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Menace and Majesty: The Jocassee Gorges Region of Upper South Carolina

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INTRODUCTION

“Where the Blue Ridge yawns its greatness,” my university’s alma mater song opens in rising, majestic tones. Then, in contrast, hum the first few bars of “Dueling Banjos” from the film *Deliverance* and reflect upon what images come to mind. Conceiving the Jocassee Gorges area in the Blue Ridge Mountains of South Carolina as a majestic yet menacing “frontier space” encapsulates the deeply-rooted ambiguity of the place to residents and visitors alike. On a more fundamental level, as newcomers and old-timers battle to develop or preserve the area, this space becomes contested ground, representing the contrastive ideals of manicured fairways or timbered wilderness. Underlying this struggle is the cultural meaning of the land itself— to some a resource for “improvement,” to others the symbolic connection to family, living and dead. This paper opens an exploration of these multiple and sometimes commingled interpretations of a well-known Southern landscape.

BACKGROUND

In this examination, my goal is to discover the various ways different groups conceptualize and utilize the same geographical space. How is it culturally possible that the same region can be both menacing

and majestic, sometimes to the same groups of people? How do differing groups define the optimal use of this ambiguous space? How do these alternate uses intersect, overlap, or impede interconnected social places in kinship or symbolic systems? How do these physical and social relationships change over time? By examining narratives from local residents in Upstate South Carolina, I have initiated an explanation of the critical position of place, and the complex relationships between people and the spaces they occupy through time.

Contracted by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources in August 2006 to work on a small grant project, I was originally expected to collect stories from the rapidly-disappearing “old time” Euro-American residents of the Jocassee Gorges region (upper Oconee and Pickens counties), abutting the border of the Carolinas. Soon I expanded the research to include newcomers living on the frontier, behind the palisaded walls of gated communities. Virtually invisible in the local histories have been African Americans, but I have contacted descendants of freed slaves settled among Euro-American residents. As much as possible, I have interviewed multiple generations to document traditions and perceptions through time. Eventually, I also plan to interview Hispanics, some of the newest residents of the Upstate, who perform much of the manual labor in the area today. Along with interviews, I have continued participant observation in the crossroads gas stations, at church fish fries, state parks, gated communities, and even at a wilderness bear-hunting expedition.

HISTORICAL SURVEY

The Jocassee Gorges region preserves one of the most beautiful areas in the southeastern U.S. (see Clay 1995, 7). At the very edge of the

Blue Ridge Mountains, cold mountain streams carve gorges through ancient metamorphic rocks and tumble over spectacular waterfalls. Boulder-strewn rivers like the Horsepasture, Whitewater, Keowee, Eastatoee, and Chattooga (the latter comprising much of the setting for the *Deliverance* film) gather together on the Piedmont and flow toward the Atlantic. Deep in the valleys are stands of rhododendron and hemlock, and Oconee bells (one of the world's rarest wildflowers) hide in the shade. Protruding above the trees are occasional outcrops of smooth granitic rock, with sheer sides and romanticized names like "Table Rock" and "Caesar's Head."

Scotch-Irish settlers, traveling southwestward down the edge of the Blue Ridge from Virginia and Pennsylvania, displaced the original Cherokee inhabitants by the late eighteenth century (Clay 1995, 22-23). These highlanders created farms in the valleys, gave their livestock free range through the hills, and transformed much of their corn crop into "runs" of moonshine. Besides the distilling process (and the term "run"), these settlers contributed characteristic words to the area's dialect, such as the aspirated "(h)it," "you-uns" (for you, plural), and the distinctive pronunciations of "chimlee" (chimney), "strenth," and "lenth" (Montgomery 2005). Even today, residents distinguish between "Piedmont" and "mountain" ways of speaking.

Another significant contribution by these mountain residents was the entrenchment of the region's "frontier" reputation. Already on the Cherokee-Charles Town trading frontier, by the early nineteenth century the region had solidified this reputation. Far from the legal centers of major cities and even county seats, people traditionally relied on neighbors for support and settled disputes among themselves. Those living within the law knew better than to report on those living just beyond the edge. Eccentricities of all types were tolerated, and "local characters" abounded in every neighborhood.

