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# “The Dead Have Been Awakened in the Service of the Living”: Activist Community-Engaged Archaeology in Charleston, South Carolina

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(Received 27 June 2023; revised 31 July 2023; accepted 15 November 2023)

## Abstract

In 2013, 36 Ancestors of African descent were identified in an unmarked eighteenth-century burial ground during construction in Charleston, South Carolina. The site, later referred to as the Anson Street African Burial Ground, was buried beneath the growing city and forgotten in the centuries that followed. The ethical treatment of these ancestral remains was of paramount importance to our community. Historically, narratives relating to the lives of African descendant people in Charleston have been inadequately documented and shared. For these reasons, we engaged the local African American community in a multifaceted memorialization process. Together, we sought to sensitively ensure that the Ancestors' identities and lives were fully explored according to the collective descendant community's wishes. To this end, we involved the community in researching and celebrating the Ancestors' lives through arts and education programs and analyzed their and community members' DNA to elucidate their ancestry. Our engagement initiatives increased access for all ages to archaeological, historical, and genetic research and encouraged active participation in the design of a permanent memorial. The Anson Street African Burial Ground Project provides a successful example of community-engaged activist archaeology focused on honoring the Ancestors and their descendants.

## Resumen

En 2013, 36 antepasados africanos fueron identificados en un cementerio sin marcar del siglo XVIII durante una construcción en Charleston, Carolina del Sur (EE. UU.). El sitio, más tarde llamado el cementerio africano de Anson Street, fue enterrado debajo de la ciudad que creció y olvidado en los siglos siguientes. El tratamiento ético de los restos ancestrales fue de suma importancia para nuestra comunidad. Históricamente, las narraciones relacionadas con la vida de los afrodescendientes en Charleston no se han documentado ni compartido adecuadamente. Por estas razones, involucramos a la comunidad afroamericana local en un proceso de investigación y conmemoración. Juntos, buscamos garantizar con sensibilidad que las identidades y las vidas de los Ancestros se exploraran por completo, siguiendo los deseos de la comunidad descendiente colectiva. Con este fin, involucramos a la comunidad en la investigación y celebración de la vida de los antepasados a través de programas de arte y educación y analizamos su ADN y el de los miembros de la comunidad para dilucidar su ascendencia. Nuestras iniciativas de participación aumentaron el acceso de todas las edades a la investigación arqueológica, histórica y genética, y alentaron la participación activa en el diseño de un monumento permanente. El Proyecto del Cementerio Africano de la Calle Anson proporciona un ejemplo exitoso de arqueología activista comprometida con la comunidad enfocada en honrar a los Ancestros y sus descendientes.

**Keywords:** descendant community; antiracist; social justice; African Americans; diaspora

**Palabras clave:** comunidad descendiente; antirracista; justicia social; afroamericanos; diáspora

### Activist Community Archaeology

Community engagement has become an essential component of archaeological research and of historic preservation and museum-based projects (International Council of Museums 2017; Society for American Archaeology 2012; World Archaeological Congress [WAC] 1989, 1990). Thoughtful, ethical, and well-organized community participation is especially important where descendant communities are involved (Colwell 2016; Flewellen et al. 2022). Numerous authors have described the benefits of collaborating with communities, recognizing the importance of building trust and ensuring continuity in relationships, as well as its necessarily time-consuming and resource-intensive nature (Agbe-Davies 2010; Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; LaRoche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 2020; Watson 2007). In addition, working with communities provides unique opportunities for connections between disparate groups and diverse fields of study (Golding 1999).

In 2013, 36 Ancestors of African descent were uncovered during a rescue excavation precipitated by renovations and redevelopment at the Gaillard Performing Arts Center in downtown Charleston, South Carolina (site number 38CH2585). Documentary evidence for this burial ground has not yet been found, but archaeological and osteological analyses indicated that children, women, and men were interred at this location approximately between AD 1760 and 1790 (Fleskes et al. 2021). In 2017, the director of the Gullah Society, Dr. Ajani Ade Ofunniyin, met with Charleston Mayor John J. Tecklenburg and secured a contract with the City of Charleston for the Gullah Society to guide the memorialization and reinterment process for the 36 Ancestors.

The Gullah Society Inc. was established by Dr. Ofunniyin in 2012 as a grassroots organization dedicated to documenting, preserving, and promoting Gullah Geechee history and culture. Locally known as “Dr. O,” Ofunniyin was a cultural anthropologist and Yoruba priest with deep roots in the Charleston area. In forming the organization, he drew inspiration from the nineteenth-century Gullah Society that had been established by the African-born conjurer Gullah Jack with Denmark Vesey and others, who formed a “united and trusted group of conspirators” responsible for the planned 1822 slave revolt (Creel 1988:156). Dr. O believed that the Ancestors demanded our attention and was particularly passionate about advocating for the protection of African American burial grounds and serving the descendants of those interred in them.

Between 2015 and 2020, a small multidisciplinary team joined Dr. O in the Gullah Society, determined to achieve the organization’s mission. The six team members included two people of African descent (Ajani Ade Ofunniyin and educator La’Sheia Oubré) and four of Euro-American descent (archaeologist Joanna Gilmore, anthropological geneticists Raquel Fleskes and Theodore Schurr, and genealogist Grant Mishoe). As a team, African-descendant voices were privileged above those of Euro-American descent in an effort to decolonize our perspectives, interpretations, and values.

The discovery of the 36 Ancestors provided an opportunity to conduct historical, archaeological, bioarchaeological, and genetic research that focused on expanding our understanding of their lives. The results of the research conducted to date are described elsewhere (Fleskes et al. 2021, 2023). The importance of studying and sharing the life histories of the Ancestors cannot be understated. Although the research into their lives was noteworthy, of equal value was the impact that this memorialization process had on local individuals and the community more broadly (McDavid 2020). In this article, we describe various aspects of our community engagement, arts, and education programs that form the core of the Anson Street African Burial Ground (ASABG) Project.

