was clearly demonstrated in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery. In order to conjure him up for critical analysis, it is necessary to flesh out the history, myths, and lore surrounding this Atlantic figure and radical antislavery activist who fomented an early pan-Africanistic project, one that was not solely based within the literary mode, the literary mode being by far the more popular and conservative strain of pan-Africanism among modern African people outside of the continent wherever they are in the world or among nationalists on the African continent.

An understanding of the Atlantic landscape that Vesey lived in allows us to think about the significance of patience, the acumen that goes into secretly planning among the enslaved an armed revolt that aspired to undermine the governmental structures of Charleston, South Carolina, and the motivation to engage in urban warfare in the city before disembarking via the Atlantic Ocean in order to sail to an ultimate escape to Haiti, a Black republic that could offer respite to the freedom-seeking Denmark Vesey and his allies in their struggle for self-emancipation. Envisioning him as an abolitionist allows us to interrogate the history of secrecy that was part of both abolitionist activity and the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, particularly when considering the fact that contemporaneous advocates of abolition constituted a small, minority force, a small force that generally did not accept the revolutionary example of the Haitian Revolution. Denmark Vesey was one of the exceptions. He, like some Underground Railroad operatives, was not reticent about the use of armed resistance in order to achieve freedom.¹⁰ Secrecy was difficult to maintain among persons of African descent in a White supremacist society that was dominated by enslavers. Interception of subversive, antislavery ideas and strategies was always a strong possibility in the Atlantic world during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Indeed, some enslaved Black and mixed-race people in Charleston, South Carolina, imagined White people as respecting – or perchance, worse, loving – them, the sort of Black and mixed-race people who were, in fact, credited with selling out Denmark Vesey and other seekers of emancipation for paltry sums and crumbs in order to survive what Vesey considered to be a living death, pitiful examples of accommodation to extant circumstances instead of imagining themselves as more than enslaved African-descended people.¹¹

To write about Denmark Vesey, a man who was known by several names, one who in fact embodies the nomenclatures projected onto figures of the Atlantic whose roots have been traced to the African continent is to write about an enigma who engaged in conversations across cultural lines within the African diaspora. His pan-Africanism was manifested in the diversity of African-descended people who appear in the trial manuscripts as his allies and who were a part of African Atlantic communities in the Carolina lowcountry during his time.

How did Denmark Vesey balance his own aspirations with his efforts to forge a collective revolt against slavery in some way, shape, or form? Whom did he choose to affiliate himself with and when and how he chose to do so are critical elements to understanding this Atlantic figure whose emancipatory and revolutionary logic subverted the revolutionary ideology of White Atlantic republicanism during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Vesey's efforts to put "an international and a black version of republicanism"¹² into motion in his own region of the African Atlantic world undermined the socially majoritarian logic legitimating boundaries between freedom and un-freedom. The Denmark Vesey conspiracy is a specific site of resistance in the Atlantic theater that reveals how African Americans could take conceptions of freedom and create their own visions and empower themselves to resist a persistent, racist slap in the collective face, or more specifically, to repudiate a White racist slap in the collective Black face. The idea of not having anyone to control him or to answer to proved to be an attractive idea to Vesey even as he knew that he operated within a relatively elite space in relation to his enslaved family in particular and in relation to his community in general after he became a free Black subject at the start of 1800.

His disciplined actions over the next twenty-two years had a radicalizing, symbiotic effect on segments of Black Charleston and aroused the fears and hatred of African American success that permeated the symbolic matrix of dominant White cultural stereotypes circulating in Charleston. The crystallization¹³ of a theory and advocacy of the development of a critical Black consciousness within the African American community that Denmark Vesey enacted occurred in the experiential contexts of Black churches and in secret, small networks with resistant, enslaved Black people and activists all outside the purview of city officials and relatively unhindered by the restrictive social mandates that regulated Black life in Charleston. Vesey fomented a "kinesthetic imagination"¹⁴ that set into motion the pan-Africanistic forces that led to his execution on July 2, 1822.

Trials and Tribulations

African American history, nineteenth-century U.S. history, and modern African history converge in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. For example, re-reading *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (1970), edited by Robert S. Starobin, demonstrates the confluence of transoceanic cultures that emerged in the early Atlantic world and flowered into subsequent movements across cultural lines.¹⁵ From the origins of the "official" trial manuscript that was commissioned by the magistrates and freeholders of Charleston to the concluding section of documented information about Denmark Vesey's specific conviction and execution, it is clear that reading trial documents opens a window into this conspiracy that many secondary sources do not provide, and this is a point that the historian Michael P. Johnson gets right, giving a devastating blow to the dissenting verdicts of what many have come to view as the old factory mill of Vesey hagiography.¹⁶

One of the most significant features of the Denmark Vesey case is that many second-hand references to his direct statements – statements that he allegedly uttered in the presence of Black (and even some White) Charlestonians – have only recently played as large a role in reconstructions of the conspiracy of 1822 as it did in public discourse at the time the conspiracy was exposed during the nineteenth century. Although they are not primary sources in the disciplinary sense of traditional history, they are valuable re-presentations of the image of Vesey in the eyes of his contemporaries, including allies, interested spectators, and all others who survived him after his execution by hanging. For example, the following statement that is said to have emerged during the trials of suspected conspirators is evidence of the impact of the Haitian Revolution during the formative stages of American national identity and its consolidation and evidence as well of the currency of revolutionary ideas in the forging of Black radical consciousness in the Atlantic world:

[H]e [Denmark Vesey] asked me if I was satisfied in my present situation; if I remembered the fable of Hercules and the Waggoner whose wagon was stalled, and he began to pray, and Hercules said, you fool put your shoulders to the wheel, whip up the horses and your wagon will be pulled out; that if we did not put our hand to the work and deliver ourselves, we should never come out of slavery; *that Congress had made us free...* Vesey told me that a large army from St. Domingo and Africa were coming to help us, and we must not stand with our hands in our pockets; he was bitter towards the whites.¹⁷

Testimony such as the following statement is indicative of an Atlantic imaginary – an African Atlantic imagination or an anxiety-ridden White Atlantic imagination – in which Black armed resistance to American slavery is fused with “Ethiopianism.”

On one occasion he asked me what news, I told him none; he replied we are free but the white people here won't let us be so; and the only way is to rise up and fight the whites....Vesey told me that he was the leader of this plot....Vesey induced me to join....Vesey said we were to take the Guard-House and Magazine to get arms; that we ought to rise up and fight against the whites for our liberties; he was the first to rise up and speak, and he *read to us from the Bible, how the Children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage.*¹⁸

Representation of Vesey's words in the trial manuscripts clearly depict his belief in a God-sanctioned strategy that would deploy arms in a struggle against slavery and would take place long enough to migrate to an Atlantic enclave in Haiti, which was frequently referred to as “St. Domingo” or “San Domingo” in the trial manuscripts and could have been reflective of the White Atlantic biases of Charleston magistrates, biases that were revealed in their usage of the French colonial name for its once-prized colonial possession.

Denmark told us, it was high time we had our liberty, and he could shew [sic] us how we might obtain it. He said, [sic] we must unite together as the St. Domingo people did, never to betray one another; and to die before we would tell upon one another. He also said, he expected the St. Domingo people would send some troops to help us—The best way, said he, for us to conquer the whites, is to set the town on fire in several places, at the Governor's Mills, and near the Docks, and for every servant in the yards to be ready with axes and knives and clubs, to kill every man, as he came out when the bells began to ring. *He then read in the Bible where God commanded, that all should be cut off, both men, women and children, and said, he believed, it was no sin for us to do so, for the Lord had commanded us to do it....*At another meeting, some of the company were opposed to killing the Ministers, and the women and children, but Denmark said, it was not safe to keep one alive, but to destroy them totally, for you see, said he, the Lord has commanded it....Some of the company asked, if they were to stay in Charleston; he said no, as soon as they could get the money from the Banks, and the goods from the stores, they should hoist sail for Saint Domingo, for he expected some armed vessels would meet them to conduct and protect them[.]¹⁹

There is a great deal of “fiction in the archives”²⁰ surrounding the chronology of the life and impact of Denmark Vesey. This is one of the strongest points that Michael P. Johnson raises in his re-assessment of “Vesey and his co-conspirators.” Johnson’s comparison of different versions of the “official” trial manuscripts further complicated the argument that the historian Richard Wade made in “The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration” that appeared in *The Journal of Southern History* in May 1964.²¹ Johnson’s use of cultural studies models of interpretation and his close attention to juridical matters is incomplete; however, since we learn from him that Vesey and others were essentially the fall-guys for a nasty case of White supremacist hysteria, victims of what one historian referred to as a “legal lynching,”²² it is clear, as Johnson points out, that White Charlestonians *believed* that a major revolt was on the horizon. Their destruction of African American bodies and a church in the process of social management to maintain control is sufficient evidence of hysteria, and Johnson’s apology for White hysteria is an old, worn out interpretation that does nothing to inform us of the consistent cultural surrogation²³ *and* insurgency embedded in the recorded “testimonies” referenced above. “The Trial of Rolla” was among the first of a series of prison trials. It seems that a closer analysis of these primary references – perhaps largely thanks to Michael P. Johnson – have become (again) central to understanding this episode in a section of the Atlantic rim.

Weaving Vesey and Charleston into a revolutionary Atlantic context is a start, a way to further understand the world that Vesey lived in—the world that formed his consciousness. In an essay on “Charleston’s Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793,” Robert Alderson notes the significant fact that many refugees from Haiti fled to Charleston in the wake of the Haitian Revolution – with their enslaved human property in tow.

This lends a great deal of contextual weight to fully understanding the intellectual and sociocultural atmosphere that permeated life in Charleston during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.²⁴ Douglas Egerton's biography of Denmark Vesey certainly provides a sort of detective's microscopic envisioning of the daily life of that southern cityscape, with vultures picking up the trash in this cosmopolitan city, a characteristic of this circum-Atlantic enclave²⁵ along the Atlantic rim that the historian John Lofton made reference to in his depiction of Charleston as a tropical, Caribbean-like space. This can also be put into conversation with Larry Koger's *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*, especially his chapter titled "The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy: Brown Masters vs. Black Slaves."²⁶

"The Trial of Monday" reveals that he was identified as an "Ebo," which adds further texture to the idea of re-visioning Vesey's conspiracy as constituting the groundwork or formative stages of pan-Africanism and Black power ideology. Nomenclatures along ethnic lines are important to consider in this moment in African American history and in this debate in African American historiography. "Gell" was the last name of Monday's enslaver, as was "Vesey" the surname of Denmark's former enslaver. The testimonies of the majority of those whose names are revealed in the trial manuscripts were reflective of the acculturative modes permeating Charleston and the circum-Atlantic Black diaspora, a space or vortex whose Black subjects had to preserve their own identity spaces while facing cultural erasure and racial deracination. The participants (and even some of the informants) in the armed revolt conspiracy paid close attention to the ethnic and religious affiliations of enslaved (and free) Black communities, both in urban and rural spaces. The tug between the city and the "country" cannot be oversimplified, but it certainly cannot be ignored if we are to trace the sources of pan-Africanism and Black Power ideology in the Atlantic world. Vesey was a product of the Atlantic and, perhaps, not of Africa.²⁷ He lived in the circum-Atlantic theater both as property and as a relatively free agent in comparison to enslaved Black people. Vesey had ties to African Americans, African Caribbeans, and Africans who also lived in revolutionary-era Charleston. This particular enclave was Vesey's window to the outside world, providing him with a reference point that was interlaced or connected with other centers along the Atlantic rim. His enslavement to a sea-faring merchant and seller of enslaved African Atlantic figures facilitated a heightened knowledge of the main connectors of these points dotting the Atlantic oceanic stage.

In order to capture the significance of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to organize an armed revolt against American slavery, we must explore the revolutionary Atlantic context or vortex in which diasporic figures emerged and operated on a day-to-day basis. However, the trial archive offers little detailed information that directly links Vesey to a specific conversation about these Atlantic connections as a participant. "The Trial of Jesse" revealed the following:

On the 15th of June, Vesey gave to Jesse \$2 to hire a horse *to go into the country to my Mistress' plantation in St. John's, to inform the people to be down on the night of the 16th*. Myself and Adam put in 25 cents each for it. Vesey told Jesse, if he could not go, he must send some one [sic] else.²⁸

Atlantic figures who were enslaved in the rural lowcountry were likely the less acculturated Africans that Vesey knew, from traveling the African Atlantic, that he could depend on. In other words, Vesey sought to link rural and urban African Atlantic figures who in turn made monetary contributions to the plot in order to engage in armed resistance against American slavery, as the following testimony further illustrates:

I have had several conversations with Denmark Vesey, the first about four weeks ago (about 1st June) he asked me if I had heard about the rising &c and did I know that the coloured [sic] people were going to try and get their liberty....we walked up St. Phillip-street and were joined by Frank Ferguson opposite Liberty-street, and we all three walked up to Vesey's house. Says Frank I am just from the country—well says Vesey and what success—says Frank I have got two fine men for our purpose on my Mistress' plantation, who must be sent up to and informed when the people are wanted in town—Vesey asked me if I would be the man to go—I said yes, but I don't know the way—says Vesey, Frank will tell you—Frank then told me how to go to Mrs. Ferguson's plantation, and that I must ask for John O [sic] and Pompey and gave me other directions—Vesey gave me \$2 to hire a horse and Frank and Adam threw down on the table 25 cents each....On Sunday I met Lot who betrayed me; the same day I told Vesey I had started but that the patrol turned me back in fact I had not started and only told him so to deceive him—the same day I met Charles Drayton at Vesey's who said the business was postponed—Vesey asked Charles how he knew the business was postponed—Charles said Ned Bennett and Monday Gell told him so. But said Vesey, how could they know it was postponed as they have not seen me—Says Charles they said they had seen you and that you had told them so. Now, said I to Vesey. You see there, suppose I had gone into the country and brought those people down to night [sic], we should all have been destroyed. As far as I know, I believe *Denmark Vesey and Monday Gell were the chief men.*²⁹

The above testimony is a revealing example of the pervasive risks that were entailed even from involvement in conversations about armed resistance to slavery in a society that was defined by an aristocratic plantocracy and mainstream White supremacy. Black people were subject to persistent surveillance by patrols. “Policing” Black bodies was central to the Southern order. Vesey knew that his revolt required Blacks from the lowcountry because he was aware of their potential differences from Blacks in the urban area. Blacks from the lowcountry could be less acculturated and less compliant than those who worked in planters' residences in the city. This is what he learned from his travels around the Atlantic rim. Vesey's imperative to enlist others from the lowcountry was about more than the need for numbers but about Vesey's Atlantic knowledge.³⁰ The presence of Black bodies in circum-Atlantic enclaves and especially in cityscapes has caused a great deal of social anxiety in the White Atlantic since the dawn of the Atlantic world system's formation.³¹

This is evident within the trial manuscripts from 1822 and in the aftermath of White Atlantic officials' "discovery" of the plot. Indeed, "[g]enerative and useful water metaphors have shaped black scholarship since Edward Wilmot Blyden and W.E.B. Du Bois."³² These water metaphors can be extended to include Atlantic figures such as Denmark Vesey since Vesey traveled the circum-Atlantic world for years as the property of a seafaring captain and merchant of enslaved African Atlantic figures.³³

Vesey, specifically in his own words or in those attributed to him as recorded by the magistrates and freeholders who were responsible for his execution by hanging, engaged in an effort to create a tight-knit environment in which those who betrayed the plot after supporting it would be subject to execution by enforcers³⁴ in the movement:

Denmark opened the meeting by saying, he had an important secret to communicate to us, which we must not disclose to any one, and if we did, we should be put to instant death. He said, we were deprived of our rights and privileges by the white people, and that our Church was shut up, so that we could not use it, and that it was high time for us to seek for our rights, and that we were fully able to conquer the whites, if we were only unanimous and courageous, as the St. Domingo people were—He then proceeded to explain his plan, by saying, that they intended to make the attack by setting the Governor's Mills on fire, and also some houses near the water, and as soon as the bells began to ring for fire, that they should kill every man as he came out of his door, and that the servants in the yard should do it, and that it should be done with axes and clubs, and afterwards they should murder the women and children, for he said, God had so commanded it in the scriptures[.]³⁵

Discursive usage of religious resources in the forging of Black power ideology during its nascent stages is also revealed in the trial manuscripts. Key to the Denmark Vesey conspiracy was the belief in God's permission to kill White children, women, and men if necessary, and in a fight against American slaveholders, there is no question that it would be necessary.³⁶ Vesey's discourse according to the archived transcripts of Charleston authorities indicated that some said they thought it was cruel to kill the ministers, and the women and the children, but Denmark Vesey said, *he thought it was for our safety not to spare one white skin alive, for this was the plan they pursued in St. Domingo*—He then said to me, Jesse, I want you to go into the country to enlist as many of the country negroes [sic] as possible, to be in readiness to come down to assist us—I told him I had no horse and no money to hire one; he then took out two dollars, and gave them to me to hire a horse, and told me to enlist as many as possible.

I got the horse the next Sabbath, and started, but the guard was so strict, I could not pass them without being taken up; so I returned, and told Denmark, at which he expressed his sorrow, and said, the business was urgent, for they wanted the country people to be armed, that they might attack the Forts, at the same time, and also to take every ship and vessel in the harbor, and to put every man to death, except the Captains. For said he, it will not be safe to stay in Charleston, for as soon, as they had got all the money out of the Banks, and the goods out of the stores on board, they intended to sail for Saint Domingo, for he had a promise that they would receive and protect them....At 4 o'clock, on the morning of the execution, I visited all the prisoners condemned, and found Jesse in prayers[.]³⁷

“The Trial of Denmark” emerges next in this narrative that situates him in a revolutionary Atlantic context as a diasporic figure. His trial and his cross-examination of his accusers that he allegedly was allowed to question reveal the significant talking-across-audiences that was central to the pan-African imagination and within nationalistic politics during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Vesey, here, was in conversation with at least three audiences: the magistrates and freeholders who conducted his prison trial and conviction; his Black accusers; and White Atlantic readership of the *Official Report*. It is certainly plausible that he was also in conversation with the Black Atlantic matrix, even as this form of communication³⁸ was via a subaltern discourse, a history of silence that “speaks” through its clandestine utterances, rumors, and silences.

According to “William, the slave of Mr. Paul, [who] testified as follows:”

Mingo Harth told me *that Denmark Vesey was the chiefest [sic] man, and more concerned than any one else*—Denmark Vesey is an old man in whose yard my master’s negro [sic] woman Sarah cooks—he was her father in law, having married her mother Beck[.]

Vesey was “old” in the sense that most enslaved men did not live to age fifty years. William also attributed the following sentiments to Vesey:

*He said he would not like to have a white man in his presence—that he had a great hatred for the whites, and that if all were like him they would resist the whites—he studies all he can to put it into the heads of the blacks to have a rising against the whites, and tried to induce me to join—he tries to induce all his acquaintances—this has been his chief study and delight for a considerable time...he studies the Bible a great deal and tries to prove from it that slavery and bondage is against the Bible. I am persuaded that Denmark Vesey was chiefly concerned in the business.*³⁹

According to “Frank, Mrs. Ferguson’s slave, [who] gave the following evidence:”

I know Denmark Vesey and have been to his house—I have heard him say that the negro’s [sic] situation was so bad he did not know how they could endure it, and was astonished they did not rise and fend for themselves, and he advised me to join and rise—he said he was going about to see different people, and mentioned the names of Ned Bennett and Peter Poyas...and that they were to go about and tell the blacks that they were free, and must rise and *fight for themselves*—that they would take the Magazines and Guard-Houses, and the city and be free—that he was going to send *into the country* to inform the people there too...he said if I would not go into the country for him he could get others—he said himself, Ned Bennett, Peter Poyas and Monday Gell were the principal men and himself the head man...*one party would land on South-Bay, one about Wappoo, and about the farms*—that the party which was to land on South-Bay was to take the Guard-House and get arms and then they would be able to go on—that the attack was to commence about 12 o’clock at night—*that great numbers would come from all about...*that they would kill all the whites...that he was going to *send a man into the country* on a horse *to bring down the country people* and that he would pay for the horse. He gave \$2 to Jesse to get the horse on Saturday week last, (15th June) about 1 o’clock in the day, and myself and No. 8, also put in 25 cents a piece...I one night met at Vesey’s a great number of men, and as they came in each handed him some money. Vesey said there was a *little man named Jack*, who could not be killed, and who would furnish them with arms, he had a charm and he would lead them[.]⁴⁰

Jack embodies a non-Christian spiritual element in Vesey’s configuration of an African Atlantic revolt against American slavery.⁴¹ The following testimony clearly reveals an example of the enforcer ethos in African Atlantic armed resistance.

Vesey said the negroes [sic] were living such an abominable life, they ought to rise. I said I was living well—he said though I was, others were not and that ‘twas such fools as I, that were in the way and would not help them, that after all things were well he would mark me.⁴²

Vesey was not a controversial emigrationist:

He said he did not go with [free Black George] *Creighton to Africa, because he had not a will, he wanted to stay and see what he could do* for his fellow-creatures—I met Ned, Monday and others at Denmark Vesey’s where they were talking about the business.⁴³

Vesey's radicalism had its limits according to this narrative, even as Vesey desired freedom for Black people. His was a strategy that more conservative yet revolutionary emigrationists and colonizationists would not support, as emigrationists and colonizationists like Creighton, a "free mulatto slaveowner ... who had purchased the schooner *Calypso* and set sail for Africa,"⁴⁴ opted to travel to West Africa, for example, in order to make their marks.

The first time I spoke with Monday Gell 'twas one night at Vesey's house, where I heard Vesey tell Monday that he must *send some one [sic] into the country to bring the people down*—Monday said *he had sent up Jack* and told him *to tell the people to come down and join in the fight* against the whites and also to ascertain and inform him how many people he could get..., in the streets, under Mr. Duncan's trees at night, where *Jack stated that he had been into the country round by Goose-Creek and Dorchester*, and that he had spoken to 6,600 persons who had agreed to join. The first time I saw Monday at Vesey's, he was going away early, when Vesey asked him to stay, to which Monday replied, he expected that night a meeting at his house to fix upon and mature the plan, &c. and that he could stay no longer—I afterwards conversed with Monday in his shop, where he asked me if I had heard that Bennett's and Poya's people were taken up, that 'twas a great pity...Whenever I talked with Vesey, he always spoke of Monday Gell as being his principal and active man in the business...I heard Gullah Jack say, he would pay no more wages, he was too busy in seeing about this insurrection; besides what would the white people want with wages[, as] they would soon be no more[.]⁴⁵

According to "Adam, a Negro man belonging to Mr. Ferguson, [who] testified as follows:"

Denmark Vesey one day asked me to walk to his home, and there asked me for 25 cents to hire a horse to send up into the country—I put down the money on the table and asked what he was going to send into the country for—he said 'twould be for my benefit—as he would tell me no more I took up the money and put it back into my pocket again—I afterwards met the man who was to go into the country, who told me he had set off, but had been brought back by the patrol [sic]; *that he was going up to bring down the black people to take this country from the whites*—I have been at Vesey's house and there it was I met the man who was to go into the country, he was a yellowish man—the witness pointing at Jesse said, that is the man who was to go into the country.⁴⁶

A White teenager, thoroughly indoctrinated in mainstream White Charlestonian culture, was even used as a witness against Vesey. White Atlantic fear of Black African equality with White Europeans, or more radically, fear of a single origin of humanity, is embedded in the White teenager's testimony. According to "Benjamin Ford, a white lad, about 15 or 16 years of age, [who] deposed as follows:"

Denmark Vesey frequently came into our shop which is near his house, and always complained of the hardships of the blacks—he said the laws were very rigid and strict and that the blacks had not their rights—that every one had his time, and that his would come round too—*his general conversation was about religion which he would apply to slavery*, as for instance, he would speak of the creation of the world, in which he would say all men had equal rights, blacks as well as whites, &c. *all his religious remarks were mingled with slavery.*⁴⁷

It is noted that “[t]he court *unanimously* found Denmark Vesey guilty, and passed upon him the sentence of Death [sic]. After his conviction, a good deal of testimony was given against him during the succeeding trials.”⁴⁸

In one of his methods of pulling off a successful revolt against American slavery, Vesey frightened some members of the Black community in Charleston; their discomfort came from examples such as the following, where Vesey is said to have sought to acquire weapons by having an enslaved man steal them from his enslaver. According to “Witness 9, a negro [sic] man [who] testified as follows:”

Denmark Vesey...He enquired of me *if my master had not arms in his house, and tried to persuade me to get them for him*. The blacks stand in great fear of him, and I so much so, that I always endeavoured [sic] to avoid him[.]⁴⁹

According to the “Sentence on Denmark Vesey, a free black man”:

“[Y]ou were the author, and original instigator of this diabolical plot ... to introduce anarchy ... It is difficult to imagine what *infatuation* could have prompted you to attempt an enterprize [sic] so wild and visionary. You were a free man ... From your age and experience, you *ought* to have known, that success was impracticable A moment’s reflection must have convinced you, that the ruin of *your race*, would have been the probable result ... In addition to treason, you have committed the grossest impiety, in attempting to pervert the sacred words of God into a sanction for crimes of the blackest hue. It is evident, that you are totally insensible to the divine influence of the Gospel, “all whose paths are peace” If you had searched them with sincerity, you would have discovered instructions, immediately applicable to the deluded victims of your artful wiles—“*Servants’* [sic] (*says Saint Paul*) *obey in all things your masters’* [sic]; *according to the flesh, not the eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God.*” And again “*Servants’* [sic] (*says Saint Peter*) *be subject to your masters’* [sic] *with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward*”

.... You cannot have forgotten the history of the malefactor on the Cross, who, like yourself, was the wretched and deluded victim of offended justice. His conscience was awakened in the pangs of dissolution, and yet there is reason to believe, that his spirit was received into the realms of bliss. May *you* imitate his example, and may your last moments prove like his!⁵⁰

White Charlestonians who sentenced Denmark Vesey to death believed that a White God approved of their decision to murder thirty-five Black men as disobedient “servants” who equally believed that a Black God blessed their revolt against White “masters.” Douglas R. Egerton points out in his biography of Denmark Vesey that the discursive structure that was employed by the magistrates and freeholders in their sentencing of Vesey to capital punishment by hanging revealed much about the important, central role that Vesey played in fomenting an armed revolt that was foiled by a fearful enslaved man.⁵¹

It also reveals the revolutionary Atlantic context that Vesey’s formation as an African Atlantic figure took place in, one that was saturated with Christianity and racism as well as with republicanism or revolutionary sentiment that advocated the violent overthrow of systems of monarchical and/or racist governance from France to Haiti to the United States. Republicanism in the hands of African Atlantic figures proved to be a frightening political theory and practice because it connoted the death of (free) White human beings at the hands of (oppressed and enslaved) Black animals according to the ideological mandates of the post-Enlightenment era. *This was the radical dimension of Vesey’s secretive strategy of galvanizing African American South Carolinians for the purposes of placing himself and them into a world-historical process in order to legitimate their claims to the “rights of man.”*⁵²

The creation of “the black radical tradition” was, in fact, the result of the struggles of enslaved Blacks of the Atlantic. This concept captures the essence of African experiential dynamics without essentializing them as diasporic models have. Indeed, the circum-Atlantic theater was a site of radicalism among Africans and African Americans. Diasporic figures emerged within the Atlantic world—they were neither products of Africa nor the Americas (or Europe). The creolization of African cultures in the Atlantic world was a dynamic process, and situating an African Atlantic figure like Denmark Vesey in a revolutionary Atlantic context reveals these processes of cultural exchange, the proliferation of an intercultural world in which figures like Vesey have been erased as part of a larger process of historical amnesia.⁵³

According to “The Trial of Monday,” the “Evidence” reveals pan-Africanistic dimensions of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. “Witness No. 10, a Negro Man [sic], gave the evidence following:”

... Monday was at the head of the Ebo Company who are going to fight the white people—Monday is an Ebo ... Previous to the 16th of June, Monday Gell called me into his shop—I went in and said to him, I heard he was Captain of his countrymen’s company the Ebo’s [sic]—he said he was sort of a one[.]⁵⁴

“The Court unanimously found Monday guilty, and passed upon him the sentence of death; after which he made the following confession:”

I come out as a man who knows he is about to die—some time after Christmas Vesey passed my door, he called in and said to me, that he was trying to gather blacks to try and see if any thing could be done to overcome the whites; he asked me to join ... Morris Brown knew nothing of it, and we agreed not to let him ... know anything about it.⁵⁵

The revolutionary Atlantic context is manifest in Monday Gell’s confession that had been obtained through torture at the hands of the law in Charleston. Also noteworthy among the several names that Gell was said to have revealed is the specific reference to Black minister Morris Brown, who was not told of the plot according to Monday Gell’s testimony; in other words, the confession reveals that Vesey, who was a radical religious thinker, knew Brown was a conservative religious thinker who might have endorsed the Christian ideology stated in the verdict against Vesey that “servants” should obey their “masters”—even those who were “froward.”

