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The Gullah People, Justice, and the Land on Hilton Head Island: A Historical Perspective

Dominique T. Hazzard

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Prerequisite for Honors

in Environmental Studies

Wellesley College

April 2012

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Professor James Turner for his infinite patience, guidance, and support, and for consistently having faith in me over the past four years. Likewise, I am grateful to my committee members Professors Elizabeth DeSombre, Ryan Quintana, and Marcy Thomas for their input and assistance during this undertaking. I would also like to thank all of the friends who supported me throughout this process, especially during the final stretch, to whom I am eternally indebted. Additionally, I would like to thank my mother for absolutely everything, my godparents Mr. and Mrs. Winston and Kimberly Jones for their hospitality, Dr. Tracey Cameron, and the helpful individuals I encountered at the Avery Research Center, the Penn Center, the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, and the Beaufort District Collection. A special thank you also goes to Dr. Renata Schultz and the wonderful, wonderful siblings of Ethos who made me believe this was possible. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the Gullah-Geechee people of the Lowcountry, and to my ancestors who survived the long journey from the West coast of Africa to the beaches of the Lowcountry Sea Islands, although I will never know their names.

Executive Summary

The Sea Islands off the coast South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, also known as the Lowcountry, have been home to the Gullah-Geechee community for the past three centuries. The Gullah-Geechee people are African Americans who are descended from the enslaved people who worked the rice and cotton plantations in the Low Country region of Georgia and South Carolina, and who continue to live on the mainland and regions 'Sea Islands to this day. These people have a rich culture; more than any other African Americans, the Gullah-Geechee have been able to retain many aspects of West African culture, from language, to music, to land usage traditions. Unfortunately, the survival of the Gullah-Geechee currently is threatened by a variety of factors-social, economic, and environmental. Today, the people are faced with displacement from their traditional lands and the cultural traditions associated with that land due to the impacts of the rise of tourism and private residential communities. On no Lowcountry island are these challenges more apparent than on Hilton Head, an island off the coast of South Carolina that is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the South. The purpose of this thesis is to examine through a historical lens how the interaction of the Gullah people of Hilton Head island with the land has intersected and been impacted by changes to that land, the justice implications of those intersections, and how the story of the Gullah people and the development of Hilton Head for tourism and private residential communities can add to the literature of environmental studies, environmental justice, and the broader history of African Americans in the United States.

Between Reconstruction and the beginning of rapid development in the 1950s, the Gullah people of Hilton Head were both nourished and challenged by the land. As Union troops receded and the island slipped back into rural obscurity, the population plummeted from 40,000 in 1862 to less than 3,000 individuals in 1868.¹ For the next fifty years, the Gullah people of Hilton Head Island would draw a living from the land, continuing to forge a unique sense of place and relationship with the land. In 1949, a Georgian real estate scout named Fred Hack and his neighbor Joseph Fraser, owner of the Fraser lumber company, journeyed to Hilton Head and became determined to harvest the island's substantial timber stands. They set up the Hilton Head Company that same year, purchased over two thirds of the island for \$60 an acre, and set up lumber mills on the southern end of the island to begin harvesting pine."² Charles Fraser later launched his own company, the Sea Pines Company, in 1957 with 5,000 acres of land and a determination to create a high class resort community on the southern tip of Hilton Head while preserving the area's natural beauty. Sea Pines, and the private residential communities Fraser built in its wake were incredibly successful; they set a trend on the Island of Hilton Head and throughout all of the Lowcountry. The politics of public and private space in America in the 1950s and 1960s- the increasing obsession among White Americans with privatization, was a likely contributor to the popularity of these private enclaves. Ultimately, the growth of tourism and private residential communities that began at Hilton Head, compounded by the problem of heirs property and fundamental differences in conceptions of what land ownership even means, facilitated the marginalization of the Gullah-Geechee community throughout the Lowcountry.

¹ Town of Hilton Head Island, "Our History," <http://www.hiltonheadislandsc.gov/ourisland/history.cfm>, 12 Nov 2011.

² Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 24.

This marginalization has manifested itself in the erosion of the Gullah-Geechee people's land based traditions and threatened the community health of the Gullah-Geechee people. This is consistent with the literature; numerous scholars have documented that rural black communities with higher rates of land ownership have a stronger sense of community and a greater number of shared values and traditions.³ From decreased ability to engage in traditional Gullah activities such as sweetgrass basket making, gardening, and fishing, to shifts away from community justice systems and towards a 'culture of servitude', reduced access to land and land ownership due to development can be directly connected to negative impacts on Gullah culture and community health.

Fortunately, far from being passive victims of cultural erosion, the Gullah people have been actively striving to determine their own fate and write their own history during the past sixty years of development in the Lowcountry. Through education, legal action, and political and economic organizing on the local, regional, national, and international levels, the Gullah people have been able to assert agency and advocate for recognition and rights as a people. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of political resiliency that has arisen is the formation of the Gullah-Geechee Nation, a political representation of the Gullah-Geechee people's demands for agency, sovereignty, and respect. Another example is the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, which was created in 2006, when the United States Congress passed the National Heritage Act of 2006 and designated the coastline from Wilmington, North Carolina to Jacksonville, NC as one of the nation's forty National Heritage Areas.⁴

These successes can be seen as part of a recent trend of indigenous peoples gaining an increasingly powerful political voice at both the national and international level by implementing conscious political strategies around the traditional narratives of the endangered nature of their cultures⁵ - essentially, purposefully politicizing themselves, their culture, and particularly their land as a means of survival and advancing their interests by adopting a broad concept of community health. It can also be viewed as a call for the field of environmental justice to embrace issues regarding privately owned land, as well as a broader understanding of what it means to fight for community health. Generally, community health is discussed solely in terms of the physical health of individual members of the community. In the environmental justice literature, community health is usually discussed in terms of the disproportionate share of pollution and toxins with which marginalized communities are burdened. But I argue for a new understanding of community health; when evaluating the impact of environmental and land issues on communities, we must also incorporate cultural, economic, and political resiliency into the concept of community health. It is not only the health of a community's bodies that matters, but the health of their music, spiritual traditions, artistic and culinary expression, language, and independent economic means.

³ V. Grim and A. B. Effland, "Sustaining a Rural Black Farming Community in the South: A Portrait of Brooks Farm, Mississippi," *Rural Development Perspectives* 12 no. 3 (1997), 48; Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, "Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland," 2

⁴ "Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor," National Park Service, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm>.

⁵ Shane Greene, "Indigenous People Incorporated?," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (April 2004), 211.

The Nexus of History and Environmental Justice

On the Georgia coast, right on the edge of the city of Savannah, sits a little green house surrounded by cacti, majestic trees elegantly strung with moss, and a community where everyone still seems to know the family lineage of their neighbors. This is my mother's childhood home; purchased by my grandparents, the grandchildren of Sea Island slaves; it is owned by my entire extended family. My mother and I drive down to visit our family in the area and do our share of caring for the property once or twice a year. "Tybee Beach, and Hilton Head... when I was little we used to go to those places all the time, but now they done bought it all up and nobody can't even afford to get in," my mother often laments with a shake of her head as we complete the long drive from our home in Maryland to Georgia. As a child, I never probed my mother to elaborate- who bought what, from whom, and why? Why were these patches of island land in such high demand anyway- what did "we" used to do with them, and what were "they" doing with them now that necessitated payment for access?

The prospect of discovering answers to these questions, and others about the land and people of my family's cultural heritage inspired me to embark upon this research. My family is descended from enslaved people who lived on the Hazzard Plantation of Jekyll Island. Jekyll Island is one of the Sea Islands off the coast South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida that have been home to the Gullah-Geechee community for the past three centuries. The Gullah-Geechee people are African Americans who are descended from the enslaved people who worked the rice and cotton plantations in the Low Country region, and who continue to live on the mainland and Sea Islands to this day; Gullah traditionally refers to South Carolina communities and "Geechee" to populations on the coasts of Georgia and northern Florida, although the terms are often used interchangeably. These people have a rich culture; more than any other African Americans, the Gullah-Geechee have been able to retain many aspects of West African culture, from language and music, to cuisine and land usage traditions.

When I started to research the Geechee roots of my family during the summer of 2010, I began to realize that certain cultural elements are not unique to my family, but are part of a larger pattern of Gullah-Geechee culture and life- the Hoppin John and gubers on New Year's Eve and the 'skreet' in lieu of 'street' - but also the struggles over and threats to sell the land we all hold

as heirs property, and the wistful remembrance of the community land rights of times past. It was then that I wondered what the full story of the relationship between the Gullah-Geechee people, the land, and justice has been and is today, and as an Environmental Studies student, realized the academic potential of investigating that question.

Today, the Gullah people are faced with the loss of their land and the associated cultural traditions due to the rise of tourism, the legal challenges of heirs property ownership, and new conservation laws and restrictions. On no Gullah island are these challenges more apparent than on Hilton Head, an island off the coast of South Carolina that is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the South. The purpose of this thesis is to examine through a historical lens how the interaction of the Gullah people of Hilton Head island with the land has intersected and been impacted by changes to that land, the justice implications of those intersections, and what the Gullah people can add to the literature of environmental studies, environmental history, and environmental justice, and to broader story of African Americans in the United States.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is a social movement, a goal, and a field of scholarly study. The beginning of the environmental justice movement in the United States cannot be reduced to a specific event or moment in time; instead as legal scholars Luke Cole and Sheila Foster note in *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*, the US environmental justice movement can be thought of as a river fed by many tributaries: the land rights struggles of Native Americans during the settlement of Europeans on the North American continent and encompassing the anti-toxics movement, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the labor movement demands for safe working conditions, as well as what is considered ‘traditional’ environmentalism.⁶

The goals of this broad-based movement vary based on the body that is defining them. While some use the definition provided by the United States government, which refers to “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental

⁶ Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up* (NY, NY: NYU Press, 2001), 20.

laws, regulations, and policies”⁷ others such as the attendees of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, use a broader concept that also includes respect for the “environmental determination of all peoples” and the inclusion of affected peoples in environmental decision making processes.⁸ The study of the environmental justice movement and the injustices it is striving to address has evolved into a robust scholarly field and avenue of activism over the last several decades. Like the movement of the same name, the field consists of several different yet interwoven threads. Of these, the most relevant to this study are those threads that have to do with African Americans and those relating to access to and sovereignty over land and its resources.

Environmental Justice and African Americans

One of the most important segments of the environmental justice movement and literature as they relate to African Americans is the inequitable disposal of toxic waste. The work of Robert Bullard provides numerous examples of literature on this topic. He writes, for example, about the 1982 protests in Warren County, NC, considered by scholars to be a pivotal moment for the growth of the US environmental justice movement. Warren County, which had a higher percentage of African Americans than any other county in the state, was chosen as the location to bury soil that was contaminated by the illegal dumping of oil laced with Polychlorinated Biphenyls. Because the area has a high water tables and groundwater was the source of residents’ drinking water, Warren County was not the most environmentally safe location in the state where toxic waste could have been disposed; the residents saw this as an infringement of civil rights and mounted a national, albeit unsuccessful, campaign against the burial of the PCBs.⁹

Bullard also chronicles the story of African American neighborhoods in Houston, Texas, and the disposal of toxic waste in the form of landfills, incinerators, and transfer stations. Between 1920 and 1970, the city of Houston opened five new waste incinerators, four of which were placed in African American neighborhoods and the other of which was placed in a Latino neighborhood; African Americans only made up a quarter of the city’s population. The demand

⁷ White House, Executive Order 12898, “Federal Actions To Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations” (Washington, DC: Federal Register, 1994).

⁸ Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, “Principles of Environmental Justice”, (1991), Accessed November 21, 2011, <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>.

⁹ Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping In Dixie: Race, Class, And Environmental Quality* (Westview Press, 2000), 101.

for environmental justice in the city exploded in 1979 when residents of the predominately black Northwest Manor Community realized that the landfill was being built near their suburban homes and less than 1400 feet from their neighborhood high school, and filed a class action lawsuit, also eventually unsuccessful, charging environmental racism.¹⁰

These early stories of environmental injustice in the form of inequitable toxic waste disposal that have been studied by Bullard and others are just the beginning; there have also been systematic studies examining this phenomenon on a national, structural level. The first of these was *Toxic Waste and Race*, published by the Commission for Racial Justice in 1987. This report was the first national study to reveal the startling correlations between the racial composition of neighborhoods and the presence of commercial waste facilities and uncontrolled waste sites; in fact the study found that more than income, or home value, race was the most salient factor in predicting where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located. The study also found a racially correlated difference between the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters- white communities see “faster action and better results” than communities where blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live, regardless of income. Further studies confirmed the salience of race as an independent factor correlated with the disposal of hazardous waste and noxious facilities, regulatory and clean up action, and environmental health outcomes.¹¹ Importantly, the twentieth anniversary edition of *Toxic Waste and Race* found that in 2007, “significant racial and socioeconomic disparities persist in the distribution of the nation’s commercial hazardous waste facilities.” Today, race continues to be the strongest predictor of where hazardous wastes are located, and people of color are actually found to be “more concentrated around hazardous waste facilities that previously shown” in the original report.¹²

Another of the most studied forms of environmental injustice that affects African Americans is the inequitable siting of polluting industries. In *Unequal Protection*, Jane Kay discusses the case of South Central and East Los Angeles, the two communities of color which were home to zip code 90058, which in 1991 was the “dirtiest” zip code in Los Angeles. Within only one square mile, these African Americans and Latino communities housed eighteen

¹⁰ Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping In Dixie*, 116.

¹¹ Phil Brown, “Race, Class, and Environmental Health: A Review and Systemization of the Literature,” *Environmental Research* 69, no. 1 (1995), 15.

¹² United Church of Christ, “Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty 1987- 2007”, Accessed November 21, 2001, <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/toxic20.pdf>.

polluting industries that spewed five times more dangerous pollutants, including lead, ammonia, and various carcinogens, into the environment than were emitted in all of the next most polluted zip code, Orange County.¹³

In an inspiring move, community organizations in predominately African American South Central Los Angeles and predominately Latino East Los Angeles joined forces to prevent the siting of additional polluting industries in their neighborhoods. Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles was the first community organization to actually block the siting of a waste incinerator in a community, which it accomplished in 1985 through marches, protests, legal hearings, and other methods of applying political pressure for justice. The construction of the same incinerator in East Los Angeles was blocked six years later when CCSCA and Mothers of East Los Angeles sued the government on the basis of environmental racism and won in the courts.¹⁴

Another prominent example that has drawn much attention from environmental justice scholars is that of Cancer Alley, the petrochemical industrial corridor that exists along the Mississippi River in Louisiana and is home to over 125 different polluting plants and companies that emit toxic and carcinogenic chemicals into the area's land, water, and air. Wright, Bryant, and Bullard write about how the idea of African Americans and their historic communities being expendable and disposable has contributed to racist zoning and environmental policing practices and has allowed these communities to become the chemical 'sacrifice zones' of America.¹⁵ Most significant to this research is the impact that inequitable siting of toxic industries has had on African American land ownership. Many chemical companies located in Cancer Alley use the strategy of "buying out" communities in order to avoid being held accountable for poisoning land and water. Homeowners in communities such as Reveilletown, Morrisonville, and Sunrise, which were founded and built by freed African Americans after the Civil War, have been forced to sell their land and community culture to companies like Dow

¹³ Jane Kay, "California's Endangered Communities of Color," in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* edited by Robert Bullard (Sierra Club Books, 1997), 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁵ Bryant, Bullard, and Wright. "Coping with Poisons in Cancer Alley," in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* edited by Robert Bullard (Sierra Club Books, 1997), 110.

Chemical so that those companies can continue the unfettered emission of pollutants without consequences.¹⁶

Environmental Justice and Land Rights

The second thread of environmental justice scholarship that is most relevant to this research is the literature concerning land sovereignty. Examples of environmental injustices that interfere with land and resource sovereignty can be found across a variety of US ethnic groups. However, the group the environmental justice literature most discusses in terms of land rights violations and displacement from the land is indigenous peoples; there is a significant body of literature on the displacement of American Indians for resource extraction, development and conservation. Some of the earliest examples of American Indian displacement for resource extraction were the appropriation of American Indian lands and the devastation of American Indian peoples in California, Washington, and Oregon during the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s.¹⁷ However, most contemporary examples have to do with energy extraction. The reservations of many American Indian nations contain significant stores of raw energy materials such as coal and uranium. In the case of coal, one third of US steam coal reserves lie under American Indian reservations, including the Black Mesa Navajo and Hopi reservation in Colorado.¹⁸ Reservations lands are held in trust by the US government, meaning that the government has some authority to use the land for the purpose that ‘best’ benefits the American people, potentially including energy resources.