### Ethics Statement

Through the ASABG Project, we sought to provide space to contest and subvert dominant narratives about the role that African Americans played in the building of Charleston and its culture in order to honor, understand, and recognize African-descendant lives yesterday and today. We carefully

considered the character of our interaction with the broader community, given the socially divided context in which we presently live and the highly politicized nature of any discussion of institutional racism, particularly within the education system. We applied relational ethics in the treatment of the Ancestors and interactions with their collective descendants by sharing stories embodied in their remains and recovering meaning with dignity and respect, as described by Zuckerman and colleagues (2014).

Through our activist approach, we sought to ensure that the research was embedded in the community and integrated into a larger memorialization process and social justice effort, with equitable benefits for the community (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Shackel 2011; Smith and Waterton 2009). It was essential that the reinterment become part of a broader recognition of both the relative absence of African-descendant lives in Charleston's historical narratives and the racial disparities that exist in the city and nation today (as advocated in Flewellen et al. 2021). Furthermore, it was critical that the project be endorsed by the City of Charleston as a statement of its commitment to healing and the protection of African-descendant burial grounds.

In this context, we carefully considered the ways that our work could build capacity and foster a greater diversity of BIPOC scholars in the field of anthropology and the sciences (Lans 2021; Mays et al. 2023). Recognizing that two White researchers were to be responsible for carrying out the genetic analyses in this project, we felt it was very important to create opportunities for the scientific training of Black students. As a result, we obtained funding that would allow Fleskes and Schurr to train undergraduate BIPOC students in laboratory and bioinformatics methods (detailed in Supplemental Text 1).

## Project Background

### Communities

It is first necessary to explain how community is defined by the ASABG team and what we mean by descendant community. Community is a vague concept, although its inherent interdisciplinarity offers additional insight by including multiple perspectives on its meaning. Within the fields of literature and communication, we can interpret a community as being a group of individuals defined by a shared identity-forming narrative or narratives (Johnstone 1990). This concept of community is particularly appropriate for the African-descendant community in the Americas, who share a narrative of African inheritance, endurance, survival, and resistance through the Middle Passage, enslavement, and ongoing racial oppression (e.g., Gyasi 2017; Morrison 1987). Rather than imagining that there is a homogeneous African American, Gullah Geechee, or Charleston community, we understand that such communities are diverse and fluid (Hall 1997; McDavid 2020).

Individually or as a group, we identify with or can be assigned to various interpretive communities or communities of practice (Fish 1980; Wenger 1998), with each person constructing meaning based on their own past experiences, prior knowledge, values, traditions, and perspectives. In terms of learning in community, Wenger (1998) elaborates on the idea of a defining narrative by describing the connection between identity and learning, or meaning-making, and the importance of a sense of belonging when defining community. These concepts are especially relevant to our community programs, given our focus on understanding ancestry and identity through the project's research.

In this project, we aimed to push the boundaries of community archaeology, a field of practice within public archaeology that is situated within a particular community. Typically, practitioners seek to understand community members' various interests and to reconcile these interests with archaeological research agendas, if not putting community interests before those of the researchers (Marshall 2002; McDavid 2020). In this case, the research and community engagement were led by a grassroots organization situated within the Charleston community and intent on effecting broader social change.

Finally, we found it helpful to reference relational ethics, as applied in bioarchaeology, and to borrow from the field of public health. These approaches focus on ethical practices and building trust, acknowledging power relations, recognizing an individual's value and experiences, and recovering agency and singularity, especially in cultural communities that have been marginalized or oppressed (Zuckerman et al. 2014). Such values are especially significant and were carefully considered because of the genetic component of our community participation activities (Nelson 2016).

### *Archaeology and Descendant Communities*

Studies in African American archaeology and the archaeology of the African diaspora gained momentum during the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s and 1970s (Fairbanks 1984; Singleton 1999). Since then, archaeologists and anthropologists have continued to expand the examination of African American lives by exploring the complexity of social relations, cultural transformation, and creolization (Ferguson 1999). The discovery of the New York African Burial Ground (NYABG) in 1991 provided an opportunity for researchers to collaborate with communities. During the NYABG project, Howard University archaeologists conducted archaeological and bioarchaeological research. They developed a clientage model that enabled them to explore the ways that their ancestors formed and transformed this nation and gave voice to those whose voices had been ignored (LaRoche and Blakey 1997). The project's community involvement also established the rights of the descendant community as a collective, rather than direct descendants, to be involved in the recovery and preservation of their past; these rights were a source of pride and empowerment (LaRoche and Blakey 1997).

The socially and politically engaged bioarchaeological research associated with the NYABG was defined by a vindicationist revision of Eurocentric exclusion (Barrett and Blakey 2011; Mullins 2008). Just one year earlier, the World Archaeological Congress Code of Ethics had reiterated the right of the descendant community to accept, modify, or reject the research design of archaeological research (WAC 1990). Following the NYABG project, other cultural communities began to claim a stake in the study and protection of their past, recognizing the value of their cultural assets: socially, economically, and for individual and collective well-being (Chirikure and Pwiti 2008).

Over the last 20 years, African diaspora scholars have focused on power dynamics, covert and overt resistance, and feminist interpretations that explore the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status through the lens of the enslaved and their descendants (Battle-Baptiste 2011; Flewellen et al. 2021; Lee and Scott 2019). In museums, there has been an increased focus on building public trust through transparency and power sharing (Marstine 2013). Collaborative projects have encouraged communities to be actors, not just beneficiaries, and to engage in a dialogue on an equal footing. As Battle-Baptiste (2011:71) argues, "Public archaeology becomes an engaged and activist archaeology when there is a connection between archaeological methods and issues important to contemporary communities." The amplified awareness of systemic racism in the national conscience has further encouraged scholars in all fields to grapple with the histories of their disciplines and their complicity in maintaining systems of oppression and violence against Black bodies (Flewellen et al. 2021; Justinvil and Colwell 2021).