The history of racism in the Atlantic theater reveals that many of the elements that make up the foundation of American (and Western) religious, philosophical, and political traditions have to be re-thought.⁵⁶ Three elements – (1) African Atlantic resistance to American slavery, (2) Black nationalism, and (3) the origins of pan-Africanism in the Atlantic world – demonstrate that epistemic frameworks of modern Western intellectual traditions have always been in conversation with diasporic figures in the West, and in the case of this study, African Atlantic figures who were first produced in a revolutionary and imperial Atlantic context during the long nineteenth century and were further forged into post-slavery African American and colonial/postcolonial African intellectual communities during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁵⁷

A comparative example can be traced in a Canadian case. *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* by Afua Cooper is an innovative approach to the significance of resistance to slavery, the history of the African Atlantic world, and historiography.

The latter is a particularly important dimension of this analysis of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy since Cooper's re-creation of the life and times of Marie-Joseph Angelique, which traces her life from her birth in Portugal in 1705 to her enslavement in North America, first in New England (which, as Cooper notes, could have been in New York state or in other traditional U.S./American conceptualizations of the region, for Canadian perceptions of New England were not identical to notions of the Hudson Valley region being excluded from New England) and then in Montreal, is an Atlantic creation. The geographical Atlantic aspects are clear enough: Cooper's book certainly compliments earlier studies of the Atlantic economy during the early modern period, ranging from analysis of the role of Portugal in inaugurating the Atlantic Slave Trade (in 1444 according to Cooper) to understanding the significant roles of financiers or capitalists from the Dutch world, and perhaps most interestingly, the roles of New Christians and Jews in the Atlantic Slave Trade.⁵⁸

There are elements regarding resistance to slavery in *The Hanging of Angelique* that give new life to studies of African and African American resistance to racialized Western domination. To burn down forty percent of any city by arson is a major feat or event in any city's life, to be certain. What Cooper's analysis does is use the juridical data that is extant while moving beyond it in order to tell a rich, colorful, and tragic tale whose relation to larger history is explored in an effort to resuscitate Angelique's ghost that Cooper metaphorically sees during her own walks in Montreal in the twenty-first century, a praxis that is not merely academic but one that Joseph Roach also exploited during his walks in late-twentieth-century New Orleans during African Atlantic rituals such as Mardi Gras. In other words, the dead have not been laid to rest in the Atlantic world, even as contemporaneous efforts are consistently made to bury the horror that was a part of the making of their demise and the making of modernity.⁵⁹

Dead Africans and people of African descent who died during the Atlantic Slave Trade often speak through documents that others record, even as Cooper seems to agree with the notion that they, in fact, played a role in creating the conditions for such recordings of their deeds, lives, and confessions under torture, as seen in the cases of Angelique and those allied with Denmark Vesey. Terrorism is an issue that any contemporary human being has to be aware of since we are bombarded with images and sound bites about the "war on terror;" but this is the occasion—not the impetus—for this intervention in especially African American historiography.⁶⁰ Slavery was a form of warfare against Black people. If we approach domestic, plantation, urban, rural, or maritime forms of enslavement from the perspective of warfare, we are able to find our way deeper into the stories that have seemingly been scattered to the four winds as were Angelique's remains after she was tortured, broken, hung, and burned at the stake. Why were the bodies of rebellious slaves vanquished?⁶¹ Was it simply to teach a lesson to those who witnessed or heard about it? How do historians tell stories of people who only "speak" in jail? How do trial manuscripts, when they are the only data from the historical record about a specific person or group, point us in the direction of a more creative use of primary and secondary sources?

How do we write the history of Black resistance without repeating what previous (generations of) historians have already and effectively articulated? Are all revisions useful or possible? When does the historian reach the point of no return, or a dead end/wall?

One of the most fascinating features embedded in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy is what it reveals about the circum-Atlantic world. The fact that Vesey's plot reveals the nexus or the originating nodes of pan-Africanism is a quite remarkable one. Vesey's case reveals that he and other Atlantic figures played instrumental roles in the creation of the African diaspora. The planning of operations of resistance based on ethnic affiliation, or gangs, is one of the elements that indicates that pan-Africanism was not the sole creation of modern Black intellectuals even as these same intellectuals *subsequently* articulated pan-Africanistic themes in their writings. The impetus or catalyst for pan-Africanism and Black power ideology stemmed from the enslaved, for it was they who worked clandestinely to forge Black identity and form community in the eighteenth century, which led to an explosion of pan-Africanistic antislavery activism as well as an emergence of nationalistic pioneers who formed Black communities in the Atlantic world on all sides. So it was not just in Africa that nation-building took place if we assess, for example, African-American community formation in Canada or in the Ohio River Valley (i.e., underground railroad history reveals this, such as the work of Keith P. Griffler, Bryan Prince, and Afua Cooper).⁶²

Black intellectuals articulated or re-articulated visions that had previously emerged in the subaltern spaces that enslaved Africans forged in Africa and in the West. It seems that a consideration of the role of captives in coastal West Africa in the formation of cross-ethnic bonds is a critical approach to understanding pan-Africanism. Many of these captives were from Central Africa or even East Africa (such as Madagascar and other regions of the Indian Ocean world) who were shipped to West African coastal enclaves before disembarkation in Europe or in the Americas.⁶³ The history of resistance to hegemonic racial domination must take into account the efforts that enslaved Black people waged for their own survival. I argue that the origins of pan-Africanism can be mapped in the contours/matrices of the Vesey case because the trial manuscripts reveal more than traditional historiographical accounts of enslaved and free Black consciousness before the demise of legal slavery in North America.⁶⁴ If Black nationalism and pan-Africanism can be traced to North American African Americans, then this lineage has to be pushed back further to include the voices of those who also articulated Black power ideology in its nascent stages, especially those who were not writers.⁶⁵ The Vesey case provides rich documentary evidence that facilitates more sophisticated approaches to the conundrum that has become Denmark Vesey studies. Vesey studies is an integrative, interdisciplinary enterprise due to the sheer fact of the silences surrounding it and the ongoing speculations on whether there was an armed revolt that was planned to take place in the summer of 1822 in Charleston. The city of Charleston, in fact, was one of the epicenters of a revolutionary context that encompassed political republicanism and revolutions across the Atlantic world and most especially in Haiti.⁶⁶ "Rumors of revolt" surrounded Charleston and other geopolitical spaces and places in the Atlantic world that Denmark Vesey traveled through as the enslaved property of a seafaring merchant, Joseph Vesey.

Connections can be drawn between the ideologies that emerge in the official trial manuscripts stemming from strings of jailhouse trials and state executions of thirty-five co-conspirators, some of whom died in silence, leaving only the traces of African Atlantic subjectivities that were embedded in the testimonies of those who broke their silences due to torture at the hands of White Charlestonian officials and supporters of slavery⁶⁷, such as the details that can be discerned from these trials that other scholars have missed, dismissed, or exhausted in their respective studies and what Michael P. Johnson offers in particular that Richard Wade, for example, did not offer in his writings on the Vesey conspiracy that cast it as a farce or reflection of White anxieties and fear of Black resistance to slavery using armed resistance and/or revolutionary violence.

Why Did the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy Fail?

“The Denmark Vesey [a]ffair”⁶⁸ occupied a great deal of conceptual space in the historiography and popular remembrance of resistance to slavery and domination in the Atlantic world. The historian Larry Koger made the provocative claim that among the primary sources that led to the foiling of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy was the minority, mixed-race elite community that was comprised of formerly enslaved people and free persons of color. He argued, “[F]ew have linked the failure of the plot with the division between the colored elite and the black masses.”⁶⁹ He further suggests that Vesey was acutely aware of the contradictory nature of slavery and freedom and the social and cultural divisions that existed among non-White people in the city of Charleston and its surrounding areas. This was due to Vesey’s place of dwelling in the city and his frequent, daily encounters with the enslaved, free Blacks, and non-White enslavers, even in his own neighborhood when among his neighbors. Koger essentially argues that Vesey broke ranks with “the ‘safe’ free black community” and its elitism in relation to the Black masses who were mostly enslaved for the duration of their lives.⁷⁰ Perhaps the most intriguing element about Koger’s overall argument is contained in a chapter focusing on “The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy: Brown Masters vs. Black Slaves” in which he insists on the fact that “Vesey traveled through the dark corridors of Charleston Neck, into the business district of Charleston City, and even into the rural setting of James Island.”⁷¹ Vesey was a careful observer of the social and political climate of Charleston and the Atlantic world in general, the latter most especially being a point of focus due to the legacy of the Haitian Revolution and due to his own travels across the Atlantic world. Vesey also lived in close proximity to mixed-race and Black enslavers:

In 1820, for example, Negro heads of household who owned slaves were reported at 72.1 percent of Afro-American dwellings in Charleston City. In the neighboring suburb of Charleston Neck, slightly more than half of the Negro households were listed with slave property. *Almost everywhere Denmark Vesey traveled within the city, he encountered free Negro slaveowners.*⁷²

In other words, the demographic percentage of African American enslavers represented a world in which Denmark Vesey, “[w]hen he went to the African Methodist Church, located on Anson Street, to attend services, ... walked past the houses of Negro masters Within six blocks from Vesey’s home on Bull Street, there were four Afro-Americans on Beaufain Street who owned slave property ... Even the next door neighbors of Denmark Vesey eventually purchased slaves.”⁷³ African American enslavers had just as much interest in maintaining slavery and appeasing White people in general – and especially those who were property owners – and were generally indisposed to, as well as opposed to, insurrectionary ideologies and activities. The primary Atlantic figures who betrayed the clandestine plot to revolt against American slavery that was reported to have been engineered by Denmark Vesey were mostly mixed-race people, according to Koger. These outwardly mixed-race people were invested in maintaining the privileges that came along with their blood and social ties to White enslavers, including “rewards” that were bestowed upon those who betrayed the revolt.

The white authorities praised the loyalty of the three Afro-Americans who had betrayed the revolution and saved Charleston from a bloody uprising. Had not Peter Desverneys mentioned the plot to [“free mulatto slaveowner”] William Penceel, and had not Penceel not urged the slave to expose the conspiracy, all of Charleston would have felt the wrath of the black masses. For the information that he provided, Peter Desverneys was manumitted by the state assembly and awarded the annual sum of \$50. William Penceel was exempted from the free Negro capitation tax and received a reward of \$1000. And George Wilson was given his freedom and a yearly pension of \$50.⁷⁴

The sociologist Richard Yidana’s recent essay on nationalism can also be put into conversation with Koger’s chapter that was first published in book form in 1985. Yidana’s emphasis on the significance of the “critical masses” in nationalistic movements (or “socio-nationalism”⁷⁵ to use his term) is one interlaced with Koger’s suggestion that Vesey’s allegiances were to the Black masses and not to the free class that he became a part of in 1800 after purchasing his freedom with winnings from the Bay Street lottery at the end of 1799.⁷⁶ This was due to a “personal concern” to be sure. According to Koger:

What kept Denmark Vesey so committed to the slave community? ... Like many of the free blacks of Charleston, Vesey had family members who were slaves. Despite the wealth he accumulated, he could not acquire the freedom of loved ones. Perhaps he tried to buy the liberty of his wife and children but was turned down ... [T]he 55-year-old black man knew his life was gradually ending. He was old, but his children were young and had not tasted liberty ... What made Denmark Vesey burn with such hatred that he planned to annihilate all of white Charleston was the simple love of a father for his children.

His radicalism was born out of the desire to see loved ones freed from bondage. That love caused him to risk much, for greater than the risk was the anticipated reward—the liberty of his family and the black masses Since the right to purchase loved ones was firmly established in South Carolina, the stimulus needed to radicalize the free Negro community in Charleston was absent. Although Denmark Vesey could not buy the freedom of his loved ones, other free blacks did ... [Virtually all] free Negroes were separated from the masses of black people. With a divided black majority, the peculiar institution was protected from servile rebellions. By and large, the Charleston of Denmark Vesey was a fragmented city where unity within the black community was impossible.⁷⁷

Indeed, Vesey also knew from personal experience the various faces of Atlantic enslavement, having endured circum-Atlantic travel aboard a ship as cargo/property and as an enslaved cabin boy. His enslaver, Captain Joseph Vesey, clearly had a vested interest in the perpetuation of African slavery in the Atlantic world. For instance, during the late-eighteenth century, he was affiliated with the White Atlantic figures based in Charleston in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution. The historian Robert Alderson noted that

Captain Joseph Vesey, who was a leading member of the Benevolent Society that provided aid to emigres and the citizens' committee that formed to protect Charleston from the (rumored) slave revolt (of 1793), had a good deal of experience in the slave trade with Saint-Domingue. As one of the dispensers of aid, many Domingan refugees made calls to speak with one of Vesey's slaves, Denmark Vesey Captain Vesey had purchased Denmark in 1781 on one of the captain's slaving voyages.⁷⁸

Alderson also notes that

[i]t is possible that ... Denmark Vesey learned not only from the example of Saint-Domingue, but also learned something about how to organize a revolt from what happened in 1793. If nothing else, later insurrectionists could see in the experience of 1793 the fear whites in South Carolina had of slave revolts. Later leaders could also see that fear could be manipulated to obtain a greater degree of political and social equality within the slave South.⁷⁹

Of course, White Atlantic figures who were not antislavery advocates could also manipulate fear in the revolutionary Atlantic world of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, as the arguments presented by the historian Michael P. Johnson demonstrate. Johnson claims that there was no conspiracy to revolt against slavery in 1822 Charleston but, rather, there existed a plot that was created by White magistrates, city officials, and leaders who were paranoid about the future of slavery in the United States in general and in the American South in particular. Vesey and the thirty-four African Atlantic figures who were convicted of “a diabolical” conspiracy and executed – the one hundred thirty-five total arrests, several banishments from the United States or the state of South Carolina as well as numerous imprisonments, including the conviction and imprisonment of four White men and the destruction of the Hampstead African Methodist Episcopal Church – were the victims of White Atlantic anxieties about the future of modernity, African enslavement in the United States of America, and the continuance of White supremacy.⁸⁰ What is clear from reading the primary and recent literature about Charleston, its hysterias about radical uprisings by the enslaved and their allies against American slavery, is that the beginning of this form of social anxiety can be traced to at least the 1790s and the influence of Saint Domingue’s refugees, both Black and White, on Charleston, revealing Charleston’s globalized position in a larger Atlantic frame. The most recent literature on Vesey allows us to weave Denmark Vesey into a revolutionary Atlantic frame and re-vision him as a pioneering/early pan-Africanist. Vesey’s trial can be situated in the nexus that connects Atlantic travel to the emergence of a pan-African imagination and the seeds of Black Power ideology in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world.⁸¹

Journal(ism), Politics, and the Historical Imagination⁸²

Historians and other writers continue to debate the life of Denmark Vesey and African Atlantic armed resistance to American slavery. Recent scholarship about Vesey has been innovative in raising our understanding of the logic that undergirded juridical accounts of his case. Contemporary writers capture the anxieties and paranoia of late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century White Charleston and the passionate love affair that White Charleston had with its own version of a form of civility that was based on an unapologetic and missionizing White supremacy even after the demise of legal slavery. Most White people in the Atlantic world were so in love with the fantasy of the righteousness of their rule of Africans and African descendants that they left a great amount of detail about their social structure. White Atlantic figures also produced a great amount of information about Black people, such as the trial manuscripts that can be read as early and indigenous collections and versions of Atlantic anthropology; accounts of Black people in the nineteenth century that were not written by Black authors can be read from an anthropological perspective. Many of these accounts served as justifications of the executive power of enslavers who were a part of the White elite ruling class. But these historic records were each designed to convey a “truth,” and they revealed important facts about power relations in the Atlantic world.⁸³

There are elements of the Black radical tradition that were central to the Black underground freedom movement that date to and even preceded the aspirations of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. Secrecy is an important dimension of radicalism. Conservatism uses secrecy too, so it is important to recall that effective radical political organizing that is not mainstream or in power must by default be secretive.⁸⁴ Vesey would have had to work the underground circuits in order to engage in planning a revolt that frightened White Atlantic enslavers and their allies into a murderous frenzy. Proslavery figures were determined to vanquish Vesey and anyone like him—that is for sure. An indicator of the social climate that Vesey was forced to negotiate can be discerned from analysis of what was revealed in the public sphere via newspapers. Postings for freedom-seekers who were classified as runaways in the Wednesday, July 3, 1822, issue of *The Southern Chronicle and Camden Gazette* appear in the same pages as advertisements of Poetry, Books, and other items for sale. Indeed, this is the window that Charleston readers – including literate men like Vesey – looked through in order to see the larger Atlantic world, and it is a picture of consumption. “Genuine Family Medicines,” “Law,” “Equity,” “Snuff,” “Wood-Tailor,” “House of Entertainment,” etc. appear verbatim next to “One hundred Dollars Reward” for “Tom” (24-years-old who might have been “inveighed away by some white person”) and “Five Dollars Reward” for “Came” (21-years-old who “ran away from the residence of the subscriber”) followed by “Twelve Dozen Porter[s], For sale at this office.”⁸⁵ Vesey could not openly talk to many or most people about the variety of things that he was aware of. Even mentioning the information above, for instance, from the newspapers during casual conversations could lead to all sorts of life-threatening gossip about his motives.⁸⁶

Vesey was also “[o]ne of the earliest Pan-Africanists,” though he was not a conservative or one who used his own writings as the principle means of organizing a revolt.⁸⁷ As an Atlantic enclave, Charleston was a site of varying degrees of mobility and a space wherein differences/similarities of Atlantic figures were on constant display. Understanding the impact of the fear of and hysteria about African-British sailors – and Black sailors in general – in Charleston and other parts of the Atlantic world allows us to grasp the fact that these Atlantic figures who were sailors – and Vesey had seafaring experiences – were seen as potential agents of contamination that would infect other allegedly happy enslaved and content, quasi-free non-European and non-European-American people. Vesey was an embodiment of the fears of White Charleston.⁸⁸ From an Atlantic perspective, it is possible to envision Vesey as a sailor who secretly spread radical ideologies of freedom among the enslaved populations of Charleston and its surrounding areas, as Charleston was an Atlantic enclave that was practically the center of the universe for those who willingly made a home there or were forced to make a home there. Negotiations within such a committed “slave society,” which the city evolved into from being a “society with slaves,” made life for free Blacks and mixed-race people amenable to seizing upon the few extant openings to exercise freedoms outside the direct purview of White hegemony.⁸⁹ It is important to note that “Vesey’s ghost hovered over the framing and rendering of the nationalist and cultural self-affirmation of mutually constitutive constructions of Black localism and globalism.”⁹⁰

If Denmark Vesey planned an armed revolt against American slavery and planned to escape Charleston, South Carolina, and the U.S., he certainly was not crazy—far from it. It was around 1815 and 1816 that Black soldiers evacuated North American Atlantic enclaves with the British and the Spanish to points in Latin America (such as Belize in Central America, Barbados and Trinidad in the Caribbean, and Nova Scotia in Canada) following the War of 1812, indicating circum-Atlantic (or circum-Caribbean as well as Latin American patterns of) movements of peoples, ideas, and material cultures.⁹¹ From a theoretical perspective, it can be argued that Denmark Vesey and his supporters committed “revolutionary suicide,” contrary to a “reactionary suicide” that was politically aimless and enacted out of despair. Vesey probably knew that there was little chance of success, but he also probably knew that the changes that were necessary to enact revolutionary social transformation in Charleston and the commencement of the destruction of American slavery had to begin with a blow, not moral suasion and not with prayer alone. Huey P. Newton concluded his autobiography with a chapter titled “I Am We,” which refers to intercommunalism as a philosophy and practice that is based on ancient African principles and reflective of his notion of revolutionary suicide; he even makes use of religious resources as well as Maoist teachings. Newton noted that being a “fool” for revolution is akin to Paul’s being a “fool for Christ,” and Vesey was certainly aware of the importance of utilizing Biblical principles as a strategic means of galvanizing enslaved Black people to engage in armed resistance in early nineteenth-century South Carolina.⁹²

In “The Narrations of the Destruction of Saint-Domingue in the Late 18th Century and their Reinterpretations after the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution” Anju Bandau utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to literary and cultural studies in order to flesh out the significance of the “context of the revolutionary Atlantic” and move our understanding of the impact of the Haitian Revolution beyond “the binary model of metropolis-colony” and “the transatlantic triangle created by the slave trade” – indeed, this is a gesture towards “decolonial studies.”⁹³ An approach of this kind has major implications for studies of Vesey, even as he is an exception to the notion that the work of those “[s]tudying the Haitian Revolution ... try to study written testimony of African (American) emancipation where there are no written testimonies by (former) slaves known to us today, a situation sharply contrasting with the anglophone context” because even in a predominantly English-speaking context like his, the “veracity” of the data is subject to debate.⁹⁴ Bandau poses major questions: “To what extent is it possible to detect repercussions by studying the medium, that is, the format of transmission that spreads the news on the Revolution? What impact would it have on the regulated ways of speaking, such as genre?”⁹⁵ The author links her analysis to studies of the “Black Atlantic and its early configurations” and focuses on “the question of black subjectivities and their representation” as well as the significance of “consulting genre as a convention inscribed in the text that allows for and shapes this representation.”⁹⁶ This certainly helps us understand the trial manuscripts as a “genre” or “format of transmission” of information that emerged in the context of the Vesey plot. “[T]he figure of the black slave in revolt” and “genre as a medium that links the past, as a world we would like to access, to the present” permeate the debates surrounding Denmark Vesey and have received new life from Atlantic perspectives on African Atlantic resistance to slavery.⁹⁷

In the context of African Atlantic resistance to enslavement during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, “the African opponent is acting and speaking repeated speech” in many of the documents that facilitate our grasp of their historic realities.⁹⁸ This approach engages “the acknowledgement of black subjectivity” by asking us “to what degree is this facilitated by the convention of genre?” – “this”, for our purposes, being an analysis of the viability of trial documents as primary and secondary historical sources.⁹⁹ Are trial documents, too, “more a history of denial than a representation of the Other” as well as indicative of the limits of “the framework of genre-poetics”?¹⁰⁰

Most information about Denmark Vesey is generated from trial documents that were clearly subject to “manipulative editing,” as narratives and interviews of formerly enslaved Africans and African descendants were historic documents that emerged from their exchanges with White interviewers and editors who changed the delivery of ideas conveyed by Black people.

The language was degraded from the original, the endings of words were taken off, [and] syllables [were] eliminated ... While historians have long argued over the validity of the former-slave narratives from the slave’s perspective, [Ellen Hampton’s] article aims to show that the editing of the interviews also offers a clear indication of how racism has continued to affect the historiography of slavery.¹⁰¹

The specific influence of “heavy-handed editing” certainly leads us to similar questions about the Denmark Vesey plot, such as “do the interviews actually reflect what the former slaves said?” or do the trial documents from the Denmark Vesey conspiracy reveal what he and others actually believed and did?¹⁰² Certainly there could have been changes to the language of those who gave voluntary or forced testimony during torture, similar to those interviews of formerly enslaved people who gave testimonies that were collected as a part of the WPA narratives: “[a]s to editing and rewriting on [sic] the interviews sent to Washington, some of it was for clarity and flow, but some of it also was aimed at degrading the language and distorting the meaning.”¹⁰³ It is reasonable to expect Vesey’s executioners to have vested interests in maintaining White supremacy in Charleston and throughout the South, as even “75 years after Emancipation people in Jackson[, Mississippi] and in Washington[,] D.C. were still defending slavery as an institution, still pretending that a few bad individuals had wrecked what was essentially a happy system.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed,

the fact that the edited and rewritten materials are the ones accessible means that some of those resources come with a hidden, embedded agenda Thus the telling of slavery has had nearly as rough a time as the former slaves themselves, with much material falling into the gaps between what the former slaves said, what the interviewers noted, what the editors rewrote, and what the publishers printed. On an historical level, these narratives are troubled waters ... They may not be all we would want, but they are all we have.¹⁰⁵

Olaudah Equiano's narrative, "part of which scholars now believe was possibly invented as Equiano may have been born in South Carolina,"¹⁰⁶ is another example of a narrative that past scholars viewed as an authoritative one while more recent scholars problematized the "veracity of the accounts"¹⁰⁷ contained in it and other narratives that were attributed to formerly enslaved African Atlantic figures.¹⁰⁸

The extent that the Denmark Vesey trial documents reveal evidence of a revolt, or if they reveal details about resistance that be discerned from reading against the grain of proslavery logic, is related to both the fact that "slave narratives enabled the subjectivisation [sic] of bondsmen who were chattel property by law" and to the "paratext" – "the framing devices authors and publishers use to contextualize works and generate interest."¹⁰⁹ There are critical components of textual analysis of narratives attributed to or written by African Atlantic figures.¹¹⁰ The trial manuscripts from the Vesey plot also constituted "echo chambers wherein multiple voices expressed themselves and reverberated" even as they were discursively recorded by defenders of slavery. To be sure, "[b]y gaining access to literacy, the slave was able to write himself into being," or, in the case of Vesey, he was able to situate himself as a historical agent of social change in the revolutionary Atlantic world via his "access to literacy."¹¹¹ Just as we are able to detect ambiguity in narratives attributed to or composed by the formerly enslaved, a "blending of reality and fiction"¹¹² is evident in the case of Vesey and other Atlantic figures who lived before the twentieth century. Vesey was a radical whose life, work, and legacy overlapped even with more conservative literary figures, including Black abolitionists after him like Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown who "[i]n the wake of the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act ... grew restive and espoused more radical views." Abolitionists Brown and Douglass each shifted from a conservative mode of resistance, "abandon[ing] pacific resistance through the use of moral suasion ... [and] espousing their brethren to take up arms in order to fight for their own freedom and for the full recognition of their manhood." What Vesey said was also echoed in calls for revolutionary violence that were declared later by David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet.¹¹³ These "creatures of abolitionism," in the words of William Andrews, grew from being men "whose 'literary autonomy' was restricted by those who seemed to encourage them most in their literary efforts"¹¹⁴ into men who advocated armed resistance to American slavery.