The Black Mesa region of Colorado is one reservation that has significant coal deposits. In 1990, the US Department of the Interior authorized the creation of the Black Mesa Kayenta mine on the Navajo and Hopi reservation of Black Mesa. The steam mining of the coal and the transport of the coal via slurry pipeline utilizing the main water aquifer for the community has led to a myriad of health and environmental problems for the Navajo and Hopi. This includes a declining water level in the Black Mesa aquifer, leading to conflicts between the Hopi and Navajo and the tribes and the US government and increased rates of lung cancer and other

¹⁶ Bryant, Bullard, and Wright, “Coping with Poisons in Cancer Alley,” 119.

¹⁷ Linda S. Parker, *Native American Estate: The Struggle Over Indian and Hawaiian Lands* (University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 40.

¹⁸ Kathy Hall, “Impacts of the Energy Industry on the Navajo and Hopi,” in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* edited by Robert Bullard (Sierra Club Books, 1997), 132.

cancers due to coal dust in the air and contamination on surface water by slurry.¹⁹ Additionally, the demand for energy resources has contributed the loss of the Navajo and Hopi people's sovereignty over the resources and land of the Black Mesa, as well as their land based-culture. One example of the undermining of the traditional self-autonomy of these groups was a mandate from the federal government in 1930 for the Navajo people on Black Mesa to reduce the size of sheep herds by ten percent; this decrease inhibited the ability of the people to sustain their flocks in a cost effective manner and led to many herders selling or consuming their flocks and therefore losing government granted 'customary rights' to herd sheep at all.²⁰

Another example is laws for the post-mining reclamation of Black Mesa landscapes. After the mining is complete, the coal mining companies are required to "reclaim" the land. Because the original desert landforms cannot be restored, companies transform the landscape into grassland with plantings of native vegetation. When this occurs, grazing, subsistence gathering, and other 'pre-mining uses' on the new grassland is prohibited until it is determined that the planted vegetation is well established; in some cases, this period where the Navajo in particular are not allowed to use the land for major economic activities is estimated to last up to forty years.²¹ The exclusion of these American Indians from using their traditional lands for the purpose of protecting landscapes artificially created in the aftermath of invasive resource extraction permitted by the US government reflects a loss of resource and land sovereignty.

As important as the literature about displacement and denial of indigenous sovereignty for resource extraction is the literature discussing the indigenous displacement that occurs to make way for development. In fact, some scholars locate the beginning of environmental injustice in North America with the displacement of American Indians for the purposes of European settlement and development. From the beginning of European settlement, a goal was to continually push American Indian peoples farther and farther west, through 'purchasing' land or through forceful seizure. This desire was eventually institutionalized by the US government with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forced tens of thousands of American Indians from

¹⁹ Hall, "Impacts of the Energy Industry on the Navajo and Hopi," 134.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

²¹ Ibid., 133.

various nations to relocate from what is now the Deep South to reservations in what is now the Southwest.²²

Although this displacement cleared over 25 million acres of land for white settlement, US population growth created demand for more land as well as pressure to further displace American Indian people. As a result, in the late 19th century, the United States government opened 113 Indian boarding schools, which at any given time between 1860 and 1920 were educating at least 6,000 American Indian youth. Though these schools were operated and marketed under the premise of educating American Indians for equality in American society, the underlying purpose was to catalyze the dissolution of American tribes and tribal cultures, therefore eliminating the need for tribally held land and freeing additional land for white American settlement.²³ Also to serve this purpose was the Dawes Act of 1887, in which the US government authorized itself to partition communal American Indian tribal lands and reservations into individual allotments; this encouraged individual home ownership, the dissolution of tribes, and the elimination of various American Indian land ownership ethics.²⁴ As a minority group of the US House of Representatives stated, “The main purpose of this bill is not to help the Indians... it is a method of getting at the valuable Indian lands and opening them up to white settlement.”²⁵ All of these various forms of forced relocation and cultural elimination deprived American Indian peoples of their ancestral land rights, their cultural ecological knowledge of the land and its resources, and their ability to support themselves through subsistence lifestyles.

In addition to being removed from private lands by the federal government to facilitate the private development of White citizens there is also a history of indigenous American people being relocated from their lands for the purpose of the creation of public parks for leisure and preservation; scholar Mark Spence argues that “wilderness protection and native dispossession” have been partnered throughout United States history.²⁶ A poignant example is the creation of Yellowstone National Park, revered by most Americans as a pristine, and public, national

²² Gloria Jahoda. *Trail of Tears: The Story of the American Indian Removals* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 48.

²³ Theda Purdue and Michael D. Green. *North American Indians: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁵ Parker, *Native American Estate*, 41.

²⁶ Mark Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

treasure. In reality, this area of Montana was not an untrammelled wilderness; the Crow, Tukudeka, and Shoshone people had been present in the area for millennia. The area that is now Yellowstone was 'discovered' by travelers in 1870; by 1879 the resident tribes of the mountains had been induced to live on reservations in Wyoming and Montana and the US had reneged on existing treaties guaranteeing these tribes to hunt on the land.²⁷

Scholarship on the topic of indigenous American peoples and land rights also includes the work of Pena and Lynch, who discuss sustainability, place identity, and land rights through the case study of Colorado *acequias*, or traditional communal irrigation systems of indigenous Latino communities. These *acequias* have been managed for hundreds of years through a system of local customary Latino practices, and they are largely still being managed that way, "against... the doctrines imposed by the overlaying of Anglo water law"²⁸ and despite contested transfers of land from Latinos to the US government and Whites after military conquests in the mid 19th century. The *acequias* and traditional access to them are endangered by the construction of homes and tourism amenities, water pollution from logging, water taxes that traditional users cannot afford to pay, and modern American systems of water ownership. The homes and amenities have led to the enclosure of what the traditional residents consider commons spaces, and the destruction of the over-story by logging is decreasing the length of the snow runoff season, disrupting the community's economy and place-based identity. When it comes to water laws, there are major differences between cultural perceptions of water. The existing community views water as communal property with usufractory rights, and views rights to water as inseparable from rights to the land. American water laws, however, view water as a commodity that can be privatized and separable from land rights. Yet, the *acequia* farmers of Colorado are still striving to maintain their ecological cultural by continuing to exercise their historic rights through negotiation or by trespassing upon land to which they believe they have usufractory rights.²⁹

A final example of land rights- related environmental justice issues is the challenges faced by the Shinnecock nation, a tribe of American Indians who are native to what is now Long Island, New York, specifically regarding the Hamptons. The Hamptons are a series of coastal

²⁷ Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 53.

²⁸ Devon Pena, "Nos Encercaron: Identity, Place, and Community in Ecological Politics" in *Environmental Justice: Politics, Poetics, Pedagogy*, edited by R. Stein (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press 2001), 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

villages along the South Fork of the island; over the past three centuries, the area that now constitutes the Hamptons has developed into a very popular vacation and residential community destination equipped with high-end resorts and summer homes. Throughout the development that has occurred in the Hamptons since the arrival of European settlers, the Shinnecock, like most American Indian nations, have experienced extensive dispossession of their traditional lands. One of the tribe's current struggles is for ownership of land now known as Parrish Pond. The trustees of South Hampton and the Shinnecock agreed in 1703 that the tribe could lease the land for 1,000 years. However in 1859, town residents produced a petition, supposedly signed by twenty-one Shinnecock agreeing to release the tribe's lease on the land. Although there was much evidence of fraud- some signatures of the petition were not authorized to sign anything on behalf of the tribe, some were minors, some were long deceased, and some were allegedly forged- this still led to the loss of this sacred burial land, which was later developed into luxury summer homes.³⁰ Many Shinnecock attempted to fight the construction of the luxury homes on their sacred burial grounds with legal actions through the court system, protest, and direct actions including sitting in front of the trucks scheduled to bulldoze the land; however, their efforts were unsuccessful.³¹

The environmental justice literature is rich and thorough, but there are several holes. As this introduction has shown, much of the scholarly discussions about environmental injustice faced by African Americans centers around urban populations and the injustices of toxic waste dumping and the siting of polluting industry. Works written on the unjust appropriation of land and the displacement of American people and cultures are primarily written about American Indian communities. For example, the issues faced by native Latinos in Colorado who use land that they perceive as commons and which is being increasingly appropriated for tourism development due to contested land titles, the issues faced by native Hawaiians living on heirs property, and the lands rights challenges the Shinnecock are confronting in the face of tourism development in the Hamptons are all very similar to the issues faced by Gullah residents of Hilton Head today. But what about when the endangered "native" culture is an African American one, the African Americans are living in rural communities on highly prized land, and the

³⁰ Corey Dolgon, *The End of the Hamptons: Scenes from the Class Struggle in America's Paradise* (NYU Press, 2006), 198.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

dispossession of land occurred to make way for the development of a beloved tourist destination? This thesis extends the environmental justice literature by examining what it really means for a culture to be indigenous, how changes to private land can impact community health in the broadest sense, and how these issues become politicized to achieve community goals.

Environmental History

A historical approach is critical to effectively evaluating the relationship between land, justice, and the Gullah people of Hilton Head Island. The field of environmental history inherently strives to understand the relationship between people, the land, and people's perception of the land. In order to understand the Gullah people and land loss on Hilton Head Island, we must historically examine who the Gullah people are, what their relationship with the land has traditionally been, what characters, trends, and significant events were involved in the transformation of Hilton Head, and how Gullah people have organized in resistance against land loss and de-culturization. The environmental history literature offers examples of how to do this.

William Cronon, author of some of the most seminal works of environmental history, approached the work of environmental history by examining the historical changes to and reorganization of ecological communities, as well as the historical changes to human modes of production. For example, in *Changes in the Land*, Cronon contrasted the ecosystems of pre-colonial New England with the ecosystems of New England in the 1700s; contrasted the ecological behaviors and ideas of American Indians in the region with those of arriving Europeans, especially in terms of the concept of property ownership; and described the ecological changes that Native American presence and Europeans arrival contributed. On the issue of forests, for example, Cronon explored the effects of Native American seasonal burning, colonist clearing, and the forest reclamation that followed Native American land lost.³²

Building off the tradition of *Changes in the Land* is *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* by Mart Stewart. Like Cronon, Stewart also writes through the work "a history which extends its boundaries beyond human institutions... to the natural ecosystems which provide the context for those institutions,"³³ except this ecological history is of the land and inhabitants of the Georgia Sea Islands, not New England.

³² William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. (Hill and Wang, 1983), 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, i.

While many histories of Georgia have been written, Stewart's work is distinct because it focuses on *how* the interactions between people and land changed each of those parties, how changes that occurred in the organization of human society affected the land and changes to the organization of the land affected people.

Stewart begins by laying out the geological history of the Georgia Sea Islands- the way in which they were formed and the unique characteristics of their soil and forests- before moving on to discuss the relationship between the land and the islands' earliest inhabitants, Native Americans. Stewart writes about what indigenous islanders ate, how they procured it, and how their diets changed over time in response to both natural changes and increasing cultural sophistication; he also covers the way food shelter, clothes, economical system, spirituality, and other cultural elements of the people indigenous to the Georgia Sea Island were adapted to the particulars of the environment.³⁴

Like Cronon, Stewart also focused on the way perceptions of the land by people contributed to the way people shaped and changed the land. For example, the work covers the fear the English settlers had of hot climates, and the associated corrupting "temperaments" that could make an industrious man lazy and despondent;³⁵ Stewart also covers the resistance hunting to due to social attitudes inherited from the British about the leisurely nature of hunting and the restriction of hunting rights to upper classes.³⁶ He also chronicles some aspects of how Lowcountry African Americans gained access to land-ownership after the war, and followed the development of the Lowcountry from one land-based economy, agriculture, to another- tourism. Finally, Stewart addresses not only how the people of the Lowcountry perceived and changed the land, but how the environment impacted their lives- through malaria and other diseases, droughts and crop failures, hurricanes and heat waves.³⁷

The works of environmental historians James Feldman and Richard White, the respective authors of *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands* and *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington*, are also highly relevant contributions to the literature. The topic of both of these works are the local environmental

³⁴ Mart A. Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast 1680- 1920*, (The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

history of islands; the first discusses a set of islands in Lake Superior, Wisconsin, and the second a set of islands off the coast of Washington state. Like the Sea Islands, the economy of Island County, Washington transformed from being agriculture, commercial fishing, and timber-based to being based on urban visitors, summer homes, camping, and sport hunting and fishing.³⁸ According to White, the Island County tourism boom made the ecological community less stable; instead of a return to the pre-settler ecosystems, what occurred was a change from one human created and human dependent ecosystem- agriculture- to another.³⁹ Although the work of agriculture in Island County was done by free settlers, and the work on the Carolina Sea Islands was done by enslaved people and later their descendants, the methods Washington uses to connect the culture and the land use of the Island County settlers can also be used for the Gullah-Geechee people of Hilton Head.

Importantly, Feldman discusses not only the transition of the Island County economy from agriculture and resource extraction to tourism, but how this shift from extraction to tourism was reflective of both the region and the times. For example, Feldman notes that the boom in tourism and resort ownership corresponded with the rise of the automobile, which gave middle class families the ability to vacation on places like on the Apostle Islands. Also relevant was the connection made between tourism and subsistence/productive industries remaining on the island; according to Feldman, these activities actually fueled the tourism that contributed to their decline. For example, some tourists “relished the opportunity to watch the fishermen return... with a load of fresh fish.”⁴⁰ Although the Apostle Islands ultimately became part of the National Park System and Hilton Head Island ultimately became a resort and private residential community enclave, this pattern may also be applicable in the case of the Lowcountry. The concept of “conservation refugees” created by the formation of public areas for conservation and ecotourism is well studied, but the impact of the private tourism industry on minority land-based cultures deserves more attention.

The legacy of Cronon, Stewart, and other works of environmental history literature is strong, and this thesis builds upon the existing environmental historiography and its methods.

³⁸ Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington*, (University of Washington Press, 1991), 11; 159.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁰ James Feldman, *A Storied Wilderness: Rewilding the Apostle Islands*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 136.

Like Stewart's work, this thesis covers life and landscape on the coastal Sea Islands. However, this work covers not several plantations of the Georgia Sea Islands, but the intersection of land, people, and justice on one particular South Carolina Sea Island, Hilton Head, from the perspective of the Gullah people, and with a focus on the years after the tourism boom began in Hilton Head during the 1950s.

Thus, this thesis aims to fill an implicit gap in the environmental studies literature. Not only does this thesis focus on something environmental justice scholars have not by focusing on a peculiar group of African Americans as well as the concept of dispossession of land through the politics of private space, it explores a perspective that Lowcountry environmental historians have not by situating the development of the Gullah-Geechee Sea Islands and the development of the Gullah-Geechee culture in the context of the local environment and environmental justice and exploring Gullah land loss through the lenses of community health and cultural rights. Therefore, the primary research question of this thesis is this- what has been the history of the intersection between land and the environment, justice, and the Gullah-Geechee people on Hilton Head Island.

Introduction to Gullah People and the Land

The story of the southern African American is central to the story of the United States. Every American student learns about the African slaves, captured, sold on the western coasts of Africa, and submitted to a trans-Atlantic journey so brutal and traumatizing that some scholars have proposed that African cultural elements, were unable to survive the voyage.⁴¹ As late as the 1960s, there was a raging debate in the field of sociology. Scholars of African American sociology such as E. Franklin Frazier argued that, “the Negro, owing to the manner in which he was captured in Africa and subsequently enslaved in America, was practically stripped of his cultural heritage... no traces of the element of culture can be found among American Negroes which can be attributed to African origin.”⁴² Every student also learns about the conditions of slavery, the strenuous agricultural work done on the soil of the South by enslaved Africans and their descendants; the Civil War and failed attempts at reparations in the form of federal distributions of “40 acres and a mule” to freedmen, and of Africans Americans who became sharecroppers or moved North.

The case of Gullah people of Hilton Head, when examined through the lens of environmental history, complicates this story of African Americans, their culture, and their relationship with the land. More than any group in North America, the Gullah have retained aspects of various African cultures that are significant to their relationship with the land. Their ancestors survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade and so did a plethora of cultural Africanisms expressed through language, art, spiritualities, agricultural knowledge, foods, and land use-patterns which continue be passed down through generations. These elements, combined with cultural mechanisms that developed in North America as forms of resistance against the experience of slavery, have shaped the Gullah culture and resulted in a group of people with a unique and strong connection to the land of the Lowcountry. To explore this connection, this chapter analyzes the path of its development from the coast of West Africa, to the peculiarities of plantation life, to the homesteads of Gullah freedmen in the years following the Civil War.