After the “War Between the States,” freed African Americans settled in small pockets of the Upstate, farming and laboring. Existing with their white neighbors in an uneasy symbiotic relationship requiring tact and caution, blacks worked in the same fields and often drank from the same dippers as their white neighbors, yet simultaneously lived in constant fear of harassment and in continual poverty of resources. Segregated black schools received inadequate funding and outdated textbooks well into the 1960s. Community residents recall with vivid terror episodes of white gangs beating black youth, the afternoon North Carolina Klansmen shot up the neighborhood, and the night forty years ago the local KKK burned the community’s historic church.

By the early twentieth century, cotton mills had become significant employers in most of the upper Piedmont towns, drawing mountain folk from the hills and valleys into electrified homes on paved streets, with better schools and more secure wages (Gauzens 1993, 164; McFall 1959, 146; Clay 1995, 24-25). Eventually, modernization penetrated even the deepest mountain coves, bringing paved highways, electric lights, refrigerators, radios, televisions, and broadened horizons (Hembree 2003, 110).

Timber companies, another major regional employer, had for a century extended rails and land purchases into the high country in an insatiable thirst for lumber (Hembree 2003, 113, 120; Duncan 1984, 4-5; 13). One of those companies, Crescent Land and Timber, was a subsidiary of Duke Power, a company with an eye for much greater future development.

Targeting the Keowee River and its tumbling mountain tributaries, in the early sixties Duke began a major push to buy as much land as possible in order to construct an interconnected series of hydroelectric lakes (Badenoch 1989, 17). Eventually the Keowee and Jocassee valleys were flooded, displacing hundreds of people and

necessitating the destruction of farmsteads, the loss of private land, the removal of churches, and the reburial of ancestors (Lane 2004, 31). Surrendering homes, lands, and history proved to be disheartening to all; but some reaped economic advantages and obtained newer homes closer to medical and educational institutions (Hembree 2003, 7).

Soon after, Duke re-sold significant portions of the former hill-sides (now lakeshores) to private development companies, who eagerly constructed a series of gated and exclusive communities along the lakes. “Snowbirds” from the North and West moved in, bringing new accents and new values—but also new tax dollars and new employment opportunities (Badenoch 1989, 37, 62). Within the past several decades, Hispanics have also moved into the Upstate communities, bringing a new language, a new religion, and a ready and willing labor force for the construction and landscaping businesses.

Emerging as a lightning rod for the conflicting meanings and uses of physical and social space was McKinney Chapel, in upper Pickens County. Originally on a hillside near the junction of Eastatoee Valley with Jocassee Valley above the Keowee River, the chapel remained a community gathering place for over a century. After the valleys flooded in the 1960s, the country road leading past the church then dead-ended into Lake Keowee just below the dam for Lake Jocassee. For a time, Eastatoee Valley residents could still freely visit McKinney Chapel and the cemetery there, as well as boat, picnic, fish, and hike at the lake. By the nineties, however, a private community on the lakeshore restricted lake access, and (after a long court battle) the development company (with governmental approval) gated the public road leading to the chapel. While the developer agreed to allow permanent public access to the lake, chapel, and cemetery, and the gate guards will wave anyone right through if one mentions an appropriate destination, most Eastatoee Valley residents today refuse

to pass through the gates, disdaining having to “beg permission” from outsiders to visit a public place and their ancestors’ graves.

DISCUSSION

The key to understanding the passion of people for the region, I believe, lies in unlocking the multilayered meanings of space and place, both geographical and social, embedded here. I have just begun to explore these complex theoretical relationships, also noted (among other places) in the Mississippi Delta of Arkansas by Susan Probasco (2005); the Jocassee Gorges area seems to be another promising case study.