Newspaper coverage of the convictions and executions of Denmark Vesey and some of his co-conspirators was widespread, ranging from nearby Camden, South Carolina, to Baltimore, Maryland, Savannah, Georgia, Boston, Massachusetts, Providence, Rhode Island, Alexandria Virginia, New Haven, Connecticut, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example.¹¹⁵ The execution of Denmark Vesey occurred in a context in which White Atlantic figures revealed their worries about the "attempt to raise an insurrection" in areas far flung from, but interlaced with, Charleston, South Carolina.¹¹⁶

The “Summary” section of the July 17, 1822 issue of the *Pittsfield Sun* indicated the “Execution” of “Denmark Vesey, (a free black man),” *after* making reference to news about “the account of the arrival of a French fleet at Samana Bay to treat with President Boyer” at “St. Domingo” (Haiti), where the French “had been once ordered off, but on their return the officers were permitted to land, and a negotiation [sic] was opened; but the subject was merely conjectural.”¹¹⁷ The *New-York Mercantile* was also quoted in the *Pittsfield Sun* as mentioning “the arrivals at that port from foreign ports, for the first six months of 1821, 410 vessels; and for the first six months of 1822, 571 vessels—being 151 more in the last six months than in the same period of 1821.”¹¹⁸ The *Pittsfield* newspaper included in its “Summary” section information from “[t]he *Norfolk Herald* in speaking of the capture of our vessels by Spanish privateers, says, ‘we must be down upon them like lightening, or they will put us to the trouble of another 20 years negotiation about spoliations and illegal captures’.”¹¹⁹ In addition to the aforementioned, information about a Kentucky colonel’s diplomatic voyage to “the Republic of Columbia” equally suggests that Atlantic world circuits were considered by White Atlantic figures to simultaneously constitute sites of prospective prosperity *and* dangerous social revolution, and the convictions and executions of African Atlantic figures like Denmark Vesey and some of his allies were certainly relevant to White Atlantic figures in Charleston and in other parts of the Atlantic theater.¹²⁰

Thirty-five men were executed for the crime of “Slave Revolt” in 1822, and all of them were executed by “Hanging.” There were five instances of state-administered executions, five of them involving at least two men and one of them involving a total of twenty-two executions in a single day. The executions in 1822 were as follows: July 2nd (six hangings, including a 55-year-old Denmark Vesey and an 18-year-old Batteau Bennett), July 12th (two hangings including the conjuror Gullah Jack Pritchard), July 26th (twenty-two hangings), July 30th (four hangings), and August 9th (one hanging). Several of the newspapers in the U.S. that covered the Denmark Vesey execution – ranging from papers in Easton, Maryland, Cooperstown, New York, New Orleans, Louisiana, New York, New York, Savannah, Georgia, Alexandria, Virginia, and Baltimore, Maryland – contained information that reveals details about the measures taken by Charleston officials to crush any sign of a revolt against slavery and details about the mind of the nation, particularly about the fears of White Atlantic figures in regards to African Atlantic armed resistance to American slavery. Editors of newspapers in the North were just as likely as those in the South to condemn armed resistance to slavery as demonic.¹²¹

In addition to the widespread coverage of the execution of Denmark Vesey and other conspirators, the editors of *The Watch-Tower* of Cooperstown, New York, included a bracketed note from the *Norfolk Herald* about a story that was relayed by:

[a] passenger in the sloop Eliza, (who brought the paper containing the above extract)[, and who] informs that he saw the above mentioned slaves executed previous to his departure. He also states, that there were upwards of 50 others in jail implicated in the same crime, and one *white man* against whom there were charges of the most serious nature. The particulars communicated by the above informants are deeply interesting – but we deem it imprudent to publish them at present.¹²²

The mention of a White man as a possible conspirator is especially noteworthy considering the level of fear that the Denmark Vesey conspiracy inspired among White Atlantic figures.¹²³ Editorial dynamics are also present in American newspapers' coverage of the conspiracy. On August 27, 1822 the *Evening Post* of New York, New York, republished South Carolina Governor Thomas Bennett's letter that was originally published in Charleston on August 10, 1822. "Slave Conspiracy in South Carolina" was the headline used in the *Evening Post's* recirculation of the *National Intelligencer's* publication of Bennett's letter, and an asterisk indicating the following editorial note was included at the beginning of the headline of the story:

* Slave Conspiracy in South Carolina.—Of the following letter from the Governor of the State of South Carolina, we have become accidentally possessed of a copy, without authority to publish it. The subject, however, being of so pervading an interest, and the letter itself being printed circular, we see no sufficient reason for withholding from our readers the information it contains Copy of a letter from the Governor of the state of South Carolina EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT, Charleston, Aug. 10, 1822.¹²⁴

The editors of the *Evening Post* indicated their decision to use the word "slave" in order to be clearer to New Yorkers and other Northern readers about the letter's references to "servile" laborers or "servants":

*We have to acknowledge to Messrs. Gales & Seaton, that we have ventured to substitute "slave" instead of "servile": not understanding the latter adjective to convey, at least in popular acceptance, the same meaning as the former. At any rate the term is ambiguous. We say the "Slave trade," and everybody [sic] understands us, but the "Servile trade" would convey a very different idea; it would mean a trade carried on by one nation in subservience to the views of another.¹²⁵

Bennett argued that "the rumor of a very extensive conspiracy" was essentially inaccurate, and he sought to provide "evidence" of the uncovering and squashing of the plot. However, "suspicion and anxiety" in the general White Atlantic public and private spheres were undeniable.

In providing details about a “confession [that] was given on Thursday, the 13th of June ... [that] contained the recital of several occurrences which would precede the attempts and evidence the intention,” Bennett noted that even though on the allegedly planned date of the revolt, the early AM hours of June 16, 1822, “Saturday and Sunday morning passed without the predicted demonstration,” and the rumors of a revolt were instrumental in “producing a night of sleepless anxiety.” It is noteworthy that even Denmark Vesey himself, “a free negro [sic], was arrested on the 21st, and on the 22nd put on his trial. Although he was unquestionably the instigator and chief of this plot, no positive proof of his guilt appeared until the 25th. This grew out of the confession of one of the convicts, [who was] tried on the 27th [, and] his guilt was further established by a servant of Mr. Ferguson.” The establishment of a “Committee of Vigilance, not only to elicit the confirmation of ... statement[s] ... [about other] convicts, but to apprehend a great number of persons engaged in the plot,” revealed the extent of the general panic among White Charlestonians.¹²⁶ The following information from Bennett’s letter is evidence of how confessions were produced in a manner that resembles the ideas of the historian Natalie Zemon Davis that were conveyed in her analysis of how letters of remission in early modern France were produced by penitents who pled to have their criminal offenses absolved via desperate, pained efforts to survive¹²⁷, if even by means of “treachery” that played into the hands of Charleston officials’ hegemony.

Several of the conspirators had entered into solemn pledges to partake of a common destiny, and one, at least, was found, who, after his arrest, felt no repugnance to enforce the obligation, by surrendering the names of his associates. A spirit of retaliation and revenge produced a similar effect with others, who suspected that they were the victims of treachery; and this principle operated with full effect, as the hope or expectation of pardon predominated. To the last hour of the existence of several, who appeared to be conspicuous actors in this drama, they were pressingly importuned to make further confessions.¹²⁸

The Bennett letter that was published in the *Evening Post* and that was alarming to enslavers’ ideology included information about the literacy of one of the conspirators, Monday Gell. Gell was a hired-out enslaved man who, according to Bennett’s letter, allegedly used his shop as a site of recruitment and fomentation of revolt. Gell was said to have confessed to writing a letter to Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer (who was also a leader in the Haitian Revolution) “requesting his aid, and addressed the envelop of his letter to a relative of the person who became the bearer of it, a negro [sic] from one of the Northern States.” White Atlantic anxieties about, and fears of, the flow of revolutionary information through African Atlantic circuits as well as debates about the future of slavery in the United States (i.e., debates surrounding the Missouri Compromise) are revealed in Bennett’s letter. Bennett felt that the plot “infected” a nearby “plantation in St. John’s ..., but I do not know on what authority.”¹²⁹

Indeed, “[w]hether or not the story is true, the important point is that it seemed plausible” to White Atlantic figures, as even those who were skeptical of the veracity of the revolt in the “Atlantic creole enclave” of Charleston were afraid of the proliferation of antislavery sentiments¹³⁰; from social, cultural and juridical standpoints, “the debate in the historiography concerning the actual presence of a conspiracy and the veracity of the official sources is immaterial.”¹³¹ Bennett’s characterization of African Atlantic resistance to slavery as an infectious disease was similar to widespread fears among White Atlantic figures of the prospects of contamination of their human property by agents of resistance to slavery. According to the historian Michael A. Schoeppner,

Denmark Vesey was a foreigner, tainted by his West Indian birth, corrupted by his Atlantic voyages, and polluted by his short stint on prerevolutionary Saint Domingue. When he moved to Charleston, he contaminated South Carolina’s slave population with his dreams of a Haitian-style revolution. That was the essence of the narrative that white Charlestonians constructed in the summer of 1822 after local law enforcement officials uncovered what they believed to be the largest slave conspiracy since the Stono Rebellion in 1739.¹³²

Bennett contradictorily felt that “the scheme has not been general nor alarmingly extensive ... No weapons (if we except 13 hoop poles) have been discovered; nor any testimony received but of six pikes.” He mocked the notion “[t]hat the first essay would be made with clubs against the state Arsenal,” which could be “inferred from their being unprovided with arms, and the concurrence of several witnesses ... [I]f any plan had been organized it was never communicated by the principal conspirator to the leaders or the men, as they were wholly ignorant even of the places of rendezvous; although within two days of the time appointed.” He went on to suggest that enslaved people were incapable of organizing a successful revolt against American slavery due to their race and their condition. But his alleged “reluctance” to write about the issue that caused what he publicly considered to be needless “general anxiety and alarm” revealed the extent of his and other White Atlantic fears of African Atlantic resistance to slavery. In fact, he concluded his circular by encouraging “the citizens ... [to] faithfully perform the duty enjoined on them by the Patrol Laws” so that “we shall continue in the enjoyment of as much tranquility and safety as any state in the Union.” But it was not as simple as Bennett hoped. He indicated in the section of his letter that followed the information that he provided to readers about the establishment of a Committee of Vigilance that “seventy-two, have been disposed of, thirty-five executed, and thirty-seven sentenced to banishment.”¹³³ Northern newspapers like the *Evening Post* and southern newspapers like the *Daily Georgian* certainly knew the significance of White Atlantic anxieties about slavery and the potential of African Atlantic resistance to American slavery, and detailed speculations about the literacy of Monday Gell and other Atlantic dimensions of the plot would not sit easy with officials in Atlantic enclaves like New York, New York or Savannah, Georgia.¹³⁴

The *National Advocate*, a newspaper published in New York, New York, circulated an article about the Denmark Vesey conspiracy on August 28, 1822, entitled “Insurrection.” The editors acknowledged receipt of “a pamphlet from Charleston of 48 pages,” James Hamilton’s *Negro Plot: An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*¹³⁵, and the newspaper editors felt that this was “a plot, which threatened the most direful consequences to the innocent and unsuspecting whites.”¹³⁶ Reference was also made to Denmark Vesey’s Atlantic origins, as he “was taken by a Captain [Joseph] Vesey, among other slaves, in 1781, and sold at Cape Francois [Saint Domingue].” After noting that “for 20 years Vesey was his faithful, honest slave,” the editors described an emancipated Denmark Vesey between 1800 and 1822 as a man who “subsequently worked at the carpenter’s trade; [he] was a powerful black, [and he was] bold, despotic and ambitious. He could read and Write with facility, and [he] appears to have been the sole mover and instigator of the plot.” The writers of this northern newspaper then suggested the need for Southerners to abolish Black “congregational or class meetings” and expressed their belief that “religious bigotry was a powerful agent of Vesey’s in urging the execution of his bloody schemes. It will now be a question for the southern people to decide, whether such assemblages, which may cover dangerous projects, had not better be abolished.” According to the New York City-based *National Advocate*, Blacks “are a much more shrewd and intelligent race of people than is generally imagined.”¹³⁷

“The Negro Plot. Copy of a Circular from the Governor of South Carolina. Executive Department, Charleston, Aug. 10, 1822” appeared in the *Alexandria Herald*, and it was comprehensive except for its exclusion of the valediction in the original that was composed by Bennett, which read: “I have the honor to be, very respectfully, sir, your obedient servant, THO. Bennett.”¹³⁸ On August 29, 1822, the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* published a headline entitled “Account,” which was a continuation of its coverage of the “Account of the Negro Plot at Charleston, S.C. published by the authority of the Corporation.” The trials of Rolla, Batteau, Peter, Ned (“the property of Gov. Bennett”), Denmark Vesey, Jesse, Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, John Horry, Harry Haig, and Gullah Jack – all of whom were found guilty – were chronicled; in addition, the trials of Stephen, Amherst, Samuel Guifford (one of “two free persons of color”), Robert Hadden (one of “two free persons of color”), Mathias, Mungo, Robert, Richard, John, Jim, Sandy, Friday, and Abraham – “all whom ... [were] found *not guilty*, and *discharged*” – were also chronicled in this article.¹³⁹ Noteworthy was inclusion of information about Peter’s idea of assistance from “San Domingo” as a reality in his eyes and as a recruitment tactic:

He appeared, from the testimony, to have employed uncommon pains to remove all the objections arising in the minds of those whom he attempted to enlist, as to the probability of the success of the effort. And [he] spoke with great confidence of the succors which were expected from San Domingo.¹⁴⁰

Abraham, who “was found *not guilty* of the charge ‘of attempting to raise an insurrection among the blacks against the whites’,” is said to have admitted to writing a letter that was “found in the trunk of Peter Poyas.” The letter was reprinted as follows:

“Dear Sir–With pleasure I give you an answer. I will endeavor to do it. Hoping that God will be in the midst to help his own. Be particular and make a sure remark. Fear not, the Lord God that delivered Daniel is able to deliver us. All that I inform agreed. I am gone up to Beach Hill. (Signed)

Abraham Poyas.”¹⁴¹

The “Account” indicated that “this letter was extremely suspicious, yet there being no other testimony against Abraham,” he was declared innocent. In the trial of Denmark Vesey, whose alleged “criminal eminence of having been the individual, in whose bosom the nefarious scheme was first engendered,” he is noted as having “spoken of it [i.e., an armed revolt] for upwards to four years.” An asterisk indicating “a brief notice” regarding biographical details about Denmark Vesey was also included in the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*. Because he was an Atlantic figure, Vesey was said to have been close “to the chance of being distinguished in the bloody events in San Domingo.” After winning “1500 dollars in the East Bay Street Lottery,” Vesey “purchased his freedom from his master, at six hundred dollars, much less than his real value.” He is also noted as being an arrogant polygamist, for “to his numerous wives and children he displayed the haughty and capricious cruelty of an Eastern Bashaw,”¹⁴² an allegation that many of Vesey’s biographers have long characterized as White Atlantic attempts to demonize leaders of African Atlantic resistance to American slavery.

Jesse is said to have “had engaged with Vesey to go out of town on Sunday the 16th to bring down some negroes [sic] from the country, to aid in the rising on that night; and remarked to the witnesses, on his way to Hibbens’ ferry, ‘if my father does not assist I will cut off his head’.” He was also one of the two people among the first six – Rolla, Batteau, Peter, Ned, Denmark Vesey, and Jesse – who were executed on July 2, 1822 to make “disclosures,” for “[s]entence of death was passed on these six men, on the 28th of June, and they were executed on the 2d of July. With the exceptions of Jesse and Rolla, they made no disclosures; all of them, with those exceptions, either explicitly or implicitly affirming their innocence,” with Peter imploring his fellow convicted “comrade[s] ... ‘*Do not open your lips! Die silent, as you shall see me do!*’”¹⁴³ The published account is virtually convinced of evidence of African Atlantic resistance to American slavery:

It was, perhaps, *alone*, in Denmark Vesey’s power to have given us the true character, extent and importance of the correspondence, it was afterwards proved was carried on with certain persons in San Domingo[.]¹⁴⁴

The selection from the “Account” concluded with details about “Charles Drayton, overwhelmed with terror and guilt, [who] went to Monday and reproached him with having induced him to join in a scheme which had placed him in such a miserable and perilous situation. To this appeal Monday not only confessed his guilt, but ... there immediately ensued between them a conversation on the extent of the guilt of others, in which Monday gave Charles the names of many accomplices whom he had not previously known in the plot.”¹⁴⁵

A selection from James Hamilton’s *Negro Plot: An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina* was reprinted in the *Spectator* of New York, New York, on August 30, 1822.¹⁴⁶ Information about an enslaved man who revealed the plot is delineated, and this information implicated the influence of the Haitian Revolution on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy:

On Saturday afternoon last, (my master being out of town) I went to the market; after finishing my business, I strolled down the wharf below the fish market, from which I observed a small vessel in the stream, with a singular flag; while looking at this object, a black man, (Mr. Paul’s William,) came up to me, and remarking the subject which engaged my attention, said, I have often seen the flag with the number 76 on it, but never with the 96, before.¹⁴⁷

The unnamed enslaved man also indicated that he was uncomfortable “under the burden of such a secret” to revolt and was moved “to consult a free man of color named -----” who encouraged the nameless enslaved man to inform his enslavers. An asterisk indicated a note that suggests that “this [free] man” should be “among those who are rewarded for their fidelity and principle.” Charleston officials used African Atlantic figures as “spies” in order to watch Peter and Mingo after their discharges “in such a manner as to give advice of all their movements.” White Atlantic fear and the mobilization of White armed forces in Charleston such as “Capt. Cartel’s corps of Hussars, Capt. Miller’s Light Infantry, Capt. Martindael’s Neck Rangers, Charleston Riflemen, and [the] City Guard” resulted in heightened anxieties among the “female part” of the community as well as crowds of people on the streets due to a pervasive fear “to go to rest or not” during the night of Saturday, June 15th, and Sunday, June 16th. Indeed, rumors that “Rolla, belonging to Governor Bennett, had communicated intelligence of the intended insurrection” during his recruitment efforts reveal the specter of the Haitian Revolution. An unnamed “gentleman” relayed the following information that he gathered from his unnamed “servant,” “A-----,” to Intendant (mayor) James Hamilton:

A----- had stated, that about three months ago, Rolla ... had asked him to join—‘That he remarked in the event of their rising, they would not be without help, as the people from San Domingo and Africa would assist them in obtaining their liberty, if they only made the motion first themselves.’

This information was according to “a gentleman, who is advantageously known in this community for his worth and respectability.”¹⁴⁸

Coverage of the “Account” continued across the United States, for example, in the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* of August 30, 1822, with information about Charles, who was reported to have become repentant about his former support of armed resistance to slavery in the face of the possibilities of conviction and death. Conversations between himself and Monday Gell in the Work House (jail) initially were said to reveal that Gell was reluctant to converse about incriminating information at the time. Yet Gell is said to have confessed as well. Charles and Monday were placed in a cell together, and when separated, Charles testified against Monday, who “confessed his own guilt as well as the truth of the statements which he made to Charles.”¹⁴⁹

Newspaper coverage of the trials and executions that resulted from the Denmark Vesey conspiracy reveal a great deal about the impact of the conspiracy in the Atlantic world. The African Atlantic dimensions of the plot are clearly revealed in the consistent references to speculations about the conspirators’ alliances with forces in “San Domingo” and the ethnic backgrounds of those involved in the movement that was organized by Vesey. The magistrates in Charleston created a system of dealing with those accused of being involved in the revolt. They considered “two classes of offence [sic],” one punishable by death and the other resulting in banishment. “Ringleaders” were considered to be those who confessed to “belonging to the association” or aiding Denmark Vesey with “money, armies or ammunition” and those guilty of “the constant habit of visiting Monday Gell’s shop or Bulkley farm”¹⁵⁰—they were subject to capital punishment. Others were forced to leave South Carolina or even the United States. “Under the second class were arranged those who had merely sent in their adhesion to the ringleaders without ever having attended a meeting at Vesey’s, or having been recognized by him as confidential men, or contributed to the purchase of arms or ammunition, or endeavored to enlist others.” Noteworthy in the “Account” that was published nationally is the following note about changes in the composition of the men who comprised the “Court” during the trials that are associated with the Denmark Vesey conspiracy:

At the meeting of the Court on the morning of the 13th, Mr. James Legare, from feeble health and great exhaustion during its previous sittings, asked and obtained leave, to withdraw whereupon Mr. Henry Deas, was summoned by the Magistrates, who took his seat and served until the adjournment of the Court.¹⁵¹

The Court envisioned itself as operating “in unison with justice and humanity.” The Court was especially pleased to have brought “Jack Pritchard, otherwise called GULLAH JACK,” to justice. Demonization of African Atlantic figures and cultures was revealed in the discursive representation of Gullah Jack, who was said to have been recruited by Vesey because of his Africanized cultural competency, but this was an Africanized cultural competency that the White Atlantic officials who conducted the trials and created public documentation of the conspiracy found to be both uncivilized and dangerous. Gullah Jack was noted as having been

[b]orn a conjurer and a physician, in his own country, (for in Angola they are matters of inheritance) [and] he practiced *these arts* in this country for fifteen years, without its being generally known among the whites. Vesey, who left no engines of power unessayed, seems, in an early stage of his design, to have turned his eye on this Necromancer, aware of his influence with his own countrymen, who are distinguished both for their credulous superstition and clannish sympathies ... Although he had been fifteen or twenty years in this country, yet he appeared to be untouched by the influences of civilized life.¹⁵²

Jack’s Africanisms, including his “rude dress,” made an impact on African-born and New World-born Atlantic figures in Charleston’s enslaved and free African-descended communities, but he was said to have weakened in his resolve about the efficacy of his mysticism.¹⁵³ According to the “Account,”

When Jack was dragged forth to the scaffold he seemed conscious that his arts would stand him in little stead, and gave up his spirit without firmness or composure.¹⁵⁴

Other members of the “Gullah Band” that was allegedly organized under the command of Gullah Jack included figures whose actions were clearly demonstrative of the gravity of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to readers in Baltimore, Maryland, and elsewhere. Tom Russell was listed as a blacksmith who forged weapons (“pikes and spears”), and Polydore Faber at “Mr. Bulkley’s farm” was listed as a Gullah from whom “handles were provided for” pikes and spears. Bulkley’s “farm was one of the principal rendezvous of the Gullah Band,” and the “farm was under the charge of a slave named *Billy*, who became a witness for the state, and gave some important details of the meetings of the *Gullahs*, several of whom were executed on the 26th.”¹⁵⁵

Lot Forrester was said to have been “the courier of the conspiracy,” and even “the conflagration of the city was confided, by Vesey, to him” allegedly due to his dedication to the planned revolt. “Match-rope was found in a situation where he had probably secreted it,” according to the “Account.” Bacchus Hammet was said to have brought “a keg of powder” to Vesey who passed the contraband on to Monday and then to Jack in order “to be prepared for cartridges,”¹⁵⁶ and he was also tasked with securing weapons from the Neck-Rangers, for “he was to have slept where the arms of the *Neck-Rangers* were deposited, and facilitated their seizure and distribution among Gullah Jack’s corps,” certainly a radical, clandestine form of activism that was allegedly a part of a planned sweep of sites in Charleston, such as “Mr. Duqueron’s store, in which there were 500 stands of arms, deposited for sale.” Other men who were charged and convicted with being a part of the Vesey plot were leaders and respected members of the African Atlantic Christian community in Charleston, such as Jack Glenn (“a Preacher”), Billy Palmer (“exceedingly pious, and a communicant at the church of his master”), and Jack Purcell (“no less devout”).¹⁵⁷ Their involvement was shocking to proslavery ideologues, such as the men who conducted the trials associated with the Vesey conspiracy, due to the fact that these rebels were Christians according to even the standards of enslavers.

The cases of JACK GLEN, BILLY PALMER, AND JACK PURCELL, are distinguished, not by any peculiar atrocity, but for the hypocrisy [sic] they blendid [sic] with their crime. Their assent to the plot was distinctly shown, and it was in proof, that Vesey had recognized them all as his men.¹⁵⁸

Jack Glen and Jack Purcell were executed, but Billy Palmer received a sentence of “banishment beyond the limits of the U[nited] States” after “the deep contrition he expressed before his execution” and “the distressing interest which his mistress is said to have taken in his fate and the lamentable delusion under which he labored, which is more particularly unfolded in his confession.” Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig received the same sentence as Billy Palmer due to the fact that “[t]he court having used the testimony of ... [each man] ... very effectively, to the ends of public justice, reconsidered the sentences, which had been passed upon them, and, instead of death, sentenced them to transportation beyond the limits of the United States.” Three others were also deported from the United States for their testimonies according to a section of the “Account” that was published in the same issue of the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* – Perauly, Johnson Enslow, and Billy Bulkley. Their testimonies were key to the conviction of others, or “all the apprehensions and trials subsequently to the 13th of July.”¹⁵⁹ National and Atlantic dissemination of the conspiracy was a reality. Republication of sections of the “Account” appeared in the *Alexandria Herald* in Virginia on August 30, 1822¹⁶⁰, and information regarding explicit reference to assistance “from San Domingo and Africa” as well as information about fear and mobilization of White armed forces was published in the August 30, 1822 edition of the New York, New York-based *Spectator*.¹⁶¹

The September 2, 1822 edition of the *Alexandria Herald* was interesting for its inclusion of information about William Garner, the last person executed as a part of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy. Garner was said to have fled Charleston “about the 1st of July” and was apprehended and returned to Charleston by “the 2d of August.” The Court clearly envisioned its handling of cases prior to Garner’s as being conducted “humanely and dispassionately,” and “as enough had been done for public example, they determined to visit capital punishment on none but ringleaders.” However, Garner was said to have had “actively engaged in recruiting others” and “to have led a troop or horses, at the rising, composed of all such of the conspirators as might have appeared in the streets on horseback.” This “first class of turpitude” led to his “execution on the 9th of August,” a day after the Court “adjourned finally on the 8th of August.”

The trials, together with some private arrangements, made with their owners, in reference to the banishment of several slaves, in cases where their guilt was clear, but not of the first degree, have at length closed the anxious and irksome labors of the corporation, after examination of little less than two months.¹⁶²

Monday Gell is recorded as having “emphatically stated, that the ringleaders were the first six who were executed on the 2d of July” and “from memory made out a list of forty-two names, of those who were in the habit of visiting his shop, for the purpose of combining & confederating in the intended insurrection, whom he called his company; everyone of whom have been apprehended, and disposed of.” Monday Gell sold out others to save his own life, for “one hundred and thirty-one were committed; thirty-five have suffered death; thirty-seven have been sentenced to banishment.” Gell’s “knowledge of the plot was, probably, exceeded only by Vesey’s.” The Court saw itself as performing God-given duties (e.g., they made appeals to “the Supreme Ruler of Events”):

We cannot venture to say, to how many the knowledge of the intended effort, was communicated who, without signifying their assent, or attending any of the meetings, were yet prepared to profit by events. That there are many who would not have permitted the enterprize [sic] to have failed at the *critical moment*, for the want of their co-operation, we have the best reasons for believing.¹⁶³

Regarding “the probable causes of this conspiracy this is a matter of speculation.”

Of the motives of Vesey we cannot set in judgment; they have been scanned by a power who can do higher justice than ourselves. But as they are explained by his character and conduct, during the combinations of the plot, they are only to be referred to a malignant hatred of whites, and inordinate lust of power and booty.

Indeed the belief is altogether justifiable, that his end would have been answered, if after laying our city in ashes, and moistening its cinders with blood, he could have embarked with a part of the pillage of our banks for San Domingo; leaving a large proportion of his deluded followers to the exterminating desolation of that justice, which would have awaited, in the end, a transient [sic] success. His followers were slaves, and for them it would not be so difficult to assign a motive; if it has not been distinctly proved, that without, scarcely an exception, they had no individual hardships to complain of, and were among the most humanely treated negroes [sic] in our city.¹⁶⁴

In other words, cases were different for enslaved and free people. According to proslavery ideology, which saturates White Atlantic representations of the Vesey conspiracy, enslaved people were infected by the circum-Atlantic dreams of Vesey, pan-African visions that were imagined by enslavers to be foreign to enslaved people who naturally embodied racial slavery as enslaved Black property of White enslavers. African Atlantic figures who resisted slavery were acting against mainstream logic during the early nineteenth century.