⁴¹ Melville J. Herskovitz, “On the Provenience of New World Negroes,” *Social Forces* 12, no. 2 (1933), 247.

⁴² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, (New York: Schocken, 1964), 15.

The Relationship Between Gullah People and the Land Pre-Slavery

The Gullah people are the descendants of Africans who were transported from various regions in Western Africa to the Lowcountry region of South Carolina, particularly the South Carolina Sea Islands; they are part of the broader group of Gullah-Geechee people. Geographically, the Lowcountry is generally considered to include the South Carolina counties of Beaufort, Colleton, Hampton, and Jasper. The Lowcountry includes the mainland as well as the thirty-three South Carolina coastal Sea Islands; the land is marshy, almost entirely below sea level, and dotted with stands of pines and moss-covered oaks. These islands were settled by the Guale, an agricultural and fishing indigenous people, for thousands of years.⁴³ The Guale were one of the first indigenous peoples to encounter European explorers, the Spanish established missions on several of the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands in the 1560s and French Huguenots established colonies, including one on Hilton Head Island, in 1562.⁴⁴ By the year 1759, the Guale were no longer residents of the area; the entire population was relocated or wiped out by the consequences of colonization, including disease and violence.⁴⁵

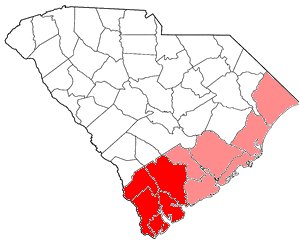


Fig. 1 Map of the South Carolina Lowcountry⁴⁶

When the English settled the Lowcountry in the 18th century in response to reports of a paradisiacal and healthy climate and with hopes of establishing cash crop plantations, the

⁴³ Mart A Stewart. *What Nature Suffers to Groe: Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 22.

⁴⁴ William S. Pollitzer. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 6; *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, s.v. Mission Santa Catalina de Guale, last accessed 9 Dec. 2011, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/HistoryArchaeology/ArchaeologyandEarlyHistory/EarlyHistory/SpanishMissions&id=h-2479>.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Saunders, *Stability and Change in Guale Indian Pottery, A.D. 1300- 1702* (University of Alabama Press, 2000), 32.

⁴⁶ "Map of the South Carolina Lowcountry," Private Communities Newswire, Last accessed April 23, 2012, http://pcnewswire.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/map_of_the_lowcountry.png.

plantation workers were initially European settlers and indentured servants. However, the colonists soon discovered that they were not easily acclimated to working in the hot, humid climate nor immune to the yellow fever and malaria that plagued them. In fact, the mortality rate in South Carolina during the early 18th century was most likely higher than that rate of any other British colony at the time.⁴⁷

The worker shortage and unhealthy circumstances led settlers to retreat to the mainland of South Carolina and begin to participate in the triangular trans-Atlantic slave trade. In fact, planters explicitly justified the importation of human cargo based on what they perceived as the greater suitability of Africans to the South Carolina weather. “The low lands of Carolina,” stated one late 18th century Carolina farmer, “which are unquestionably the richest grounds in the country, must long have remained a wilderness had not Africans, whose natural constitutions were suited to the clime and work, been employed in cultivating this useful article of food and commerce.”⁴⁸

Analysis of slave records from the port of Charleston, SC show that the country of origin breakdown for Lowcountry slaves was 32% from Angola, 27% from Senegambia (Senegal and Gambia), 32% the Windward Coast (Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire) and Ghana, 6% from Sierra Leone, and 3% from Madagascar and Mozambique.⁴⁹ These individuals included both enslaved people transported to the Lowcountry directly from Africa, as well as Africans enslaved in the Caribbean and transported to the Lowcountry. In fact, most enslaved people who arrived in South Carolina had previously spent time in the Caribbean, particularly the island of Barbados, to be “seasoned” to the climate and work.⁵⁰ Ultimately, the Lowcountry became one of the last areas in the United States to cease participating in the slave trade; the last documented cargo of slaves to America landed on Jekyll Island in 1858, half a century after the trade was outlawed.⁵¹ Since the beginning of the slave trade and through to the present day, the Gullah-Geechee have

⁴⁷ Merrens, H. Roy, and George D. Terry. "Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina." *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 50, No. 4 (1984), 534.

⁴⁸ Bartholomew Rivers Carroll, *Historical Collections of South Carolina: Embracing Many Rare and Valuable Pamphlets, and other Documents, Relating to the History of that State from its First Discovery to its Independence, in the Year 1776* (Harper & Bros., 1836), 110.

⁴⁹ Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵¹ Erik Calonius, *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and the Conspiracy That Set Its Sails* (NY: MacMillan, 2008), 112.

possessed and continue to possess a unique culture that can be seen as part of what historian Ras Brown refers to as the overall “African Atlantic culture”, a continuation of various cultures that survived the trans-Atlantic journey.⁵²

The African Roots of Gullah Environmental Culture

In addition to being testaments to the survival of a people, many aspects of Gullah culture also shed light on the past and current relationship between Gullah people and the land. Perhaps the most studied aspect of the Gullah culture is Gullah-Geechee speech. The Gullah-Geechee dialect and its unique intonation, grammar, and vocabulary have been studied by linguistics scholars since the 1930s. Originally perceived to be an incorrect, simplified form of English, the dialect is now recognized to be a creole of Revolution era southern English and African languages from various regions⁵³. While the African American Vernacular English spoken by many African Americans also features grammatical aspects of West African languages, Gullah features many more Africanisms. These can be seen in vocabulary words such as “oonah” instead of you, body language, and naming practices- including the more than four thousand West African “basket names” still given to Gullah newborns.⁵⁴ Many Gullah words have crossed over into mainstream AAVE and Standard English, such as “gumbo”, “kumbayah”, and “yam.”

The Africanisms in the Gullah dialect can help to infer that relationships to, and perceptions of, land possessed by enslaved Africans from various cultures, especially West-Central African cultures, were part of the cultural continuities that survived the trans-Atlantic journey. In fact, one-third of the current Core Lowcountry African Lexicon- a group of words identified by linguists as being of African origin and being generally used and understood by the Gullah people are words describing nature and the environment.⁵⁵ In his analysis of the etymology of words relating to nature in the Gullah language, Brown includes this statement recorded by an enslaved man, Gullah Joe, in the 18th century, which shows how the language that enslaved Africans and their descendants used preserved African concepts of the land:

⁵² Ras Michael L.B. Brown, “Crossing Kalunga: West Central Africans and Their Cultural Influence in the South Carolina Lowcountry” (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Dissertations, 2004), 1.

⁵³ Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (University of South Carolina Press, 1949), 5; Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 108.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁵ Brown, “Crossing Kalunga,” 272.

I am an old man now, but I have a longing to walk in the *feenda*. I want to see it one more time. I have a wife and children here, but when I think of my tribe and my friends and my daddy and my mammy and the great *feenda*, a feeling rises up in my throat and my eyes well up with tears.⁵⁶

Gullah Joe's diction through the use of the word KiKongo word *feenda*, which means forest, instead of the English word shows that he retained a KiKongo perception of forests⁵⁷. The survival of this word in the Gullah lexicon today as "finda", or "wild space" points to the survival of West and West-Central spiritual interpretations of the land, which will be explored more in depth, in Gullah culture.

In addition to language, the spirituality of Gullah people also conveys information about a cultural connection to the land that has African roots. Discussions of early Gullah spirituality often focus on the activities that occurred within the plantation praise houses such as the famous "ring-shout", a spiritual tradition with African roots that consists of rhythmic dancing and singing while moving in a counterclockwise direction.⁵⁸ However, also important is the Afro-Atlantic spirituality expressed by early Gullah people and some Gullah people today, outside of the praise house, through their relationship with nature. Perhaps most significant is the distinction between cultivated land and wilderness, expressed respectively through the Gullah words *dimba* and *finda*.⁵⁹ For the early Gullah people, *dimba* represented the land of the living. It was the cleared and manipulated land where they slept, played, and worked to produce food through agriculture. Spiritual activities in *dimba* mainly related to crop production, and included activities such as rain rituals and sacrificing root crops such as peanuts and yams to the moon to ensure growth.⁶⁰

The forest and other wild spaces, on the other hand, were considered by Lowcountry enslaved people and early Gullah people to be not only sources of food but also the realm of spiritual transformation, spirit-beings, and the ancestors. In early Gullah Christianity, conversion was a three-step process and the forest was the location of a young person's initial and final

⁵⁶ Brown, "Crossing Kalunga," 312.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 312.

⁵⁸ Emory Campbell and Wilbur Shaw Cross, *Gullah Culture in America* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publishing, 2012), 246.

⁵⁹ Brown, "Crossing Kalungala," 279.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 280.

conversion. The first stage involved long nights of solitude and fervent prayer in the *finda*, for some continuing as long as several months, until the young person had a dream that was confirmed by an elder in the church. Next, the young person had to pass an exam in the praise house, or return to the forest until he or she was ready. Finally, a stream in the *finda* was chosen as the site of baptism for complete conversion into the Gullah people's Africanized Christianity. The seeking process and the fact the river or stream itself was called upon as a deity to wash away sins, rather than the name of any Christian deity, points to the influence of initiation rituals from several regions of West Africa and West-Central Africa.⁶¹

In addition to be a place where young Gullah were initiated into a new spiritual life, the *finda* was also a place to connect with the deceased as well as a place in which nature spirits were encountered. The early Gullah, and many Gullah today, bury their dead under forest trees; they also "preferred sites that were beside water so that souls might easily return to Africa", and decorated graves with seashells as a further connection to the transporting power of water.⁶² In this way, families create locations of relevance to the living in the land of the dead. The *finda* is also seen as housing a great variety of nature spirits, or *simbi*, some which heal and protect, and some which harm and are to be feared.⁶³ For the Gullah, the wilderness was a place of spiritual transition- from youth to enlightened adulthood and from life to death- and a place to foster connections to home.

Similarly, the celebrated art form of Gullah sweetgrass baskets represents cultural survival and a desire to remain connected to the lands of West and West-Central Africa. The sweetgrass basket is, in fact, considered to be the oldest surviving African art form in Africa.⁶⁴ In Africa, these baskets were crafted from reedy plants such as bulrush and palm to assist in the planting and harvesting of rice. In the New World, as early as the 17th century, the baskets had appeared and were being used in the production process for all of the South Carolina plantation cash crops; eventually they began to be used for non-agricultural purposes as well. The baskets were made, and continue to be made, from the materials most similar to the materials used in

⁶¹ Brown, "Crossing Kalunga," 330.

⁶² National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. "Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement" (Washington D.C., 2005), 76.

⁶³ Brown, "Crossing Kalungala," 334.

⁶⁴ African Studies Center, University of California Los Angeles, *African Arts: Volume 42*, (UCLA, 2009), 55.

Africa- bulrush and sweetgrass.⁶⁵ The crafting of sweetgrass has also retained a spiritual dimension that has been present since the earliest days of sweetgrass basket weaving in America. Because of the similarity of materials available in the old landscape and the new, enslaved coastal peoples viewed the opportunity as a “gift from God” and a way to remain connected to their homeland. Even today, many Gullah who craft sweetgrass baskets make a spiritual promise to “continue their craft as long as there is material available.”⁶⁶

Another significant aspect of Gullah culture that has African roots and has impacted the relationship between the Gullah people and the land is Gullah food and agricultural practices. African agricultural practices are at the core of why the Gullah are the people they are today. While in other locations plantation owners simply desired African slaves, in the Lowcountry they wanted Africans who possessed previous knowledge about cultivating one of the most important cash crops of the region- rice.⁶⁷ The dominant method of producing rice in the Lowcountry was not the typical dry method used in other areas of the colonies, but a “tidal method” that was introduced in the 1750s and produced larger yields for the region. This method required large amounts of labor for the intense work of clearing swamps of timber growth and building dykes and dams. The intricate nature of tidal rice plantations also necessitated a workforce that was highly skilled and able to control the complicated hydraulic systems.⁶⁸ Therefore, as demonstrated previously, the majority of enslaved Africans brought to the Lowcountry originated in the rice growing regions of Angola and Senegambia. Many people imported from these regions already had experience doing the backbreaking work of clearing land for rice cultivation, and had knowledge that plantations owners didn’t about operating tidal systems, preparing seeds, and harvesting the crop. Rice had been a staple food for these enslaved people in their homelands, rice was carried by them over the Atlantic Ocean during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and rice became a staple food for them and their descendants in the Lowcountry. Today, the sweetgrass baskets used in rice production during slavery survive as a creative art

⁶⁵ Brian C. Grabbatin, “Sweetgrass Basketry: The Political Ecology of an African American Art in the South Carolina Lowcountry” (M.S. thesis, College of Chareleston, 2008), 6.

⁶⁶ National Park Service, “Low Country Gullah Culture,” 67.

⁶⁷ Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (University of Illinois Press, 1991), 78.

⁶⁸ Judith Ann Carney, *Black Rice: The Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 160.

form, and rice survives as the staple food of the Gullah people- and of the entire region.⁶⁹ It is said that when mealtime approaches in a Lowcountry home, the rice pot is first put on to boil and then the decision of what to serve with the rice is made; from this approach comes a variety of classic Lowcountry dishes such as Hoppin' John (rice, black-eyed peas, and pork), gumbo (a savory stew of rice, okra, meat, and seafood), and red rice (a combination of rice, tomatoes, and spices).

Like rice, many other foods survived the journey from West and West-Central Africa to take their place in the cuisine of the Gullah people and serve as a connection to the land of the ancestors. Some key examples are okra, yams, peas, and peanuts, all of which continue to be important foods in Gullah cuisine and some of which are used to make dishes that point directly to a West and West-Central African culinary heritage- peanut soup, for example which is not a dish prepared in the African American mainstream. Other foods eaten by the Gullah people, and other southern enslaved people, were acquired upon arrival in America, such as cornbread and grits, squash, and chile peppers, from Native American influences.⁷⁰ Still other dishes were created out of necessity by Gullah cooks in the process of making food out of scraps; examples such as fried pig ears, chitlins, and hog heads survive as foodstuffs in the Lowcountry today.

Finally, an element of Gullah environmental culture that embodies the legacy of an African heritage is family structure and the resultant land-use patterns. For the Gullah "family" is not a nuclear unit of parents and children; instead one's family is defined in much broader terms as the wide group of people with whom one is related to through blood or marriage; the extended family is, therefore, the organizing unit of society.⁷¹ Marriage is not always legal, but is instead legitimized by the approval and involvement of both families. Polygamy is less common among the Gullah people of today, but was common among the early Gullah, and contributed to the matrilineal nature of Gullah social organization. Children are highly valued by the community, and adoption facilitated by 'giving away' children to relatives who desire to expand their family was and still is commonplace.⁷²

⁶⁹ National Park Service, "Low Country Gullah Culture," F35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 63.

⁷¹ Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 30.

⁷² Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird, "Sea Island Culture: Matrix of the African American Family," *Sea Island Roots* edited by Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird. (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1991), 5.

All of these aspects of Gullah family structure have impacted the way land is organized and land ownership is conceptualized in Gullah communities. Homes are built to be within “hollerin” distance, in the style of compounds and separated from each other by only a few feet. For example, a typical Sea Island compound may contain four generations of extended family living in six houses that are organized as a cluster of residences surrounding a communal dirt yard.⁷³ Such a structure, where adult children continue to live with their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, is not conducive to traditional American ideas of land ownership. Instead, land is passed down from one full generation to the next, usually without legal paperwork. Land is never “sold”, but may be given to an extended family member who has moved from a different area. The West African roots of Gullah land organization practices are clear. Broad conceptualizations of kinship, polygamy, community sanctioned marriages, inter-family adoption, and communal and multi-generational living arrangements are all common practices across the region of West Africa.⁷⁴

Overall, the culture of early and current day Gullah people disproves theories that have proposed that the transatlantic slave trade obliterated any remnants of African cultures in enslaved people. Elements of West and West-Central African cultures in particular survived with the enslaved Africans who survived the journey and can be seen in the vibrant language, spirituality, art forms, foods and agricultural practices, and land use patterns of Lowcountry Africans and their Gullah descendants; these aspects of Gullah culture also shed light on the past and current relationships between Gullah people and the land of the Lowcountry.