### *Historical and Social Context*

Narratives that treated slavery as a benevolent and civilizing institution passed through generations of families living in Charleston, to such an extent that individual memory became public (or collective) memory (Kytte and Roberts 2018; Yuhl 2005). The significant contributions made by African-descendant individuals in shaping the Lowcountry landscapes, economies, foodways, architecture, language, material culture, music, and dance were not discussed in the museums, historic houses, and plantations in and around Charleston. This situation has improved over the last 10 to 15 years, with interpretations that now include slave dwellings and specialist (often separate) African American Experience tours (Coats 2021; Felton 2021; Hull 2020; McGill and Frazier 2023).

Although these changes are important, interpretations at the plantation alone do not acknowledge the presence of enslaved and free African people in the urban context and elsewhere. Charleston presently has a population of nearly 160,000 people and has been described as the fastest gentrifying city in the United States (City of Charleston 2023; Patton 2017). In 2022, more than 7,700,000 people visited the Charleston area (Guttentag and Patience 2023). These visitors are mainly White and college educated with an upper-middle income, fall into the 50+ age group, and are residents of neighboring states (Guttentag and Patience 2020). Despite this traditional cultural-heritage-oriented demographic, there is a growing demand in Charleston, from both community activists and visitors, for access to an honest history of the city and its place in the establishment of this nation (Hull 2020).

Numerous individuals have recognized that healing is only possible through truth-telling, shifting narratives, and bearing witness (see details in Supplemental Text 1). For instance, in contrast to many neighboring plantation-based historic sites, interpretation at the McLeod Plantation Historic Site focuses solely on the transition from enslavement to freedom and the perspectives of the enslaved laborers and free African descendants who continued to live on the plantation until 1990 (Halifax 2018). Black visitorship to McLeod, which was opened by the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission, has grown exponentially from less than 5% in 2015 to about 25% in 2021 (which is almost equal to Black residency in Charleston County; Shawn Halifax, personal communication 2021). Similarly, preservation activist Joe McGill founded the Slave Dwelling Project at the Magnolia Plantation in 2010 with the mission of changing the narratives about slavery through the preservation of landscapes associated with the enslaved (Horwitz 2013; McGill and Frazier 2023).

Charleston has often been at the epicenter of national conversations about slavery and racism (Kytte and Roberts 2018). The massacre of nine parishioners at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in June 2015 had a significant impact on the city and nation. In the months that followed, John J. Tecklenburg was elected as the new mayor of Charleston, the College of Charleston created the Race & Social Justice Initiative (RSJI), and discussions about the construction of a memorial for the victims and survivors at Mother Emanuel began.

The Mother Emanuel massacre and pressure from activists and the academic community, combined with evidence of countywide racial disparities, motivated Mayor Tecklenburg to focus on racial reconciliation (Balsamo 2021; Borden 2015; Patton 2017). In the summer of 2018, the Mayor presented a resolution “recognizing, denouncing and apologizing on behalf of the city of Charleston for the city’s role in regulating, supporting and fostering slavery” and described the city’s complicity with the institution in detail (City of Charleston 2018). City support of the community-led memorialization of the ASABG Ancestors was viewed as a reparative act by Mayor Tecklenburg.

### *Inception of the ASABG Project*

The Ancestors were excavated by Eric Poplin and other archaeologists working with Brockington and Associates Inc., a cultural resource management company hired to document the burials after their accidental discovery in February 2013. According to Ofunniyin, “We want to say that construction made that happen, but spiritually I can’t believe that. I have to believe that my Ancestors made that happen” (Ajani Ade Ofunniyin, personal communication 2018). Osteological, dental, and isotopic analyses were conducted by Drs. Suzanne Abel, Wolf Bueschgen, and Chelsey Juarez, respectively. The initial analyses demonstrated that these 36 Ancestors were buried with care over time in four equally spaced rows (Fleskes et al. 2021). After completion of the osteological analyses, the Ancestors’ remains were moved to a government storage facility.

From May 2017 through April 2018, Ofunniyin and Gilmore engaged in activities that laid the foundation for the Ancestors’ repatriation. We met with City of Charleston representatives, hosted screenings of the NYABG documentary at public libraries, and described the archaeological research related to the 36 Ancestors during what we termed “Community Conversations” at various locations. These were not passive events but instead were occasions where we endeavored to “change our understanding not only of the past but of ourselves and of the times we live in” (Melish 2006:101).

We were encouraged by the community to view the 36 as our collective Ancestors, to use this point in time and place for healing, and to recognize the many people of African descent in Charleston whose burials have been lost or destroyed. During our initial conversations, community members expressed an interest in learning about the origins of these 36 people, asking questions about who they were and where they came from. These questions, which focused on identity and ancestry, informed the research and program of events throughout the memorialization process.

In October 2017, Ofunniyin and Gilmore used community feedback to develop an action plan for the memorialization process and DNA analysis, which they presented to National Geographic Society staff. The staff encouraged them to apply for a grant with anthropological geneticists, Dr. Theodore Schurr and then-PhD candidate Raquel Fleskes, at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2018, we were

awarded funding from the National Geographic Society for community engagement and education programs, as well as for scientific research. We received additional financial support from the City of Charleston for community engagement activities.

### **Goals, Justification, and Methods**

Early in the planning phase, we identified three priorities for the memorialization of the Ancestors. First, we felt a strong desire in the community to acknowledge African identities and stories and to elaborate on their contributions to and roles in the development of Charleston and the city today. We viewed the African presence in Charleston through a racial justice lens, which was especially important considering ongoing racial disparities there and in the broader United States. Our second priority was to ensure that we created multiple opportunities for community involvement in the reburial of the Ancestors. In this way, our work strove to be inclusive, relevant, and beneficial to the community, providing moments for reflection, pride, and healing (Battle-Baptiste 2011). Third, we aimed to permanently alter the memorial landscape in Charleston and, with the support of the City Council, provide a place for people of African descent (and others) to remember their/our Ancestors. At present, there are a limited yet growing number of marked locations that explicitly describe the African-descendant experience in Charleston.