In “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey: The Complications of History” Jamie Lynn Johnson argues that the Denmark Vesey conspiracy “challenges the ethics of how we use the historical record and concludes [that] we will probably never know exactly what happened because any event involving slavery comes to us through filtered documents: documents that record the African American experience only through the actions of whites. History is thus a tentative craft.”¹⁶⁵ The authors notes that “Ashley Cooper wrote in a *New[s] and Courier* column[,] ‘If black leaders in Charleston had searched for a thousand years, they could not have found a local black whose portrait would have been more offensive to many white people’ ... For whites, Vesey is an image of menace and terror.”¹⁶⁶ The following critical observation is also interesting in the sense of Vesey’s awareness of the chances of success, particularly as it relates to the significance of political leader and theorist Huey P. Newton’s idea of “revolutionary suicide” as distinct from “reactionary suicide.”¹⁶⁷ Johnson writes,

Any slave revolt in the United States would have been a suicide mission; this goes for Vesey and his army because unlike the successful slave revolt in the Caribbean, slaves in South Carolina did not have the absolute numerical superiority. Eventually, even if the rebellion met initial success, whites from surrounding areas would arm and regain dominance and physical control. But resistance to slavery was a just cause, worthy of self-sacrifice. Denmark Vesey was not enslaved, but was willing to sacrifice his “privileged” position as a free black in society to benefit current and future generations of black brethren.¹⁶⁸

In her analysis of the more recent historiography of the Vesey conspiracy, Johnson further contends,

The defenders of the traditional interpretation include historians [Edward A.] Pearson, [David] Robertson, and [Douglas R.] Egerton. Pearson's reputation was nearly destroyed based on Johnson's critique of his work, to the point that his publishers withdrew support for his *Designs against Charleston*. Robertson and Egerton simply won't hear of Johnson and Wade's interpretation. They are too married to the battle between the first and second perspective on Vesey. He was either a hero or a threat; there was no room for subtle resistance to slavery.¹⁶⁹

She essentially seeks to "examine the three known perspectives on Denmark Vesey, a man to fear, a man to consider a martyr, and finally a strong black leader victimized by white fear, in hopes of revealing a fourth perspective - truth."¹⁷⁰ According to the historian William W. Freehling,

The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy superbly illustrates domestic slavery's dual tendency. The Vesey Conspiracy, the most widespread and cogent insurrection plot uncovered in the nineteenth-century South, occurred in the right place to compel attention: Charleston, South Carolina, the southern city in the blackest black belt. It transpired at the right moment: 1822, a period when Charlestonians experimented with the loosest paternalistic control they would ever deploy.¹⁷¹

Indeed, from an Atlantic perspective, the following point that Jamie Lynn Johnson makes is critically important to understanding the wider implications of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy:

Northern emancipation sent increasing numbers of slaves in the South. Northern slave owners, wishing to protect their financial assets as their states eliminated their human property rights, sold their property south at auction. Northern states avoided the social complications of emancipation through auction, which caused a "blackening" of the South with the relative "whitening" of the North Sales of slaves into the South increased the occurrence of "black belt" communities. Some local populations achieved hugely skewed concentrations of blacks, with blacks making up majorities nearly ninety percent of the populace. Freehling notes that these conditions were ripe for revolution. South American rebellions occurred in areas with similar concentrated ratios of blacks to whites.¹⁷²

White Atlantic “[f]ear of [v]iolence” was a common thread in the tapestry of the Southern landscape, where a combination of the “Southern climate and terrain, slave belts and jungle conditions all encouraged insurrection” as it did in other Atlantic locations.¹⁷³ As Jamie Lynn Johnson reminds us, “[John] Lofton notes that in Gabriel’s plot, the insurrectionist ‘were well aware of the difficulties between France and the United States at the time and hoped for French assistance.’ Charleston papers published ‘a vague report which mentioned the execution of several of the rebels’ ... With literate slaves and free blacks living in Charleston, the knowledge of other insurrections in the black community was a real threat to the social order and security.”¹⁷⁴ She also indicates that, citing Lofton’s reference, “one authority has estimated that between 1800, the year of Denmark Vesey’s liberation, and 1821, there were at least fifty-three uprisings plotted in the United States, six of them in South Carolina.”¹⁷⁵ This was a context in which the impact of the Haitian Revolution was evident:

Despite the French outlaw of slavery in 1793, this violent revolt lasted a bloody ten years. During the 10- year rebellion, many white slave owners fled north into the United States bringing with them their “infected” chattel property. Southern whites were rightly concerned that these slaves would bring with them knowledge of the newly formed black nation- state ... Importantly, Captain Joseph Vesey was in Charleston acting as the treasurer in a mutual aid society assisting French refugees from St. Dominque.¹⁷⁶

Fear of African Atlantic figures who were not enslaved subjects was especially pronounced in Charleston, South Carolina.

White Charleston became increasingly fearful of their slaves; but they were even more scared of free blacks like Denmark Vesey. Free blacks could legally be literate, gaining them access to information through newspaper and propaganda publications. Unlike slaves, they had the freedom to move with relative ease. The concern was that free blacks could become knowledgeable of these insurrections and spread information and inspiration among the larger black community. Free blacks had casual access to slaves through marketplaces but whites could supervise these interactions. Separate institutions such as the African Methodist Church and home meetings limited white supervision There was good reason for whites to fear a free black/slave alliance. Free blacks had more in common with slaves [than with] whites.¹⁷⁷

African Atlantic figures like Denmark Vesey clearly envisioned Black churches – in this case a branch of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church – as sites that “could be used to plot not only the path to heaven, but also a path to insurrection.”¹⁷⁸

In “Designs against Historians” Rob Gregg argues that Marina Wikramanayake’s *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* was an important contribution to understanding the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, and he argues that her controversial book, in fact, is one that anticipates the recent, raging debates about the veracity of the Vesey plot and Vesey’s ability to organize an armed revolt against American slavery in light of Michael P. Johnson’s recent article and review of recent books on the Vesey conspiracy that appeared in *The William and Mary Quarterly* in October 2001. Gregg notes,

While they may have the same point of origin, one whereby, according to Wikramanayake, the irony was “that plotter and victim should reverse their roles,” their explanations of this role reversal are of a different order. Johnson makes the claim that there are political reasons explaining the actions of leading whites who went after the black “conspirators” ... *By contrast, Wikramanyake’s work seems to bear the marks of an understanding of colonialism and its forms of governmentality ... While she preceded Ranajit Guha by many years, she seems to have suggested the same things about colonialism and similarly oppressive systems of government that he did when he talked about the need to understand the role of anxiety in colonial rule.* Clearly, for Wikramanayake, anxiety was at the heart of the story. While Johnson seems to want to discount the importance of black resistance in his account, suggesting that it was largely white fabrication, she ties the events to the growing visibility and strength of the African Methodists in the city and the anxieties this provoked – with good reason. If there was a [White] conspiracy, she would argue, it was one that was intended to go after the likes of Morris Brown who would find it necessary to flee north to Philadelphia.¹⁷⁹

Similar to “Richard C. Wade, who had been a mentor of [Marina Wikramanayake] Fernando and who had been discredited earlier,” the work of Wikramanayake is described by Rob Gregg as being subject to marginalization because of the volatile political climate in which she asserted her controversial thesis as well as because her argument “had been heresy for a Sri Lankan woman to say almost thirty years ago,” whereas the argument of Michael P. Johnson “was now being accepted as cutting edge scholarship in 2002 coming from a white male.”¹⁸⁰ Jamie Lynn Johnson also perceptively remarks,

Denmark Vesey took the stage as the embodiment of everything the south had to fear. He was an educated free black man; he became a threat that couldn’t be tolerated. He was literate, informed of the Haitian revolt, the Missouri Crisis, and had access to the unsettled slave community ... It was in this context of heightened tensions [that] Denmark Vesey took the stage.¹⁸¹

According to Charles Johnson, “Denmark Vesey is a symbol of a spirit too violent to be acceptable to the White community.”¹⁸² Jamie Lynn Johnson argues that the “*Official Record*” functioned as an originating ideological and discursive source in the public sphere for both White Atlantic fears of a man like Vesey and African Atlantic pride in the same man. She claims, “We see evidence of their fears in the questions they posed to witnesses.”¹⁸³ She insists, along with historians such as Peter Kolchin, that in the United States “[a] slave revolt was a suicide mission.”¹⁸⁴ However, she argues, “Despite the odds against success, Charleston’s accused stood together. Like other revolutionaries, they would hang together or they would surely hang separately,”¹⁸⁵ as previous American revolutionaries like Benjamin Franklin were said to articulate in the context of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁸⁶

Content from Marina Wikramanayake’s *A World in Shadow* is revealing about the specific site in the revolutionary Atlantic context that we principally associate with the life and times of Denmark Vesey. Her analysis of the constrictive nature of the lives of free and enslaved African Atlantic figures is important in the sense that the two statuses were inextricably bound. Most free Blacks were manumitted or the descendants of emancipated, formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans whose freedom was linked to the benevolence of enslavers, and a significant portion of “quasi free” Blacks were forced to operate within the strictures of trusteeships under the dominion and administration of property owning White Charlestonians – indeed, many free Blacks did not experience nominal freedom until the deaths of their enslavers, and even upon attaining freedom, due to the “politics of manumission” within a society that the historian Nathan Huggins referred to as “an essentially closed society,” it is important to remember that “[t]he very existence of a free black population was ultimately challenged by legal restrictions on manumissions and by promotions of colonization schemes.” In fact, according to Huggins, “[c]onsidering the details of life for free blacks in the antebellum South, America was a totalitarian society from every point of view.”¹⁸⁷

Emblematic of the totalitarian character of antebellum South Carolina is the inquisition that followed the disclosure of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy ... [T]he trials testified to the willingness of white men to use any means necessary to preserve the whiteness of society and slavery within it ... Like the free blacks of the antebellum period, present-day Afro-Americans remain the source of the country’s deepest problems and anxieties[.]¹⁸⁸

The “anomalous position” of free Blacks in South Carolina, according to Wikramanayake, was one in which they negotiated the constraints of a racist society in which they were, in the words of Wikramanayake, “denizens of the state,” far from being citizens, as “[t]he term ‘Negro Citizen’ was a misnomer in antebellum America, for in no part of the United States did the black enjoy a status of equality with the white.”¹⁸⁹ Three factors were essential to survival in Charleston for Vesey, particularly during his years of freedom between 1800 and 1822: “Liberty for the black was therefore hedged about by a multiplicity of qualifications.

It was a right enjoyed only on sufferance and, as such, maintained only by a combination of *vigilance*, *subordination* and *sheer good luck*.”¹⁹⁰ These elements constitute central components of the subaltern survival tactics that defined acculturation and resistance among African diasporic figures in the Atlantic world.¹⁹¹

Noteworthy is the argument of Wikramanayake regarding the context that free Blacks in South Carolina had to negotiate. Communication between African Atlantic figures in South Carolina and beyond is captured in an example that indicates that “[o]ne of the suspects in the Vesey trials first heard of the attempted insurrection while in New York; he returned shortly after, only to be incriminated in the plot himself.”¹⁹² This was because “[u]ntil 1822 ... free blacks were allowed to leave the state and reenter it freely.”¹⁹³ African Atlantic figures in Charleston had to survive within difficult, exploitative circumstances to be certain:

The city of Charleston, in particular, seems to have conceived of its denizens as a bottomless fund. When the city council set up a municipal guard in 1822 in the wake of the Vesey trials, the expenses involved were defrayed by taxes imposed on free black tenants and landlords, with a further tax of ten dollars on all free blacks who participated in any “Mechanik [sic] trade within the limits.” The prevailing attitude appears to have been informed by the rationalization that, if the state had to suffer its denizens, it may as well exact the maximum from them.¹⁹⁴

A rigid “distinction between denizen and citizen” was a reality that Vesey negotiated in his immediate surroundings, and “[t]he free black did not perhaps conform to the Sambo image, but he was expected at all times to follow rather closely in Sambo’s shadow.”¹⁹⁵ Vesey lived in a world that “[u]ntil 1821, the death penalty did not apply to a white man who murdered a black” person.¹⁹⁶

Wikramanayake argued that free Blacks existed in a nominal, marginalized position in South Carolina in general, as they “lived on the margin between two societies, the slave and the white”: this was an “anomalous position,” according to Wikramanayake, in which free African Atlantic figures “experienced what W.E.B. Du Bois called a ‘double-consciousness’.”¹⁹⁷ Even after he bought his freedom, Vesey and other free Blacks felt the sting of White supremacy on a daily basis: “[s]ignificant numbers among the freed colored population had once been slaves; even among the freeborn the daily contact with slaves, regular public auctions and whippings, and the frequent irritations of the patrol system all served as a constant reminder of the peculiar circumstances in which they operated as ‘free persons of color’ rather than as ‘free citizens’.”¹⁹⁸ Underground antislavery activity was also a part of free Black life in Charleston, as “[f]ree black homes were often the refuge of fugitive slaves, particularly in the city of Charleston, where the presence of a vast throng of blacks, slave and free, hampered the detection of runaways.”¹⁹⁹

There were limits to antislavery activism among leaders in Black Charleston. AME leader Morris Brown “frequently bought and manumitted slaves,” and an example can be cited in a “Bill of Sale of a Negro Man Slave Named London, Nov. 18, 1813” and in a “Certificate of Manumission of Slave London, Nov. 19, 1813.”²⁰⁰ The non-elite Black community of Charleston lived in close proximity to one another, as “Charleston Neck, in the northern part of the city, was such a ghetto, where free blacks and slaves mixed freely and enjoyed the benefits of close communal living.”²⁰¹ Vesey was positioned between “the bottom of the social ladder” – which included “free black artisans, yeoman farmers and the large mass of unskilled laborers in the city” – and “[t]he upper class among South Carolina’s free blacks” that included “landowners, wealthy merchants and real estate speculators.”²⁰² As a free man, Vesey belonged to the “artisan group [that] was perhaps the most varied, ranging from the independent craftsman who maintained his own modest establishment to the skilled worker who was employed by a white or free black craftsman.”²⁰³

Note the nomenclatural significance of a man by the name of April Ellison: “Freed when he was twenty-nine, ex-slave April Ellison took his master’s name, realizing ‘that such a change although apparently unimportant would yet greatly advance his interest as a tradesman’.”²⁰⁴ This is a name-change pattern that Vesey also capitalized on upon purchasing his freedom in 1800. Free Blacks did not enjoy the same economic privileges as Whites, but they were able to negotiate their socioeconomic climate to their own advantages, as “the free black was always paid less than the competing white mechanic and his labor was therefore in greater demand. This situation gave rise to numerous protests from white artisans, who petitioned as early as 1793 against ‘Jobbing Negroe [sic] Tradesman [sic], who undervalue Work by undertaking it for very little more than the Materials would cost’.”²⁰⁵ There is also mention of *Reflections Occasioned by the Late Insurrection in Charleston, by Achatas* (1822) in which complainants against the economic efforts of Black workers lamented “that cheap negro [sic] labor was steadily undermining that class of population which had ever been stridently Republican.”²⁰⁶ It is important to note that “[m]ost of Charleston’s free blacks were cooks, seamstresses, mantuamakers, *carpenters* and barbers, all of them skilled artisans.”²⁰⁷ Mention is also made of a “Free Black Book” that was compiled by the Charleston city council, and the 1823 version indicates the number of “Carpenters [at] 43” about a year after the execution of Vesey, who was then a carpenter as well as a free man.²⁰⁸ “The village of Hampstead, which had been chartered in 1816 in the northernmost part of the city, offered a rich source of investment for those who had the means,” and this habitation was the site of the African Church.²⁰⁹ “The great majority of free blacks, of course, owned no land at all.”²¹⁰ And it is just as important to recall that “[t]he free black population in South Carolina was not a sizable one. Even when its numbers were largest, it never exceeded 2 percent of the total population.”²¹¹ It is clear that even as Vesey negotiated his social environment with caution, as all non-enslaved African Atlantic figures were compelled to do so in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, his ideological position and political decisions within Black Charleston were contrary to the norms of almost all other free Blacks, for he did not lose his cultural association with enslaved African Atlantic figures once he became free, including those in his family who remained enslaved after 1800.

An overlap existed in the life experiences of free and enslaved African Atlantic figures in Vesey's Charleston. According to Wikramanayake's analysis of "Black Religion,"

The free black was closely associated with the slave in his religious activity ... The same inadequacy in his social life as in the slave's led him to rely on the church for the fulfillment of his social needs ... The city provided more opportunity, but even here all gatherings, whether in the market place, the tavern or the home, were strictly under the surveillance of the city patrol ... [Black church meetings were] subject to the legal requirement that at least one white person should be present at the gathering[s].²¹²

Within these social constrictions, religious gatherings of Black Christians afforded "an avenue for self-expression and the growth of a sense of community within the free black group," such as opportunities for leadership within African American congregations.²¹³ The author also identifies what she contends was the "Methodist appeal," an antislavery "reputation in regard to slavery," that resulted in a steady increase in numbers of Black people who became Methodists between 1787 and 1815: "[i]n 1787 an increase of 53 was reported in the colored congregation, while the whites registered no increase. In 1791, there were 119 blacks and 66 whites; in 1793, 280 blacks and 65 whites; and by 1815, 3,793 blacks and 282 whites."²¹⁴ She also suggestively argues that "of perhaps more fundamental appeal to the black was the inherently chiliastic outlook of Methodist teaching, concerned as it was with preparing the souls of men for the life hereafter ... It was as Karl Mannheim has so aptly expressed it, 'the hope of the dispirited and the defeated'," an idea that the author complicates by noting that "Mannheim observes that these promises of a better land, removed in time and place, are like checks that cannot be cashed: their only function is to provide escape from the situation of struggle to which the individual actually belongs."²¹⁵ Additionally, "strong currents of emotionalism," the demonstrative character of African Atlantic religious patterns in South Carolina, especially appealed to the enslaved:

The slave found the outlet welcome. The Methodist church redirected his emotions from his repressive daily life and social situation into the limitless avenue of religious experience. Worship thus became an event where preacher, steward, class leader and class member alike gave themselves up to the workings of the Spirit.²¹⁶

Indeed, Wikramanayake notes that "the free black found in the church his first opportunity to fulfill his capacity for leadership. *Methodism revolutionized his status* ... Among the cast numbers arrested for complicity in the Vesey 'uprising' were many who were acknowledged by witnesses as leaders in the black community. With few exceptions, they were all class leaders."²¹⁷

The stigmatization of Methodism in South Carolina was certainly pronounced, as “Methodists were watched, ridiculed and openly assailed ... Their churches were styled ‘negro [sic] churches’ and their preachers ‘the negro [sic] preachers’.”²¹⁸ Violence against Methodists, who were “the target of an anti-abolitionist campaign,” was manifest in “Acts passed in 1800 and 1803” that further constrained Black religious practices within parameters designed to marginalize the efficacy of Black congregations. For example, these Acts “declared their religious meetings held between sunset and sunrise to be illegal, while any meeting in the daytime was to consist of a majority of white people.”²¹⁹ It can be said without exaggeration that “it was believed by judge and jury alike that ‘the Patrol Law ... ought to be considered as one of the safeguards of the people of South Carolina, for the protection of their dwellings ... and as a security against insurrection; a danger of such a nature, that it never can or ought to be lost sight of in the southern states’.”²²⁰ Wikramanayake also observes, “According to the testimony in the Vesey trials, these meetings were more social than religious.”²²¹ There was opportunity for leadership among Blacks in the “segregated” Methodist church, and these chances to serve as leaders in their own communities trumped emotionalism, opening windows to “the prospect of power and responsibility” in segregated spaces.²²² The 1817 establishment of an AME church in Charleston stemmed from discriminatory “Methodist regulations [that] impinged upon the independence enjoyed so far by the colored congregations”; this led to “the withdrawal of 4,367” Black members from the White-controlled denomination. It is critically important to note that the establishment of a Black church was done in a manner that was accommodating to the mandates of White supremacy. According to a “Petition of certain free persons of color attached to the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, called Zion, in 1817” and a “Petition of free people of color for authority to purchase two lots of land in Wraggsborough for a burial ground, 1817,” these African Atlantic figures were determined to appear as operating within the boundaries of their social environment, insisting that the doors of the church remain open always, and that all white ministers of the Gospel of every denomination shall be respectfully invited to officiate in the said Church, whenever disposed so to do, and that separate seats shall be provided for such citizens as may honor the congregation with their presence, either for religious instruction or to inspect their morals and deportment. That no minister of color who does not reside in this State shall officiate for the said congregation, nor shall any slave be admitted a member thereof without the approbation of his or her owner ... That every exertion will be used ... to preserve the utmost order and decorum.”²²³

White officials’ responses were not concessionary, as a “Report of the Charleston delegation to whom was referred the Petition of free persons of color of Mt. Zion Church, Dec. 2, 1817” noted that “the petitioners would be better instructed by well educated and pious Divines in the Churches in that city than by ignorant and fanatical preachers of their own color,” and there were the vitriolic responses of White Charlestonians who were anxious about Black Charleston due to the fact that “[f]or a time the Charleston A.M.E. congregation ... [was] second only to that of Philadelphia in numbers ... as slave and free black, rich and poor, flocked to the first all-black association in the state.”²²⁴

Multiple arrests and imprisonments of members and leaders in Methodist congregations, including Morris Brown, in December 1817 and June 1818, for example, were indicative of the harsh social climate of early nineteenth-century Charleston. And in 1820, White Charlestonians, in a “Petition of sundry citizens of Charleston to the House of Representatives, 1820,” lamented “existing evils among free negroes [sic] [whom allegedly were] amply furnished with pecuniary means by abolition societies of that State [Pennsylvania], for the avowed purposes of educating our Negroes.”²²⁵ Wikramanayake contends that the Denmark Vesey conspiracy gave an opportunity to White Charleston to further demonize the AME church as a bastion of abolitionism; following the end of the executions of Vesey and thirty-three others, Black leaders such as Morris Brown “were found guilty of leaving the state and reentering it illegally and were ordered to leave South Carolina within fifteen days. Soon after, the church was dismantled on the orders of the city council.”²²⁶ In fact, “[t]he court concluded that the plot originated in the church.”²²⁷ Religious expression in Charleston was subject to even more pronounced surveillance following the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, as “[e]vangelical zeal was tempered now with caution. The churches relied on verbal instruction through sermons, hymns and catechisms.”²²⁸

Rob Gregg notes that one of Wikramanayake’s chapters, “The Denmark Vesey Affair,” anticipates the arguments that were presented by Michael P. Johnson in his *William and Mary Quarterly* review of the work of Douglas R. Egerton, David Robertson, and Edward A. Pearson in October 2001. In that chapter she argues that Vesey and the other men who were either executed or sentenced to banishment from South Carolina to locations in the U.S. or abroad were “victim[s]”: indeed, she concludes her argument by suggesting that “[i]t was ironic ... that plotter and victim should reverse their roles.”²²⁹ In coming to this conclusion, she begins her analysis with a reference to “Santo Domingo” in the recollections of William Hasell Wilson that were cited in *Reminiscences of William Hasell Wilson*, an edited volume that contains the memories of Hasell when he was an eleven-year-old boy who allegedly saw Vesey and five other men executed on the Lines at the edges of Charleston’s boundaries. The “Denmark Vesey uprising” entailed the trials of “[o]ne hundred and twenty-six terrified witnesses,” and “[w]hen the court adjourned, 35 of the 131 accused had been sentenced to death and 37 more to transportation outside of the limits of the state.”²³⁰ It is important to note that those who were sentenced to banishment faced a different fate than their sentences indicate, as

[t]ransportation presented something of a problem since South Carolina was not recognized as a sovereign state. The United States ambassador in Altamina, Joel R. Poinsett, on behalf of his native state, investigated the possibilities of selling the convicted slaves in South America, but to no avail. Eventually, the slaves were transported to the rice fields of lower Georgia and Alabama.²³¹

One of the enslaved witnesses who was rewarded for his testimony against others who were convicted, Peter Desverney, sought an increase to his annually allocated reward a few years following the July, 2, 1822 execution of Denmark Vesey according to a “Petition of Peter Desverney, a free person of color, for an increase of the annual bounty conferred upon him, 1837.”²³²

Contemporaries and historians cast Denmark Vesey as both “the semblance of a martyr” and “the symbol of the sable terror.”²³³ Wikramanayake also makes a key observation that drives home the point that was articulated by Rob Gregg regarding precursors to the findings of Michael P. Johnson besides those that were articulated in the work of Richard Wade. It is agreed by most scholars of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy that “three major printed sources available” constitute the main evidentiary basis of any analysis of the Vesey saga: James Hamilton, Jr.’s *Negro Plot: An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among A Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*; Thomas Bennett Jr.’s “message to the legislature in 1822”; and Lionel H. Kennedy’s and Thomas Parker’s *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes Charged With An Attempt to Raise An Insurrection in the State of South Carolina: Preceded By An Introduction and Narrative: And, In An Appendix, A Report of the Trials of Four White Persons on Indictments for Attempting to Excite the Slaves to Insurrection*. According to Wikramanayake:

The Kennedy-Parker report is perhaps the fullest of the three accounts [of the Vesey conspiracy]. Kennedy and Parker recorded the evidence, sifted the facts and drew their conclusions, but the Report does not quite tally with the manuscript records of the trials. It omits a good deal of evidence and makes significant alterations in the statements of witnesses; and more curiously, it includes confessions not recorded in the trials. The conclusion which the report makes inevitable becomes *dubious*, and a reexamination of the evidence opens it to challenge.²³⁴

Mention is also made of reportage by an enslaved man on May 13, 1822 of information about an insurrectionary conversation that he allegedly “overheard on one of the wharves,” and this enslaved man implicated William Paul, who subsequently confessed after being incarcerated in “solitary confinement in ‘the black hole of the Workshop’,” the latter being a site of correction for recalcitrant enslaved and free African Atlantic figures in Charleston. White officials determined that his confession “was clearly the fanciful story of a desperate man. The matter was dismissed.”²³⁵ On June 14, 1822 an enslaver reported an impending revolt on June 16, 1822 that was purportedly to be led by members of the African Church; this resulted in the militia being summoned, but “no insurrection took place.”²³⁶ However, by June 18, 1822, ten Blacks were arrested, including Denmark Vesey, “a free black class leader in the African church.”²³⁷ Vesey, in the threatening light of testimonies of others against him, was “convicted on the confession of one of the suspects arrested with him,” yet “actual evidence against him unfolded after his execution.”²³⁸ Wikramanayake contends that “[t]he plan was evidently immature, however, for none of the leaders of the plot could outline a coherent plan of action.”²³⁹ Indeed, few weapons were found, which she describes as a telling sign of the extremely limited chances of success for an armed resistance movement whose members possessed what appeared to be a very limited amount of “material for an army nine thousand strong.”²⁴⁰

The testimonies of “three witnesses for the state” were central to the alleged evidence that virtually damned anyone involved in the Vesey conspiracy: “Monday Gell, Harry Haig and Charles Drayton” were incarcerated “in a common ward until separate cells could be provided them,” where they apparently concocted to save their own lives at any expense—even if it meant providing evidence against others. Monday Gell was said to have identified Vesey as the mastermind of African Atlantic armed resistance against American slavery in Charleston.²⁴¹ An important note about the character and nature of “[t]he procedure of the trial is not completely recorded in either the report or the manuscript record; the manuscript, however, contains fragments of the examination and cross-examinations of witnesses.”²⁴² The “Trial of Caesar” – an African-born member of the African Church – signaled an African Atlantic presence in Charleston. Monday Gell was one of the witnesses who provided testimony against Caesar, “who was convicted on the evidence recorded.”²⁴³ Juridical transparency was another issue that was subject to debate among those who saw a conspiracy in the making and those who doubted one. According to Wikramanayake, “[t]estimony was frequently received in secret and the witnesses’ identity never disclosed.”²⁴⁴ The basis of what we know about the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery is intricately tied to this issue, as even “Denmark Vesey’s role in the affair has remained something of a mystery. What we do know about him is drawn chiefly from the court’s report, and from the indications of individual witnesses.”²⁴⁵

Wikramanayake argues, “From conjecturing his character the court went on to conjecture his role in the plot.”²⁴⁶ She also argues that it was not until the AME church was implicated in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy that White officials took the plot as a serious possibility; this was due to the AME church’s ties to “its parent church in Philadelphia, the high seat of abolitionism.”²⁴⁷ Indeed, “South Carolinians lived under the constant shadow of the successful rebellion in Santo Domingo,” an example being found in a case of 1794 “letters of ‘Rusticus’” expressing what Wikramanayake described as “fears of the majority in the state.” According to Rusticus,

[A]n excess of humanity has led us to be totally blind to our interests and that mindful alone of their situation, we have forgot the dangers of our own From the moment we admitted the St. Domingo Negroes into our own Country, security from that source became daily more precarious.²⁴⁸

Forgetting their own dangers in 1794, the letters of Rusticus spoke of the problems that some South Carolinians saw in the fact that “[i]n 1794 the state had actively assisted the marooned white government ... and ... displaced French refugees,” with many accompanied by “blacks [whom] the French had brought with them.”²⁴⁹