Gullah People and the Land During Slavery

The relationship between the enslaved people of the South Carolina Sea Islands and the land was greatly structured by plantation life; scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois have argued that overall, the exploitative nature of slavery as an agricultural system led to enslaved people and their descendants being psychologically alienated from the land.⁷⁵ However, a study of the relationship shows that the Gullah people were not completely alienated from the land. The people related to the land and water through slavery but also through subsistence farming and

⁷³ Twining and Baird, “Sea Island Culture,” 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Arc Manor LLC, 2008), 130; Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought* (University of Kansas, 2007), 95.

fishing, land-based economic activities, and as an important mode of transportation. In fact, due to peculiarities of slavery in the Lowcountry and their impact on the development of Gullah culture, the Gullah people are endowed with a uniquely strong sense of place and connection to the Lowcountry landscape.

The work that enslaved people in the Lowcountry did was very significant and commanded the majority of their waking hours. The main crops grown by enslaved people were tidal strains of rice, known as Carolina Golden Rice and Carolina White Rice.⁷⁶ The work of cultivating rice included clearing swampland, building dams to create artificial irrigation systems, and planting, harvesting, and processing the grains by hand. The other most important cash crop grown in the Lowcountry was Sea Island cotton. The first successful crop of cotton in the South Carolina Lowcountry was produced on a Hilton Head plantation in 1790.⁷⁷ For almost the next 150 years, cotton was an anchor of the Lowcountry economy. Cultivating the crop was very labor intensive and involved year round work on the part of enslaved people: tilling land in the first months of the year, then planting seeds, thinning and weeding seedlings, harvesting the crop, and finally picking the valuable strands apart from the seeds during the last months of the year. The third most important crop cultivated by enslaved people in the Lowcountry was indigo. This valuable plant was the chief source of dye in the New World. Not only did enslaved people in the Lowcountry grow indigo, but they processed it into dye by soaking and fermenting the leaves, allowing the sediment to settle, and forming it into dried cakes of dye.⁷⁸

As the work to produce these crops was done, enslaved people on Lowcountry plantations were frequently left without any white presence of for long stretches of time, particularly between the months of March and November.⁷⁹ This was indirectly due to the fact that the hot-humid climate of the Lowcountry region, served as an incubator for pathogens imported along with human cargo during the slave trade, most importantly malaria and yellow fever.⁸⁰ Although planters originally viewed the Lowcountry as a bastion of good health compared to the mainland, they soon realized that the “air” of the Sea Islands during the summer

⁷⁶ Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 86.

⁷⁷ Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 94.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁹ Campbell and Cross, *Gullah Culture in America*, 20.

⁸⁰ Corrine Shear Wood et al., “New Evidence for a Late Introduction of Malaria Into the New World,” *Current Anthropology*, 16 no. 2 (1975), 96; Juliet E. Bryany et al., “Out of Africa: A Molecular Perspective on the Introduction of Yellow Fever Virus into the Americas,” *PLoS Pathogens*, 3 no. 5 (2007).

months was taking a toll on life expectancy and began to spend those months inland.⁸¹ These absences on behalf of planters and their families provided an unusual opportunity for the culture of an enslaved population to freely develop.

As important as plantation-work interactions were in determining the relationship between enslaved Gullah people and the land, interactions off the plantations were also quite important. One factor that distinguished the interactions of Lowcountry enslaved people and the land from the interactions other enslaved people had was the task-system. The dominant system of plantation work in North America was the ‘gang system’; in this system all enslaved workers performing a certain task worked in unison from sun-up to sun-down, led by one or two workers who set the pace. On the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coasts however, the ‘task system’ was preferred. In this system, plantation owners or overseers assigned each slave a specific task to complete over a specific area of land each day, according to the individual’s abilities.⁸² This system of delegation was brought to the Lowcountry by planters from Caribbean islands, where the task system was also preferred because it was believed to boost the morale and work ethic of enslaved workers.⁸³

While the task system might have accomplished this, it also allowed for Gullah culture to develop and flourish on plantations to an extent that would not have been possible under the gang system. The system was not less brutal- enslaved people were still undernourished, mentally abused, and physically beaten. But compared to their counterparts, enslaved people in the Lowcountry had greater autonomy- once the task for the day was accomplished an individual was free to utilize his or her “free” time however he or she wished. This situation made it possible for most enslaved families to spend part of their time developing the forms of cultural expression described above such as art and crafts, music, and spiritual practices, and catering to their own private gardening and hunting activities.⁸⁴

Lowcountry slaveholders conceded to providing workers with plots of land for private use, and sometimes even scheduled time for them to tend to that land, because this was perceived to boost purpose and morale. The crops grown in these gardens usually included the same crops

⁸¹ Merrens and Terry, “Dying in Paradise,” 548.

⁸² Philip D. Morgan, “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 39 no.4 (1982), 566.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁸⁴ Brown, “Crossing the Kalunga,” 294.

discussed earlier- foods such as okra, squash and gourds, black-eyed peas, peppers, melons, and peanuts. Men, in particular were able to use their personal time to hunt animals such as raccoons, opossums, and wild birds. Not only did enslaved Gullah people have incentives to cultivate and hunt food for their own personal consumption, but they also had monetary incentives. They were usually allowed to sell their products for personal profit- many plantation owners, for example, were fond of peanuts and purchased them from their slaves.⁸⁵ Gullah enslaved people also sold their products to wider markets in Beaufort and Charleston; some were even able to earn enough money to purchase their own freedom. Far from being isolated by the waters separating their islands from the mainland, enslaved and later free Gullah people developed an expertise in building boats and navigating the swampy waters surrounding the Sea Islands.⁸⁶ Essentially, the task system created time and space for the Gullah culture to develop, while enabling enslaved people to have positive personal and economic experiences from the land.

Finally, the Gullah people were able to develop a uniquely strong connection to their landscape because of the cultural phenomenon of ‘catching sense.’ ‘Catching sense’ is a method of establishing one’s sense of place and right to belonging to a particular community that developed among the Gullah people as a method of community survival under the particular conditions of slavery.⁸⁷ In Gullah culture one catches sense on particular plantation by living on that plantation during ones formative years (approximately the 2nd-12th years of life), and therefore gaining knowledge about the social relationships and norms in that particular community and broader insights about the meaning of life and the importance of relationships.⁸⁸

Anthropologist Patricia Guthrie argues that the system of determining community membership through catching sense instead of through familial connections or place of birth developed under circumstances where legitimizing belonging through family ties was often impossible due to the illegality of slave marriage and interracial rape, and where there was a high likelihood that one would be sold away from one’s family or the plantation on which one was born.⁸⁹ Catching sense is important because it is the plantation where one caught sense, not the

⁸⁵ Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, 134.

⁸⁶ Brown, “Crossing the Kalunga,” 85.

⁸⁷ Patricia Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense? Plantation Membership on St. Helena Island,” *Transforming Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (1992), 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁹ Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense?” 5.

plantation where one was born, that determines where an individual is ‘from’ and on which plantation that individual is entitled to the social, spiritual and ‘just law’ rights of a community member. For example, an individual who catches sense on a particular plantation can potentially obtain the highly revered position of praise leader in that plantation’s praise house, and has the right to be buried in that plantation’s burial ground.⁹⁰ Due to various aspects of Lowcountry plantation life, enslaved people of the region were able to develop strong feelings of belonging, to and ownership of, the land- a sense of place that would have an impact for many years to come.⁹¹

The Civil War, The Hilton Head Gullah, and Land-ownership

Many are familiar with the failed “Forty-acre-and-a-mule” policy implemented by General William Sherman during the Civil War. The general’s orders were intended to provide formerly enslaved African Americans with forty acres of arable land from plantations that were abandoned during the Union advance, as well as a mule to help each freed family cultivate their new land. Because the initiative was rescinded during the presidency of Andrew Johnson, the efforts to distribute land to new freedmen were canceled and most African Americans never experienced its benefits. But for the Gullah people on Hilton Head Island where the government’s first experiments with transferring land to African Americans occurred, the impact on landownership is still being felt today; partly due to the experiments, the Gullah people were more successful at becoming landowners than any other group of African Americans.

At the time of the Union invasion, twenty-four plantations were in operation across the fifty square miles that make up Hilton Head, a small South Carolina island off the coast of Savannah, GA. The date was November 7, 1861, and Union troops had just sailed into Port Royal Sound, opened fire, and occupied the island. The white residents of Hilton Head quickly fled, leaving behind deserted houses, deserted plantations with thousands of dollars’ worth of cotton crop left unharvested, and most importantly, eighty percent of the island population- newly freed Gullah men, women, and children.⁹² No one, not the Union soldiers, the Federal government, nor the freedmen were sure what would come next.

⁹⁰ Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense?” 4.

⁹¹ Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, 129; Stewart, *What Nature Suffers to Groe*, xvi.

⁹² Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (Galaxy Books, 1976), xxi.

One of the first changes was a change in the population of the island. As mentioned, Hilton Head was almost totally cleared of plantation owners and Confederate sympathizers in the days following the Union invasion; many owners were able to convince their enslaved laborers to move with them to the mainland with tales of what the Yankees would do to those who stayed behind- tales of being eaten, beaten, or sold to Cuban plantation.⁹³ In their places arrived thousands of Union soldiers, and left behind were thousands of former slaves who now found themselves in the position of being seized by the government as ‘contraband property’, neither enslaved nor free.⁹⁴ Some of them joined the Union army, eventually forming segregated “Negro units”, and some joined the unsegregated Union navy as well.⁹⁵ In comparison to activities in other regions of the south, most former slaves however remained on Hilton and on their plantations.

There were also significant changes to the political and physical organization of the island. The Union army built Port Royal Fort, and renamed the island from Hilton Head to Port Royal Island, after the fort and sound of the same name. The government established Port Royal as the administrative center headquarters of its new Department of the South, which was composed of Union troops assigned to South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida; General Rufus Saxton was appointed by the Department to oversee all Negro affairs. Organized and paid pensions financed by Department, the contraband workforce harvested the massive 1861 cotton crop that was left behind on the fields of the Lowcountry; they were also employed building structures for the war efforts. They continued to plant and cultivate personal gardens, and sold extra produce such as eggs, vegetables, and poultry to Union soldiers.⁹⁶

In February of 1862, General Saxton authored General Order 9, which successfully petitioned for further support of contraband pensions from the Office of the Treasury and northern philanthropists; the Gullah people on Hilton Head and other Sea Islands continued to work plantations, preparing the land for the next crop of cotton. In April of 1862, a military order was issued officially freeing all ‘contraband’ people on the South Carolina Sea Islands; Negro quarters were built within the Port Royal compound to house the new freedmen who were

⁹³ Edwin D. Hoffman, “From Slavery to Self-Reliance: The Record of Achievement of the Freedmen of the Sea Island Region,” *The Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1956), 13.

⁹⁴ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 21.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

working on the island.⁹⁷ In November, to ease the space constrictions and racial tensions within the military compound, the town of Mitchelville, the first freedmen town on the island was established by General Mitchel. Mitchelville remained a functioning Gullah town until approximately 1920.⁹⁸

By December of 1864 the Union had successfully marched from Atlanta to the coast of Georgia, captured the city of Savannah, and begun to march back north through the Carolinas. Over 20,000 ‘contraband’ Georgia slaves followed Sherman’s troops and flooded into Port Royal Island during the last weeks of the year.⁹⁹ In 1865 the Department of the South established the Freedmen’s Bureau, which operated schools and helped freedmen on Port Royal and eventually throughout the South meet their daily needs of finding food employment and lost family members.¹⁰⁰ But on Port Royal, it was clear that more action was needed. With the addition of 20,000 Geechee contraband from Georgia, conditions among the freedmen were again cramped. After seeing the independence and success gained by freedmen who had been able to purchase and work their own land, the same people who were content working under an overseer as long as no lashing was involved and receiving meager earnings at unpredictable intervals just a year earlier were no longer satisfied. As General Saxton explained, the Gullah people “understand the value of property and are eager for its acquisition, especially of land.”¹⁰¹

In response, General Sherman met with a group of religious and political Gullah leaders from across the Sea Islands and Savannah to determine the best solution. He asked them what would be the ideal land distribution arrangement for the Gullah people.¹⁰² In response to the needs they expressed, Sherman issued Special Field Orders 15, which proclaimed:

The islands from Charleston south... are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States. At... Hilton Head... the blacks may remain in their chosen or accustomed vocations; but on the islands... no white person whatever,

⁹⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 240.

⁹⁸ Laura Josephine Webster, *The Operation of the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina, Volume 1, Issue 2*, (Department of History, Smith College, 1916), 80.

⁹⁹ Hoffman, “From Slavery to Self-Reliance,” 20.

¹⁰⁰ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 352.

¹⁰¹ Hoffman, “From Slavery to Self-Reliance,” 13.

¹⁰² National Park Service, “Low Country Gullah Culture,” 80.

unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside; and the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves...Whenever three respectable negroes, heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island or a locality clearly defined within the limits above designated, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations will....give them a license to settle such island or district... so that each family shall have a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground, and, when it borders on some water channel, with not more than eight hundred feet waterfront...¹⁰³

Through purchase, renting-to-own, and the benefits of this edict, over 40,000 freedmen gained rights to property across the South Carolina Sea Islands by the summer of 1865.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps due to the strong sense of place fostered through the task system, and the bonds of kinship that were able to develop in the context of low rates of fracturing enslaved families in the Lowcountry, most freedmen from the South Carolina Sea Islands, including Port Royal, chose to stay on their home plantations. These new landowners continued to cultivate and catch food for subsistence purposes, as well as grow small amounts of cotton to sell to pay taxes and purchase materials goods.

The ‘Rehearsal for Reconstruction’ seemed to be off to a strong start. With Port Royal and the other Sea Islands as the initial experiments, it appeared likely that the great plantations of the south would be transformed into twenty and forty acre plots of small-scale production largely inhabited and planted by former enslaved people and their descendants. However, this dream of General Saxton’s was shattered on April 14, 1865 when President Abraham Lincoln was shot in Washington, D.C. and Vice President Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency. Johnson was a man wholly and publicly unsympathetic to the concerns of the new freedmen in the South. In the summer of 1865, Johnson rescinded Special Field Orders 15, pardoning all Confederate rebels who pledged allegiance to the United States and making allowances for them to reclaim land confiscated by the Department of the South during the war as long as they paid the taxes due.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ General William Sherman, “Order by the Commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi”, Freedmen and Southern Society Project, last accessed November 12, 201, <http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/sfo15.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 330.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

The governments' default on the promises made in Special Field Orders 15 led to widespread discontent among southern African Americans, the remnants of which can still be heard today in the phrase "40 acres and a mule", which is used to reference a broken promise.¹⁰⁶

On Port Royal and several other Sea Islands, the story played out differently. With their pardons in hands, former plantation owners began to return back to the islands to reclaim their property. Many were shocked to see the physical state of the Port Royal they found upon their return, and even more shocked to encounter the new mental states of their former enslaved workers. Said one planter upon his return to Port Royal, "Hilton Head is a Town, I was lost in wonder at the vast buildings, the wharf is 1,400 feet long and cost \$300,000." Of their former slaves his brother remarked, "They were delighted to see me, and treated me with overflowing affection. They waited on me as before, gave me beautiful breakfasts and splendid dinners, but they firmly and respectfully informed me: 'We own this land now. Put it out of your head that it will ever be yours again.'"¹⁰⁷

These interactions were not acceptable for many returning former Sea Island landowners, and they quickly launched a campaign asking President Johnson to provide a solution that would compel the freedmen to return their land and work under them as contract laborers. A group of planters collaborated to send a petition to President Johnson, demanding that their land be returned to them by November of 1865.¹⁰⁸ Johnson agreed to their request, and passed on these orders to General Saxton. Saxton greatly sympathized with the Gullah freedmen. He had originally been reluctant to even begin the land distribution experiment because he had little faith that his superiors would hold their promises to the Gullah people. Yet, under orders, he held meetings with freedmen community across the islands to attempt to convince them to sign labor contracts with their former masters. The freedmen found this idea abhorrent; at meetings they sobbed, prayed, sang spirituals, and asked Saxton "Why, General, why do you take away our lands? You take them from us that are true, true to the government. You give them to our all-time enemies. How can we work under them? That is not right."¹⁰⁹

Eventually, Saxton was forced to report to his superiors: "The freedmen have their hearts set upon the possession of these islands and nothing but that or its equivalent will

¹⁰⁶ National Park Service, "Low Country Gullah Culture," 48.

¹⁰⁷ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 348.