Threaded throughout the narratives and observations I continue to collect are two separate and contrastive themes, providing juxtaposed images of this place, the meanings of this place, and the relationships of those within it. On the one hand, and especially to outsiders, the place is a physical and social frontier with potentially menacing residents (both human and non-human); on the other hand, the place is also majestic, and the residents (including outsiders) deeply committed to this special place. Complicating the analysis, these contrastive themes of place interweave with social relationships, locating individuals within this ambiguous space and through layers of time. In other words, geographical places connect, and are rhetorically connected directly to people (living and dead). Land metaphorically becomes a living being, a critical member of family kinship networks. Likewise, people connect, and are connected to, landscapes—symbolically by means of family stories and actually by means of cemetery burials. For locals, then, losing family land to development equals the death of a family member, and this I believe explains the passion most people have for preserving their family’s land. The landscape of the Jocassee Gorges thus becomes

a multilayered text of contrastive themes where people and places merge and flow through generations.

The Menacing Frontier

Today, thousands of acres of the Jocassee Gorges region are protected as federal wilderness, National Forest land, the Wild and Scenic Chattooga River, or as state parks. As one travels deeper into the mountain coves, the roads eventually dead-end at isolated trailers or turn into gravel logging roads heading deeper into the back country. Bears routinely raid bird feeders and deer nibble gardens, even in gated communities. A college student remembered “bear scares” cutting their grade-school recess short. In a gated community recently, I have had to wait for deer to cross the road from one fairway to the next.

In thirty years, over thirty people have died trying to run the Chattooga River to emulate the suburbanites in *Deliverance* (Lane 2004, 5). At a local tourist restaurant at the foot of the mountains, T-shirts proclaim: “Keep paddling; I hear banjo music,” a joke so deeply embedded in popular culture we still laugh even thirty-five years after the film’s premier. James Dickey (1970, 273) described the area as “the Country of Nine-Fingered People and Prepare to Meet Thy God.” During the filming of the screenplay, Dickey’s son Christopher remembered: “There were plenty of real mountain men out there, with real guns.... I was scared” (1998, 180).

Moonshine (and now illegal drugs) can be easily obtained from the “right” people (see also Hembree 2003, 104). One man I recently interviewed freely admitted that his moonshining activities helped pay for the house he now lived in. Despite having been arrested several times, he stayed in business until a recent injury forced him to retire.

Local residents have told decades-old stories of “quare” folks, including rumors of gay and lesbian couples generally ignored by their religiously conservative neighbors. At a well-known mountain watering hole along a U.S. highway, the former proprietor, “Scatterbrains,” once allegedly shot the bar’s television to prove he was a faster draw than Sheriff Matt Dillon. “Road Kill Grill,” a ramshackle sign currently announces to those driving by. After expressing my curiosity about the bar, I was cautioned by a local woman not to enter the place by myself.

The Majestic Mountains

Simultaneously, the spectacular beauty of the region has fostered in the residents an intimate love affair with the land they occupy. For the locals along the Chattooga, the river “is...something akin to home, a place you feel your connection to very deeply but cannot articulate” (Lane 2004, 18). Debbie Fletcher (2003, 9) described the now-flooded Jocassee Valley as “the nearest place I knew to heaven on earth.” As she returns from a trip to her Eastatoee Valley home, Elizabeth Nelson reveals, “my heart jumps when I see that first row of mountains in the distance. It’s like, I’m home. Yeah!”

Even those isolated behind the gates of private communities sense this deep-seated association with the land. Overwhelmingly, these residents describe their protected areas as “home,” where they feel peace and serenity. Jack Benson and his wife Carol, looking for a place to retire, eventually discovered the flooded valleys in the Upstate: “Lo and behold, here’s Lake Keowee,” he recalled; “I mean the water is absolutely gorgeous, and the scenery is beautiful countryside.” Carol Benson added: “We fell in love with the blue lake.”

The Metaphors of Land: Spaces, Places, and Meanings

The meaning of place becomes emotionally intense when one is compelled to surrender that place. Residents forced to move by the rising lake waters somberly told of elderly neighbors who died almost immediately after selling out or who sat on their porch steps one last time as the lake waters lapped inevitably toward the stoop. In two different homes, informants preserve photos of “Chapman’s Bridge,” a covered bridge originally situated just about where Jocassee Dam looms today. Another man, whose home has been replaced by a state park visitors’ center, brought stones from the Whitewater River to line a pathway into his new home’s back door. Another resident transplanted rare Oconee bells from Jocassee Valley behind his new home in Eastatoee Valley. In these examples, parts of landscapes (rocks, flowers, bridges) reconnect people to vanished places, and reintegrate those places back into people’s lives.