Two figures, William Paul and Bacchus Hammett, are noted as providing critical insight about the implication of the AME church in the plot, each testifying that the 1818 origins of the planned revolt occurred in the church “when the African church had begun to worship in the building at Hampstead.”²⁵⁰ With this combination of evidence that ranged “[f]rom hearsay evidence to direct participation, the court was able to build up a case.”²⁵¹ The African Church was critical to the development of the plot, and it was even said that Denmark Vesey changed his “conduct and language” since the establishment of the church in Charleston.²⁵² There was a “wide acceptance” of the verdicts in the Vesey trials, even as some influential officials were skeptics about the veracity of the revolt, including Governor Bennett and U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Johnson.²⁵³ In addition to Johnson’s 1822 “Communication” that was published in the *Charleston Courier*, other enslavers’ petitioned the state legislature before the end of 1822 and expressed doubts about the viability of a revolt in light of economic motives of securing their profitable human property. Death sentences for enslaved men who were found guilty legally warranted state compensation, but banishment did not result in state compensation for enslavers, who also “had to pay for the maintenance of the slave in the city’s workhouse.”²⁵⁴

White Charlestonians also sought “external causes” for the foiled revolt.²⁵⁵ For example, James Negrin’s *Life of Toussaint* (1804) was deemed by Charleston authorities as “intended to excite domestic insurrection”: according to Wikramanayake, “Negrin, a Swish immigrant of ten years’ residence, ... had been imprisoned on the charge, his property and printing press had been sold by his landlord to cover his rent, and he had come out of prison eight months later not only persona non grata but also a pauper.”²⁵⁶ In South Carolina, of course, “[a]bolitionism had never been tolerated whether its roots were internal or external,” and the author contends that “[t]he Denmark Vesey affair coincided with a renewed campaign against abolitionists.”²⁵⁷ Antislavery activism was certainly difficult within a committed “slave society” (and even within a “society with slaves”) in the antebellum South, and, unsurprisingly, “[t]he number of free blacks in the Denmark Vesey trials was remarkably small, but the leadership ascribed to Vesey inescapably linked the free black with the uprising.”²⁵⁸ Of the “eleven free blacks [who] were indicted ... eight of them were acquitted, two were sentenced to transportation, and one was hanged.”²⁵⁹ The Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery highlighted “the state’s problem regarding the free black” – free African Atlantic figures were either cast as rebels against, or “buffer[s] between[,] the master class and the slaves.”²⁶⁰ Anti-free Black sentiment constructed free Blacks as a menace, and “hostility was strongest among rural whites, who were outnumbered by the blacks.”²⁶¹ A specific example of White Atlantic popular sentiment about free African Atlantic figures can be mapped in the popular “[a]ntipathy to the [f]ree Negro” expressed in the words of a Kentuckian interviewed around March 3, 1857: “I like a nigger ..., but I hate a damned free nigger.”²⁶² Another example can be found in “the petition of Charles M. Perlott and sundry citizens of Abbeville” regarding free Blacks: “[T]hey [free Blacks] have decidedly a demoralizing effect upon our slave-population We would therefore humbly prey [sic] that you would ... plac[e] them in a happy state of bondage, the place where God designated the African race to be ... [, or] have them removed to Liberia and thus relieve the State of their contaminating influence.”²⁶³

White Charlestonians certainly exploited opportunistic free Blacks such as in the case of an “anonymous ‘free black,’ who merely identified himself as ‘one who is contented with his situation,’ [and] informed the authorities of anticipated uprisings” in 1793.²⁶⁴ The author refers to the Denmark Vesey conspiracy as “the state’s grand revolte noir” that was “planned for the summer months,” as the summer months were a period of absence for many enslavers who sought to escape inclement heat on plantations during that time of the year.²⁶⁵ An integration of information about Atlantic currents in Charleston reveals that

[t]he sable fear was intensified by the legacy South Carolina had inherited from Santo Domingo in 1794. When the successful slave uprising on that island threatened its white population, the port of Charleston, which had maintained a steady trade with the French West Indies, became the major haven for French refugees. They were warmly welcomed by the state. South Carolina had, in fact, made several attempts to assist the isolated white government in Santo Domingo. The welcome hardly extended, however, to blacks, slave and free, who arrived with the white refugees ... [W]hite South Carolinians ... continued to regard the immigrant blacks with suspicion, as a contaminating influence on the local slaves.²⁶⁶

Examples of White South Carolinian “fear of infiltration from Santo Domingo” close to the time that Vesey won a lottery and purchased his freedom include reportage in 1795 of the apprehension of “a very dangerous negro [sic] named Joukain, a Fellow who headed a parcel of colored people in Santo Domingo and engaged in a pitched Battle with the Whites” and the 1797 incident where “four slaves from Santo Domingo were hanged for plotting an insurrection.”²⁶⁷ An 1820 Act in South Carolina was particularly repressive for free African Atlantic figures such as Vesey, particularly the restrictions that were placed on “any free black or white who ‘circulated or brought within this state, any written or printed paper, with intent to disturb the peace or security of the same in relation to the slaves of the people of this State’.”²⁶⁸ Wikramanayake argues that “[w]ell before the advent of William Lloyd Garrison and *The Liberator*, South Carolina had closed her ranks to the thrust of abolitionism,” and she contends that “*the Denmark Vesey affair did not produce the repression of free blacks that historians have attributed to its aftermath.*”²⁶⁹ Charleston, South Carolina’s racial climate was a closed one according to the logic of Wikramanayake’s study, one where even “a representative in the House and one of the magistrates in the Vesey trials” felt that “[Daniel] Payne is playing hell in Charleston” by running a school – a school that in fact “catered to the leading white families in the city”; magistrate Kennedy subsequently “introduced the bills which later became the Act of 1834,” which was “legislation of note against free blacks in South Carolina during this period[,] ... which forbade their maintenance of schools ... [but] did not specifically prohibit the education of free blacks.”²⁷⁰

Historians and writers of creative nonfiction as well as creative fiction agree that Vesey was born c.1767 and was purchased in 1781 at St. Thomas; was a “domestic servant” from this time and following his arrival in South Carolina with his enslaver in 1783 “trained as [a] carpenter” during his teenage years; “was hired out for wages, benefitting the Captain [Joseph Vesey] and Denmark, who was allowed to keep part of his wages”; “used these wages to enter a lottery and in 1799 won a city lottery prize of \$1500”; and “[a]fter 18 years as the Captain’s slave, Denmark purchased his freedom for \$600, an amount well below his market value. With the remainder of his winnings he established a carpentry shop.”²⁷¹ He was subject to the same kind of restrictions on free Black life that date back to at least the colonial era when “the black codes [were] adopted in 1680,” and, as Jamie Lynn Johnson argues, “As a mulatto ... (contemporary accounts describe him having mixed blood)[,] he would have physically embodied the very sensitive topic of miscegenation.”²⁷² The impact of literacy on Denmark Vesey was highlighted by John Lofton who noted that Vesey was “[s]chooled by long experience as a slave himself and acquainted through his reading with many expressed aspirations for freedom,” which Jamie Lynn Johnson builds upon in her assertion that “Vesey had traveled and had been exposed to revolutionary ideas as a slave in St. Dominique and must have been frustrated to have his truncated version of freedom.”²⁷³ The “three primary source documents” by which “Denmark Vesey the insurrectionist is defined” were constructed by the intendant (mayor) “during the summer of 1822,” the magistrates (in October 1822), and the governor “in late fall of 1822.”²⁷⁴ The first “two accounts comprise the ‘pro-plot’ contemporary account of the Denmark Vesey Insurrection”; and the latter “was the single dissenting voice known in Charleston at the time of the court proceedings.”²⁷⁵ It is important to note the name discrepancy regarding “Peter (or Devany as the name appears in some of the literature).”²⁷⁶ Peter was the enslaved man who reported word of a planned revolt to “a free black named George (referred to as William in some literature) Pencil.”²⁷⁷ Also, the specter of torture during incarceration can be traced in an example in which “William Pencil (or Paul as he is sometimes referred to in the literature) ... revealed no information and was ordered held ... ‘in solitary confinement in the black hole of the workhouse, interrogating him daily’.”²⁷⁸ However, “[a]fter a week in solitary confinement Williams gave up the names of Mingo Harth and Peter Poyas as well as plot details.”²⁷⁹ A “‘Court of Five Freeholders’ began hearing secret testimony on June 18th. Denmark Vesey was arrested on June 21st and was hanging from the gallows along with five others on July 2nd, 1822.”²⁸⁰ The first court came to a close on July 26, 1822, and “a second court assembled to handle lesser plot participants ... The first court [executed] 63% of the accused, whereas the second court hanged 8.7%.”²⁸¹ It is important to note the abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s 1861 observation that “Bukley’s Farm, two miles and a half from the city” indicates the extent of the conspiracy, as Bukley’s Farm figured prominently in press coverage and debates about the veracity of the plot to revolt.²⁸² Important historiographical information can be mapped from analysis of the fact that “John Lofton, writing in 1948, summarized the plot and the development of the case in great detail using these three [above-mentioned] primary accounts. Two generations later, historians Michael Johnson, David Robertson, Douglas Egerton, and Edward Pearson [...] have different interpretations of many particulars of the plot[,] but they do agree on Lofton’s version of events lifted from the *Official Report*.”²⁸³

It is believed that the initial combatants in the Denmark Vesey revolt would have been constituted by “seven separate forces each with distinct and important tasks. All would rise at the hour of midnight.”²⁸⁴ Atlantic oceanic metaphor/symbology can be traced in a critical rhetorical and discursive moment in an alleged conversation that White Charlestonians attributed to discovery of the plot: mention by an unknown person of “the *Sally* from Cap Haitien, anchored in the harbor. At her masthead fluttered a flag with the number 96 on it.”²⁸⁵ Armed resistance to slavery was subject to capital punishment, which was stipulated as early as the Act of 1740 in South Carolina.²⁸⁶ An important element to keep in mind when seeking an understanding of the physical and psychological impacts of torture and solitary confinement on those arrested was the fact that the site of confinement, known as “[t]he workhouse[,] was the established place where slaves were sent for corrective beatings.”²⁸⁷

Vesey biographer “[John] Lofton, like most historians before him, accepted the magistrates’ version of events but traced the impact of the revolt.”²⁸⁸ An Atlantic perspective of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy complicates historians’ understanding of the impact of the foiled revolt that was followed by “new port rules” (the Negro Seaman Act of 1822) and “nullification of federal acts” (the “nullification crisis of 1832”). The historian William W. Freehling noted South Carolina’s threats to leave the early national union in 1787, which Jamie Lynn Johnson indicated was central to South Carolinians’ “unique notions of states rights” that manifested again in the 1820s as the state threatened succession if colonization of free African Americans became national/federal policy.²⁸⁹ The work of the historian Richard Wade, who was a skeptic regarding the veracity of the Vesey revolt, reflected what Jamie Lynn Johnson contends was his belief “that urban slaves had little reason to challenge the existing system since they were treated well.”²⁹⁰ Wade was skeptical about what he saw as a “chance encounter of Devany Prioleau with William Paul on the wharf on May 25, 1822” that was blown out of proportion by the dominant culture, which became “a town frozen in terror for almost a summer.”²⁹¹ Wade’s acknowledgement of the pervasive extent of White Atlantic fear is critical to our understanding of the conspiracy. His reference to “deep fears” is central to delineating the fact that “many people, both white and Negro, ... believe[d] in the existence of a widespread scheme to overturn the institution of slavery.”²⁹² “Contemporary doubters” did exist, including “Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, the brother in law of Governor Bennett.”²⁹³ Judge Johnson published a letter in the local press (*Charleston Courier*) regarding a past execution of an innocent victim during a time of false alarm regarding a revolt. “Judge William Johnson’s unsigned letter was published during the newspaper blackout” that resulted as a precautionary measure against dissemination of insurrectionary, frightening information about African Atlantic resistance to slavery in Charleston and in general. Noting the torture and killing of an innocent enslaved Black person during a previous social crisis, he argued that the enslaved person known as Billy “was first whipped severely to extort a confession, and then, with his eyes bound, commanded to prepare for instant death from a sabre [sic] ... Billy was hung amidst crowds of execrating spectators.”²⁹⁴

Wade's role in "questioning the traditional narrative" on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, particularly his commentary on "interrogation methods," indicated the subjective and physical violence that was central to "interrogation methods used against the accused and the implied threat of execution": this kind of violence "motivated [the accused] to give testimony pleasing to the court."²⁹⁵ In regards to ongoing revisionism, Jamie Lynn Johnson notes that

[u]ntil Michael Johnson emerged in 2002, there was only one historian who saw merit in Wade's theory. Marina Wikramanayake Fernando also came to the conclusion that no plot existed. She too, as Sri Lankan woman, was an outsider, whose work was largely ignored at the time because she was writing from a colonial perspective on slavery.²⁹⁶

This "modern debate" is cast as an "undead discussion" by Jamie Lynn Johnson, who was influenced by Michael P. Johnson's review of three recent studies that focus on Denmark Vesey: "[Michael P.] Johnson theorized that ... modern historians who accepted the *Official Report* as fact have furthered the conspiracy against both Denmark Vesey and his legacy."²⁹⁷ A major source of questioning the historic truthfulness of accounts of Vesey is, of course, related to "manipulative editing" by "white planters" who kept "manuscript depositions that those slaves gave out of court and that happen to have survived in the private papers of white planters." Michael P. Johnson made the controversial observation that "Vesey and the other condemned black men were victims of an insurrectionary conspiracy conjured into being in 1822 by the court, its cooperative black witnesses, and its numerous white supporters and kept alive ever since by [h]istorians eager to accept the court's judgments while rejecting its morality." The reticence of both Judge Johnson and Governor Bennett prompted the court to assert its legitimacy coupled with its strategic use of testimonies from "coerced and tortured witnesses."²⁹⁸

Writing in the discursive context of American debates about "collective public memory," historian Darin J. Waters notes in "Whose Story? Democratizing America's Collective Historical Memory,"

Collectively speaking, [Denmark] Vesey's story seems more in keeping with this country's own struggle for independence and self-determination. Seen in this light, one could argue that rather than being a terrorist, Vesey was a liberator, much like George Washington, who helped free his countrymen from the tyrannical British. To some, equating Vesey with Washington is blasphemy. But why, one might ask? And what would African-Americans have to say about that?²⁹⁹

Critical to understanding the wide range of writings about the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery are the forms of “creative writing, whether fiction or nonfiction” that are interlaced in terms of “craft, techniques, and processes” and that are “particularly things traditionally associated with fiction, such as point of view, dialogue, narration, and scene—as well as many of [the] ‘process’ things [that] you can do to ‘get to’ your material,” which are all “techniques [that] could (and should) be used to generate and revise nonfiction work. Indeed, that is what makes it *creative* nonfiction: the use of fictional techniques brought to factual subject matter.”³⁰⁰

The important fact that “that there are inherent challenges in interpreting documents from slave trials” is linked to Michael P. Johnson’s observation that “what Vesey actually said might have been different from what witnesses testified and the court recorded” and that “half of the testimony of the *Official Report* published against Vesey was given when he could not possibly have been present to hear or question it”; indeed, “a word-by-word comparison of Evidence and [Edward A. Pearson’s] *Designs against Charleston* reveals that there are 5,000-6,000 discrepancies between the Evidence manuscript and the published transcript in *Designs against Charleston*,” which Michael P. Johnson regards as “ill-advised editorial interventions” on the part of Pearson. Mayor Hamilton is noted as “the court’s chief magistrate.”³⁰¹ The second manuscript was a *creation* of Mayor Hamilton that was meant to legitimate the court in the face of criticism from Governor Bennett of South Carolina:

[I]n switching the original for the copy, Pearson missed an important detail. Johnson contends that the second manuscript was actually a defense of the court’s proceedings. Johnson believes that the court’s chief magistrate, Mayor Hamilton, was responding to the criticism of his political rival Governor Bennett. Hamilton needed to justify his actions so in the second manuscript, he includes more witness testimony to support the charges. Johnson contends that there was never even a trial of Denmark Vesey. Vesey was never a defendant given the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses. But, in the second manuscript, the magistrates quote heated exchanges between Vesey the defendant and his accusers.³⁰²

Jamie Lynn Johnson argued, “Egerton and Robertson don’t even grant an inch of ground towards Johnson’s interpretation. Robertson’s response is by far the most heated,” as “Robertson contends that Michael Johnson intentionally ignored important primary source documents that support the existence of a plot,” such as Robertson’s references to (1) a minister’s visit; (2) a prisoner’s confessions; (3) letters of a White Charlestonian, Mary Lamboll Beach, to her sister in Philadelphia; and (4) a doctor who cared for ill and tortured prisoners.³⁰³ Mary Lamboll Beach claimed, “I heard that Vesey said in jail that it was a glorious cause he was to die for.”³⁰⁴

Robertson also made a case that, in the words of Jamie Lynn Johnson, “[Michael P.] Johnson ignored other primary source documents that would have threatened his conclusions.”³⁰⁵ Specifically, as Robertson argued, “Nor does he mention the detailed records of the Charleston physician who attended to the sick and abused prisoners during their incarcerations (among whose number were included the witnesses whom [Michael P.] Johnson characterizes as the court’s ‘pets’). The unhappy conclusion is that [Michael P.] Johnson is a contextualist when such a practice supports his thesis and not a contextualist when the historical documents might compromise his authority. *He do the police in different voices.*”³⁰⁶ Robertson also argued that “an economic and demographic agenda was undeniably working against Denmark Vesey during his trial.”³⁰⁷ Edward A. Pearson’s response to Michael P. Johnson’s critique of his work indicated his contention that “[e]ven though my transcription of the trial document is inaccurate, the accompanying analysis based on my reading and consideration of the evidence stands, I believe, as a sound piece of scholarship that contributes not just to our understanding of the plot itself, but also to the historiography on the antebellum South and urban slavery.”³⁰⁸ Pearson’s response is said to be one that is reflective of his “cutting to the heart of the matter,” or “the matter of interpretation of the evidence and analysis.”³⁰⁹ Pearson highlights the significance of an Atlantic “city undergoing considerable economic and cultural stresses and strains during the late 1810s and early 1820s[,] ... debates over the fate of Missouri” and the future of American slavery, the rise of organized abolitionism in the U.S., and the political dynamics of the revolutionary Atlantic world, further complicating our understanding of the context in which Vesey operated.³¹⁰ According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “[Michael P.] Johnson’s work is credible. His interpretation is fresh and plausible given what we now know about the subtleties of slave resistance. An armed revolt would have been suicidal for Vesey and his followers. But, Vesey was still a threat to the status quo because of how he existed in society.”³¹¹ Indeed, his life continues to inspire scholars and writers in various disciplines and of different political commitments to engage in spirited debates, which have been referred to as “the clash of perspectives” that are tied to “the human complication in interpreting historic events.” It seems obvious that “the accused were individually tortured and collectively facing execution. Additionally, their words were recorded by, and published by, their accusers.”³¹² In light of Robert Starobin’s argument that “[t]hough two leaders confessed, ... the rest of the leadership denied complicity or remained silent,”³¹³ Jamie Lynn Johnson provocatively asks, “So how do we evaluate the testimony of tortured slaves, or a slave in whose interest it was to cooperate with the court’s magistrates? It is clear that slaves were aware of executions.”³¹⁴ For example, according to the September 12, 1822 issue of the *Charleston Southern Patriot and Commercial Advisor*, a White Charlestonian recollected that “[t]here was a wonderful degree of politeness shown to us, ... bows and politeness, and ... give way for the gentlemen and ladies, [which] met you at every turn and corner ... [T]he first six executions seemed to have ripped the heart out of the rebellion.”³¹⁵

The labor of Vesey and his allies/the accused were obviously critical to understanding the interpersonal dynamics of those who were allegedly involved in the plot.³¹⁶ According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “The letters of Ana Hayes Johnson, daughter of a respected judge and a niece of the Governor, describe the fear unleashed by the very rumor of the insurrection. ‘Their plans were simply these,’ she wrote late in June: ‘They were to set fire to the town and while the whites were endeavoring to put it out they were to commence their horrid depredations’.”³¹⁷ She further notes, “Ana Hayes Johnson was in a unique situation to have knowledge of the plot. Her diaries reveal that white Charleston was fully aware of the details of the plot and had every reason to fear.”³¹⁸ The immediate, fearful response of Charleston’s White Atlantic figures was one in which “White Charleston took the plot so seriously that they immediately armed against the rebellion ... with vigilance.”³¹⁹ Indeed, White Charlestonians were especially upset at the reality of some domestic enslaved persons (i.e., “house slaves”) “being taught to read and write,” skills that were viewed by the dominant culture as inherently subversive to American slavery and White supremacy.³²⁰ Of course, there were “contemporary doubters” regarding the veracity of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery. “Charleston newspapers imposed *a nearly perfect blackout* on the details of the episode throughout the summer, confining themselves to a simple recording of sentences and executions. And contemporaries left only a few scattered items to help fill out the slight skeleton provided by the council’s publication.”³²¹ Jamie Lynn Johnson notes the critical importance of understanding “not that Judge Johnson doubted the guilt of the accused as Wade suggested, but rather that Judge Johnson feared [that] the white hysteria would cause mass executions, and a witch hunt like response But, unlike Wade and Johnson’s conclusion, the contemporary critics weren’t attacking the charges, but rather the lack of transparency in the courtroom proceedings.”³²² A June 23, 1822 letter from Ana Hayes Johnson (“daughter of Judge Johnson”) to Elizabeth E.W. Haywood revealed the fear that permeated public space in Charleston, indicating her view that “there is a look of horror in every countenance.”³²³ Even “the mayor sensed fear among white members of Charleston’s voting society.”³²⁴ The question of weapons is a critical one, of course, in the unfolding of assessments of the Vesey conspiracy, and John Lofton observed examples of what Jamie Lynn Johnson terms the “feasibility of the plot” in Lofton’s references to examples of alleged conspirators’ abilities to actually “fashion weapons” such as “pike heads and bayonets with sockets ready to be mounted on poles,” “100 pikes ... ready,” “[t]wo or three hundred bayonets,” and “[a] bundle of ten-foot poles suitable for pike heads and bayonets ... concealed under the house at Buckley’s farm.”³²⁵ “Coordination” of an armed revolt was certainly feasible; “[c]ountry slaves gathered in Charleston on Sundays for worship services, which would support the magistrates’ assertion that slaves could gather on a weekend unnoticed.” Indeed, one abolitionist noted that “[m]ore than a thousand came, on ordinary occasions, and a far larger number might at any time make their appearance without exciting any suspicion.”³²⁶ Vesey’s awareness of “the Congressional Debate about Missouri” and “Senator Rufus King’s passionate speeches” was “included [in] testimony of the *Official Record*,” and even as “[t]he African Methodist Church was being crushed in 1822[,] ... the communication network had already been established ... [T]here were ‘at least fifty-three uprisings plotted in the United States, six of them in South Carolina’ in the 21 years that passed between Vesey’s liberation from slavery and his execution.”

Appreciating White fear of “the extent of literacy” is a critical element in forming a holistic view of the historical record of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy.³²⁷ The list of physical evidence, equally important, included examples of weapons “said to have been made” and acquired: “one hundred (pike heads and bayonets) ... at an early day, and by the 16th June, as many as two or three hundred,” “three and four hundred daggers,” “a sword,” “a gun and a sword,” “a sword,” “a scythe converted into a sword,” “a knife,” “a sword,” and “a sword and a gun.” Wade noted, however, that “except for these few individual weapons, no arms cache was uncovered.” Indeed, “Wade’s point is fair that historians accepted the magistrates’ version of witness testimony as fact, without physical evidence to corroborate the testimony ... [N]one of these caches were ever discovered, to include the pistol that Lofton claims Vesey acquired.”³²⁸

According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “It should be noted that a lack of execution does not prove a lack of planning.”³²⁹ Regarding “mutual hysteria,” she argues that “[t]he matter of hysteria is important because fear acted as the combustible fuel ignited by the allegations of armed rebellion. The instant hysterical response described in the literature undermines the peaceful facade claimed by slave owning whites, pre Denmark Vesey. Blacks and whites alike ... had reason to be fearful in Charleston in 1822.”³³⁰ The 1818 “closing of the African Methodist Church” was also a significant element that fomented “black hysteria.” “Finally, and most urgent for slaves, rumors circulated about whites ‘thinning out’ the slave population.” In response to Michael P. Johnson’s questions – “But how could such a rumor arise? Although Charleston’s slaves and free people of color understood white brutality all too well, why would they credit a rumor that the city’s whites would kill blacks indiscriminately?” – Jamie Lynn Johnson contends that “[t]he human response to a mortal threat is natural[,] and it is unequivocal. Mortal threats justify immoral acts.” “Charleston fell into a state of mass hysteria,” and there was “panic in white Charleston.”³³¹ Abolitionist “Higginson notes that whites conspired to conceal the details of this plot from literate slaves and free blacks alike[,] revealing that the facade of peaceful, domestic tranquility had crumbled under the weight of insurrectionists’ scheming.” Even after the execution of Vesey and others in 1822, there was a White Charlestonian fear of “the dangerous eyes of the slaves” in 1841 according to “a friend of the writer [Higginson], then visiting South Carolina”:

In 1841, a friend of the writer, then visiting South Carolina, heard from her hostess for the first time the events, which are recounted here. On asking to see the reports of the trials, she was cautiously told that the only copy in the house, after being carefully kept for years under lock and key, had been burnt at last, lest it should reach the dangerous eyes of the slaves. The same thing happened, it was added, in many other families ...; this is why, to readers of American history, Denmark Vesey and Peter Poyas have been heretofore but the shadows of names.³³²

According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “Higginson wasn’t alone in noticing the secrecy of the court” and of White Atlantic figures in Charleston about the Vesey conspiracy.³³³ Complicating Michael P. Johnson’s argument that Vesey fell victim to a White supremacist “legal lynching” (her phrase), Jamie Lynn Johnson concluded that

Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if Johnson and Wade were correct or incorrect in their interpretation of the revolt. The visceral response from each community, through history, to this insurrection is what reveals our human nature ... [Vesey] is still either an image to vilify or celebrate, but [he is] also ... an image to protect. The modern academic debate has illuminated another option, Vesey as victim and perhaps also a vessel into which our perceptions are poured and then reflected. Vesey is a mirror to our own perceptions about race, heroism, resistance and justice.³³⁴

Enslaved African Atlantic figures’ ability to assume agency – and White Atlantic figures’ ability to imagine Blacks with lethal agency – constitute central elements to understanding Denmark Vesey from an Atlantic perspective.

In *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, Vincent Woodard points out the irony of being “delectable” in an anti-Negro milieu. He also highlighted the fact that “[m]ost slave narratives contained overt or covert references to flesh-eating.” In his approach to African Atlantic cultures in a U.S. context, unlike Paul Gilroy’s approach in his classic study, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Woodard’s “organizing metaphor is not the ship but the captured bodies brought aboard slave ships and the ways those bodies, specifically male bodies, underwent processes of sexual and social cannibalization.” Concentrating on often ignored “epicurean implications” of enslavement, he argues that the “cultural contexts” of enslavement “were highly eroticized situations and locales” in which the threat of “hunger” and “auto-cannibalism” (or “self-consumption”) were everyday realities for the enslaved. However,

In many instances, the cultivation of literal and emotional hunger in the slave produced the opposite affect. The hunger for familial connection, for self and safety, and the ability to resist literal and spiritual consumption led to just that, *resistance and self-reclamation* in the slave ... [There were] numerous ways the slave resisted cannibalization and struggled mightily against the institutionalized urge for self-consumption.

In other words, hunger could lead to “resistance” against “voluntar[y]” or forced self-consumption “through external coercion.” African Atlantic slavery was certainly “a new type of cannibalism system” with “beliefs and practices” that included “white ‘Christian minister cannibals’.”