¹⁰⁸ Hoffman, "From Slavery to Self-Reliance," 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

satisfy them. They refuse to contract, and express a determination to leave the islands rather than to do so.” In 1866, Saxton was accused of fueling the spirit of resistance among the Gullah islanders and was relieved of his position by President Johnson.¹¹⁰

For two years, until 1867, freedmen across the South Carolina used various tactics to resist the sale of their land back to the former planters. Some wrote letters to President Johnson, asking for “a Chance to Recover out of this Trouble.” Others went on a form of strike, refusing to work unless they were at least allowed to rent the land they were working, and refusing to even speak to planters attempting to negotiate contracts. Still others went so far as to take up arms to defend their island property against the encroachment of the old owners. From Edisto Island to James Island, Gullah communities took up clubs, pitchforks, and guns to threaten speculators and former owners, hold them captive, and force them to retreat from the islands. The impasse between planters and Gullah freedmen was broken in January of 1867 when federal officers from the Department shot and killed a freeman who was part of a group trying to re-take ownership of a Sea Island plantation.¹¹¹

In the end, landownership outcomes differed across the Sea Islands. On some islands, such as Edisto, freedmen eventually had no choice but to leave the land or succumb to contract work and sharecropping.¹¹² Some, like St. Helena Island, were minimally affected by the pardoning of Confederate landowners, and the land distribution from Sherman’s Special Field Orders 15 is still intact to this day. The outcome on Port Royal island was somewhere between these two extremes. Some land was eventually returned to planters, some was sold by the Freedman’s Bureau to northern investors and speculators, and some land did ultimately remain in the ownership of freedmen who acquired title through purchase, renting-to-own, and government distribution.¹¹³

Hilton Head Gullah and the Land, Reconstruction to 1950

Between Reconstruction and the beginning of rapid development in the 1950s, the Gullah people of Hilton Head were both nourished and challenged by the land. As Union troops receded and the island, now renamed Hilton Head, slipped back into rural obscurity, the population

¹¹⁰ Hoffman, “From Slavery to Self-Reliance,” 27.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹¹² Ibid., 40.

¹¹³ Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 225; 338.

plummeted from 40,000 in 1862 to less than 3,000 individuals in in 1868.¹¹⁴ The Department of the South was decommissioned- the hospitals, administrative buildings, and stores left behind. The Freedmen's Bureau was disbanded by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1871. The Gullah residents of Hilton Head- once again the majority, with thirty black residents for every white resident- no longer had the benefit of government assistance finding food or shelter. Within a decade, the economy of the island had shifted completely from cash crop to subsistence.

For the next fifty years, the Gullah people of Hilton Head Island would draw a living from the land. Using the skills and seeds honed during years of personal gardening under the task system, the freedmen and their descendants fed themselves through subsistence farming, fishing, and hunting; they also continued to travel by boat to sell surplus items to the nearby market of Savannah, GA. Freedman James Aiken and his son William Aiken, born in 1894, for example, were two generations of Hilton Head men who operated sailboats transporting cotton, watermelon, and oysters for sale to the city.¹¹⁵ Food was produced in family units, with younger and more-able individuals providing for the elderly and needy members of the community; with this model of independent subsistence, the Hilton Head Gullah were largely able to avoid falling under to oppressive regime of sharecropping that was popular on the mainland. Over time, distinct towns and communities formed on the lands that freedmen had been able to secure as property during the Port Royal experiment.¹¹⁶

Land-based industries also began to form on Hilton Head toward the end of the 19th century, including a timber, commercial fishing, and seafood processing. Nellie White, for example, born in 1886 on Hilton Head Island was married to a commercial fisherman and worked herself in the L.P. Maggioni steam factory shucking oysters.¹¹⁷ Because of the economic independence and self-sufficiency of many of Hilton Head's residents, the island and its inhabitants were able to use the land and each other to survive tough times- from the immediate ante-bellum period to the Great Depression.

¹¹⁴ Town of Hilton Head Island, "Our History", <http://www.hiltonheadislandsc.gov/ourisland/history.cfm>, 12 Nov 2011.

¹¹⁵ Fran H. Marscher, *Remembering the Way It Was on Hilton Head, Bluffton, and Daufuskie: Volume Two*, (The History Press, 2007), 25.

¹¹⁶ National Park Service, "Low Country Gullah Culture," 97.

¹¹⁷ Fran H. Marscher, *Remembering the Way it Was on Hilton Head, Bluffton, and Daufuskie*, (The History Press, 2005), 21.

While the land enabled people to survive, it also was a source of challenges to the people of Hilton Head Island during this time. In 1893, a serious hurricane struck Beaufort County, killing approximately 2,000 people, flooding the island with a 12 foot surge, and destroying large amounts of capital, island structure, and residential property.¹¹⁸ The island was also stricken in 1917 by the boll weevil, a cotton-infesting beetle that invaded the United States from Mexico and devastated cotton crops across the American South by the year 1920.¹¹⁹ Although the cotton empire had collapsed and most Gullah people on Hilton Head were primarily surviving off of subsistence production, many people still cultivated small amounts of cotton to sell for money to purchase material goods.¹²⁰ The final termination of cotton production on the island therefore had a significant impact upon the economic lives of individuals. From farming produce to sell in Savannah and harvesting food from the Atlantic Ocean, to withstanding disease and natural disaster, the people maintained a strong connection to the land and a unique sense of place.

From the first Africans who stepped foot on the island bringing Afro-Atlantic continuities with them, to the Georgia ‘contrabands’ who flooded onto the island searching for freedom during the Port Royal experiment, to the resilient descendants of freedmen who carved out an existence from the land in the years following Reconstruction, the Gullah people of Hilton Head represent an alternate story of the relationship between southern African Americans and the land. Their history shows that African culture had a significant impact on Gullah perceptions of and interactions with the land that can still be seen in the Gullah culture today, that the circumstances of slavery in the Lowcountry enabled enslaved workers to interact with the land in multiple ways- some of which contributed to the development of the Gullah sense of place, that the Federal “40 acres and a mule” distribution policy had lasting positive impacts on the landownership of some communities, and that the Lowcountry landscape made life on the Hilton Head Island both possible and difficult for Gullah residents post-Reconstruction.

¹¹⁸ Town of Hilton Head Island, “Our History.”

¹¹⁹ Hoffman, “From Slavery to Self-Reliance,” 39.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

Acquisition, Development, and Transformation of Community on Hilton Head

In the 1950s and 1960s, the cities of Savannah, Atlanta, and Charleston were all considered leaders in the movement toward civil rights. While Montgomery, Jacksonville, and Little Rock rioted in resistance, these major cities of South Carolina and Georgia earned reputations as cities that were easily de-segregated, and seemed to set the example of progress for the rest of the South. Charleston had no zoning restrictions to separate the races residentially, and the lowest index of racial segregation of any city for which data was collected in 1950.¹²¹ Savannah achieved comprehensive desegregation of public spaces in 1963, six months ahead of the corresponding federal legislation; amazingly, Atlanta peacefully de-segregated its schools in 1961.¹²² The municipal governments of both Charleston and Savannah both declared their cities as a “City too Busy to Hate.”¹²³

However the relatively smooth acceptance of these changes on behalf of Whites did not translate to a willingness to share public leisure spaces such as parks, tennis courts, and golf greens with African Americans or to contribute their tax dollars to recreational spaces that could be used by all. Fear of the negative effects African Americans would have on communal leisure spaces, from the spread of disease to plain discomfort of white community members, was widespread in the South. Also widespread was anger that white tax dollars would continue to be used to finance shared community recreation facilities despite the existing discomfort. In response to the desegregation of the city’s golf course in 1958, a segregationist sheet was spread around Atlanta asking “SHALL YOU CONTINUE TO PAY FOR THEIR PLEASURE?”¹²⁴ A commonly studied result of this phenomenon was the decline of the American city and the concentration of African Americans in urban slums as white flight occurred and tax bases

¹²¹ William D. Smyth, “Segregation in Charleston in the 1950s: A Decade of Transition,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 92, vo. 2 (1991), 119.

¹²² Stephen Tuck, “A City Too Dignified to Hate: Civic Pride, Civil Rights, and Savannah in Comparative Perspective,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1995), 542; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

¹²³ Kevin M. Kruse, “The Politics of Race and Public Space: Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta,” *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 5 (2005): 610; Tuck, “A City Too Dignified to Hate,” 542

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 626.

eroded;¹²⁵ another result was the rise of private recreational enclaves and communities and the resulting displacement of rural African Americans, like the Gullah residents of Hilton Head, from their land.

Between 1949 and 1983, when the first developers purchased land on Hilton Head Island and when the island was incorporated as municipality, the rise of tourist and private residential communities on Hilton Head had a drastic impact on the landscape of the island, the landownership of the island's Gullah residents, and the type of community and community management structure that now exists. The development of tourism and private residential communities on Hilton Head is part of several national trends and sheds light on the impact of the management of public lands on the creation of privatized leisure. The development of Hilton Head was also trendsetting, and changed the way resorts and gated communities are developed in the United States. Finally, because of conflicting ideas of land and stewardship between native Gullah people and newcomers, the development pattern of Hilton Head was a strong causal force, both directly and indirectly, in the loss of landownership rights among the Gullah community due to displacement, exclusion from traditionally communal land, and loss of political autonomy to make land use decisions.

Southern historian Richard Starnes argues that tourism should be viewed as “a causal force in history, a lens through which to examine history and culture, and as a way to ask questions about regional and national identity.”¹²⁶ This is especially true in the American South, where tourism is one of the top three economic activities in every state of the former Confederacy.¹²⁷ In the South, the beginnings of a tourist economy can be found in early Southern planters who left their plantations in the summer to stay in cities like Savannah and Charleston, resorts, or upland summer homes,¹²⁸ as well as with wealthy northerners who traveled to the South for health benefits in the 19th century.¹²⁹ After reconstruction, leisure emerged as one of the most important industries in the South as wealthy individuals began not only to travel to the

¹²⁵ Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, 12.

¹²⁶ Richard Starnes, *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (University of Alabama Press, 2003), 3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁹ Cindy S. Aron, *Work at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

South for leisure, but to acquire homes in resort towns such as Charleston and Jekyll Island.¹³⁰ In the past century, tourism in the South and across the nation has expanded, due to the rise of the family automobile and the growing middle class, to include an increasingly diverse pool of vacationers.¹³¹ In the past six decades, tourism's economic impact has eclipsed agriculture in several Southern states. Yet, "controversies over the use of culture as an attraction, land use and land prices, and decisions to put image and visitor needs ahead of those of local residents divide resort communities across the nation."¹³² Hilton Head Island, South Carolina is no exception from these trends.

Acquisition of Land for Tourism Development on Hilton Head

In 1949, the island of Hilton was even more rural, isolated, and sparsely populated than it had been during the antebellum period. Long gone were the forts, military bases, and the people and business that accompanied them to Hilton Head. All that remained were approximately 1,100 Gullah residents and 25 white residents clustered on the farmland of the northern third of the island; virgin forest covered most of the other two-thirds, and new forest growth had reclaimed the rest.¹³³ There was no phone service or electricity on the island¹³⁴, and the nearest post office and police station were in Savannah.¹³⁵ Perhaps most importantly, there was no public form of connection between Hilton Head and the mainland. Since at least 1940, a private boat service, provided by a Gullah family, enabled farmers to sell their produce in the Savannah market.¹³⁶ According to Charles Simmons Jr., a Hilton Head native whose grandfather operated the boat service, before the introduction of power boats to the island, a round trip to Savannah took two to three days, while after the introduction the trip only took two to three hours.¹³⁷

The deeds to the forested areas of Hilton Head were held by a North Carolina hunting group, led by W.P. Clyde and Roy Rainey; subsequently everything except for the northern family plots and the hunting preserve, over 10,000 acres of forest, were purchased by absentee

¹³⁰ Starnes, *Southern Journeys*, 4.

¹³¹ Aron, *Work at Play*, 3.

¹³² Starnes, *Southern Journeys*, 8.

¹³³ Michael N. Danielson and Patricia R.F. Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise: The Development of Hilton Head Island* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 11.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁵ *Hilton Head Before the Bridge*, (Beaufort County Public Library, 1983), VHS.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

owners Alfred L. Loomis and Landon K. Thorne, a pair of wealthy New Yorkers. In 1949, a Georgian real estate scout named Fred Hack and his neighbor Joseph Fraser, owner of the Fraser Lumber Company, journeyed to Hilton Head and became determined to harvest the island's substantial timber stands. They set up the Hilton Head Company that same year, purchased over two thirds of the island for \$60 an acre, and set up lumber mills on the southern end of the island to begin harvesting pine.¹³⁸ This substantial purchase was marked by a small article in a corner of the Beaufort Gazette that declared "Sale of a 10,159 acre tract of land on Hilton Head Island near here for \$600,000 was announced today."¹³⁹ Over the next two years, Fraser and Hack harvested the marketable soft wood timber that stood on the southern portion of Hilton Head, successfully creating enough profit to cover the cost of purchasing most of Hilton Head.¹⁴⁰ But Fraser and Hack had other plans; the more they explored their new property, the more they realized the potential to develop it as a "beach colony along the Hilton Head strand fronting on the Atlantic."¹⁴¹

The challenge before the two investors was how to change perceptions of Hilton Head from that of a neglected "pocket of the past bypassed by South Carolina's progress"¹⁴² for over a "century of loneliness"¹⁴³ into that of an accessible, healthy, paradisiacal location. As previously discussed, Hilton Head was never truly isolated. The Gullah residents of the island had found ways to travel to the mainland for trade purposes since the times of slavery. However, in order to attract visitors to the southern end of the island, the property owners had to make it possible for outsiders to frequent Hilton Head. In 1953, Hack, Fraser, and their supporter in Columbia state representative Wilson Graves successfully petitioned the highway authority to begin operation of a ferry between the island and Savannah.¹⁴⁴

Although a 1951 news article espoused that "The business of transporting people thither is the chief obstacle preventing rapid development of the island these days. Once that is hurdled (through the establishment of state highway department ferry service) present-day visitors will

¹³⁸ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 12.

¹³⁹ "Hilton Head Tract Sold for \$600,000," *News and Courier*, May 5, 1951.

¹⁴⁰ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 14.

¹⁴¹ W.D.W., "Hilton Head Island Catches Up with Progress of State," *News and Courier*, July 29, 1951.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ "Fabulous HH: Lost Island Regained", *The State Magazine*, December 19, 1954.

¹⁴⁴ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 14.

have opportunity to see for themselves the varied attractions of the island,”¹⁴⁵ the ferry was ultimately not substantial enough to achieve this, though it was never intended to be by the developers. Indeed, at the bottom of the news article that reported the first trip of the public ferry was a note stating that “Applications for beach development lots on HHI should be made by calling Wilton Graves of Bluffton”;¹⁴⁶ for Hack and Fraser the goal had always been to increase traffic enough to justify the creation of a bridge, after which they could continue with the full-fledged plan for resort development.¹⁴⁷ Despite increasing the traffic flow to the island exponentially, and using political connections to place pressure on Columbia, the two were unable to gain enough support for a publicly financed bridge connecting the island to the mainland. Starting what would become a trend toward privatization on Hilton Head, Hack and Fraser instead pursued the creation of a privately financed toll bridge through a new entity, the Hilton Head Toll Bridge Authority; the J. Byrnes Bridge opened in May of 1956 at a cost of 1.5 million dollars.¹⁴⁸ The bridge accomplished its objective, even “exceeding the volume predicted by the NY engineering firm engaged to make a forecast of the toll bridge's traffic and accompanying revenues.”¹⁴⁹ With a \$2.50 toll, over 200,000 people came to Hilton Head in the year after the completion. Twice as many journeyed to the island the next year after the toll was halved, and even more traveled when tolls were eliminated in 1959.¹⁵⁰ In addition to the bridge, by this time both publicly provided electricity (in 1952) and telephone service (in 1954) were available on the island. This increased accessibility led to the creation of over one hundred vacation resort cottages, the purchase of over three hundred private ocean side lots, and the establishment of businesses to cater to the island’s new population.¹⁵¹

In just one decade, perceptions of land and life on Hilton Head changed dramatically. In 1949, few mainland individuals, with the exception of hunting enthusiasts, were even aware of the existence of Hilton Head; ten years later, whites from the South and across the United States were pouring into the island each month by the hundreds of thousands. Since the plantations on

¹⁴⁵ W.D.D., “1663 Description of Island is Still Applicable Today,” *News and Courier*, July 31, 1954.

¹⁴⁶ W.D.W., “Hilton Head Island Catches Up with Progress of State,” *News and Courier*, July 29 1951.

¹⁴⁷ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 13.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁹ “Hilton Head Traffic Exceeds Forecasts,” *News and Courier*, January 21 1957.

¹⁵⁰ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 15.

¹⁵¹ “HHI Fast Growing Area: Beach Development Has 100 New Homes,” *News and Courier*, August 23 1957; Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 16.

the Sea Islands were abandoned after the Civil War, the islands were perceived to be unusable “neglected” land;¹⁵² suddenly, outsiders began to perceive this Sea Island as an easily accessible and leisurely paradise. Perceptions of the island changed for local residents as well.