For those who have managed to retain their family lands despite the area’s development, those places have transcendent layers of symbolic meanings connecting people into physical and social landscapes. Those who still wander the hills of their youth describe knobs and outcrops and even specific trees in the same intimate detail as an urbanite giving directions to a corner deli. On family farms, granddaughters proudly work the same garden plots alongside their grandmothers, and most high-school students remain close to home after graduation. A young man from northern Pickens County succinctly connects place, time, and social relations as he recalls a recent trip with his father:

I pointed out a...field that I had picked up hay in, and he goes, “well I picked up hay in that same field there,

see, 'cause that used to be your uncle's house across the street." So I thought that was kind of neat,... doing the same thing [on the same land] my father had done when he was younger.

A woman from Eastatoee Valley directly ties herself and her family to her land with spiritual bonds:

I'm the seventh generation of my family to live in this valley so I have very deep roots here.... If you just go out and sit and look at it, you can't help but be touched by it in some fashion. It's a spiritual thing for me. I just feel like I'm very blessed that I and my family have been allowed to live in this incredible place.

In a wonderful metaphor anthropomorphizing the very terrain she occupies, Shirley Patterson describes her emotions as she approaches her Upstate home, on land held by her African American family for over a century. As she tops a hill and sees in the near distance the wall of the Blue Ridge, bookended by the granitic outcrops of Table Rock and Caesar's Head, she experiences:

...a sense of peace. Peace. You can feel it.... There's something about once I...make that turn right here..., it's just the serenity and the peace. It's just overpowering. You can't explain it. You have to feel it.... That whole area just opens up its arms and just hugs me.

Those born and raised within sight of the Blue Ridge see and feel a spiritual connection to the place, an intimacy between the land and the social relationships embedded in those places. "There's a spirit about this place," Elizabeth Nelson explains; "the day of my dad's funeral,... we started up the road out of the valley and it had the most empty, spiritless feeling. I'm sure because my dad was gone."

Because of these symbolic and actual familial and generational associations, then, the destruction of these special places because of impounded water or manufactured landscapes creates a sense of personal loss. Land becomes culturally linked to relatives through story and memory and actually linked through burials. Thus, the “death” of the land symbolically means the loss of previous generations and of family memories. Despairing over the flooding of Jocassee Valley, Frank Finley notes that the lake reminds him “of a canopy over a grave” (Hembree 2003, 161), metaphorically associating the death of that landscape with the death of a person. In the Jocassee Gorges region (and probably elsewhere), places become metamorphosed into living beings, and living beings are absorbed back into physical places. This symbolic connection between people and place, I believe, explains the tenacious attempts by locals to protect landscape and thus kinship from destruction.

CONCLUSION

The Jocassee Gorges region is a place of multilayered contrasts of space, place, time, and social relations. Gated community residents love their neighbors but hesitate to shop or dine in nearby local crossroads stores because of the “outsider” glares. Local residents respect the financial contributions of their gated neighbors but resent the new lifestyles locked behind the gates. Both locals and newcomers recognize the “menace” of the mountain frontier, home to bears, moonshiners, and eccentric characters. At the same time, all also recognize the magnificent beauty of the area and the deeply rooted traditional cultures but see those same elements in different ways.

Mountain residents recognize that the place has some negative aspects; but, as with a family member, they accept the faults of the place and love unconditionally. In the Upstate, this love of

land equates to a love of family, because land enters the kinship network as another member. More than just the background to events, places connect directly to kin through story, and kin dissolve back into places through time. It is this complicated anthropomorphic metaphor involving a place both menacing and majestic, linked with family and reinforced with spiritual meanings, that explains the multilayered perceptions of the Jocassee Gorges area today.

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