In what follows, we explain how we identified target audiences for the community engagement program based on our research into individuals who currently engage with cultural heritage in Charleston. Within this framework, we also considered racial disparities in access to cultural resources and the lack of exposure to Gullah Geechee history and culture in the K–12 education system. We then describe the methods used during our Community Conversations, the arts and education programs, and the naming and reinterment ceremonies. We conclude by discussing the impact and meanings derived from the memorialization process.

### ***Understanding Our Communities***

As discussed earlier, communities are not homogeneous and static. When initially meeting with community members, we recognized that we had no authority to define who belongs in a community, nor did we select representatives or people who could speak on behalf of the group or community. Yet, we deliberately targeted audiences that we knew had been historically excluded from the decision-making process concerning cultural heritage and whose members have not been exposed to this subject matter via the Charleston County school system (Hawes et al. 2018). Of course, we welcomed all individuals into our conversations, especially because African-descendant lives and the history of slavery and racism are still inadequately discussed throughout the US school system and at many cultural heritage sites (Hudson et al. 2020; Shuster 2018; Vlach 2006).

We contacted local cultural institutions to better understand their views of their audiences. Their responses suggested that little was known about current and potential African-descendant audiences for engagement with cultural heritage in the Charleston area. Research into the tourism sector in South Carolina has demonstrated that it is crucial to preserve, cultivate, and promote existing African American sites that are more welcoming toward African American visitors (see Hudson et al. 2020). With these understandings, we focused our efforts on collaboration through the arts and through equitable partnerships with artists, community members, students, teachers, and professors, as described later in more detail.

### ***Community Conversations***

In our 13 Community Conversations, we purposefully acknowledged perspectives that shaped our work and deliberately rejected the position of neutrality and omnipotence (Marstine 2013). We referred to the *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* rubric of best practices, acknowledging the authors' viewpoint that truth-telling makes the marginalized visible and supports the physical, mental, and spiritual health of both the oppressed and the oppressor (National Trust for Historic Preservation 2019). In this way, the Community Conversations effectively began the healing and reparations process for community members involved in our work.

We sought to provide safe and welcoming forums for discussion at all our events and programs. We aimed to engage as many people in African American communities as possible precisely because these individuals often have the greatest barriers to accessing cultural and historical resources (Hudson et al. 2020). Intellectual and cultural barriers to access involve the lack of representation in the presentation of Gullah Geechee stories at historical sites, discomfort due to location or institutional history (at sites that have not previously interpreted histories associated with oppression), and a lack of recognition for the Gullah Geechee language or cultural traditions. Personal or emotional barriers include a fear of racial discrimination and feeling unwelcome (Hudson et al. 2020). Economic barriers may consist of a lack of public transportation to sites, limited opening hours, and the cost of entry for programs. Furthermore, Dr. O encouraged us to be thoughtful about the language that we used, acknowledging that our words can disconnect and sow distrust if not carefully chosen.

We addressed these cultural, economic, and social barriers to access in several ways. Our school-based programs, art programs, exhibitions, events, and adult-focused Community Conversations were all free. At our conversations and exhibitions, we provided refreshments that were catered by a local Gullah Geechee business. Examples from museum education settings demonstrate that starting an event with refreshments often helps build trust through consistency and helps participants feel welcomed and comfortable (Falk and Dierking 2013; Silverman 2010). In addition, we distributed questionnaires and collected contact information, which we used to learn about individuals' thoughts and hopes for the reinterment and to keep in touch with attendees via emails and newsletters.

The Community Conversations provided spaces in which we could build relationships with community members. We did this by presenting the details about archaeological, historical, and DNA research, answering questions about the process, and soliciting feedback on the results. These conversations provided important opportunities for the White researchers Fleskes and Schurr coming from outside the community to build trust related to the DNA research. This process was particularly important, given the history of abuses by White scientists of the Black community (Nuriddin et al. 2020). We viewed this as an important component of obtaining informed consent for genetic research when the individuals being studied were no longer living (Zuckerman et al. 2014). Thus, the process of community engagement was understood as an evolving dialogue grounded in listening to the descendant community and communicating the details of the research process as it unfolded.

In April 2018, Ofunniyin and Gilmore curated an exhibition, *WOKE: Rattling Bones, Conversations, Sacred Rites and Holy Places*, at the Charleston City Gallery at Waterfront Park. The exhibition explored the treatment of African-descendant peoples in life and death and drew parallels between our lives today and the influence of those who came before us (see Bland 2018). It was intended to illuminate what the discovery of the 36 Ancestors meant for African descendants and all those living in Charleston today through thought-provoking historical research, archaeological interpretations, art, poetry, and the voices of formerly enslaved people. The exhibition also involved African American Studies students from the College of Charleston who curated a fashion show of current West African fashions (Figure 1).