During this decade, the island became more developed, but not for all. While life with a predominantly subsistence economy had been difficult for the Gullah people of Hilton Head, with an almost insignificant white population on the island, they had been largely shielded from the racism of the Jim Crow South.¹⁵³ The land of Hilton Head had provided sustenance for life and support for the Gullah culture, but extreme demographic changes occurred during the decade; newcomers represented forty percent of the population in 1960,¹⁵⁴ and the land now physically demonstrated marginalization. The decade had brought telephone service, electricity, and grocery markets to the island, but only to the southern portion. Most Gullah inhabitants of northern Hilton Head still lived without electricity or even running water.¹⁵⁵

The Rise of Private Recreation and Private Residential Communities on Hilton Head

However significant these initial introductions were, the changes to the island were just beginning. In 1956, Joseph Fraser had sold his share of the Hilton Head Company to his son, Charles Fraser. While the Hilton Head Company was viewed as being largely successful, the twenty-six-year-old Yale Law School graduate saw in the island potential for a new type of leisure community. The young Fraser wanted to create a private community that catered not to the growing middle class, as most of the resorts at the time were, but to affluent families. He planned to do this by providing “abundant parks and open spaces, attractive accommodations and recreational facilities, and strict controls to exclude undesirable activities.”¹⁵⁶ Charles Fraser launched his own company, the Sea Pines company, in 1957 with 5,000 acres of land and a determination to create a high class resort community on the southern tip of Hilton Head while preserving the area’s natural beauty. As opposed to the public conservation movement that was popular in the United States at the time, Fraser implemented a form of private conservation that

¹⁵² W.D.W., “Hilton Head Island Catches Up with Progress of State,” *News and Courier*, July 29 1951.

¹⁵³ John P. Smith, “Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah,” 284; *Hilton Head Before the Bridge*, (Beaufort County Public Library, 1983), VHS.

¹⁵⁴ Margaret Anne Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists: Hilton Head Island and Beaufort County, South Carolina, 1950-1983” (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1996), 7.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁶ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 24.

championed preservation and environmentally sensitive development. However, this was not done for altruistic reasons, but because such practices would attract affluent residents and vacationers and provide the highest return on investment.

Fraser was especially entranced by the idea of a private community. In this respect, the creation and popularity of Sea Pines was part of a geographic trend- the movement of affluent, and middle class white individuals away from cities and into private residential communities in the wake of the desegregation of public spaces. As the urban historian K. M. Kruse has pointed out, as the civil rights progress began to occur in the South during the late 1950s and early 1960s, ‘desegregation’ was not equivalent to a desire for ‘integration’.”¹⁵⁷ In the case of Hilton Head, we see that the segregation of leisure that had been comfortably perpetuated on public lands was simply re-formatted as residential and recreational separatism on private lands. At Sea Pines, Fraser’s preoccupation with creating a private utopia for the wealthy resulted in community development and community service distribution being almost entirely in private hands during the early years of resort development on the island.. Decisions about continued growth, ‘public’ works such as roads and sewage treatment, and even the development of schools, churches, libraries, recreational facilities, and hospitals on the majority of Hilton Head was decided by Charles Fraser and the owners of the other resort communities that were developed in the likeness of Sea Pines.¹⁵⁸

From the perspective of making profit, capturing an untapped recreational market, and revolutionizing the environmental ethos of resort planning, Charles Fraser’s Sea Pines was a grand success. This success is reflected in the impact Sea Pines had on the rest of the island and, later, on the resort industry as a whole. Fraser’s concept of high-end resorts and gated communities with full amenities and designs that blended into the natural beauty of the environment was commonly imitated, even on Hilton Head itself. In the years following the development of Sea Pines, “much of the rest of the island was covered with plantations either under construction or modeled for future development.”¹⁵⁹

Yet, by other measures, Sea Pines and the luxury plantations that followed were not successful. The more the plantation communities developed, the greater the difference between

¹⁵⁷ Kruse, “The Politics of Race and Public Space,” 610.

¹⁵⁸ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 85.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

the ‘two Hilton Heads.’¹⁶⁰ The land where the Sea Pines plantation was constructed was gained legally, without coercion or fraud; the chain of owners from pre-Civil War plantation masters to Charles Fraser is clear and indisputable. Yet, almost as a direct result of recreational development on those acres of private land, the Gullah people of Hilton Head were disenfranchised from their land. By 1970 the majority of the island was populated by affluent permanent and temporary residents who enjoyed a plethora of luxury private services while the Gullah residents of the island were testifying before the United States Senate on the abject poverty existent on the island.¹⁶¹

Conflicting Concepts of Landownership and the Disenfranchisement of Gullah People on Hilton Head

One of the dominant driving forces behind the development of Hilton Head was the politics of public and private space in America in the 1950s and 1960s- the increasing obsession among White Americans, especially in the South, with private schools, private transportation, and particularly, private recreation. But there were several factors that made it easier for this driving force to result in alienation of the Gullah people from the land on the island, primarily differences between conceptions of landownership held by developers and new residents and conceptions of landownership held by the Gullah residents. The ‘problem’ of heirs property and fundamental differences in who owned land on Hilton Head, how they came to own it, what privileges they enjoyed because of landownership, and what landownership even means, facilitated the marginalization of the island’s Gullah community.

Heirs property generally refers to real property purchased by African Americans and held within families for generations without clear title.¹⁶² Any piece of property can become heirs property if it is passed down from one generation to the next and a deceased individual’s name remains on the deed longer than a specified period of time. It is a predominantly African American phenomenon, particularly so in the Lowcountry.¹⁶³ One reason for this is the cultural conceptions of property ownership among the Gullah people. As in many West African cultures,

¹⁶⁰ “HHI Shows Contrast in Living,” *News and Courier*, May 31 1970.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Faith R. Rivers, “The Public Trust Debate: Implications for Heirs Property Along the Gullah Coast,” *Southeastern Environmental Law Journal* 147 (2006).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 134.

land is considered the communal property of the multi-generational extended family.¹⁶⁴ Not only have individuals felt it unnecessary to formally transfer ownership of land to their next of kin through wills and deeds, but it is not uncommon for distant relatives to be welcomed onto a piece of property. Property is simply not viewed as being owned by one individual person, but by all who are connected to an individual through common ancestry.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, wills were, and to some extent still are, uncommon among the Gullah people because of a preference for an oral history of inheritance “due to a history of legal theft... and a distrust of white dominated legal systems.”¹⁶⁶

An additional reason that heirs property is common on the Sea Islands concerns education. The educational attainment of most Gullah people on Hilton Head and the other Sea Islands after the Port Royal land sales and distribution, and through most of the following decades, has generally been limited. Illiteracy was common. And even for those who could read, school on the island was only in session for four months per year, while in Beaufort County there was no black high school until the 1950s.¹⁶⁷ As a result, even if a Hilton Head native in the 1940s, 1950s, and even 1960s wanted to create a deed or designate a form of landownership other than tenancy in common for their descendants, it would be difficult for that individual to navigate the legal system and the required forms and texts.

The impacts of heirs property ownership among the Gullah people has been, and continues to be, substantial. One of the most significant forces of land loss among Gullah on Hilton Head and elsewhere has been forced partition sells. Partition sales occur when an heir of a percent share in a property requests the partition of a property in order to receive their share. In the institution of tenancy in common, each heir owns a percentage of the entire property as a *whole*. Thus, an heir who requests a partition sale of a property does not have a particular physical “share” of the property that can be sold in a standalone manner. Therefore, either the remaining heirs must produce the requesting heirs fair monetary share during the short turnaround time of a partition sale or the entire property must be sold so that the requesting heir

¹⁶⁴ Brian Grabbatin and Jennie L. Stephens, *Wigfall v. Mobley et. al: Heirs Property Rights in Family and in Law* (2011), 141.

¹⁶⁵ Patricia Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense? Plantation Membership on St. Helena Island”, *Transforming Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (1992), 2; US National Park Service, *Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (Atlanta, GA, 2005), 94.

¹⁶⁶ Brian Grabbatin and Jennie L. Stephens, *Wigfall v. Mobley et. al*, 137.

¹⁶⁷ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 12.

can receive their fair monetary share of the property. This is one scenario in which a group of Gullah heirs property owners can involuntarily lose ownership of their land. This was exacerbated by the Great Migration patterns, which led to many black individuals emigrating from the Lowcountry and the South in general to the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast of the United States; this resulted in owners of heirs property in the Lowcountry being scattered across the nation.¹⁶⁸ With no physical ties to the land, these nonpossessory individuals were more likely to request a partition sale.¹⁶⁹

Even more likely is the scenario in which an heir, who lives on the land or not, sells their share of the property to a developer, who then requests that the courts partition the land on behalf of the heir. Once able to claim an ownership interest, land speculators and developers file an action for partition requesting that the property be sold to satisfy his or her newly-acquired ownership interest. Again, because of the increase of land value following development on Hilton Head and other Gullah Sea Islands, fellow heirs “often do not have the funds (or the ability to raise the funds) to pay the requesting heir his or her share of the fair market value of the land within the confines of quick-paced judicial sales.”¹⁷⁰ Scholars, legal professionals, and developers alike acknowledge that partition actions are a mechanism for outsiders to acquire private property that is otherwise not for sale.¹⁷¹

Another cause of loss of land held in heirs property is tax delinquency sales. Part of this trend is tied up with the presence of heirs property. One segment of the problem is that because of far flung heirs or because of convoluted lineages involving multiple parents, “illegitimate” offspring, and intra-family adoption, heirs cannot always locate or determine all of the owners of a piece of land to create a plan for paying property taxes.¹⁷² Additionally, the structure of heirs property and taxation laws create a collective action problem. An heir receives no additional property rights by paying more than their fair share of taxes; conversely, an heir does not lose property rights by paying less than their fair share of property taxes or no taxes at all.¹⁷³ The

¹⁶⁸ Jane Hutchinson, “Better Homes and Gullah”, *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1993), 104.

¹⁶⁹ Walden, Josh. Interview with Author. Charleston, SC, January 26, 2012.

¹⁷⁰ Brian Grabbatin and Jennie L. Stephens, “Wigfall v. Mobley et. al, 141.

¹⁷¹ Rivers, “The Public Trust Debate.”

¹⁷² Walden, Josh. Interview with Author. Charleston, SC, January 26, 2012.

¹⁷³ Brian Grabbatin and Jennie L. Stephens, “Wigfall v. Mobley et. al, 141.

greater the number of heirs to property held through tenancy-in-common, the more likely it is that the heirs will fail to agree on a property tax payment plan and no one will pay taxes at all.¹⁷⁴

Finally, many Gullah heirs simply cannot afford to pay property taxes any longer due to rising land values resulting from tourism development and land speculation.¹⁷⁵ On Hilton Head in particular, land prices skyrocketed after the construction of the J.F.B. Bridge, and continued to rise dramatically before leveling off in the 1990s.¹⁷⁶ There are established legal protections to help prevent loss of land through tax delinquency sale: low-income individuals over the age of 65 are exempt from tax delinquency seizure, there is a ten-year statute of limitation concerning seizure of land for tax delinquency, tax delinquency sales must be advertised publicly in the local newspaper and occur at a public auction, “excessive” seizures of land are void when the taxes could potentially be settled by selling a divisible section of property, and perhaps most importantly, landowners have twelve months from the sell of their land at a public auction to redeem their property by paying the buyer the purchase price plus seven percent interest.¹⁷⁷ However, the challenge is ensuring that heirs property members are knowledgeable of these protections, that county officers are monitored to ensure adherence to the law, and that heirs have access to affordable legal services to challenge fraud and excessive land seizure.

Heirs property land loss has been a problem on Hilton Head not because there were fraudulent tax seizures, nor forced partition sales to acquire the land to build Sea Pines and the following resorts, but because the creation of these spaces significantly raised property values leading to an increase in tax delinquency and greater incentives for nonpossessory heirs to sell their property rights to what the Center for Heirs Property Preservation calls “predatory developers.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, as Sea Pines style plantations spread across Hilton Head they eventually bumped up against the black owned land on the northern third of the island. Here is where the fraud and deceptive real estate practices began. According to one of Hilton Head’s mayors, “The blacks have a legitimate gripe. There were some whites who came here in the

¹⁷⁴ Walden, Josh. Interview with Author. Charleston, SC, January 26, 2012.

¹⁷⁵ Harold R. Washington, *Black Land Manual: Got Land Problems?* Penn Community Services. 1973, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 3.

¹⁷⁷ Washington, *Black Land Manual*, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Walden, Josh. Interview with Author. Charleston, SC, January 26, 2012.

beginning, told the blacks their taxes would skyrocket and bought up their land for \$100 an acre.”¹⁷⁹

It is also a problem simply because, as Center for Heirs Property and Preservation attorney Brian Grabbatin argues, property law “privileges the economic value of land over its social and cultural value.”¹⁸⁰ The intent behind property transfer law is generally to put the land to its “best use.” The logic behind partition sale mandates is based on ensuring that any one tenancy-in-common landowner is able to receive a fair market price for their property and put it to the best economic use. However, this logic places no value on the cultural, social, or spiritual value and uses of land.

A classic legal case demonstrating this concept is *Wigfall v. Mobley et al*, which resulted in twenty five Gullah individuals in Berkeley County, SC being evicted in 2001 from land that was originally purchased by their ancestor, freedman Hector Rivers, in 1883. Beginning with the death of Hector Rivers, the land was passed on through generations of tenancy-in-common owners until 1994 when nonpossessory heir owner Blondell Rivers Wigfall requested a partition sale. The plaintiff desired to sell her “share” of the property, but did not want to attempt to quiet the title by dividing it into independent parcels with her fellow owners because of “insufficient acreage.” Her relative Johnny Rivers had been living on the property all of his life, along with some of his immediate and extended family members, and had single-handedly paid the property taxes for thirty years.

In 2000, after years of the Rivers attempting to come to agreement over the open case and after the defendants were unable to buy out the plaintiff, a court ordered the heirs to accept a \$900,000 offer from a developer. Ultimately, Johnny Rivers received 3.126% of the sale price; the plaintiff’s attorney received 10% of the sale price. Three months after the sale the developer sold the property for three million dollars. While the rights of the heir who wished to actualize the economic market value of the property were significant, this case shows that the rights and interests of such a party are automatically more valued than the rights of heirs who wish to continue capitalizing upon the cultural and spiritual value of heirs property.¹⁸¹

According to the Center for Heir Property and Preservation, which provides assistance to heirs property owners who are attempting to retain ownership of their land, less than one percent

¹⁷⁹ “Islanders Find Common Cause on Growth Issue,” *The Island Packet*, November 18 1984.

¹⁸⁰ Brian Grabbatin and Jennie L. Stephens, “*Wigfall v. Mobley et. Al*,” 134.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*.

of requests for assistance come from owners on Hilton Head Island, most likely because “the land that could be lost, has been lost.”¹⁸² However, cases such as *Wigfall v. Mobley*, and others, such as the descendants of former slave Frank C. Johnson who are currently mobilizing to prevent the sale of their Beaufort County heirs property from being sold at auction,¹⁸³ demonstrate the conflicting ideas of landownership that were most likely a major contribution to loss of Gullah landownership on Hilton Head.

Another way that differing conceptions of landownership have resulted in the marginalization of Gullah people on Hilton Head Island is the construction of private resorts, beaches, and gated communities. As previously established, after the antebellum period, white residents of Hilton almost entirely deserted the island; however, absentee owners continued to own approximately two thirds of the island until Fraser and Hack acquired the deed. But that is not how many Gullah people see the story. At a 1983 panel titled “Hilton Head Before the Bridge”, an elderly Hilton Head Gullah woman asked, “So at no time has the black ownership of total acreage been greater than the whites?” She replied, “I question that, cause after the Civil War most of the whites left the island. And after they left the island those who were slaves took over, and came in possession of the land. That's the way I seen it.”¹⁸⁴ Another panelist recalled, “Before all the development and before the bridge and all that, Hilton Head was an open community. You were free to go anywhere- the beaches or anywhere you felt like going; there was no problem. We didn't have to show I.D. and we didn't have to have a ticket. Now, the code says you can't take a piece of sand off the beach cause it'll bring you charge. So I dunno. But I guess you gotta abide by the law even though those who make these laws they aren't always right.”¹⁸⁵

According to legally encoded concepts of landownership, the southern two thirds of Hilton Head was rightfully owned by a series of plantation owners, huntsman, and real estate developers. But for the Gullah residents of the island, both those who were aware of these absentee owners and those who were not, the island was always communally theirs. Here their ancestors labored and developed a sense of place under the task system, here they worshipped and had religious coming-of-age experiences, here they buried their dead, and here they hunted

¹⁸² Walden, Josh. Interview with Author. Charleston, SC, January 26, 2012.

