

Charleston: Listening for the Right Moves

By Tumelo Mosaka, 2025

I was last in Charleston two decades ago. At that time, I worked for the Spoleto Festival USA as curator for its visual arts program. Even then, I moved through the city with an awareness of its unspoken underside—shaped by a legacy of slavery, economic injustice, and enduring Black resistance. Charleston confronts this history while simultaneously denying the profound social divisions it has produced. My return recently was not simply to measure what has changed, but to reflect on what has endured: to trace where residues remain and to better understand the recurring, unresolved dimensions of the city’s identity and challenges.

My desire was to move beyond Charleston’s choreographed elegance—its manicured gardens, grand homes, and iconic sites, including the carefully contained narratives of Gullah culture. I searched instead for what exceeds visibility, what resists stabilization as heritage. I was drawn to that which moves beyond linear time and the limits of the material. To penetrate the surface of Charleston’s history required an approach attuned to the spiritual as much as the political—one attentive to the intertwined spheres of past and present that have given form to the city.

From my first day, Charleston announced itself through the body. The scent of Spanish moss hung heavy from oak trees like tidal debris caught in suspension—at once sheltering and suffocating, binding land to water. Its damp, earthen weight summoned histories that refuse closure. These were not memories safely consigned to the past, but were ongoing conditions defined by persistent injustice that is sedimented into the city’s soil, its air, its rhythms of life. The grey moss seemed to exhale these unresolved histories, insisting on a reckoning with the structural silences that obscure the history of slave labor as central to the city’s development.

Within this environment, grief is suspended and largely unrecognized within the social structures organized by white privilege. In moving through the city, I found a fragile refuge beneath the oak trees. Standing as sentinels of Black collective memory, they hold not only the grief but also the methods of survival, improvisation, and relation. Their roots reached deep into the ground while their branches stretched outward, recalling diasporic formations that are not linear but tidal, shaped by rupture, drift, and return. Here, diaspora registers less as an origin story than as an ongoing process, a continual remaking under pressure.

With the steady pull of the sea breeze and the dense canopy of moss, the landscape revealed a quiet, fugitive magic. This was not a spectacle but attunement: a demand for slowness, for listening, for recalibrating the senses toward what is peripheral, submerged, and unfinished. Such magic resists capture. It appears only when one relinquishes the mastery of familiarity and allows oneself to be moved by what cannot be fully named.

As I moved deliberately through the city—between cultural institutions, artists, and those working within and against the limits of representation—I traced lines of relation rather than origin. These encounters felt less like documentation than a practice of listening across time, toward an intangible past that is not behind us but beside us. These voices I sought were not lost; they were held elsewhere, sleeping in the depths of the ocean, carried in the wake of the Middle Passage, audible in the relentless crashes of waves, pursuing the midnight-deafening silence of unsettled hypnotic dreamscapes that blur reality and fantasy to reflect inner thoughts and desires.

Water, in this sense, was not merely a metaphor but a method. It remembers what the archive cannot. It cleanses, nourishes, and sustains life while holding the weight of unspeakable loss. To listen to water was to engage a Black Atlantic mode of knowing—one grounded in relation, movement, and care rather than fixity or possession, in circulation rather than enclosure.

Ultimately, what Charleston asked of me was not what I could see, but how I might listen—for connections that exceed the present and the purely material. The questions that emerged were less about resolution than practice: how do we inhabit space together in ways that acknowledge rupture without surrendering to despair, that honor memory while opening room for repair? How do we move through the world attuned to the turbulent currents that bind us across land and sea, past and present, toward new possible futures?