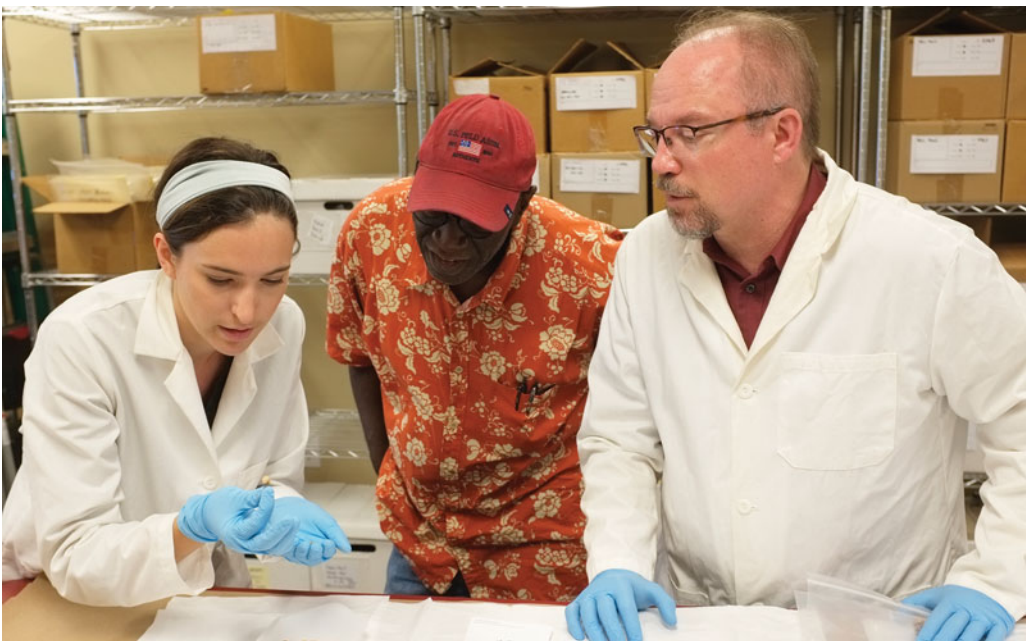
Following the exhibition, Fleskes and Schurr visited Charleston to collect DNA samples from the Ancestors (Figure 2). During their visit, we hosted another Community Conversation where they described how anthropological geneticists conduct ancient DNA research and what we can learn from it. With support from the National Geographic Society and the University of Pennsylvania, we provided an opportunity for 78 persons of African descent to have their DNA analyzed. Initially, we had offered 36 tests as a symbolic connection between the Ancestors and collective descendants. Because of significant community interest, we expanded the testing to include an additional 42 individuals (Figure 3).

The DNA research component was included as a means of fostering greater participation, trust, and understanding in genetic research and creating an avenue for participants to make personal connections with the Ancestors. After the community members' DNA samples were analyzed, we hosted an event where we handed out the DNA test results to them. This was a moving experience for many participants, including Oubré, who joined the ASABG team shortly thereafter. The event also served as an important opportunity for public science education about genetic ancestry testing.



**Figure 1.** Ofunniyin with his College of Charleston African American Studies students, who created an African Fashion show at our *WOKE: Rattling Bones, Conversations, Sacred Rites and Holy Places* exhibition. Photograph courtesy of Joanna Gilmore.

An important aspect of this project has been the powerful integration of archaeological and scientific research into planning for the artistic and ceremonial aspects of the memorialization of the Ancestors. For example, at the same event, architect Rodney Leon, founder and principal of Rodney Leon Architects and designer of the New York African Burial Ground Memorial, talked about his inspiration in designing memorials for the ancestors in New York. We invited Leon to speak to inspire the approximately 100 Charlestonians who attended the event to envisage how an empowering and poetic monument to their collective Ancestors might take shape. Attendees fervently encouraged



**Figure 2.** Fleskes and Schurr collected DNA samples from the Ancestors with Ofunniyin and Gilmore at the Brockington and Associates lab. Photograph courtesy of Joanna Gilmore.





**Figure 3.** Community member Regina Scott Sanders participates in DNA sampling with Gilmore. Photograph courtesy of Ajani Ade Ofunniyin.

Mayor Tecklenburg, who was also in attendance, to ensure that this sacred ground be indelibly marked in recognition of the African presence in the city.

In our final Community Conversation before the reinterment, Fleskes and Schurr presented the results of the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis for the Ancestors. To make the genetic research more transparent, Fleskes showed a 12-minute video that she created using a Go-Pro camera while inside the University of Tennessee Ancient DNA lab. The video enabled the community to go with her into the lab to better visualize the processes of ancient DNA extraction for the Anson Street Ancestors. In addition, the initial DNA findings were shared by integrating the ceremonial names of the Anson Street Ancestors, bestowed during a Yoruba Naming Ceremony before the reinterment (described later), with their mtDNA haplogroups (maternal lineages). Each name was called and repeated by the audience, followed by a discussion of the personal history of each Ancestor gleaned from the bioarchaeological and DNA research to further honor them. The calling of the honorary names of the Ancestors centered the personhood of each individual in every discussion of the scientific results.

### **Education and Arts Programs**

To provide opportunities for community members of all ages to actively express their responses to the research and to claim ownership in the memorialization process, we developed a range of strategies for participation. Our approach drew on engagement strategies developed by the Monument Lab in Philadelphia (<https://monumentlab.com/>) and the Paper Monuments Project in New Orleans (<https://www.papermonuments.org>). Both projects encouraged participatory engagement with the history of race and gender in each city to create public art (Budds 2018). Our approach built on these strategies and combined historical, archaeological, and bioarchaeological research with community feedback to develop ideas for a memorial.

As a first step in this direction, College of Charleston professor of art and architectural history Nathaniel Walker developed a course in which students could explore a broad range of sites of commemoration, with a special focus on Africa and the American South and its many contested monuments. During the course, students drafted memorial designs that were critiqued by various community members. Their proposed designs were presented during a Community Conversation, which was followed by an informed discussion about what sort of ceremony and memorial community members envisaged. After listening to feedback from the community, the students modified their designs and exhibited the final memorial design proposals at the College of Charleston.

In addition to targeting college students and adults, we aimed to engage children in the K–12 education system through our education and arts program. To this end, Oubré visited nine schools in and around Charleston, many of which are located in low-income neighborhoods. At these talks, students learned about the discovery of the burials, and Oubré highlighted the ways that archaeological, osteological, and genetic research can enhance our understanding of our identities and the lives of people in the past. Students benefited from improved scientific, cultural, and historical literacy via hands-on constructivist learning, boosting self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Black 2005; Silverman 2010). Oubré also encouraged students to consider careers in science, anthropology, and archaeology in recognition of the lack of representation of BIPOC in these fields. In total, approximately 380 students were engaged via the grade-school education program. Students at each school created a mural, inspired by the research, that was displayed at the community art exhibition (Figure 4).