¹⁸³ “Scattered Family Unites to Protect Ancestor’s Legacy”, *The Island Press*, July 17 2011.

¹⁸⁴ *Hilton Head Before the Bridge*, (Beaufort County Public Library, 1983), VHS.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

the forest, harvested seafood from the sea, and shared the beaches communally for almost a century.

As more and more gates sprung up around the island, the Gullah residents perceived their presence not only as inhibitive but, as the panelist inferred when he stated that the laws aren't "right", as morally wrong. Gardenia White, a native who runs a community improvement project in the poor section of the island said, "I find it very offensive that more than half the island I grew up on is behind gates. As my daddy said, 'Progress is good. But if you can't live here, it's not progress.'"¹⁸⁶ Lamented another Gullah resident in an interview for *Progressive* magazine, "For generations, this island has been an open community. You could go anywhere on the island. It didn't matter who you were. People shared. If someone caught fish everyone had fish. That is no longer true. Half this island is now off limits."¹⁸⁷

Even plantations that are not totally closed off, but allow visitor access for a fee, have received condemnation from Gullah residents. Sea Pines, for example, permits public access with a \$3 entrance fee- the same amount is costs to drive into a state park.¹⁸⁸ Interestingly, this setup has actually put some residents in a situation that can be viewed as similar to the dilemma of indigenous conservation refugees who have been displaced from spiritually significant lands by public bodies. Hilton Head native Perry White exemplifies this dilemma. Many of his ancestors are buried in a graveyard near the Harbour Town golf holes in Sea Pines Plantation. "To visit his ancestor's graves, White says, he must pay a \$3 visitor's fee at the gate leading into the Sea Pines development or explain himself to a guard. It makes him mad."¹⁸⁹

Juxtaposed with these more communal and use-based notions of landownership are the dominant and legally recognized ideas, usually espoused by developers and more recent residents of Hilton Head. From the viewpoint of this philosophy, no matter how long and in what manner the Gullah people on Hilton Head have used the southern portion of the island; it is and has always been owned fairly by other individuals. As Charles Fraser put it:

I have very little patience or the desire to attack what others have done with others' land. Sea Pines was never owned by blacks. It was locked up for fifty years as a

¹⁸⁶ "Newcomers and Natives Square Off on Hilton Head," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 3, 1983.

¹⁸⁷ "Closed Gates Trouble Outsiders," *Progressive*, October 1993.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ "Newcomers and Natives Square Off on Hilton Head," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 3, 1983.

game preserve. Did they tell you about the cemetery? It's their favorite gambit with the media. 'Oh, they won't let me visit my old granddaddy's burial place.' That's absolute bogwash. The road to it was impossible when we bought the property and there have been more burials since we took over than in the previous 50 years. From Day One, there have been orders if anyone wants to visit or bury someone, let em through. Some of these people are just whiners.¹⁹⁰

Fraser and other developers also believed that Gullah Hilton Head residents should be thankful that the many gates on Hilton Head existed because the gates had "one more to raise their property values than anything else. Said Fraser, "They complain about the gates. My guess is, if those gates had not been installed the amount of jobs on Hilton Head today would be ten percent of what it is and their land would be worth about \$1,500 an acre instead of \$50,000."¹⁹¹ Again, this speaks to the drastically different perspectives on land held by natives to Hilton Head versus residents, as many Gullah viewed the gates as representing fraud and exclusion, and faced significant challenges due to the rising property values.

Conflicting Concepts of Conservation and the Disenfranchisement of Gullah People on Hilton Head

Ultimately, one of the main reasons that resort and private community development on Hilton Head Island was able to lead to the disenfranchisement of Gullah residents from the land was the existence of several conflicting ideas about how land is lived on, acquired, owned, and passed down through generations. An additional cause of landownership loss among the Gullah people is the existence of conflicting concepts of community and conservation. Beginning in the 1970s, changes in the structure of Hilton Head's government and land use regulations resulted in Gullah residents of the island experiencing reduced control over the management of their land even in cases where they were able to retain landownership.

It is first worth noting that the political demographics of Hilton Head changed dramatically throughout the decades that followed the initial development in the early 1950s. On the eve of development on Hilton Head, the population of the island was almost entirely African Americans living on low incomes or in the subsistence economy. By 1985, there were more than

¹⁹⁰ "Newcomers and Natives Square Off on Hilton Head," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 3, 1983.

¹⁹¹ Shannon, "From Tomato Fields to Tourists," 30.

16,000 additional residents on the island, and the population was much more affluent and over eighty seven-percent White.¹⁹² Predictably, such a drastic change in the island's population had an impact on the island's political dynamics.

In the 1970s, Hilton Head transitioned from a community where major decisions about development, land use, and public works were made by the "benevolent dictators" who owned the major resorts and managed the plantations,¹⁹³ to a democracy with intense community involvement in these issues. However, the community was sharply divided between native Gullah people and newcomers, who in general had very different interests and agendas. Plantation residents were concerned with continually rising property values, ensuring that further growth and development was closely regulated to avoid "visual blight" and changes in community makeup, the maintenance of high quality services and amenities, and the preservation of a pristine environment.

On these matters, the affluent newcomers of Hilton Head did not believe that the Beaufort County government was representative of their community. In 1969 controversy erupted over the construction of a Badische Anilin and Soda Fabrik chemical plant three miles from Hilton Head. The Beaufort County government, eager to ameliorate unemployment and diversify the economy of a county almost entirely dependent on agriculture, military installments, and tourism, had enthusiastically supported the chemical plant. This was despite the pollution threat posed by a chemical complex run by a company with a reputation of being a "world class polluter" that recklessly disposed of untreated industrial waste posed to the surrounding waters and to a high end tourism industry that depended on perceptions of environmental perfection. The issue was settled later that same year, in favor of those who opposed the plant.¹⁹⁴

Plantation residents also felt unrepresented by county government on the issue of growth control. As Danielson argues, these islanders were highly aware of the fact that development changes the features that attracted the development in the first place, and now that the plantation residents had found themselves in paradise they wanted to "pull up the barge." Although most of the island was under the constraints of "private covenants" that regulated land use, a full third of the island was outside of this system. Private community residents resented the lax zoning and land use regulations of the Beaufort County that allowed practically any commercial, industrial,

¹⁹² Shannon, "From Tomato Fields to Tourists," 30.

¹⁹³ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 86.

¹⁹⁴ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*.; Shannon, "From Tomato Fields to Tourists", 45.

or residential use of that land.¹⁹⁵ These situations led to a widespread desire for a form of publicly recognized local government; ultimately, “settlers wanted private control over their plantations and public control over the rest of the island.”¹⁹⁶ According to one plantation resident, “The straw that broke the camel’s back was the county’s approval of the stack-a-shack (apartment complex) on U.S. 278. We saw that we had no control over the development of the island.”¹⁹⁷

Again, the debates among affluent white residents of Hilton Head in the 1970s mirrored larger conceptual trends. Partly, the concerns reflected the rise of environmentalism and support for conservation in the United States. The Audobon Society was influential among island residents, and a general conservation ethos was present.¹⁹⁸ In 1974 Charles Fraser assured, ““We are making every effort to protect the environment of Hilton Head, because we want at least one section of this nation to be untouched by pollution,”¹⁹⁹ and the Hilton Head Island Community Association referenced the community’s environmental ethos in 1973 when it urged developers to “regulate the size, design, and location of structures and developed lands in accordance with “accepted” community standards of beauty, ecology, and safety.”²⁰⁰ Additionally, as established, most of the permanent newcomers to the island resided in private, gated “plantations”. Although these communities were part of Hilton Head and therefore under the county government of Beaufort County, most of the public services usually provided by local government, such as trash pickup and security, were provided privately to members. This echoes the continuation of the 1950s privatization and tax revolt that occurred nationwide in the 1970s and 1980s, “ranging from the establishment of private security forces to... the campaign for tuition vouchers for private education.”²⁰¹

Outside the gates, Gullah communities also had concerns about community values and being properly represented by the government. Numerically, Gullah representation on the island was declining, and the representation of Hilton Head Gullah interests in the county government

¹⁹⁵ Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 167.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁹⁷ *Hilton Head Report*, Spring 1986.

¹⁹⁸ “Audobon Club is Organized by Hilton Head Residents,” *News and Courier*, October 15, 1960.

¹⁹⁹ “Hilton Head: Progress Without Destruction,” *News and Courier*, March 10, 1974.

²⁰⁰ Island Development Continues Behind Screen of Trees, *Island Packet*, November 20, 1973.

²⁰¹ Kruse, “The Politics of Race and Public Space,” 629.

was becoming diluted.²⁰² Unlike their neighbors to the south, Gullah Hilton Head residents lived with “poor roads and minimal water, sewage, and garbage pickup” and police protection.²⁰³ Facing land loss and a continually declining percentage of land on an island that was dedicated to agriculture, most of the island’s Gullah residents were employed in low wage tourism service jobs.²⁰⁴

On the issue of permitting the siting of the BASF chemical plant, Hilton Head Gullah residents were split. Although acknowledging that the construction of the plant would lead to pollution of the waters surrounding Hilton Head, the head of the Penn Center at the time, John W. Gadsen, supported the plant, offering the rationale, “And the people against it are saying now, if BASF doesn’t come in, they’ll open up other jobs without pollution. Well, one of our girls we sent out the other day on a waitress job was offered twenty-two cents an hour plus tips- if that’s the kind of thing they’re talking about, forget it.”²⁰⁵ Fred Hack claimed that black residents of Hilton Head were so passionate about their support of the plant that they were terrorizing him and his family with threats and public demonstrations because of their opposition to the plant, and believed that the chair of the State Development board should resign for “whipping up the blacks to fever pitch.”²⁰⁶

On the other side of the issue were Gullah individuals and organizations such as the Hilton Head Fishing Cooperative, a group of black fishermen and shrimpers on the island who controlled their own seafood capture operations and sales. This group was highly opposed to the approval of the BASF chemistry plant and was very vocal about its opposition. In 1970 the cooperative protested the plant by sailing one of their largest ships from Hilton Head all the way to the Washington, D.C. pier of the Potomac river, gaining national attention and prompting the federal government to be involved in the issue.²⁰⁷

Clearly, the Gullah community of Hilton Head was an active part of the environmental debates that were occurring on the island in the 1970s. In addition to being part of the conversation about BASF, the Gullah community was also deeply invested in the dialogue and

²⁰² Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 48.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁰⁴ “S.C. Coast Mixes Wealth, Poverty,” *News and Courier*, September 30, 1973.

²⁰⁵ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 35.

²⁰⁶ Island Developer Rips McNair, Board Official, *Island Packet*, 1970.

²⁰⁷ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 41.

decision making around government structure, zoning requirements, and land use regulations. However, organizations like the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were more influential than organizations like the Audobon Society and private community associations. Ultimately, the Gullah people of Hilton Head wanted a government structure that would help them retain ownership of their land, and retain autonomy over their land use decisions in the face of striking demographic shifts in the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the island's population; this included a desire to choose whether to make no changes to their land, continue harvesting the natural resources of their land, or take advantage of the value of their land and tourism economy of the island by developing it themselves.

As the population and economy of Hilton Head continued to grow, it was clear that if aspects of any of the differing views of community land management were to be satisfied, change was necessary. In 1973, the Hilton Head Community Association hired a Clemson professor to consult residents on the governmental structure options available to them. Out of the options to succeed from Beaufort County, join a neighboring county, or form an island-wide municipality, the island chose instead to vote on a referendum to create a Public Service Commission with four districts; the commission would completely exclude the Gullah communities of Hilton Head. NAACP leader Joe Brown successfully convinced the Hilton Head Community Association to indefinitely postpone the implementation of the referendum, because the commission would fail to adequately represent African Americans.²⁰⁸

At this time, the Gullah political leaders on Hilton Head were strongly in favor of the incorporation of an island-wide municipality. The local NAACP proposed a structure where the municipality would have a city council composed of two at-large alderman seats as well as aldermen elected after the island would be divided into burroughs and a mayor.²⁰⁹ This new municipality would be full service- it would collect taxes and provide the entire island with public services such as police and firemen, and have the authority to make zoning decisions.²¹⁰ Although this structure would increase taxes for low-income residents of the island, the NAACP saw this as an acceptable compromise, the reason being that "Minorities and the poor will have a

²⁰⁸ Shannon, "From Tomato Fields to Tourists," 52.

²⁰⁹ "NAACP Opts for Municipal Government," *Island Packet*, March 22, 1973.

²¹⁰ Shannon, "From Tomato Fields to Tourists," 53.

‘say-so’ as to the government and its administration and will be assured a place in its operation.”²¹¹

Ultimately, this vision was not successfully implemented. Instead, a Public Service Commission based on existing service districts (the lines of which were largely drawn based on plantation boundaries) consisting of appointed representatives was implemented in 1973. Due to controversy and opposition from the NAACP over the appointed nature of the commission, the commission that was eventually created was stripped of the taxation and zoning authority that it was originally intended to have; for ten years, this essentially useless body would ‘govern’ over growth and public services on Hilton Head Island.²¹²

Ten years later, in 1983, the call for incorporation of Hilton Head was revived. This year, the island’s Gullah leaders had completely switched from calling for incorporation of the entire island as a full municipality to stringently opposing incorporation. Historian Margaret Anne Shannon argues that this change was due to further changes in the island’s demographics and the ability of Gullah islanders to be politically represented in such a system. While in 1973 Gullah leaders felt as though their interests would be properly represented, in 1983 Gullah residents made up a significantly smaller percentage of the island’s population and represented the minority in each proposed district.²¹³ Development on the island was also pushing more against Gullah lands than it had a decade earlier. As a 1983 Philadelphia Inquirer article reported, “Blacks own much of the undeveloped land and feel that it is unfair for outsiders- who caused the increase in the island’s population density-- to control the land that blacks own have left alone more strictly than anyone else’s land. “A community leader added, “There’s no way blacks will be able to develop their land themselves under the very upscale standards of “behind the gates.”²¹⁴

The Gullah community was also largely opposed to the 1983 incorporation because, once again, black island leaders had not been consulted in drafting the structure of the proposed municipality, resulting in suspicion about the motives behind the Hilton Head Community Association’s new push for incorporation. As community leader Thomas C. Barnwell remembered in 1993, ““Those of us who had been here had been left out of the process,’ The

²¹¹ “NAACP Opts for Municipal Government,” *Island Packet*, March 22, 1973.

²¹² Danielson and Danielson, *Profits and Politics in Paradise*, 176.

²¹³ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 62.

²¹⁴ “Newcomers and Natives Square Off on Hilton Head,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 3, 1983.

town just had not addressed needs pertaining to people who have been here.”²¹⁵ Additionally, the proposed municipality would raise taxes for those living outside of planned communities despite the fact that the municipality would not be full service, but a ‘limited service’ municipality. The municipality would lose public services from Beaufort County, which would be replaced with limited services; this would only be adequate for those living in private communities with supplementary services. Explained Perry White, the president of the island NAACP at the time, "Our concerns are just what in the world the government that's being proposed will do. We can't see anything coming out of it except extremely limited services. Since only limited planning and police services are proposed, the government is really aimed at only those areas of the island inside the numerous planned developments.”²¹⁶

The issue of incorporation of the municipality of Hilton Head went up for a final vote on May 10, 1983. While only 51.6% percent of those registered on the island voted, African American turnout was high. The referendum passed with 59.5% of the vote; it failed in Precinct 4, the area with the greatest concentration of Gullah residents.²¹⁷ Immediately, the South Carolina chapter of the NAACP set about attempting to have the vote overturned. First, the organization tried to halt the first municipal elections on August 2nd under allegations that the Hilton Head Community Association had not properly filed paperwork. The allegations further stated that if only the number of permanent residents was considered, the island did not even have a sufficient population to qualify for incorporation.²¹⁸

When this attempt failed, the NAACP lodged another lawsuit, this time alleging that the referendum vote violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 because it drew boundaries in a manner that diluted the political power of a minority group. When the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in favor of the defendants, the NAACP appealed to the federal Supreme Court in 1984.²¹⁹ Here too, the suit was overturned because “while blacks did suffer loss of political power, incorporation was legal and therefore not something the court had power to overturn.”²²⁰ With the Gullah population of Hilton Head still expressing fears of unmeetable tax increases and loss of control over land, the South Carolina NAACP made one final attempt to reverse the

²¹⁵ “Tale of a Town”, *Island Packet*, July 29 1993.