Even a reliance on the logic that the Vesey conspiracy was a “legal lynching” leaves us with the conclusion that the Vesey episode entailed White Atlantic “‘Christian cannibalism’ and an existent ‘cannibal jurisdiction’ within southern legislative and geographic territories.” Woodard approaches “Slavery as History and Memory” instead of “follow[ing] Gilroy’s path, emphasizing routes of transmission instead of the roots of origins and cultural legacies.” Woodard’s approach centers on the enslaved Black body as, in the words of Gilroy, the “chronotype” and “organizing symbol” of his study.³³⁵

A significant element that was constitutive of Denmark Vesey’s aim was his insistence that ideological change among the enslaved – the masses – was a necessary component of African Atlantic armed resistance to slavery, an early nineteenth-century effort, in the words of Richard Wright, of “giving form, organization, direction, meaning, and a sense of justification to those lives” and to actualize “a method of taking people from one order of life and making them face what [women and] men, all [women and] men everywhere, must face.”³³⁶ There were other Atlantic dimensions embedded in “the fears and divisions among whites over the ideology and practice of black slavery, as well as the thoughts and actions of alienated whites within the slaveholding South and how they were treated by the slavocracy ... [There were four] men ... who had no part in Denmark Vesey’s slave insurrection conspiracy yet were convicted of inciting it.” The four White Atlantic figures who were convicted in Charleston for “attempting to excite the slaves to insurrection” were William Allen (Scottish descent), John Igneshias (Spanish descent), Andrew S. Rhodes (“long term resident of Charleston”), and Jacob Danders (German descent).³³⁷ As a result of “the incredulous, anxious, and even panicked white population of Charleston in 1822,”

Articles on the Vesey conspiracy were amazingly few and terse in the *Charleston Courier* in 1822, for the most part simply noting the executions. This further suggests that slaveholding elites were trying to prevent rather than encourage any kind of mass white hysteria. The trials of the white would-be conspirators were never mentioned in the *Courier*, nor were their names or alleged crimes.³³⁸

It is important to remember the significance of the number of enslaved African Atlantic figures in Charleston from a demographic perspective. According to the historian Peter Charles Hoffer,

Slaves were present in all of the British North American colonial cities, and although state gradual emancipation laws ended slavery in Boston, Newport, New York City, and Philadelphia, slaves abounded in the southern cities of the early republic, especially port cities like Baltimore, Norfolk, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans. *No city had more slaves per capita, and no slaves were more visible than those of antebellum Charleston. They outnumbered whites by 63,615 to 18,768 in the Charleston district in 1800. There were slightly fewer than six hundred free blacks in the city at that time.* Freedom for these men and women came with strings—their children were still slaves, as were there spouses in many cases.³³⁹

Hoffer provocatively suggests that there was an “overlap” between a White conspiracy against Vesey and the Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery:

The issue then becomes why the authorities would decide to take such criminal conversations seriously—seriously enough to take testimony, hold trials, execute valuable slaves, and put the entire city in a state of panic. Here is where Johnson’s alternative to the slave conspiracy—a conspiracy by elements of the white power structure against the governor and his clique—might overlap the slaves’ own conspiracy. One might argue that the affair occurred when it did because of the overlap between the two conspiracies, an explanation which would accommodate both sides. Even if Hamilton and others precipitated the crisis for their own reasons, it would not preclude the slaves and Vesey from colluding.³⁴⁰

According to *A Preservation Plan for Charleston, South Carolina* from 2008,

Although white Charlestonians certainly held the position of power, fear of slave revolts and sabotage terrified many whites, feeding on the pre-existing racial tensions in Charleston. *The Denmark Vesey slave insurrection plot of 1822 galvanized white Charlestonians, many of whom feared suffering the same fate as the white population of the former French colony of San Domingo in 1791-2.* After the Denmark Vesey plot, the City established a guardhouse on the site of the Tobacco Inspection complex on what is now Marion Square. The guardhouse was designed by Major James Gadsden in Rational Neoclassical style, with arches springing from giant Doric columns in the quadrangle. In 1842, the South Carolina General Assembly created the Citadel.³⁴¹

Denmark Vesey is best understood as an Atlantic figure. His pan-African visions reflect circum-Atlantic situations. He was a product of his environment. Some writers focus on his reported organization of diverse African Atlantic figures’ participation in armed resistance against slavery, envisioning this as his major contribution to pan-Africanism.³⁴² Others concentrate on what they consider to be Vesey’s nationalistic and transcultural non-violent strategies among African Atlantic populations in the Charleston, South Carolina, area’s African Methodist Episcopal Church and in the surrounding African communities of enslaved people from across the circum-Atlantic world, Black people who were trapped in the United States and whose cultural traditions remain central to African Atlantic subjects and Black politics even today.³⁴³ These scholars argue that Vesey saw above the fog that defined African American blindness to the beatitudes of being willing to sacrifice one’s life if necessary for freedom instead of only being aware of an enslaved experiential reality without doing anything concrete to fundamentally change that form of social condition other than survive.

They write that his ideology inspired African Atlantic figures to participate in a revolutionary Atlantic context through employment of social agency in a manner that was not very different from the radical precedents of other Atlantic figures such as the Haitian Revolution or even the American Revolution that was led by White Atlantic figures who became the slaveholding fathers of the U.S.³⁴⁴ after their repudiation of English domination through engagement in armed resistance to political oppression. Of course, the historical contestations about the veracity of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy continue as part of an ongoing debate as to whether there was actually a plot among the enslaved or if it was a White fantasy used to control free persons of color in a committed slaveholding state.³⁴⁵ This essay focused on using Vesey to illuminate an Atlantic world vision. If there was a conspiracy led by Vesey, it illustrates the long and great shadow of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the successful end of the Haitian Revolution cast over Black – and indeed White – imaginations, hopes, and fears. If there was not a conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery, it shows the same thing, this time in the imagination and fears of White Charlestonians.

Notes

¹ See “Example 1 (*above and opposite*). ‘You Can’t Trust in Love’ from *Denmark Vesey*. Author’s [Melissa J. de Graaf’s] transcription,” in Melissa J. de Graaf, “Searching for ‘Authenticity’ in Paul Bowles’s *Denmark Vesey*,” in *Blackness in Opera*, Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, Editors (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 198-199. According to Melissa J. de Graaf, “[i]n January 1938, Juanita Hall conducted the Negro Melody Singers in an unstaged performance of the first act of *Denmark Vesey* for the New York Composer’s Forum. The performance, featuring music by Paul Bowles set to libretto by Charles Henri Ford, provoked thoughtful and pointed questions from listeners. The work... [was] never completed[,]” but the author notes the critical, racialized and politicized reception “to the language and music, which overwhelmingly emphasizes Africanisms and African American folklore, much of it thoroughly researched and, in the white creators’ minds, authentic.” The author also argues that “[f]or Bowles and Ford, the main theme of the opera—Love versus Hate—had deep political and racial implications. Throughout the work, love is equated with betrayal, and hate (particularly the hatred of whites) with strength and freedom.” Indeed, this “love-hate duality” is captured in one of “the three songs on the single extant recording” from the opera (*Denmark Vesey*) titled “‘You Can’t Trust in Love,’ in no small part because it encapsulates the love-hate dichotomy at the heart of the story.” de Graaf does make an important historiographical observation about this song, arguing that “[t]his musical instability reflects Bowles’s conception of the story’s larger moral: the ‘failure of blacks to free their race because they were unable to see beyond race hatred.’ Thus, Bowles, the omniscient composer, appears to possess insight about the eventual failure of the power of hate that Denmark, the protagonist, does not Despite their attractiveness and dramatic propriety, Bowles’s musical setting of these songs effectively neutralized Ford’s goal of authenticity.” The author does point out that “[w]hat sets *Denmark Vesey* apart [from minstrel-like, stereotypical and racist “precursors such as *Porgy and Bess* and *Emperor Jones*”], however, is its evocation of Communist-style revolution. The opera abounds with romanticized Marxist imagery, which would have had powerful resonances in the context of race and labor conflicts in the 1930s The artistic choices Ford and Bowles made transform the opera from a historical event into a heroic, romantic struggle for liberation. Denmark becomes a Soviet-style hero, dying dramatically for the cause.” It is important to note that “Bowles was a member of the Communist Party, though an infrequent participant, [and] Ford leaned toward Trotskyism.” de Graaf also indicates in her study that Ford and Bowles “discussed the possibility of including the historically accurate offer of aid from several white men, but in the end decided against it, fearing black outrage.” Indeed, “Bowles and Ford achieved a distinctive result in their integration of race and politics and their bridging of 1820s and 1930s race and labor turmoil.”

See de Graaf, "Searching for 'Authenticity' in Paul Bowles's *Denmark Vesey*, 187, 194, 197-200, 202-205. See also Tracy Flemming, "Black Marxism, Creative Intellectuals and Culture: The 1930s," *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Volume 3, Number 9 (June-July 2010): 7-24, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol3no9/3.9BlackMarxism.pdf> and Philip F. Rubio, "'Though he had a white face, he was a negro in heart': Examining the White Men Convicted of Supporting the 1822 Denmark Vesey Slave Insurrection Conspiracy," *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Volume 113, Number 1 (January 2012): 50-67.

² Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the U.S.* (New York, New York: Viking Press, 1941), in *Richard Wright Reader*, Edited by Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre, Notes by Michel Fabre (New York, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 234 (emphasis added). In his reply to David L. Cohn's review of *Native Son*, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright" (*Atlantic Monthly*, May 1940), Richard Wright wrote in "I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me" (*Atlantic Monthly*, June 1940), "The unconscious basis upon which most whites excuse Negro oppression is as follows: (1) the Negro did not have a culture when he was brought here; (2) the Negro was physically inferior and susceptible to diseases; (3) *the Negro did not resist his enslavement.*" The third element – nonresistance to American slavery – is critical to understanding psychological and physical resistance to enslavement and adherence to African Atlantic religious traditions and was viewed by Wright as one of the "three falsehoods [that] have been woven into an ideological and moral principle to justify whatever America wants to do with the Negro," which Wright described as central tenets of American White supremacy. Wright asked, "Does it sound strange that American historians have distorted or omitted hundreds of records of slave revolts in America?" Wright, *Ibid.*, 50, 64-65 (emphasis added).

³ Charles Spurgeon Johnson, "Chapter IX: Intra-race Attitudes" in Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*. Prepared for the American Youth Commission (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1941), 243, accessed July 17, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.02853.0001.001>. Gunnar Myrdal also references part of the above quote in *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, "Chapter 35: The Negro Protest," Section I. *The Slave Revolts* (New York, New York and London, United Kingdom: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944), 736-737, 1391n2. See also Jamie Lynn Johnson, "The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey: The Complications of History" (M.A. Thesis, Georgetown University, 2010), 32.

⁴ Huey P. Newton, "Aftermath," in Newton, *With the Assistance of J. Herman Blake*. Introduction by Fredrika Newton. *Revolutionary Suicide*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2009; 1973), 197.

⁵ Sharon Ewell Foster, *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part Two: The Testimony* (New York, New York: Howard Books, 2012). According to Foster, “Courage was standing to do what was needed, even afraid ... Courage was summoning the strength to keep living ... Courage, despite the odds, to keep fighting.” Foster, *Ibid*, 228-229.

⁶ For example, an African Atlantic presence was a constitutive dimension of diasporic life and was captured in the following scene from the recent novel in which Vesey is a character, *The Invention of Wings*. According to Handful, one of the central characters:

Misses didn’t have Christmas that year, but she said go ahead and have Jonkonnu if you want to. That was a custom that got started a few years back brought by the Jamaica slaves. Tomfry would dress up in a shirt and pants tattered with strips of bright cloth sewed on, and a stove pipe hat on his head—what we called the Ragman. We’d traipse behind him, singing and banging pots, winding to the back door. He’d knock and missus and everybody would come out and watch him dance. Then missus would hand out little gifts to us. Could be a coin or a new candle. Sometimes a scarf or a cob pipe. This was supposed to keep us happy.

See Sue Monk Kidd, *The Invention of Wings* (London, United Kingdom: Tinder Press/Headline Publishing Group, An Hachette UK Group, 2014), 199. According to Simon Gikandi, these were

forms of play that frightened white planters because they took place in a dark, secretive world—one that was imperceptible to their eyes and seemed outside the realm of European reason—[and] were the essence of the slaves’ revolt against the political and cultural order that rationalized bondage ...[,] a counterculture, including one that went against the grain of sense and sensibility ... Dance, song, and sound represented what had clarity for the slaves but was inaudible to the masters.

See Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford, United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2011), 263. For further analysis of “John Canoe festival” in the Atlantic world, see Gikandi, *Ibid.*, 269, 271-78, 317-318n96. According to Steeve O. Buckridge,

In Jamaica, carnival celebrations included masquerades, called Jonkonnu or John Canoe, that consisted of masked troupes, dancers, actors and processions of women, called Set Girls, in their finest dresses Jonkonnu has its roots in West Africa. Among the Mende, Igbo and Yoruba, masks were used in religious ceremonies, festivals and initiation rites. Yoruba ritual masks were very elaborate in design, consisting of human features frequently combined with animals, snakes or geometrical forms ... Slave carnivals existed throughout much of the Caribbean and other parts of the colonial empire, from Belize in the southwest to Bermuda and North Carolina in the north ... These masquerades had a long and complicated history. However, the origins of the name Jonkonnu are still unclear.

See Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2004), 98-99. See also Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51-52, 54, 59, 141, 181, 221, 257n128. “Fiction,” according to Alice LaPlante, is defined as “[m]ade up events presented as if true in a narrative [and] [c]an be either a novel, a novella, or a short story.” See Alice LaPlante, *“The Making of a Story”: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing* (New York, New York and London, United Kingdom: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 644. See John Oliver Killens, *Great Gittin Up Morning* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972) and Kevin F. Jones, *Due Unto: Denmark Vesey’s Story* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Two Harbors Press, 2014). For historical studies of Vesey see James O’Neil Spady, “Power and Confession: On the Credibility of the Earliest Reports on the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Volume 68, Number 2 (April 2011): 287-304; Tracy Flemming, “Acculturation and Resistance: The Origins of Pan-Africanism in the Black Atlantic World,” *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Volume 3, Number 2 (September 2009): 3-32, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol3no2/3.2Acculturation.pdf>; Robert L. Paquette and Douglass Egerton, “Of Facts and Fables: New Light on the Denmark Vesey Affair,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Volume 105, Number 1 (January 2004): 8-48; Robert L. Paquette, “From Rebellion to Revisionism: The Continuing Debate about the Denmark Vesey Affair,” *Journal of the Historical Society*, Volume IV, Number 3 (Fall 2004): 291-334; Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 58, Number 4 (October 2001): 915-976; Robert A. Gross, “Introduction: Forum:

The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, part 2,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 135-136; Edward A. Pearson, “Trials and Errors: Denmark Vesey and His Historians,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 137-142; Douglas R. Egerton, “Forgetting Denmark Vesey; Or, Oliver Stone Meets Richard Wade,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 143-152; David Robertson, “Inconsistent Contextualism: The Hermeneutics of Michal Johnson,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 153-158; Philip D. Morgan, “Conspiracy Scares,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 159-166; Thomas J. Davis, “Conspiracy and Credibility: Look Who’s Talking About What: Law Talk and Loose Talk,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 167-174; James Sidbury, “Plausible Stories and Varnished Truths,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 179-184; Robert L. Paquette, “Jacobins and the Lowcountry: The Vesey Plot on Trial,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 185-192; Michael P. Johnson, “Reading Evidence,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Volume 59, Number 1 (January 2002): 193-202.

⁷ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto, Ontario: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd, 2006); Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Williamsburg, Virginia: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture; Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Adam Parker, “Denmark Vesey Monument Revealed in Hampton Park Before Hundreds,” *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC), February 15, 2014, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20140215/PC16/140219534>; Douglas R. Egerton, “Abolitionist or Terrorist?” *New York Times*, February 25, 2014, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/26/opinion/abolitionist-or-terrorist.html>; Honor Sachs, “Devils, Saints, and Denmark Vesey,” *Huffington Post*, February 27, 2014, accessed March 17, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/honor-sachs/devils-saints-and-denmark_b_4870022.html#. In an op-ed about Denmark Vesey that appeared in *The New York Times* titled “Abolitionist or Terrorist?” Egerton recently highlighted the “often ignore[d] ... fact that of the roughly 400,000 Africans sold into what is now the United States, approximately 40 percent landed on Sullivan’s Island, a hellish Ellis Island of sorts just outside of Charleston Harbor.” Egerton, *Ibid.* Victoria De Grazia employs “White Atlantic” in her *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11, 36-49.

⁸ Ibid. Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

⁹ For Joseph Roach's dynamic approach to "circum-Atlantic performance," see *Cities of the Dead*. Roach makes the important observation that life in the street is just as critical as life in the archive, office or any place else from a theoretical perspective as well as from the personal perspective of a participant observer, a global citizen, as he brings the dead and the living from two Atlantic sites into conversation: London and New Orleans. Roach, Ibid., xii, 7. See also Ellen Hampton, "'Lawdy! I was sho' happy when I was a slave!': Manipulative Editing in the WPA Former-Slave Narratives from Mississippi," *L'Ordinaire des Amériques*, Issue 215 (2013), accessed February 28, 2014, <http://orda.revues.org/522> and Lawrence Aje, "Fugitive Slave Narratives and the (Re)presentation of the Self? The Cases of Frederick Douglass and William Brown," *L'Ordinaire des Amériques*, Issue 215 (2013), February 28, 2014, <http://orda.revues.org/507>.

¹⁰ Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004; 2010). According to the historian Ashli White, "A few American writers ... argued for the justness of black Saint-Dominguans' actions and aspirations. Authors in this vein fell into two camps. The first were those who saw the rebellion as an inevitable outgrowth of the African slave trade ... The second camp blamed the institution of slavery itself ... While these critiques are significant and even radical for this period, they also reveal a reticence to embrace the universalist vision that the Haitian Revolution advocated, namely that all men are free, equal, and entitled to the rights of citizens. Most U.S. abolitionists looked to adapt the lessons of Saint-Domingue in ways that would avoid such tremendous change in the young republic." See White, *Encountering Revolution*, 130. Victor Oguejiofor Okafor situates Vesey among the precursors to "a well-organized, national and international abolitionist movement" in his *Towards an Understanding of Africology*, Fourth Edition, Revised Printing (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2002; 2006; 2010; 2013), 24.

¹¹ Larry Koger, "The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy: Brown Masters vs. Black Slaves," in Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1985; 2012), 160-186.

¹² Robert Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, David P. Geggus, Editor (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 93, 105, 108-109, 111.

¹³ The idea of activism as the crystallization of theory is borrowed from personal communication with Dr. Veta Smith Tucker.

¹⁴ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 26.

¹⁵ Starobin was a European American scholar who committed suicide a year or so after this text emerged. It is noted in the author's note prior to the title page that all proceeds (or royalties) from this volume were to be donated to the Southern Conference Education Fund and the Black Panther Party. *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822*, Robert S. Starobin, Editor (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), i. See also Alex Lichtenstein, "Industrial Slavery and the Tragedy of Robert Starobin," *Reviews in American History*, Volume 19, Number 4 (December 1991): 604-617.

¹⁶ Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators." See also note 6. According to the historian Peter Charles Hoffer, "Johnson was not the first one to raise a red flag about the resurrection of the rebels. Albert J. von Frank, a historian of literature who published on slavery, lamented 'a distinctly uncritical, even hagiographical coloring to the narrative.'" In his review of studies of Vesey by Douglas R. Egerton, Edward A. Pearson, and David Robertson, Frank argued that "[d]espite an impressive marshalling [sic] of factual material, much of it new, there is, in the books under review, a distinctly uncritical, even hagiographical coloring to the narrative, which, in Egerton and Robinson [sic] especially, seems an effect of choosing to regard the 1822 plot as the dramatic denouement of one hero's personal life-story." See Peter Charles Hoffer, "New Introduction: The Return of Denmark Vesey," in John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey's Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2013; 1983; 1964), xiii; Albert J. von Frank, "Remember Denmark Vesey," *Reviews in American History*, Volume 29, Number 1 (March 2001): 41. Joseph Roach's circumAtlantic approach to a deeper understanding of *genealogies of performance* offers a great deal of methodological insight into the *genealogy* of this moment, helping us to take an approach to this historiographical problem in which we can conceptually grab the bull by its horns in order to come to a clearer picture of what actually happened in circumAtlantic, revolutionary milieu Charleston. Genealogists trace the archeological matrices of historical phenomenon not to celebrate roots or to uncritically resuscitate memories of a golden era of tranquility. Hence, the implications of *genealogies of revolt – genealogies of acculturation and resistance* – are useful to understanding this episode in modern African Atlantic history. Studies of Black women's cultures and histories also provide important lenses through which to assess the implications of Vesey's and other Atlantic and diasporic figures' lives during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, especially the contention that Black women's experiences historically occur at the "intersection of race, gender, and class" – in a "Crooked Room" –, making their experiences similar to, but more importantly for my analysis, different from, the experiences of European American women and distinct from, but overlapping with, those of men (including Black men).

The fact that Black men in the Atlantic world also existed within hybrid “vortices of behavior” is also a noteworthy characteristic that defines the uniqueness of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Black male agents who were the early advocates of masculine-centered versions of Black nationalism and pan-Africanism. See Melville Herskovits, *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* (New York, New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1938); Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 26, 28, 85-92, 252; Flemming, “Acculturation and Resistance.” “Black women’s cultures and histories” is borrowed from personal communication with Dr. Veta Smith Tucker; see Veta Smith Tucker, “Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlefields,” in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, Edited by Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M. Walters. Foreword by Darlene Clark Hine (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 77-98. See also Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), 28-50.

¹⁷ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “The Trial of Rolla” / “Evidence” / “Witness No. 1—A negro [sic] man testified as follows,” 20 (original emphasis). All citations of published trial documents appear as they do in respective volumes, with little editorial changes except in cases where clarification is necessary.

¹⁸ Ibid., “The Trial of Rolla” / “Evidence” / “The voluntary confession of Rolla to the Court, made after all the evidence had been heard, but before his conviction,” 21 (original emphasis). According to the historian Nell Irvin Painter, “In the face of racist insult, African Americans shaped their own versions of Africa. The process unfolded across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as knowledge of the African past increased and as black Americans discussed the meaning of African history among themselves. They often put several African civilizations together as a single, glorious past they claimed as their own. That way of thinking is called ‘Ethiopianism.’” The equation, “Ethiopianism: Ancient Egypt + Cush + Ethiopia = the Negro Race,” is also used as a means of understanding religious dynamics of Atlantic figures in the African diaspora. For more on Ethiopianism, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; 2007), 6-8 and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1988; Camden, Connecticut: Archon Book, 1978).

¹⁹ Ibid., “After sentence of death had been passed upon him, [Rolla] made a confession in prison to the Rev[.] Dr. Hall, who furnished the Court with it in writing, and in the following words,” 22 (original emphasis). For insightful analysis of how “[t]he black and white Atlantics intertwined in many ways” and the impact of the “transformation of Saint-Dominique into Haiti,” see White, *Encountering Revolution*, 141, 167.

²⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987).

²¹ Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," 915; Richard Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History*, Volume 30, Number 2 (May 1964): 148-161.

²² Jamie Lynn Johnson, "The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey," iii, 4, 8-9, 66, 80, 110.

²³ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, xvi, 2.

²⁴ According to Alderson, "As one of the closest American ports to Saint-Domingue, Charleston received a large number of refugees from the island." See Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793," 95. According to Julius S. Scott, information about the revolutionary context at Saint-Domingue "was transmitted to the North American slave population through an intricate interregional communication network operated by black seamen from American merchant ships trading in the West Indies." Julius Sherrard Scott, III, "The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986), cited in Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793," 102, 110. Scott also noted, "Prior to, during, and following the Haitian Revolution, regional networks of communication carried news of special interest to Afro-Americans all over the Caribbean and beyond. Before the outbreak of Saint-Domingue, British and Spanish officials were already battling rampant rumors forecasting the end of slavery. Such reports gathered intensity in the 1790s." Scott, "The Common Wind," 4-5.

²⁵ Mamadou Diouf, "The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," *Public Culture*, Volume 12, Number 3 (Fall 2000): 690; Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, "Introduction," in Diouf and Nkwankwo, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12. Joseph Roach makes reference to "circum-Caribbean forms" in traditional festivals (carnival) in New Orleans, Louisiana, in his *Cities of the Dead*, 23-24.

²⁶ Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 160-186; Stephen O. Murray's incorporation of "the circum-Mediterranean culture complex" into his work on Islamic homosexualities is also revealing of the power of transnational analyses of hybrid cultural exchange/production in another context. See his "The Will Not to Know: Islamic Accommodations of Male Homosexuality" in *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, Editors (New York, New York: New York University Press, 1997), 44n7.

²⁷ It is unclear if Denmark Vesey was “born” in Africa. It is more likely that he saw Africa with Captain Joseph Vesey as an enslaved cabin boy. Recently, Kevin F. Jones envisioned Denmark Vesey as an African-born Atlantic figure in his biographical novel, *Due Unto: Denmark Vesey’s Story*. See also Quito Swan, *Black Power in Bermuda: The Struggle for Decolonization* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11.

²⁸ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “The Trial of Jesse” / “Evidence” / “Frank, Mrs. Ferguson’s slave, testified as follows,” 28 (original emphasis).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, “The voluntary confession of Jesse *to the Court*, made after all the evidence had been heard, but before his conviction,” 28-29 (original emphasis). References to “the business” are insider references to the plot to engage in armed resistance against American slavery.

³⁰ Hazel V. Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 18, Number 4, *Identities* (Summer 1992): 738-755; Eva Cherniavsky, “Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame,” *boundary 2*, Volume 23, Number 2 (Summer 1996): 85-110; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1997); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; 2000), 149-181; Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. The historian Mamadou Diouf’s chapter in the edited volume, *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, has significant implications for the study of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery, especially regarding understanding variegated ideas of “revolt,” battles over citizenship, and, for our specific purposes, the elder Denmark Vesey’s recruitment tactics in a social and cultural landscape that was simultaneously a “home” and a “hell.” According to Diouf,

These populations, in particular the youngest segment, re-create in all its sound, fury and violence a marginal space, a marginalized “zone,” captured by its overall physicality in its buildings and circuits, its squares, its loudness, its surfaces and spaces of social gathering, in short, an experience lived as both home and hell for its inhabitants.

Prior to this observation, Diouf made some critical remarks that centrally relate to this study’s focus on Denmark Vesey that situate Vesey and the conspiracy that surrounded him into a revolutionary Atlantic context while outlining his formation as an Atlantic figure.

The practice of memory particularly serves at this juncture to produce narratives that fashion new identifications, either to break with the community to which the individuals do not feel they belong or to demand a revision and a renegotiation of the signs and resources of membership. The new citizens and members of the community are attempting to expand, at times reformulate, the master narrative of historical, genealogical, and geographic references by introducing within it their own singular narratives and references that have been denied, effaced, and ignored. In seeking to be incorporated into the historical past of the nation, on their terms and with their historical resources, they are staking a claim in the future of the national community. This can only be accomplished by rewriting the place that they occupy in the past. Though decidedly political, this rewriting of history is not simply an intellectual or cultural exercise, it is most certainly the object of recriminations, conflicts, and violence.

Mamadou Diouf, "The Lost Territories of the Republic: Historical Narratives and the Recomposition of French Citizenship," *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, Tricia Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stoval, Editors (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), 40-41, 42. Diouf divides his chapter into sections that explore "Historical Detours," "Subaltern Ethnographies," and "Native / Indigène of the Republic in the Process of Dissolution." Diouf, "The Lost Territories of the Republic," 32-56.

³¹ "France experienced this in October through November of 2005," and as Diouf further notes, "What we saw in the revolts of 2005 was the demand for that recognition." He also makes three critical observations on the production of race and ethnicity in the circumAtlantic theater:

In the French context, the term "communitarianism" seems to cover any claims of membership to a community based on race, religion, and ethnicity, with entities seen as contradicting the only meaningful community in France, the *national community*, which is defined by republican citizenship.

Hélène Carrère d'Encausse is a Russian historian and the permanent secretary of the Académie Française, the official arbiter of French language and literature since the reign of Louis XIV. D'Encausse also serves on commissions of the European Union and French government. In attempting to explain the causes of the revolts in 2005 to the Russian press, she was quoted in *Libération* on November 2005 as having said: "These people come directly from their African villages [of course, never urban cities, then]....Why are the African children in the street and not at school? Why can't their parents buy a flat? The reason is obvious: many of these Africans are polygamous. In one flat there are three or four wives and twenty-five children. They are so crammed that they're no longer apartments, but God knows what! You can understand why these children are running about in the street."

It is worth reproducing [Jacques René] Chirac's words. In 1991 before he became president of the Republic [1995—2007], he described Africans as having "three or four wives and twenty some-odd children, who receive 50,000 francs in public assistance without, of course, working....If you add to that the noise and stench, the French worker living on the same floor becomes crazy."

Ibid., 41, 46, 53n33 (original emphasis), 56n52 (original bracket/insertion), 56n53.

³² Jafari S. Allen, "Introduction: Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture," *Black/Queer/Diaspora* (Special Issue), *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 18, Numbers 2-3 (2012): 232.