Ofunniyin, Gilmore, and Oubré also partnered with Megan Collier-Bansil at the Redux Contemporary Art Center and five artists of African descent—photographer Dontré Major, textile artist Arianne King Comer, musician Nic Jenkins, quilt artist Peggie Hartwell, and painter Quadré Stuckey—to develop free weekly workshops with local senior adults and grade-school students. The artists explored Gullah Geechee ancestry and stories through traditional African arts in their workshops (Figure 5). An estimated 70 people of all ages (fourth to fifth graders, ninth to twelfth graders, and senior adults) participated in these workshops. The artwork they created was exhibited at the Charleston Civic Design Center during the reinterment (2019) and at the McLeod Plantation Historic Site (2021; see <https://youtu.be/YsFxiJDRPw>). Meaning-making was central to this endeavor, as students and artists brought a variety of frames of reference, memories, and emotions to the experience (Silverman 2010).



**Figure 4.** Oubré is interviewed by the Charleston County School District at the Community Art Exhibition at the Charleston Civic Design Center. Photograph courtesy of Joanna Gilmore.



**Figure 5.** The *Tree of Memories* designed by artist Arianne King Comer. Inspired by their Ancestors, community elders created indigo batik pieces to hang on the tree. Photograph courtesy of Joanna Gilmore.

### *Naming Ceremony and Reinterment Ceremony Events*

The first of the reinterment events, the Naming Ceremony, was held at McLeod Plantation Historic Site in April 2019 (Figure 6). The idea to bestow honorary names on the Ancestors arose during our education program. At a school visit in March 2019, Oubré was asked by two middle-school students whether the Ancestors had names. She responded that they did not and that archaeologists use alphanumeric identifiers to distinguish individual burials. Motivated by this question, we asked Natalie Washington-Weik, who is a Yorùbá-Orisa Ọ̀ṣun priestess and an African historian, to name the Ancestors. The names chosen incorporated the isotopic data and mtDNA evidence of regional African maternal ancestry and the work of Lorenzo Dow Turner (2002), who recorded more than 400 Gullah Geechee names in the early twentieth century (Supplemental Table 1). Washington-Weik, historical archaeologist Terrance Weik, and Ofunniyin conducted the Naming Ceremony. According to Washington-Weik (personal communication 2019), this was “an important step forward in reclaiming the humanity of the deceased people who were most likely forced to travel across the Atlantic Ocean under the terror of other humans—who saw them as mere animals. These individuals deserve names and not mere numbers. They cannot be reinterred as mere numbers like that which they may have been assigned on slave ships.” In addition to restoring aspects of their humanity before reburial, the naming of the Ancestors enabled us to directly incorporate the wishes of community members into the reinterment process. It also reflects how projects can grow into meaningful directions through community collaboration.

We selected the McLeod Plantation Historic Site as the location for the Naming Ceremony and the Community Art Exhibition because, in alignment with the interpretation at the site, we wanted to further reassert Black agency in this space (Halifax 2018). Black agency was already being asserted on every New Year’s Day at McLeod, as libations are poured at the plantation’s Sankofa Memorial Garden: Sacred Burial Ground of Our African Ancestors. The Naming Ceremony took place close to Wappoo Creek to acknowledge the connection to the water that brought the Ancestors to



**Figure 6.** Natalie Washington-Weik, Ofunniyin, and Terrance Weik led a Yoruba Naming Ceremony for the Ancestors at McLeod Plantation Historic Site. Photograph courtesy of Raquel Fleskes.

Charleston and would take them back to Africa after death, according to Gullah Geechee burial traditions (Creel 1988; Pollitzer 1999).

The Reinterment Ceremony took place in early May 2019. Feedback provided in Community Conversations indicated that community members wanted the reinterment to be a meaningful, powerful, and joyful event that would illuminate and celebrate the lives of the 36 Ancestors. In the weeks before the reinterment, 16 members of the International Center for Indigo Culture from across the United States had hand-dyed and sent indigo fabric to Charleston for use during the ceremony. On the day of the reinterment, six small caskets containing two children, two women, and two men were wrapped in the hand-dyed indigo and placed in a horse-drawn hearse.

The hearse proceeded west to east on George Street, which had been closed by a rolling police escort, to the reinterment site. It was followed by an Egungun Masquerade performed by drummers from the Oyotunji Yoruba Village and children from the Watoto Academy of Meeting Street Schools, King Adejuyigbe Adefunmi II, and Gullah Society and community members (Figures 7 and 8). The Oyotunji Yoruba Village had been established in Sheldon, South Carolina, in 1970 as a religious and cultural community based on the Yoruba and Dahomey tribes of West Africa (Oyotunji 2023). The Watoto Academy was created by Donald O'Connor with a mission of building self-esteem in urban youth by providing education programs that focus on African American history and culture through music and dance (Watoto Academy 2023).

Using a horse-drawn hearse, hiring Black-owned Fielding Home for Funerals to manage the reburial, and hosting an African drum procession that closed city streets were intentional acts that aimed to reclaim this gentrified part of the city as “not merely a place of captivity, but a culturally contested site” (Vlach 2006:59). This was a place where enslaved and free people resisted oppression by continually pushing the boundaries of their agency in expressing and preserving their ancestral cultures and identity, as well as by passing on their intangible heritage by sharing memories and telling stories to their children (LaRoche and Blakey 1997). The ceremonial procession deliberately defied South Carolina’s 1740 Negro Act, created in response to the 1739 Stono Rebellion (which occurred



**Figure 7.** Children of the Watoto Academy of Meeting Street Schools followed the Oyotunji community to the reinterment site. Photograph courtesy of Raquel Fleskes.

within 20 miles of Charlestown), which banned enslaved and free African people from gathering and playing African drums (Wood 1996).

At the reinterment site, the six Ancestors wrapped in indigo were placed in a specially designed vault with the other 30 individuals, along with handwritten messages to the Ancestors composed by community members (Figure 9). Writing messages provided another opportunity for community members to connect with their Ancestors, because this act is an important part of African and Gullah Geechee traditions (Creel 1988). The enclosure of the Ancestors in the vault was followed



**Figure 8.** King Adejuyigbe Adefunmi II and the Oyotunji African Village members followed the horse-drawn hearse and led the procession to the reinterment site. Photograph courtesy of Bruno Ghersi.