³³ Atlantic and other "water metaphors" can be extended to analyses of Alexander Crummell since he was one of Du Bois's mentors in the United States and a colleague of Edward Blyden in West Africa. Crummell, who had also lived in West Africa for "nigh twenty years" after studying in England prior to becoming a missionary in the Republic of Liberia, was a missionizing Christian who, upon returning to the U.S., played an instrumental role in founding the American Negro Academy and serving as a minister in Washington, D.C. See Alexander Crummell, "Black Women in the South: Her Neglects and Her Needs," Address before the "Freedman's Aid Society," Methodist Episcopal Church, Ocean Grove, New Jersey, August 15, 1883, from Alexander Crummell, *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Wiley and Company, 1891), 59-82, in Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Editors, *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 52; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Alexander Crummell," in Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, New York: Fawcett World Library, 1961. Originally published in 1903), 157-165; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Allen, Ibid. See also Martin Kilson, *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880-2012* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), 94-95.

³⁴ "Enforcers" is a concept borrowed from Akinyele Omowale Umoja's *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2013). Umoja includes examples of the enforcement of an armed resistance movement's boundaries for success and safety in a twentieth-century context.

³⁵ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, "Trials," 29.

³⁶ Egerton argues that armed resistance was the only viable option in a violent context in which Black lives were "defined by the whip." See Egerton, "Abolitionist or Terrorist?"

³⁷ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Trials,” 29-30. “The Court *unanimously* found Jesse guilty, and passed upon him the sentence of death....Subsequently to his conviction, he made the following confession in prison *to the Rev. Dr. Hall.*” “Trials,” 29 (original emphasis).

³⁸ Scott, “The Common Wind”; Laurent Dubois and Julius S. Scott, Editors, *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, Rewriting Histories Series (New York, New York and London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2010).

³⁹ Referencing a context that began about eight years after Vesey’s execution, Steven Mintz noted, “Few slaves lived into old age. Between 1830 and 1860, only 10 percent of slaves in North America were over 50 years old.” He also observed that “[i]n 1860, less than 10 percent of the slave population was over 50 and only 3.5 percent was over 60.” See Mintz, “Facts about the Slave Trade and Slavery,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed August 21, 2014, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/facts-about-slave-trade-and-slavery>; Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Evidence,” 31 (original emphasis).

⁴⁰ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Evidence,” 31-32.

⁴¹ *A Documented History of Gullah Jack Pritchard and the Denmark Vesey Slave Insurrection of 1822*, Studies in American History, Volume 29, Lois A. Walker and Susan R. Silverman, Editors (The Edwin Mellon Press, Lewiston, New York: 2000). In regards to the presence of an African Atlantic sensibility in the revolt, Walker and Silverman note that Gullah Jack Pritchard “employ[ed] both his African heritage as a conjurer and his leadership skills” and regard him as a “major secondary figure in the uprising” in their volume. Walker and Silverman, “Acknowledgements,” in *A Documented History of Gullah Jack Pritchard and the Denmark Vesey Slave Insurrection of 1822*, iii.

⁴² Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Evidence,” 32.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997; 1990), 92. It is critically important to remember that, according to the historian Marina Wikramanayake, “George Creighton, another free black, financed the migration of his slaves when he left for Liberia in 1821.” She also notes, “As early as 1821, when colonization offered little security to any black, George Creighton, a wealthy free black barber of considerable reputation, sold his establishment and announced his willingness to emancipate his slaves if they would go to Liberia with him.”

See Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina*. Tricentennial Studies, Number 7 (Columbia, South Carolina: Published for the South Carolina Tricentennial Commission by the University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 110, 177.

⁴⁵ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Evidence”, 32-33 (original emphasis). See also Doulgas R. Egerton, “‘Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing’: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Volume 100, Number 4 (October 1999): 316-317 and Doulgas R. Egerton, “‘Why They Did Not Preach up This Thing’: Denmark Vesey and Revolutionary Theology,” *Rebels, Reformers, & Revolutionaries: Collected Essays and Second Thoughts* (New York: Routledge, 2002; 2013), 89-90.

⁴⁶ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, “Evidence”, 33 (original emphasis).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33 (original emphasis).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34 (original emphasis).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, “Sentence on Denmark Vesey, a free black man,” 34-35 (original emphasis).

⁵¹ Douglass R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House Publishers, Inc., 1999).

⁵² *Toussaint L’Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*, Nick Nesbit, Editor. Introduction by Jean-Bertrand Aristide (London, United Kingdom: Verso, 2008).

⁵³ Molefi Kete Asante, “Reclaiming the Black Radical Tradition or How Glen Ford Betrayed the BRT,” USA Africa Dialogue Series, accessed June 8, 2014, <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/usaafricadialogue/2XZJY8Vehb8>; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995; 1997); Karen Fields, “What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly,” *Oral History*, Volume 17, Number 1, Health and Caring (Spring 1989): 44-53; Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in America* (London, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Verso, 2012; 2014), 171-192.

⁵⁴ Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 35. See also “James Hamilton, Jr., *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of This City ...* (Charleston, 1822)” [sic] for more second-hand details regarding Monday Gell’s acumen, literacy, and Ebo ethnicity on page 35, note 9, in Starobin’s volume.

See also pages 30-31 for details about Denmark Vesey where it is noted that “[t]he following sketch of his [Denmark Vesey’s] life is copied from the account of the intended Insurrection published by the authority of the Corporation of Charleston” on page 30, note 8, in Starobin’s volume.

⁵⁵ Ibid., “Confession of Monday Gell”, 36, 38. See “James Hamilton, Jr., *An Account*” for details contradicting Monday Gell’s denials on page 37, note 10, in Starobin’s volume.

⁵⁶ Teshale Tibebu, *Edward Wilmot Blyden and the Racial Nationalist Imagination* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2012). Tibebu notes, “I call Blyden’s perspective ‘black racial nationalism,’ a project of black racial totalization.” Tibebu, *Edward Wilmot Blyden*, 17.

⁵⁷ Robert W. July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought: Its Development in West Africa During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004. A Reprint of the Original Edition by Frederick A. Praeger, 1967. A New Foreword by Richard L. Sklar, 2004); Robert W. July, *An African Voice: The Role of the Humanities in African Independence* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987); Martin Kilson, *Transformation of the African American Intelligentsia, 1880-2012*.

⁵⁸ Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique*, 32, 39, 46-47, 54-55, 58-59, 160; Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997; 1999).

⁵⁹ Cooper, Ibid., 5; Jamie Lynn Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey”; and Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

⁶⁰ Egerton, “Abolitionist or Terrorist?”

⁶¹ The bodies of Denmark Vesey and the other executed men who were convicted in the trials surrounding the conspiracy to engage in armed resistance against American slavery may have been given to medical practitioners in Charleston to serve as cadavers. According to Starobin, “Those sentenced to death were hung publicly before crowds of spectators, and reportedly, ‘their bodies [were] to be delivered to the surgeons for dissection, if requested.’” See Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 8 (original bracket/insertion). David Robertson notes, “Bodies of criminals executed in Charleston were sometimes offered by the city, ‘if desired,’ to local surgeons for dissection; but the minutes of the Charleston Medical Society for 1822 record no such use of the remains of Vesey or his conspirators. See the archives of the Medical University of South Carolina Library, Charleston, South Carolina.”

See Robertson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried History of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 191n148. In his biography of Judah P. Benjamin (1811-1884), Robert Douthat Meade noted,

On July 2 when Denmark Vesey and five associates were given public hangings “immense crowds of whites and blacks were present,” one of Judah’s contemporaries vividly recalled over eighty years later. On 26 July he saw distinctly from the third-story window of his father’s house in upper King Street, not far from the scene, a long gallows erected on “The Lines,” and twenty-two Negroes hanging on it at one time. “I might say that the whole city turned out on this occasion, a sight calculated to strike terror into the heart of every slave.” Nor was their terror decreased by the provision in certain cases— “and their bodies to be delivered to the surgeons for dissection, if requested.”

See Robert Douthat Meade, With a New Foreword by William C. Davis, *Judah P. Benjamin: Confederate Statesman* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001; Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1943), 13.

⁶² Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom*; Bryan Prince, *I Came As A Stranger: The Underground Railroad* (Toronto, Ontario: Tundra Books, 2004); Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique*; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; 2013).

⁶³ Cooper, *Ibid.* Ashli White also cites an example of a southwest Indian born male who was transported to an Atlantic world site. According to White, “In November 1794, Crispin, a sixteen-year-old indentured to the prominent merchant Stephen Girard, disappeared from Philadelphia. Crispin was from Malabar, a coastal region of southwest India, and although sources offer no insight about how exactly he ended up bound to Girard, the merchant had connections with French firms in southern India and hoped to expand his enterprise into the Indian Ocean, in particular to the Isle de France, east of Madagascar.” For more information on Crispin, see White, *Encountering Revolution*, 148.

⁶⁴ A notable, classic exception can be found in Lawrence W. Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; 2007).

⁶⁵ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*.

⁶⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, Second Edition, Revised (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1989; 1963); Scott, "The Common Wind"; White, *Encountering Revolution*; Anja Bandau, "The Narrations of the Destruction of Saint-Domingue in the Late 18th Century and their Reinterpretations after the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution," *L'Ordinaire des Amériques*, Issue 215 (2013), accessed February 28, 2014, <http://orda.revues.org/688>.

⁶⁷ According to Jamie Lynn Johnson,

Governor Bennett was unequivocal in his indictment of the "court." In his address he called the court assembled by the Charleston City Council "in every sense ... an usurpation of authority and a violation of the Law." He noted his objections to nearly every detail in the method the court operated. Justice required sunshine[,] and this court did not allow the accused to confront their accusers in open court. The Governor repeated the theme (that) the court instead chose to "close its doors upon the community" and accepted testimony from witnesses "under pledges of inviolable secrecy" and "convicted [the accused], and sentenced [them] to death, without [their] seeing the persons, or hearing the voices of those, who testified of their guilt."

See Johnson, "The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey," 51-52 (original bracket/insertion).

⁶⁸ Wikramanayake, "The Denmark Vesey Affair," in *A World in Shadow*, 133-153.

⁶⁹ Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 172 (emphasis added).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, 176. It is important to note that "[i]n many slave societies, free mulattoes also earned the reputation as turncoats, which proved to be the case in Charleston in 1822 when three 'brown men'—Peter Prioleau, George Wilson, and William Penceel—turned in Denmark Vesey and his followers." See Douglas R. Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc.), 281.

⁷⁵ Richard Yidana, “Socionationalism in Ghana: History, Insights, and Lessons for Africa,” *Journal of Third World Studies*, Volume XXIX, Number 1 (Spring 2012): 103-136.

⁷⁶ Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World*, 279.

⁷⁷ Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 184-186.

⁷⁸ Alderson, “Charleston’s Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793,” 105.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 105; White, *Encountering Revolution*.

⁸⁰ Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators”; Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 60; Rubio, “‘Though he had a white face, he was a negro in heart’.”

⁸¹ Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World*, 202, 279, 281-282, 368, 479. Egerton and others noted that “[a]t a time when many white evangelicals in the northern states hoped to persuade slaveholders of the error in their ways and literally prayed for a more Godly republic, black speakers swore that enslaved Americans enjoyed a moral right to resist in any way possible. [Frederick] Douglass, who as a slave had wrestled a celebrated ‘slave breaker’ into subservience, had little use for the genteel racism of his more cautious allies. ‘We want Nat Turner—not speeches,’ he shouted on one occasion, ‘Denmark Vesey—not resolutions.’ Nor were black activists unaware that northern whites shared many of the cultural biases of their planter enemies.” Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World*, 479.

⁸² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Maryland and London, United Kingdom: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁸³ On October 23, 2012, I had the opportunity to give a presentation of an earlier version of this essay on Denmark Vesey and the history that surrounds the 1822 conspiracy to a group of school-age children from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who are a part of an African American Christian mentoring program, the Mazizi Maji Mentoring Program at the Baxter Community Center on the Southeast side of the second largest city in the state of Michigan. They were my invited guests to one of the courses that I teach in African and African American Studies and International Area Studies at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, AAA 355: History of Underground Railroad. The framing of my presentation on Vesey to the invited guests and to my students was one that cast Vesey as an abolitionist. Envisioning him as an antislavery activist offers a different perspective on the history of the Underground Railroad and Abolitionist movements in the Atlantic world because it not only covers the kind of examples that are embedded in the work of the historian Keith P. Griffler that centers on the social agency of

freedom-seekers, including their engagement in nineteenth-century “armed resistance” before the more famous twentieth-century Black Power Movement that was recently chronicled in a case study by Akinyele Umoja, but because it also highlights a part of Black history that is not a part of dominant memory of the struggle against slavery and because it situates Vesey as a pan-Africanist and as a radical intellectual. His ability to courageously engage in clandestine abolitionism was not guided by the pacifism that many antislavery activists believed in. Vesey’s unique instruction from the Bible, his application of revolutionary republican political theory, and his Afrocentric activism made him one of the fathers of Black nationalism and pan-Africanism. He clearly remains a mythological and heroic figure in the contemporary imagination. He did not leave any writings behind, so our understanding of him indisputably comes from secondary insights – namely trial manuscripts re-constructed by the White power structure of Charleston, South Carolina. See Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators”; Johnson, “Reading Evidence”; Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*. American Council of Learned Societies, New York, New York (New York, New York: The Viking Press, 1939). Edward A. Pearson traces the historical legacy and memory of the Vesey conspiracy among African Americans in the introduction to his controversial, now out-of-print *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 5-8. See also Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom*; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*. For a reference to Vesey as an “abolitionist,” see Egerton et al, *The Atlantic World*, 202.

⁸⁴ Asante, “Reclaiming the Black Radical Tradition or How Glen Ford Betrayed the BRT”; Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back*.

⁸⁵ *Southern Chronicle and Camden Gazette*, Wednesday, July 3, 1822, Volume 1, Number 21.

⁸⁶ Pearson’s “Introduction” is remarkable in theoretical terms of its leads about the Atlantic world as well as about what he seems to focus on as the revolutionary possibilities for working class people through his analysis of Black working class culture in Charleston, South Carolina, relating it to a larger history of modernity, or what he calls “unfettered capitalism,” and the struggle for human rights, a clash between good and evil, indeed. The veracity of his transcription of trial documents was questioned, which an article in *The New York Times* noted him as regretting. The fact remains that the reality and myth of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy are vexing issues in African and African American studies from all sorts of disciplinary perspectives and angles.

Historical analyses of the Vesey episode continue to debate if it happened or not, and the non-academic world continues to be largely unaware of any of the specifics about a man whose legacy frightened so many White Atlantic figures that the widespread fear of Black radical political movements seems unrelated to one of the principal figures whose life and death was a conduit through which the radical Black freedom movement found expression in his catalytic – though largely unacknowledged and forgotten – form. See Pearson, *Designs against Charleston*, 14; Dinitia Smith, “Challenging the History Of a Slave Conspiracy,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2002, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/23/arts/think-tank-challenging-the-history-of-a-slave-conspiracy.html>. However, the dynamic relationship between memory, history, and fiction in commemorations of Vesey continues, as the New York Regiment United States Colored Reenactors posted a photograph on Facebook of a “USCT pvt [sic] Marvin at Denmark ‘Telemaque’ Vessey’s [sic] home” dressed in regalia accompanied with biographical information about Vesey that described him as “an African man of Mande who labored briefly in French Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), and then was settled in Charleston, South Carolina as a youth. He was famous for planning a slave rebellion in the United States in 1822 Among Vesey’s co-conspirators was Gullah Jack Prichard, an African priest from Mozambique.” See New York Regiment United States Colored Troops Reenactors’ (20th, 26th, 31st) Facebook page, accessed August 1, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/604617856233679/photos/a.604913129537485.1073741828.604617856233679/672973469398117/?type=1&theater>.

⁸⁷ According to the “Africana Editors’ Notes” to Edward Wilmot Blyden’s *African Life and Customs*, “One of the earliest Pan-Africanists [was] Blyden [who] encouraged all people of African descent to celebrate their heritage and to live in African nations.” See “Africana Editors’ Notes,” in Edward Wilmot Blyden, *African Life and Customs* (London: C.M. Phillips, 1908), accessed August 2, 2013, <http://elearning.zaou.ac.zm:8060/Myths%20&%20History/North%20American/American%20History/Black%20America/African%20Life%20and%20Customs%20-%20Edward%20Wilmot%20Blyden%201908.doc> (in the author’s possession). See also Itibari M. Zulu, “Africana Studies: Post Black Studies Vagrancy in Academe,” *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Volume 5, Number 7 (October 2012): 4-8, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.jpanafrican.com/docs/vol5no7/5.67AfricanaStudies.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Pierce Force, “The House on Bayou Road: Atlantic Creole Networks in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History*, Volume 100, Number 1 (June 2013): 21-45; Michael A. Schoeppner, “Status across Borders: Roger Taney, Black British Subjects, and a Diplomatic Antecedent to the Dred Scott Decision,” *Journal of American History*, Volume 100, Number 1 (June 2013): 46-67. See Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*.

⁸⁹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Alan Schoeppner, “Navigating the Dangerous Atlantic: Racial Quarantines, Black Sailors and United States Constitutionalism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida 2010), 18-40. Indeed, according to Ricki Stevenson, “Many people mistakenly believe that the first great mass migration of African-Americans to France came with the Harlem Renaissance. It didn’t. The first great mass migration came following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.” See Eleanor Beardsley, “Paris Has Been A Haven For African Americans Escaping Racism,” *NPR*, September 2, 2013, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/09/02/218074523/paris-has-been-a-haven-for-african-americans-escaping-racism>.

⁹⁰ Dr. Richard Yidana, text message to the author, September 16, 2013.

⁹¹ See Gene Allen Smith, *The Slaves’ Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 189.

⁹² Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 359-360. For details about “revolutionary intercommunalism,” see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, California, Los Angeles, California, and London, United Kingdom: University of California Press, 2013), 312 and 467-468n11.

⁹³ Bandau, “The Narrations of the Destruction of Saint-Domingue in the Late 18th Century and their Reinterpretations after the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution,” page 3 of PDF version.

⁹⁴ Bandau, *Ibid.*, 3-4 (original parentheses/insertion). See also Matt D. Childs, “The 1812 Aponte Rebellion and the Struggle Against Slavery in Cuba (Selections),” in Dubois and Scott, Editors, *Origins of the Black Atlantic*, 310-311n33.

⁹⁵ Bandau, *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰¹ Hampton, “‘Lawdy! I was sho’ happy when I was a slave!’” page 2 of PDF version.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Hampton, “Bibliographie” in *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Aje, “Fugitive Slave Narratives and the (Re)presentation of the Self?” page 6 of PDF version.

¹⁰⁸ Of course, trial documents that emerged in the context of the Vesey plot are not narratives that were written by the formerly enslaved or attained via conventional dictation, but the emergence of William Grime’s 1825 narrative may be useful here, as it is said to be the first narrative in African American history attributed to a formerly enslaved fugitive. See *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time. Written by Himself*, Edited by William L. Andrews and Regina E. Mason (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Originally published 1825; Republished in 1855).

¹⁰⁹ According to *A Dictionary for Critical Thinking*, “paratext” is defined as “French literary theorist Gérard Genette’s term for the framing devices authors and publishers use to contextualize works and generate interest (e.g. blurbs, subtitles, celebrity endorsements, and so forth). As Genette points out in *Seuils* (1987) translated as *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), although not officially part of the text, the paratext can have a significant influence over the way a text is received.” See Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary for Critical Thinking*. Oxford Reference (Oxford, United Kingdom and New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; 2014), Current Online Version, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-510>.

¹¹⁰ Aje notes, “Evidently, abolitionists needed a slave representative who would conform to their political agenda, not a rebel. Thus, any personal outburst, or even comment, from the fugitive slave was proscribed,” and proslavery figures certainly sought to create a demonized, representative rebel along the lines that Michael P. Johnson suggested occurred in the case of Denmark Vesey where the White Charlestonian power structure made efforts to domesticate the terrors haunting Charleston in a revolutionary Atlantic context. If “abolitionists fashioned the slave’s image, speech, and narrative according to what a nineteenth-century white audience or

readership was ready to hear or believe,” then Michael Johnson’s suggestion does not appear to be far-fetched, as the Denmark Vesey trial manuscripts whose veracity he questions were produced for a proslavery audience. In the words of James Olney, “in one sense the narrative lives of ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders.” See Aje, “Fugitive Slave Narratives and the (Re)Presentation of the Self?” 3, 6, 7, 8; Olney cited in Aje, *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹¹ Aje, *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹² Aje, *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹³ Aje, *Ibid.*, 13-14; Personal communication with Dr. Veta Smith Tucker; David Walker, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance” (1830) and Henry Highland Garnet, “The Past and The Present Condition, and the Destiny of the Colored Race” (1848) in *Black Pearls of Wisdom: Voicing the African-American Journey for Freedom, Empowerment, and the Future*, Edited by Donald Spivey (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2014), 3-12, 23-28; Egerton, “Abolitionist or Terrorist?” See also Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (1843), in Garnet, *Walker’s Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life, and also Garnet’s Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York: J.H. Tobitt, 1848), accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16516/16516-h/16516-h.htm>.

¹¹⁴ Andrews cited in Aje, *Ibid.*, 17n20.

¹¹⁵ *Southern Chronicle and Camden Gazette*, Volume 1, Issue 21, July 3, 1822; “Charleston, June 29,” *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Volume XX, Issue 2, July 6, 1822; “Execution,” *Daily Georgian* (Savannah, GA), Volume IV, Issue 34, July 6, 1822; *Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot*, Volume LVI, Issue 4300, July 10, 1822; “By the Mails,” *Providence Gazette*, July 10, 1822, Volume LVIII, Issue 3184, July 10, 1822; “Execution,” *Alexandria Herald*, Volume XIII, Issue 1825, July 15, 1822; “Charleston, June 29, 1822,” *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven, CT), Volume XIX, Issue 41, July 16, 1822; “By the Mails,” *American Federalist Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), Issue 3993, July 17, 1822; “Summary,” *Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), Volume XXII, Issue 1139, July 17, 1822; “South-Carolina,” *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, Volume XXXIII, Issue 29, July 20, 1822.

¹¹⁶ *Pittsfield Sun*, Volume XXII, Issue 1139, July, 17, 1822.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ “Executions [in] the U.S. 1608-2002: The ESPY File Executions by State,” Death Penalty Information Center, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/ESPYyear.pdf>. This document includes information about the “Name (Last First)”, “Race”, “Age”, “Sex”, “Crime”, “Method”, “Day”, “Month”, “Year”, and “State” categories listed in the historical record.

¹²² *Watch-Tower* (Cooperstown, NY), Volume IX, Issue 434, July 22, 1822.

¹²³ Rubio, “‘Though he had a white face, he was a negro in heart’.”

¹²⁴ “Slave Conspiracy in South Carolina,” *Evening Post* (New York, NY), Volume 6290, August 27, 1822.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹²⁸ “Slave Conspiracy in South Carolina,” *Evening Post* (New York, NY), Volume 6290, August 27, 1822.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Force, “The House on Bayou Road,” 38, 44.

¹³¹ Schoeppner, “Navigating the Dangerous Atlantic,” 24n11.

¹³² Schoeppner, “Status across Borders,” 48-49. See also Michael Schoeppner, “Peculiar Quarantines: The Seamen Acts and Regulatory Authority in the Antebellum South,” *Law and History Review*, Volume 31, Number 3 (August 2013): 459-586; Michael Schoeppner, “Legitimizing Quarantine: Moral Contagions, the Commerce Clause, and the Limits of *Gibbins v. Ogden*,” *Journal of Southern Legal History*, Volume 17, Numbers 1/2 (December 2009): 81-120.

¹³³ “Slave Conspiracy in South Carolina,” *Evening Post* (New York, NY), Volume 6290, August 27, 1822.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*; “The Late Plot,” *Daily Georgian* (Savannah, GA), Volume IV, Number 56, August 27, 1822.

¹³⁵ James Hamilton, *Negro Plot: An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina* (Boston, Massachusetts: Joseph W. Ingraham, 1822).

¹³⁶ “Insurrection,” *National Advocate* (New York, NY), Volume X, August 28, 1822.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Bennett’s valediction cited in *Evening Post* (New York, NY), Volume 6290, August 27, 1822; “The Negro Plot. Copy of a Circular from the Governor of South Carolina. Executive Department, Charleston, Aug. 10, 1822,” *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, Virginia), Volume XIII, Issue 1844, August 28, 1822.

¹³⁹ “Account,” *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Volume XX, Issue 48, August 29, 1822.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* The quotation marks in the letter are from the original citation in the *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ “An Account,” *Spectator* (New York, NY), August 30, 1822.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Volume XX, Issue 49, August 30, 1822.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid. This was also depicted in a film about the Vesey conspiracy. See *A House Divided: Denmark Vesey's Rebellion*, Written by William Hauptman and Directed by Stan Lathan (PBS Television, 1982). See also Richard F. Shepard, "A Forgotten Rebellion of Slaves," *New York Times*, February 17, 1982, accessed July 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/17/arts/tv-a-forgotton-rebellion-of-slaves.html>.

¹⁵⁴ *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Volume XX, Issue 49, August 30, 1822.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid (original emphasis).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. This was also represented in a gunpowder keg-lifting scene in the film, *A House Divided*.

¹⁵⁷ *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, Volume XX, Issue 49, August 30, 1822.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. As with many enslaved African Atlantic figures, it is important to note the fact that "frequently, only first names were given for free African Americans in the record." See Rubio, "'Though he had a white face, he was a negro in heart'," 57n24.

¹⁶⁰ *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, VA), Volume XIII, Issue 1845, August 30, 1822.

¹⁶¹ "An Account," *Spectator* (New York, NY), August 30, 1822.

¹⁶² *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, VA), Volume XIII, Issue 1846, September 2, 1822.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” iii.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁷ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 1-6.

¹⁶⁸ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 5-6.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷¹ Freehling cited in Ibid., 12. See also William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1990), 79.

¹⁷² Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 14.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 15, 17.

¹⁷⁴ Lofton cited in Ibid., 17. See also John Lofton, *Insurrection in South Carolina: The Turbulent World of Denmark Vesey* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1964); John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Plot that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1983; Lofton, *Denmark Vesey’s Revolt*.

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 18.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. See also Lillie J. Edwards, *Denmark Vesey: Slave Revolt Leader* (New York, New York and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 57-59, cited in Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 24.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷⁹ Rob Gregg, “Designs against Historians,” *Histrionics*, Number 22, December 3, 2003, accessed May 19, 2014, <http://loki.stockton.edu/~greggr/vesey.htm>; Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow* (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁰ Gregg, “Designs against Historians.”

¹⁸¹ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 30.

¹⁸² Charles S. Johnson, cited in *Ibid.*, 32. See also the epigraph of this essay.

¹⁸³ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 32. Johnson notes that the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, “wrote the introduction to the children’s book titled *Denmark Vesey*. In it Mrs. King offers Denmark Vesey as an example of a black man of exemplary character. In him, she saw the definition of black manhood to be embraced by oppressed blacks of any generation spanning the divide between nonviolent resisters and panthers. Mrs. King, like other Vesey supporters, saw in Denmark Vesey the ideal of a man worthy of celebration and emulation. Vesey was a remarkable man who stood up against oppression, to his own detriment.” However, Coretta Scott King’s endorsement of the book, which was written for adolescent and young adult audiences, appeared in other books from the Black Americans of Achievement Series that were produced with the assistance of Senior Consulting Editor Nathan Irvin Huggins. Johnson, *Ibid.*, 32-33. See also King, “On Achievement,” in Edwards, *Denmark Vesey*, 7-8.

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ According to Walter Isaacson, “At the signing of the parchment copy on August 2, John Hancock, the president of the [Continental] Congress, penned his name with his famous flourish. ‘There must be no pulling different ways,’ he declared. ‘We must all hang together.’ According to the early historian Jared Sparks, Franklin replied: ‘Yes, we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.’ Their lives, as well as their sacred honor, had been put on the line.” See Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York, New York; London, United Kingdom; Toronto, Ontario; Sydney, Australia; and Singapore, Malaysia: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 313; Jared Sparks, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin; Containing The Autobiography, With Notes and a Continuation* (Boston, Massachusetts: Tappan and Dennet, 1844), 408.