**Figure 9.** Community members and Ofunniyin carried the caskets for the six Ancestors and placed them in the burial vault. Photograph courtesy of Raquel Fleskes.

by the pouring of libations, prayers, calling the names of the Ancestors, and their committal to the sacred ground in which they were laid to rest in the eighteenth century.

In addition to community feedback, we used the archaeological and genetic research to inform the reinterment events. For example, in recognition of the ancestry of Coosaw, who had a maternal ancestor with a mtDNA haplotype found in Native American populations, we invited the Keepers of the Word Native American singers and drummers to be part of the ceremony. Other aspects of the Ancestors' identities were manifested in performances by Gullah Spiritual singers, an African drum and dance troupe, and a Caribbean music and dance group, as well as contemporary Charlestonian singers, poets, and public figures. We found no archaeological evidence for the spiritual beliefs of the Ancestors. Therefore, representatives of various Christian denominations and Muslim, Native American, and Yoruba belief systems were incorporated into the reinterment ceremony. Oubré and Ofunniyin coordinated speakers and performers for the various reinterment events, and Gilmore designed programs for each event, including the "Anson Street African Burial Ground: Lessons from our Ancestors" booklet for community participants. The events ended with an ecumenical service at St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church the following day, officiated by Reverend Willie Hill Jr.

### **Meanings, Impact, and Evaluation**

Between May 2017 and the reinterment date of May 4, 2019, we organized 13 free Community Conversation events, in addition to three exhibitions and the reinterment events. More than 800 people participated in the Community Conversations, and 2,617 people visited the *WOKE: Rattling Bones, Conversations, Sacred Rites and Holy Places* exhibition at the Charleston City Gallery. Through the education and arts programs, 475 students learned about the Ancestors and created artwork for the Community Art Exhibition. At the College of Charleston, 13 students thoughtfully proposed memorial designs that were displayed at the Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston, during which time more than 26,000 people visited the library. More than 700 people of all ages participated in and attended the reinterment ceremony events.

Throughout the memorialization process, we sought to inform local, regional, and national audiences about the importance of the 36 Ancestors while expanding our understanding of African-descendant lives in Charleston and throughout the African diaspora. We used the Gullah Society website (now [www.asabgproject.com](http://www.asabgproject.com)) and social media to provide updates about the DNA research, community and education programs, events, and planning for the reinterment. We recognized that there were many people in Charleston and beyond who would not be able to attend events but had indicated that they supported, appreciated, and trusted the Gullah Society to guide the reinterment process. Access for these people was provided via livestream video during five Community Conversations and the reinterment. These videos were viewed 14,245 times. Furthermore, our work over the past two years has been reported in newspapers and on radio and television news broadcasts more than 25 times. Overall, we estimate that more than 4,600 people were directly involved in the reinterment and memorialization process. Not only were these individuals exposed to new topics and knowledge, including the process of conducting archaeological, bioarchaeological, genetic, and historical research, but they also played an active role in the memorialization process itself.

One important aspect of our working ethos is to multiply benefits for people of African descent on various levels through the decisions that were made collectively throughout the project. With the support of the National Geographic Society, College of Charleston student Adeyemi Oduwole was able to complete an internship at the University of Pennsylvania to analyze the genomic diversity of 78 members of the descendant community who participated in the project (Figure 10). For Oduwole, who was born in New York to Nigerian parents and aims to be a medical doctor, this work was personal. In 2018, he was quoted as saying,

Being involved in something that means so much to me personally makes it almost too good to be true: I get the undergraduate research experience and I get to do something I care about deeply. . . . There are a lot of gaps between the Charleston community and its history, and I'm happy to help close those gaps and help fill in people's stories for them. I'm really honored to have the opportunity to help in that narrative. When it comes to these stories, the narrator really matters [Lutz 2018].

We collected feedback throughout the memorialization process via questionnaires and comment cards. These qualitative responses enhanced our understanding of the ways the process was being



**Figure 10.** Adeyemi Oduwole completed an internship working with Fleskes (pictured) and Schurr at the University of Pennsylvania. Photograph courtesy of Morgan Hoke.

interpreted and experienced (Sandell 2007). In the 165 responses to our questionnaires, participants overwhelmingly demonstrated a genuine interest in returning the Ancestors near to their original burial site with honor, dignity, respect, and with descendant community participation. As a result of their participation in the project, people felt encouraged, empowered, hopeful, curious, sad, angry, proud, enlightened, thankful, inspired, and informed.

The range of responses is evident in the comments received. One woman said, “This conversation makes me feel curious about the lives and faiths of the people whose bones were discovered. What was everyday life like for them? How does that inform our lives?” Another said, “I found the discourse interesting. I am also concerned for the protection of future grave sites that may be discovered.” One simply wrote that the “best word to describe how this conversation makes me feel is *complete*.”

This comment regarding completeness is important. In discussing reparations, Melish (2006:112) states that “one of the most important aspects of the notion of reparations, then, is its promise of restoring completeness to everyone’s American history.” The acknowledgment of the Anson Street Ancestors and this sacred ground in the heart of Charleston is not about financial reparations but instead is a more powerful reparative healing process made tangible by treating the Ancestors with the honor and dignity that they had not been afforded in life. Engaging students and the community through this methodology led to improved connections with an obscured past and provided significant opportunities to engender future dialogues for healing (Barsalou and Baxter 2007).

Participants felt that it was extremely important that a memorial be built at the reinterment site. For instance, one person said, “The history of the Africans brought to the US and their family members must be documented, preserved and integrated into the history of S.C. White Americans need to know the inhuman treatment of African Americans.” Comments at the exhibition of student memorial design proposals included, “It is long overdue, but it’s progress towards finally appreciating our African Ancestors,” “I love all of the imaginative and diverse designs,” and “these are all very empowering and beautiful designs.”

We received several comments during the *WOKE* exhibition, including this one: “Speechless; so powerful. So glad to have walked into this gallery. Wish my kids were with me to see this. I shall share this with them so that one day when they are old enough, they can come and visit and learn the history that is not taught in school.” Another visitor said, “How very moving and important this exhibit is. Thank you”; it was “deeply touching and educational.” In more extended remarks, an attendee stated,

*WOKE* is shocking, heartbreaking, and unrelenting in its insistence that the viewer come face-to-face and be up close and personal with the unvarnished truth about man’s (and woman’s) inhumanity to man. This amazing exhibit should force the viewer to think about the subject contained in the photos and, hopefully, discover their higher angels and develop true love for all of their brothers and sisters.

In their studies of visitors in museum settings, Falk and Dierking (2013:212) find that emotional and satisfying experiences enhance memory formation. They further suggest that experiences out of the ordinary are those most likely to be remembered, which is certainly the case for the reinterment events. The memories associated with these experiences reflect those things that individuals find most meaningful and worth remembering.

When considering the context of the Ancestors’ memorialization, it is worth remembering the historical and contemporary collective memory related to people of African descent that was described earlier. If memories exist within both the individual and the group, then the impact of the memorialization process on those involved in it becomes more powerful (Falk and Dierking 2013:209). As individuals discuss their memories of the reinterment and the research into the Ancestors’ lives, these memories trigger others’ recollections, which enrich and reshape the collective memory of African-descendant lives in Charleston.



## Concluding Remarks

Priorities that emerged within the community during the memorialization process focused on acknowledging African-descendant lives, collaborating with persons of all ages, and changing the memorial landscape and narratives related to the African presence in Charleston. By applying relational ethics theory, we directly aimed to meet different levels of community members' needs by honoring, preserving, and sharing narratives about the Ancestors (Maslow 1943; Zuckerman et al. 2014). We aimed for the highest levels of individual growth and fulfillment by treating the Ancestors and all descendants with respect, leading to pride and restoration. Furthermore, we aimed to instill a sense of achievement through our arts and education programs and to enhance community well-being through healing and a greater commitment to racial equity by recognizing the lives of the Ancestors at a community-wide level.

Our research and evaluation demonstrated that this project had an impact on thousands of individuals in meaningful ways. It made a significant contribution to understanding and acknowledging the lives of the undocumented African-descendant individuals who lived, were enslaved, and worked in Charleston during the eighteenth century. Through the process of memorialization, this community endeavor was an effort to create new collective and individual memories. Importantly, these memories relate to identity and the narratives told in Charleston, as David Blight (2006:20) argues, "We are our memories"; memory "is at the heart of our humanity."

In terms of the mutual benefits of community collaboration in social science, the analysis of the Ancestors' DNAs has yielded new insights into their ancestry and the genetic impact of the African Diaspora. The DNA analysis of contemporary African Americans also helps trace ancestral roots and make connections to the past. In addition, we obtained funds to train a student of African descent with foundational skills in genetic methods and mentorship during a critical stage of his academic development. The results of the bioarchaeological and DNA studies were taken into public schools and local colleges to expand knowledge of research methods and teach students about aspects of African American history not taught from these perspectives. Overall, the DNA data serve as a means of opening conversations about the lived histories of the Ancestors.

We are currently partnering with numerous stakeholders to erect a permanent memorial at Anson Street and to map the many African-descendant burial grounds in and around Charleston so that they can be effectively managed via a local government-maintained GIS system. A permanent memorial to the Ancestors will serve as a site of conscience and memory of their roles in the establishment and development of Charleston. For the descendant community, the Anson Street African Burial Ground is a site of power where memories coalesce in a sacred space that is "ultimately emotional, not intellectual" (Bailyn 2001:250; see also Blight 2006; Lukacs 1968). These memories should be part of the public landscape and no longer marginalized (Horton and Horton 2006; Vlach 2006).

The humanization of the Ancestors occurred on multiple levels. Through the archaeological and genetic research, we were able to tell stories about their lives. By naming the Ancestors, individuals whose names are unknown and who were forgotten, we created new memories that recognize and honor them and their descendants. By sharing the stories of our Ancestors' lives, we were encouraged to face up to who we are and to decide who we want to be (Blakey 1997). In honoring the Ancestors' lives, we enrich our own.

**Acknowledgments.** We would like to acknowledge the African American community members who supported and guided this work. Without their involvement, none of our community outreach, education, and research efforts would have been possible. We would also like to thank the numerous individuals who played important roles in the memorialization process, including colleagues at the College of Charleston and the University of Pennsylvania; the Gullah Society board and student volunteers; City of Charleston employees; Charleston County School District teachers and students; religious and spiritual leaders; speakers and performers at the Reinterment Ceremony; ASABG artists; the Redux Center for Contemporary Art staff; and the McLeod Plantation Historic Site staff. No permit for this work was required.

Dr. Ofunniyin, whose words are quoted in the title, joined the Ancestors on October 7, 2020. This project would not have happened without his insistence that we reinter the Ancestors with honor and dignity. His words are etched in our hearts, and we hope that his generous, gentle, mindful guidance, and presence, now as an Ancestor, is evident in this text. Thank you, Ade (Baba) and the Ancestors for blessing us with this work: it has been an honor and a privilege to work with and for you. Peace!

**Funding Statement.** The work described in this article was funded by the National Geographic Society (#NGS-52378R-18 to Ade Ofunniyin; #NGS-54324E-18 to Joanna Gilmore, #EC-52936R-18 to Adeyemi Oduwole), a University of Pennsylvania Research Foundation grant (to Theodore Schurr), the City of Charleston, the College of Charleston, the Coastal Community Foundation of South Carolina, and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.

**Data Availability Statement.** No original data were used.

**Competing Interests.** The authors declare none.

**Supplemental Material.** For supplemental material accompanying this article, visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2023.105>.

Supplemental Text 1. Ethical and Theoretical Framing of the Anson Street African Burial Ground Project.

Supplemental Table 1. Ancestors' Names and Demographic Information

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