¹⁸⁷ Nathan Irvin Huggins, “Foreword” to Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, xv-xvi.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁸⁹ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 1, 47.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 56 (emphasis added).

¹⁹¹ Flemming, “Acculturation and Resistance.”

¹⁹² “Statement of Prince Graham, Document B, Documents Relating to the Vesey Uprising,” cited in Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 58n32.

¹⁹³ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 58.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 67, 69.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 71. See also David Levering Lewis, “The Autobiography of Biography,” *American Scholar*, Volume 83, Issue 3 (Summer 2014), accessed August 30, 2015, <http://theamericanscholar.org/the-autobiography-of-biography/>. Du Bois, according to Lewis, was “even ultimately convinced that what others called treason was the last refuge of the true patriot[, which] was, I decided, of less importance than that his ideas were fecund and his obduracy deeply principled.” Nicholas Johnson reminds us that even twentieth-century African American intellectual leaders such as W.E.B Du Bois, in his younger days “[i]n classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ... argued that organized violence was folly, noting that ‘the death of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner proved long since to the Negro the present hopelessness of physical defense.’ At the same time, in the chapter titled ‘Of the Coming of John,’ a tale of violence and private honor, Du Bois championed self-defense as a core private interest.” According to Johnson,

Political nonviolence so dominates the story of the modern civil-rights movement that it obscures the tradition of individual self-defense. And while the folly of political violence seems plain today, the case against it did not always sway black folk. Indeed, luminaries of the nineteenth-century leadership class advocated organized violent resistance against slavery as a matter of considered policy. And before that, cryptic accounts of early American slavery, [sic] evidence abundant individual and organized resistance.

Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2014), 31-32, 153. Johnson et al noted that “[f]ear of Black resistance and revolt were an inherent feature of slavery in America.” Indeed,

The Southern fear of slave rebellion was not unfounded. Although there were others, two particularly notable slave uprisings heavily influenced slaveholders in the South [e.g., resistance movements led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner] ... The [Vesey] plan was foiled ... Still, slave owners took notice—it was reportedly feared that as many as 6,600 to 9,000 slaves and free blacks [sic] were involved in the plot The fear generated by ... rebellions led Southern legislatures to take particularly vicious aim at the rights of free blacks [sic] and slaves to speak or to keep and bear arms for their defense.

See Nicholas J. Johnson, David B. Kopel, George A. Mocsary, and Michael P. O’Shea, *Firearms Law and the Second Amendment* (New York, New York: Wolters Kluwer Law & Business, 2012), 293, 674.

¹⁹⁸ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 72-73.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 74, 74n9.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 79. The author makes reference to the following “remarkable circumstance in the Vesey trials”: “A remarkable circumstance in the Vesey trials was the degree of confidence that well-established Charleston planters like the Bennetts and the Prioleaus continued to place in their accused slaves.” Morris Brown’s effort to build an AME network was foiled by the “large-scale implication of black class leaders in the Vesey affair, and his (Brown’s) attempts at black religious unification died with his (Brown’s) expulsion from the state.” Free Black Societies included the widely recognized Brown Fellowship Society as well as the Humane Brotherhood (“originally the Society of Free Dark Men”), the Unity and Friendship Society, the Friendly Moralistic Society, the Minors’ Moralistic Society, and the Christian Benevolent Society, for example. *Ibid.*, 81-82, 84n42, 85, 88. According to James Ciment,

Many blacks in turn resented and distrusted mulattoes. After the failed Denmark Vesey slave uprising of 1822, the blacks of Charleston blamed mulattoes for informing the white authorities of the plan. In a speech to that city’s elite light-skinned Friendly Moralistic Society, Michael Eggart acknowledged the hostility, stating that as mulattoes they faced not only the “prejudice of the white man” but “the deeper hate of our more sable brethren.”

De Toqueville [sic] picked up on the tension and put it [in] another context, noting that “when quarrels originating in differences of color take place, they [mulattoes] generally side with the whites, just as the lackeys of the great in Europe assume the contemptuous airs of the nobility towards the lower orders.”

See James Ciment, *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It* (New York, New York: Hill & Wang, 2013), 104 (original bracket/insertation).

²⁰⁴ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 94.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁰⁶ Wikramanayake notes, “The authorship of the pamphlet has been attributed to Thomas Pinckney.” See *Ibid.*, 102n18; cited from page 12 of *Reflections Occasioned by the Late Disturbances in Charleston, by Achates* in Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 102.

²⁰⁷ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 103-104 (emphasis added).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 113-114.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120-121 (emphasis added).

²¹⁸ Ibid., 121 (emphasis added).

²¹⁹ Ibid., 122.

²²⁰ Ibid., 122.

²²¹ Ibid., 123.

²²² Ibid., 123.

²²³ Ibid., 124-125.

²²⁴ Ibid., 125-126.

²²⁵ Ibid., 127.

²²⁶ Ibid., 128. August 6, 1822 was the date of Morris Brown's conviction. Ibid., 128. William Garner, who was the thirty-fourth person to be executed besides Vesey, was executed on August 9, 1822. See "Executions [in] the U.S. 1608-2002."

²²⁷ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 127-128.

²²⁸ Ibid., 129; Gregg, "Designs against Historians."

²²⁹ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 153.

²³⁰ Ibid., 133-134, 133n1; Elizabeth B. Pharo, Editor, *Reminiscences of William Hasell Wilson* (1811-1902) (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Patterson & White Company, 1937), 6-10, cited in Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., 134n2.

²³² Ibid., 134n3.

²³³ Ibid., 135.

²³⁴ Ibid., 135 (emphasis added).

²³⁵ Ibid., 136.

²³⁶ Ibid., 136.

²³⁷ Ibid., 136.

²³⁸ Ibid., 136.

²³⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 137.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 137-138.

²⁴² Ibid., 138 (emphasis added).

²⁴³ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 139.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 139.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 140.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 140-141.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 141-142. "Letters of 'Rusticus,'" cited in Ibid., 141-142, 142n18.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 141.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 142.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 142.

²⁵² Ibid., 143.

²⁵³ Ibid., 143, 145.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 145.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 148.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 148-149.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 150. See also Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*.

²⁵⁹ Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow*, 150n35.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 155.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 155.

²⁶² James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States*, “Letter XIX, Charleston, 3rd March 1857,” cited in Ibid., 156n1.

²⁶³ Ibid, 156-157, 157n2.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 158, 158n4.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 158-159.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 159.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 160.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 161-162.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 163-164 (emphasis added).

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 167-168. The author’s closing chapter uses a conceptualization of “Escape from Freedom” or a concept that denotes a form of antislavery activism and resistance to the fetters of freedom. She frames her conclusion by arguing that the racial climate in South Carolina was so permeated by White supremacy leading up to the Civil War that “[f]inding little redress outside South Carolina, the state’s free blacks had one further option: voluntary enslavement. Between 1859 and 1863 a remarkable number of free blacks petitioned the legislature for permission to go into slavery.” The petitioners who were cited included one “free black boy” with all of the rest being “women ... with family and having no means of support”; even “the state was beginning to believe that enslavement was the only viable option for free blacks” according to a “Bill to authorize voluntary enslavement, 1859.”

In short, according to Wikramanayake, “the free blacks of South Carolina had enjoyed a *dubious* freedom.” Ibid., 171, 183, 183n23-24, 184 (emphasis added). See also the work of Saidiya V. Hartman regarding African American fettered freedom during the transition from legal enslavement to emancipation in the nineteenth century in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁷¹ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 35-36.

²⁷² Ibid., 36 (original parentheses/insertion).

²⁷³ Lofton cited in Ibid., 37.

²⁷⁴ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 38.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 39 (original parentheses/insertion).

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 40 (original parentheses/insertion).

²⁷⁸ Wade cited in Ibid., 40 (original parentheses/insertion).

²⁷⁹ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 41.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 42.

²⁸² Higginson cited in Ibid., 42-43.

²⁸³ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 43.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁸⁵ Lofton cited in Ibid., 45.

²⁸⁶ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 46.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 47. Jamie Lynn Johnson pointed out that Monday and Rolla both “confessed under coercion.” According to Michael P. Johnson, “forty-men ... pleaded guilty ... [, and] twenty-three of the 131 men arrested ... testified against other defendants ... Of the thirty-five men eventually hanged, twenty-three [of 35 executed] remained mute ... Two ... gave lengthy confessions ... Four ... implicat[ed] others ... six ... spoke ... in self-defense ... only two of the executed men ... confessed and just six testified to any knowledge of the plot.” Michael P. Johnson claims that the court and historians based their “judgments” on “principally the testimony of other witnesses” or essentially what others said—secondary-hand sources of information indeed. He also argued that torture was a part of interrogations of the accused; for example, he notes, “Since white Charleston routinely sent their slaves to the workhouse for beatings, Paul’s examination probably included physical stimuli considered likely to improve his memory.” Robert Starobin had earlier made observations about “the use of executions to extract confessions,” as he contended that “Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig confessed only after being sentenced to death, but were then promised clemency for cooperation. The court simply delayed their execution so that they had more time to implicate more rebels and testify against them. As a reward, the court commuted their sentences from death to deportation.” Michael P. Johnson argued that the court made use of “pet witnesses” who desperately sought to avoid torture or implication in the plot by testifying against others. Michael P. Johnson and Robert Starobin cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 33-34, 48-49. See also Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting,” in Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁸⁸ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 53.

²⁸⁹ Freehling cited in *Ibid.*, 53-54.

²⁹⁰ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 55.

²⁹¹ Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁹² Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁹³ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 57.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55, 60.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 62. See also Gregg, “Designs against Historians.”

²⁹⁷ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 63-64.

²⁹⁸ Michael P. Johnson cited in Ibid., 66-67. See also Hampton, “‘Lawdy! I was sho’ happy when I was a slave!’”

²⁹⁹ See Darin J. Waters, “Whose Story? Democratizing America’s Collective Historical Memory,” *Mountain Xpress* (Ashville, NC), June 16, 2014, accessed June 16, 2014, <http://mountainx.com/opinion/whose-story-democratizing-americas-collective-historical-memory/>.

³⁰⁰ Alice LaPlante’s analytical approach to creative writing informs my approach to both Vesey and African Atlantic armed resistance against American slavery as well as to the historiography of the episode surrounding him in the summer of 1822. She defined “creative nonfiction” as “[f]act-based writing that uses fictional techniques to bring the subject to life.” See LaPlante, “*The Making of a Story*”, 619, 644 (original emphasis and original parentheses/insertion; brackets/insertion added). See especially Chapter 14, “Getting beyond Facts to Truth,” 619-642.

³⁰¹ Johnson, “The Undead Bones of Denmark Vesey,” 70, 73. Michael P. Johnson cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, Ibid., 71-72. Michael P. Johnson argued that “[i]t exaggerates only slightly to say that the July trials were held by a hanging court” and maintained that “[t]he only evidence of the conspiracy came from the witnesses’ words, some version of which a clerk recorded in the court transcript.” Jamie Lynn Johnson pointed out that “[t]he heart of [Michael P.] Johnson’s argument is that society, as well as historians[,] had based their understanding of the plot on flawed, politically motivated documents. [According to Michael P. Johnson,] ‘By drawing mostly on sources used to convict the insurrectionists, historians have followed the lead of the court and of nineteenth-century abolitionists who accepted the court’s conclusions about Vesey’s leadership while rejecting the court’s defense of slavery and white supremacy.’” Jamie Lynn Johnson also observed that Michael P. Johnson felt that, in her words, “[t]he cultural and political bias extends to abolitionists who accepted the magistrates’ version of events. [Michael P.] Johnson noted that even in 1861 the famous abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson accepted the still prevailing consensus that the Vesey conspiracy ‘was the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves, and came the nearest to a terrible success. In boldness of conception and thoroughness of organization there has been nothing to compare with it.’” Michael P. Johnson cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, Ibid., 68-69.

³⁰² Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 73. David Robertson argued,

Vesey's circumstances during his imprisonment and trial should not be forgotten All the more remarkable, then, was Vesey's stamina and courage in insisting that he personally be allowed in the Work House courtroom to cross-examine the black and mulatto witnesses brought against him. "He at first questioned them [the witnesses] in the dictatorial, despotic manner in which he was probably accustomed to address them," his judges later wrote. "But this not producing the desired effect, he questioned them with affected surprise and concern for learning false testimony against him; still failing in his purpose, he then examined them strictly as to dates, but could not make them contradict themselves" Such, at least, is the version supplied by Vesey's judges, and no text of his actual cross-examination was recorded by the court."

Robertson, *Denmark Vesey*, 96-97 (original bracket/insertion).

³⁰³ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 74-76.

³⁰⁴ Mary Lamboll Beach letter, July 5, 1822, from Robertson, cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰⁵ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁰⁶ Robertson cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 76 (original emphasis and original parentheses/insertion).

³⁰⁷ Robertson cited in *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰⁸ Pearson cited in *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰⁹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 78.

³¹⁰ Pearson cited in *Ibid.*, 79-80.

³¹¹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 80.

³¹² Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 80-81.

³¹³ Starobin cited in *Ibid.*, 82.

³¹⁴ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 82.

³¹⁵ *Charleston Southern Patriot and Commercial Advisor* (September 12, 1822) reference from Wade, cited in *Ibid.*, 82. According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “Self [p]reservation and freedom act as intense motivators ... Blacks were terrorized both by the trial and concern about being accused themselves. These considerations must be taken into account when considering witness testimony. The threat against slaves was real, as was the incentive for cooperation.” The latter is noted by historians such as Richard Wade and Marina Wikramanayake as being critical to the fact that “cooperative slaves were granted manumission.” Wikramanayake argued, “In 1822 two slaves whose evidence had led to the arrests made in the Vesey affair were awarded their freedom and an annuity by the South Carolina legislature.” Jamie Lynn Johnson also asserts that “[f]or generations, the consensus view held that the Magistrate’s version of events was accurate.” She also engages in a critical examination of “three fundamental questions: Were tortured slaves fearful of execution enough to provide false witness? Was the plot more than ‘loose talk’ among aggrieved slaves? Was the plot well developed and feasible?” Her critical examination was one that focused on “slave class and revolt.” Wikramanayake cited in *Ibid.*, 82. See also *Ibid.*, 82-84.

³¹⁶ Robert Starobin noted that “the rebel leadership ... consisted mainly of skilled slave artisans and religious leaders. Vesey himself was a free black carpenter, and his lieutenants were all slave craftsmen and preachers[.] Peter Poyas [was] a ‘first-rate’ ship carpenter, Mingo Harth was a ‘mechanic’, Tom Russell was a blacksmith, and Monday Gell was a harness maker who hired out his own labor and kept a workshop in the center of the city. Gullah Jack was a ‘conjurer’ who kept alive African religious traditions, while other leaders were deacons in the black church.” See Starobin cited in *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹⁷ Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 86.

³¹⁸ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 86.

³¹⁹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 87. Starobin characterized their response as one in which “no one at the time doubted that blacks actually intended to rebel ...[, and] troops guarded the prison and court day and night to prevent blacks from freeing the captives and continuing the conspiracy.” See Starobin cited in *Ibid.*, 87.

³²⁰ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 87. See also Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 87. According to Wade, “[Thomas] Pinckney thought them ‘certainly most dangerous’ because they had an ‘intimate acquaintance with all circumstances relating to the interior of the dwellings,’ because of ‘confidence reposed to them,’ and because of ‘information they unavoidably obtain, from hearing the conversation, and observing the habitual transactions of their owners’.” See Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 88.

Pinckney had formerly held the following positions: Major in the Continental Army, U.S. Minister to Great Britain, Envoy Extraordinary to Spain, Governor of South Carolina, U.S Representative, and Major General (U.S. Army). See “Pinckney, Thomas (1750-1828),” Biographical Information, *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000357>.

³²¹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 88. See also Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 88. An article that appeared in the *Charleston Courier* titled “Melancholy Effect of Popular Excitement” (June 21, 1822) by Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, Jr., was critical of the cultural climate that the magistrates’/court’s findings caused in Charleston, particularly the fear and hysteria it caused. See Michael P. Johnson cited in Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 89-90.

³²² Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 90.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 91; Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 91-92.

³²⁴ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 92. Egerton made a perceptive observation about newspaper politics wherein an apology was issued by the editor of the newspaper who published William Johnson’s article, for “[s]o great was the outcry against Johnson that the editor of the *Courier* printed a public apology in which he insisted he had run Johnson’s objections only after ‘read[ing them] over in a very hasty manner.’” According to Jamie Lynn Johnson’s key historiographical point on this issue, “It appears that Michael Johnson has equated political tension with corrupt political motivation. It is natural for a Supreme Court Justice to defend the rule of law and public testimony. This does not necessarily corroborate the charge that the chief magistrate created a false plot to advance his political career. It is true[,] however, that the magistrate benefitted from his position defending Charleston. The contrast between the Mayor who served the Chief Magistrate and the Governor couldn’t be starker. The Mayor protected citizens from a potentially deadly plot; the Governor was so blind to the threat of insurrection that he housed four of the alleged masterminds in his home.” *Ibid.*, 94-95; Egerton cited in *Ibid.*, 94.

³²⁵ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 95. She argued that “urban slaves had opportunity to organize and revolt which undermines Wade’s theory” that enslaved African Atlantic figures in cities were less prone to be discontent with enslavement enough to engage in armed resistance against American slavery in organized fashion. Lofton did note that “[a] few free Negroes were numbered among the enlistees, indicating that Vesey was not the only member of his class who was willing to risk all on what white overlords might regard as a fools’ goals.” Lofton cited in *Ibid.*, 95 and 97.

³²⁶ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 97; Higginson, cited in *Ibid.*, 97. According to Jamie Lynn Johnson, “If slaves could acquire weapons, and gather without drawing scrutiny, they still needed to be able to communicate. This is the final matter of feasibility.” *Ibid.*, 98.

³²⁷ Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 99; Lofton cited in *Ibid.*, 98. See also Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stone Rebellion* (New York, New York and London, United Kingdom: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974; 1975).

³²⁸ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 100; Wade, cited in *Ibid.*, 99-100.

³²⁹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 101. This is also a point that I made in an earlier essay; see Flemming, “Acculturation and Resistance,” 10.

³³⁰ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 101-102. According to Wade in his analysis of Black and White fears, “Blacks heard that whites were going to ‘thin out’ the colored population ... Circulating among the whites were equally hair-raising notions: a servile uprising, the seizure of the city, the carrying off of women after all males had been exterminated.” Michael Johnson noted, “In 1820, the South Carolina legislature prohibited masters from manumitting their slaves, stating unambiguously ‘that no slave shall hereafter be emancipated but by act of the Legislature’.” Indeed, “[Michael P.] Johnson makes much of the fact that slaves and free Negroes might have misinterpreted reports in Charleston’s *Courier*, interpreting an absolute ban on manumission ending the dream of eventual emancipation ... [According to Michael P. Johnson,] ‘The news reports did not assume an audience of intensely curious black readers’” although literate Blacks and Whites alike were able to read published coverage about the legislation. Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 101-102; Michael P. Johnson cited in *Ibid.*, 102.

³³¹ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 103-104; Michael P. Johnson cited in *Ibid.*, 103.

³³² Jamie Lynn Johnson, 104; Higginson cited in *Ibid.*, 104-105.

³³³ Wade noted, “Blacks were terrorized by the trial.” However, as Jamie Lynn Johnson observed, “Richard Wade claims Governor Bennett doubted the existence of a plot. A doubtful governor would not request troops from a barely trusted federal government in such a charged political atmosphere” as the early nineteenth-century revolutionary Atlantic context. If “[h]istorians have long acknowledged [that] the evidence in the Denmark Vesey case came to us through a *biased filter*” then “[t]he trial of Denmark Vesey is all the more important to our understanding of human nature, because the case occurred *at the intersection of justice and self-preservation*.” Further,

Our knowledge of Denmark Vesey follows this model. The details of Vesey's life come to us through the documentation provided only through his contact with white society, purchase records, travel logs and white diaries. We know when he was purchased as well [as] when he bought his own freedom. We know about his business because he served white Charleston. We know about his death because it came at the hands of his white accusers. The details of his crime also come to us through this sift, as is the case of all the would-be insurrectionists. We can never know their stories through their eyes nor how they experienced the world The accusers themselves wrote the only published record of the case. The witness testimony comes from slaves who faced possible manumission or execution in exchange for their cooperation or non-cooperation *But some inherent truth speaks to us through this record. The questioning from the Magistrates is dripping with a grave sense of fear, long brewing among whites in Charleston.*

For example, "references to poisoning [a] well were deleted from printed records. In any event, *the evidence suggests that a revision of the traditional role assigned to house servants is in order.* Jamie Lynn Johnson argued that if "the goal of Vesey's army was rebel only enough to make an escape, it might have been feasible." Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 105-110 (emphasis added); Wade cited in *Ibid.*, 105, 109-110.

³³⁴ Jamie Lynn Johnson, *Ibid.*, 110, 111-112.

³³⁵ Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8, 13, 16, 19-20 (emphasis added); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London, United Kingdom: Verso, 1993). Woodard's study is an important one also in terms of the larger implication of his analysis, specifically "the contemporary implications of the cultural origins debate."

For this issue of roots of cultural transmission is not simply a matter of revising or changing the master narrative from Eurocentric to African origins of black American culture. Rather, at stake in this debate over cultural origins is a deeper understanding of the ways in which, for example, the penal politics of slavery and chattel bondage speak to current political phenomena, such as the incarceration of black people and black men in particular; economic issues of racial reparations and the larger, systemic sedimentation of racial inequality; and issues of trauma and post-traumatic stress that affect the ideological and material aspects of black uplift politics and communities.

Woodard, *Ibid.*, 20.

³³⁶ According to Richard Wright, who was writing in the context of African anticolonial and independence movement struggles:

There is but one honorable course that assumes and answers the ideological, traditional, organizational, emotional, political, and productive needs of Africa at this time: AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED! not for war, but for peace; not for destruction, but for service; not for aggression but for production; not for despotism, but to free minds from mumbo-jumbo I'm not speaking of a military dictatorship. You know that. I need not even have to say that to you, but I say it for the sake of others who will try to be naive enough to misconstrue my words. I'm speaking simply of a militarization of the daily, social lives of the people; I'm speaking of giving form, organization, direction, meaning, and a sense of justification to those lives I'm speaking of a temporary discipline that will unite the nation, sweep out the tribal cobwebs, and place the feet of the masses upon a basis of reality. I'm not speaking of guns or secret police; I'm speaking of a method of taking people from one order of life and making them face what men, all men everywhere, must face. What the Europeans failed to do, didn't want to do because they feared disrupting their own profits and global real estate, you must do.

Wright, *Black Power*, in *Richard Wright Reader*, 104.

³³⁷ In conversation with the debate that was re-sparked by the historian Michael P. Johnson regarding the veracity of the conspiracy, Rubio argues that “actions by the court do not have the appearance of a witch hunt. To the contrary, not only were the procedures typical of South Carolina’s justice system at the time, but Magistrates Kennedy and Parker went out of their way to promise an equitable hearing for the black defendants in the Vesey trials ... But, [the historian Douglas] Egerton, citing [the abolitionist Thomas] Higginson’s observations, additionally notes that ‘the Charleston court routinely deviated from the settled rules of evidence established in English common law, and certainly it was true that most western nations had abandoned the practice of obtaining testimony through torture’.” Rubio made the important observation that “[d]uring the course of that debate, the role of the four white men on trial was not even mentioned.” Ultimately, Rubio argues,

The fact that none of the whites pled guilty despite eyewitness testimony is no more proof of their innocence or guilt than it was for the accused black conspirators. Whether from genuine innocence, conviction in their beliefs that revolutionary violence was not a crime, or simply trying to avoid punishment, Vesey and most plot leaders pled not guilty. Vesey took over his own defense from his counsel, G.W. Cross, whom he felt was incompetent, and unsuccessfully tried to shake the stories of the witnesses who testified as to his role in organizing the plot.

The maritime dimensions of the convicted White men that are highlighted in Rubio's study also resonate with the findings of W. Jeffrey Bolster and other Atlantic historians of sailors. Vesey is referred to as ranking among "black abolitionists" such as Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, who all "shared a personal history of seafaring." Rubio also contends that "there also is evidence that Vesey and [David] Walker were acquainted during a visit by Walker to Charleston in the early 1820s, when they likely attended the same African Methodist church." In regards to John Oliver Killen's edited volume, *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1970), it is also noteworthy that Rubio contends that "Killen's version is not considered reliable due to heavy editing." Philip F. Rubio, "'Though he had a white face, he was a negro in heart,'" 50n1, 51-52, 56n21, 58-59, 60-62, 64n54, 67.

³³⁸ Rubio, *Ibid.*, 51, 65. The observations of Edward A. Pearson are also cited by Rubio as a reference to support this particular claim: "Not until the court passed its first [Vesey trial] sentence did city papers break their silence....Only when the *Official Report* appeared at the end of the year could white Charlestonians read about the trials." Pearson cited in Rubio, *Ibid.*, 65n61.

³³⁹ Hoffer, "New Introduction: The Return of Denmark Vesey," ix (emphasis added). An important historiographical observation by Hoffer is that "Edward Pearson, Douglas Egerton, and David Robertson would publish their own accounts, each one heroicizing Vesey far more than the more circumspect Lofton." Hoffer, *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁴⁰ Hoffer, *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii. Hoffer concludes his "New Introduction: The Return of Denmark Vesey" to Lofton's book by arguing that

there are three ways to tell the story of Vesey's rebellion, and all revolve around this most elusive of men. The first, the story in Egerton, Robertson, and Pearson, is a tale of a people who rose up to plot their own freedom, led by a man of courage, faith, and vision, an unwilling if not unwitting victim of his own yearning for his people's freedom The second story is that of a man and his acquaintances victimized by the system he had seemingly surmounted, as unscrupulous and as vicious as white politicians made him and his friends the pawns in their contest for power. Here Vesey becomes not the protagonist but another victim. This is Michael Johnson's Vesey The third story is the one that I think is the most viable and perhaps important, the story of a set of laws that demeaned the black man and deluded the white man, so persistently and so profoundly that candor, decency, and justice would always be victims. This is Lofton's story, judging Vesey a man who had "a dual impact" on the history of slavery, on the one hand convincing some lawmakers that the only defense of slavery lay in an "unyielding defensive stance" in defiance of all efforts to end slavery, and on the other, inspiring those who opposed slavery. It is this story that requires us to read Lofton once again.

Hoffer, *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

³⁴¹ *A Preservation Plan for Charleston, South Carolina*, Prepared by Page & Turnbull, Inc. for The City of Charleston and Historic Charleston Foundation (San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles, California: Page & Turnbull, January 2008), 209, accessed July 17, 2014, <http://www.charleston-sc.gov/index.aspx?NID=891>(emphasis added). An earlier preservation plan was published as a *Historic Preservation Plan*, Prepared for the City of Charleston by City Planning and Architectural Associates (Chapel Hill, North Carolina), Russell Wright (Barrington, Rhode Island), Carl Feiss (Gainesville, Florida), and National Heritage Corporation (West Chester, Pennsylvania) (June 1974). According to Ronald Takaki,

After the brutal suppression of the Denmark Vesey slave conspiracy of 1822, a worried South Carolina gentleman exclaimed: Our blacks were ‘barbarians who would, IF THEY COULD, become the DESTROYERS of our race.’ This southerner’s fear was not wholly paranoid. Several years later in Southampton, Virginia, Nat Turner and his fellow slave rebels took up the knife against their oppressors and slew nearly sixty whites.

Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York, New York and Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121.

³⁴² Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Walter C. Rucker, “‘I Will Gather All Nations’: Resistance, Culture, and Pan-African Collaboration in Denmark Vesey’s South Carolina,” *Journal of Negro History*, Volume 86, Number 2 (Spring 2001): 132-147; Michael A. Gomez, “Vesey’s Challenge,” in Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1-16.

³⁴³ Asante, Molefi Kete Asante, “Vesey's Conspiracy,” in *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, Editors (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 467-69, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952538.n246>.

³⁴⁴ Gleaves Whitney, “Slaveholding Presidents” (2006), *Ask Gleaves*, Paper 30, accessed October 15, 2014, http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/30.

³⁴⁵ Jon Weiner, “Denmark Vesey: A New Verdict,” *The Nation*, February 21, 2002, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/denmark-vesey-new-verdict>; “Statues of lamentations?” (Editorial), *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC), September 16, 2014, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20140916/PC1002/140919613>.