²¹⁶ “Hilton Head Incorporation Coming to a Vote,” *Island Packet*, April 16, 1983.

²¹⁷ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 63.

²¹⁸ “NAACP Suit Seeks to Prevent Incorporation of Hilton Head,” *Island Packet*, July 12 1983.

²¹⁹ “Court Dismisses Suit Over Vote in Hilton Head,” *Island Packet*, March 10 1984.

²²⁰ Shannon, “From Tomato Fields to Tourists,” 63.

incorporation of Hilton Head, approaching the State Supreme Court with a suit based on the argument that Hilton Head was not qualified to be a city; in October of 1985 the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the incorporation of the Hilton Head Island municipality had been proper.²²¹

According to Hilton Head Gullah residents such as Thomas Barnwell Jr., the fears that powered the Gullah resistance to incorporation of the island had been realized. “The town’s “limited services” government has increased taxes on native islands while providing little in return. In 10 years, I haven’t seen any roads paved,” he said in a 1993 interview.²²² As proof that Hilton Head residents who live outside of the private communities would have been better served by the full service government of Beaufort County, he pointed to infrastructure improvements that occurred in rural areas of Beaufort County during the decade that had passed, and argued that incorporation had indeed “wrested control of undeveloped areas from blacks.”²²³ In this way, the incorporation of Hilton Head led to yet another form of Hilton Head Gullah community being disenfranchised from the land, in this case by being denied the political autonomy to make its own land use decisions.

The battle of the incorporation of Hilton Head can be interpreted as a competition between two different ideas of environmentalism and what it means to be a steward of the land. The support of the residents of Hilton Head’s private residential communities for a limited-service incorporation was undoubtedly influenced by the general atmosphere of a nation that, in the aftermath of white flight and a movement for the privatization of neighborhoods and community services, was still uncomfortable with taxation for public goods and services that benefited marginalized communities. But, another likely contributing factor was that these residents really did feel strongly about protecting the ecosystems and natural beauty of the island from an onslaught of unrequited and poorly planned development. By incorporating the island and implementing zoning restrictions, these islanders did what they felt was best through the lens of conservation environmentalism, which was the dominant environmentalist ideology at the time. This conflict speaks to the importance of examining the consequences of conservation efforts on private lands. As the environmental historian Peter Alagona argues, broadening our

²²¹ “Court Rules Hilton Head Island 1983 Incorporation Proper,” *Island Packet* October 17 1985.

²²² “The Tale of a Town,” *Island Packet*, July 29 1993.

²²³ *Ibid.*

concept of conservation to include that which occurs on private lands is essential;²²⁴ otherwise the negative impacts that conservation on public lands can have on local and indigenous populations is acknowledged, but the impacts that private conservation efforts can have are not addressed.

This viewpoint conflicted with the environmental ethos of many of the native Gullah islanders. For these islands, uncertainty surrounding accountable representation and political agency were major contributing factors to opposition to the final incorporation of the island. Also important was the Gullah people's ideas about land and their perceptions of the impacts incorporation would have upon the land. Like the gated plantation residents, the native islanders were also concerned with development and protecting the ecosystems of the island. But the important aspect for these islanders was not preserving natural beauty for leisure, but preserving land in order to continue their work and spiritual relationship with the island. To the Gullah, an incorporated government with prohibitive zoning and more gates and barriers would not, and did not, achieve this.

Conclusion

The development of resorts and private communities on Hilton Head between 1949 and 1983 was the most significant causal force, both directly and indirectly, contributing to the loss of landownership rights among the island's Gullah community due to displacement, exclusion from traditionally communal land, and decreased access to the political systems that distributed land use and zoning rights. This development and the excitement around it was part of several trends, notably the replacement of public leisure spaces in the lives of Americans with private recreational outlets in the wake of desegregation, and a later movement to further privatize traditionally public aspects of communities and essential community services. Significantly, the development at Hilton Head itself started the trend. Sea Pines and the following plantation developments on Hilton head set a precedent for a new type of leisure development that soon spread across many of the other Sea Islands, making Hilton Head a critical source of the land loss that is currently affecting Gullah communities across the Lowcountry.

²²⁴ Peter Alagona, "Homes on the Range: Cooperative Conservation and Environmental Change on California's Privately Owned Hardwood Rangelands," *Environmental History* 13, no. 2 (2008), 344.

Erosion of Community Health and the Gullah-Geechee Movement

All of this developed from a culture growing out of chattel enslavement keeping these people together, where they then created their own language, music, folk traditions, and so on. And so all of this has arisen from North American soil. It has grown from it. It has grown here. And this is home for it. Thus it is indigenous here.

-Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah-Geechee Nation²²⁵

On April 1, 1999 in Geneva, Switzerland, Marquetta Goodwine, now known as Queen Quet of the Gullah nation, made history by becoming the first Gullah-Geechee to speak before the United Nations. Before the Commission on Human Rights as a representative of the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition (GGSIC) and the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities (IHRAAM) Marquetta Goodwine spoke to call attention to the impact that land loss and desecration of land inhabited by the Gullah-Geechee people of the Lowcountry and the Seminole people of the American Southwest are having on the survival of the cultures of these groups.²²⁶ She emphasized the negative impacts tourism development has on Lowcountry ecosystems, the health of Gullah linguistic, spiritual, and artistic traditions, and the political and economic well-being of the Gullah people. Beginning with a story of her own family's struggle to protect ancestral burial grounds from developers, Goodwine constructed an argument not only for the Commission to pressure the United States National Park Service to protect Gullah lands, but for the world to see the Gullah-Geechee as an indigenous people with a culture literally born from the soil of the Lowcountry and the corresponding political rights.

I argue that this assertion on behalf of the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition can be seen as part of a recent trend of indigenous peoples gaining an increasingly powerful political voice at both the national and international level by implementing conscious political strategies around the traditional narratives of the endangered nature of their cultures²²⁷ - essentially,

²²⁵ Marquetta Goodwine, "Gullah/Geechee TV Nayshun Nyews with Queen Quet UN Minority Forum 09 Pt XII," United Nations Minority Forum, Geneva, Switzerland, 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IboErZCbn6s>.

²²⁶ Marquetta Goodwine, "Statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights from the Gullah/Geechee Community of the United States," United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland, 1999. <http://www.blackbusinesslist.com/as-gullahqueen.htm>.

²²⁷ Shane Greene, "Indigenous People Incorporated?" *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (April 2004), 211.

purposefully politicizing themselves, their culture, and particularly their land as a means of survival and advancing their interests. I also argue that in order to fully understand and accept Queen Quet's claims, we must adopt a broad concept of community health. Generally, community health is discussed solely in terms of the physical health of individuals members of the community. In the environmental justice literature, community health is usually discussed in terms of the disproportionate share of pollution and toxins with which marginalized communities are burdened. But I argue for a new understanding of community health; when evaluating the impact of environmental and land issues on communities, we must also incorporate cultural, economic, and political resiliency into the concept of community health. It is not only the health of a community's bodies that matters, but also the health of their music, spiritual traditions, artistic and culinary expression, language, and independent economic means. Therefore the framework of environmental injustice must be expanded to include the disproportionately negative impacts of environmental problems on marginalized community health and indigenous communities in the fullest sense.

The island of Hilton Head is arguably the most dramatic example of the impact that tourism development and land loss can have on the Gullah culture of an area. Since 1949, landownership on Hilton Head Island has been eroded through means direct and indirect and malicious and unintentional. With this loss of landownership has come drastic changes in both the physical and cultural geography of the island. There is a common consensus that loss of property has impacted the Hilton Head Gullah negatively, so much so that Gullah communities on other Lowcountry Sea Islands reference a fear of becoming "another Hilton Head."²²⁸ Yet, to describe the cultural losses the Hilton Head Gullah have experienced, either quantitatively or qualitatively, is difficult simply because of the very low number of Gullah individuals remaining on the island.

Prior to the onset of extensive tourism development, the Gullah of Hilton Head made up almost the entire population of the island and owned approximately one third of the island's land. By the year 2000, Gullah individuals and families owned less than ten percent of land on the

²²⁸ "United Nations Session Hears Gullah Language, Plea," *Island Packet*, April 3, 1999, www.islandpacket.com/man/gullah/un.html.

island,²²⁹ and African Americans of all cultures made up just 10.2 percent of the island's population.²³⁰ Approximately ten Gullah-Geechee neighborhoods exist on the island. With so few Gullah people and such a small amount of land untouched by tourism development remaining on the island, to make substantial observations of the environmental and justice impacts of development we cannot compare pre-tourism Hilton Head to current Hilton Head. Instead, we can examine the situation of Gullah communities living on nearby, similar islands that have not experienced tourism development to the same extent as Hilton Head. Although essentially no Lowcountry Sea Island has been untouched by tourism development, Hilton Head is certainly the most drastic example. In this way, we can begin to imagine what Hilton Head might have been like without dramatic changes to the landscape, the demography, and the political structure. Furthermore, we can examine how it is that Hilton Head has become the most exemplary case of the underlying problem affecting communities across the Lowcountry- the erosion of community health in the broadest sense.

Cultural Impacts

In much of the literature concerning the Gullah people, the Gullah culture is presented as dead, dying, or extinct. However, there is a sense in more recent literature that the extent of the disappearance of the Gullah culture from the Lowcountry region may be overstated.²³¹ In a 2008 interview, Elder Carlestine Denson of the Gullah-Geechee nation expressed a similar sentiment saying, "People say 'Oh the Gullah culture is dead. The language is dead.' I want to know what island they are on!"²³² However, in the Lowcountry land is a critical source of income, political power, and cultural sustainability,²³³ and there is general recognition that the culture has faced substantial negative impacts in many areas due to development and land loss.

²²⁹ Charles W. Jarrett, "The Gullah of Squire Pope Road: A Case Study in Social Impact Assessment," presented at the National Association of African American Studies Conference (Feb 2004), 1.

http://web1.southern.ohiou.edu/faculty/jarrett/Gullahs_SquirePope.pdf.

²³⁰ United States Census Bureau, *Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000 for Hilton Head Island CCD, Beaufort County, SC*.

²³¹ Jarrett, "The Gullah of Squire Pope Road," 36.

²³² Carlestine Denson, interview by Rachel Martin, "Interview U-0399," Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, June 24, 2008. MP3.

<http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/sohp&CISOPTR=5866&REC=7>.

²³³ Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, "Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland: A Review of the Research Literature and Its Implications," *Southern Rural Sociology* 18, no. 2 (2002), 5.

Cultural Space

One of the main sources of land loss is the discrepancy between the traditional Gullah-Geechee ideas of landownership and the legal definitions of landownership. As discussed in Chapter Three, this has led to Gullah people losing access to land and sea that they may not have ever technically owned, but have traditionally used. This discrepancy and the resulting loss have had cultural implications. In a 2008 interview conducted by natural resources scholar Terry Ogawa, residents of Daniel Island, a Sea Island off the coast of Charleston, noted that the increase of traffic and the widening of roads due to development have inhibited access to forests and fields for traditional uses, and limited access to roads for traditional Gullah parades. One of the respondents, a Gullah woman who was just twenty-one years old reminisced,

We used to have a parade from the fire department in Huger to Cainhoy School.... Sometimes they would have parades just like, say for instance, a family's having a family reunion, they wanna raise money, so they would get people to put their cars in parades to raise money like that.... For this band to come, it'll be like such and such, and for homecoming we would have a parade, a Christmas parade.... In the streets, having fun. Oh, it has been a loooong time [since we had the last parade]. Hmmmmmmmm-mmnn. It's been a long time. We used to have it along Huger Road, so I think because of the traffic, you know from NuCor and trucks coming in through the back way, I think it'd be hard to cut [the street off], you know? 'Cause they have to do the deliveries and stuff.²³⁴

Access to Sweetwater Basket Resources

Another example of how differing conceptualizations of land rights have impacted the health of the Gullah culture is the current status of the sweetwater basket making art form in the Lowcountry. Sweetwater baskets originated as a functional part of the Gullah culture, used for storing produce and other items, and evolved over time into an elaborate craft showcasing the creativity and African roots of the Gullah people. While basket makers were at one time found in

²³⁴ Terry Yasuko Ogawa, "Wando Huger: A Study of the Impacts of Development on the Cultural Role of Land in Black Communities in the South Carolina Lowcountry," (M.S. thesis., University of Michigan, 2008), 4-15 <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/61366>.

every Gullah community, over the past few years the ability to make the baskets, which can yield a profit of up to \$300 each in the market²³⁵, has dwindled; individuals who know how to make the official craft of South Carolina are now found primarily in Mount Pleasant, a mainland Gullah community on the outskirts of Charleston.²³⁶ Even on St. Helena Island, the cultural center of the Gullah community, basket making no longer has a cultural stronghold. In “Environmental Justice at the Margins: An Examination of African-American Sweetgrass Basket Making in the South Carolina Lowcountry,” environmental studies scholars Grabbatin, Halfacre, and Hurley explicitly draw connection between this phenomenon and the environmental injustice trend of “rural gentrification,” which limits “access to community environmental resources” and has a negative effect on “ecological democracy.”²³⁷ While no scientific study has been completed to document the abundance or location of the wild sweetgrass needed to make the baskets²³⁸, there is a consensus among Mount Pleasant basket makers that the stands of sweetgrass they rely on to make their craft are being increasingly “dozed over, built up, and chopped up”²³⁹, and that there is simply less sweetgrass around to make this traditional Gullah craft due to development. Additionally, sweetgrass, or *Muhlenbergia filipes* is listed as a “species of concern” on the South Carolina’s rare, threatened, and endangered species list.²⁴⁰

Reduced access to fields containing sweetgrass is a significant obstacle to basket makers. In an interview I conducted in Monks Corner, a Charleston suburb with a significant Gullah population, a community leader noted, “The sweetgrass? It’s all built up or fenced up. I know some folks who have to ship it in from Florida!”²⁴¹ In Grabbatin’s study, 69% of Mount Pleasant basket makers believe that both finding and accessing sweetgrass has become for difficult over their lifetimes. One basket maker aptly described the trouble he now has accessing the material; after naming several Mount Pleasant subdivisions where sweetgrass still grows, he added, “even

²³⁵ US National Park Service, *Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement* (Atlanta, GA, 2005), 67.

²³⁶ Brian C. Grabbatin, “Sweetgrass Basketry: The Political Ecology of an African American Art in the South Carolina Lowcountry” (M.S. thesis, College of Chareleston, 2008), 18 <http://gradworks.umi.com/1450460.pdf>.

²³⁷ Angela Halfacre, Patrick T. Hurley, and Brian Grabbatin, “Sewing Environmental Justice into African American Sweetgrass Basket-Making in the South Carolina Lowcountry,” *Southeastern Geographer* 50, no. 1 (2010), 155

²³⁸ Grabbatin, “Sweetgrass Basketry,” 35.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴⁰ South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, *Rare, Threatened, and Endangered Species and Communities Known to Occur in South Carolina* (SC, 2012) http://www.dnr.sc.gov/species/pdf/SC_state_wide.pdf.

²⁴¹ Rev. Anne Harkness, interview with author, January 15, 2012.

if it's [sweetgrass] there you can't go in there, they don't want you on their property so how you gonna do that. It *was* free.”²⁴²

Survival of the Restorative Justice Tradition

A third example of the impact of resort development on the health and strength of Gullah-Geechee culture is the shift from the use of what Gullah call “just law” to resolve conflicts and address crime, to the use of “unjust law”. According to African American studies scholar Morris Jenkins, these terms correspond with existing concepts in the literature of the field.²⁴³ “Just law” refers to a community-reconciliation-oriented process that is directed by local leaders and the church, or in the case of the traditional Gullah-Geechee, the praise house.²⁴⁴ “Unjust law” refers to the Eurocentric model of justice that is officially encoded in the United States legal system, which is oriented toward state action, social control and reformation of the offender, and compensation of the defendant.²⁴⁵ The Gullah concept of “just law” is similar to, and developed from, the indigenous systems of *restorative justice* that were practiced and continue to be practiced on the west coast of Africa.

Throughout the 20th century, restorative justice and the praise house remained central and influential forces in the lives of Gullah-Geechee people, especially on the Sea Islands; praise houses were “the political, social, and judicial center of the community.”²⁴⁶ In instances where social norms are broken, offenders meet with praise house leaders, undergo spiritual counseling, and give some type of spiritual or physical reparations to the individual or family offended. Additionally, a community meeting is held for the entire community to discuss the incident or issue and achieve reconciliation. Complaints are rarely taken outside of the community to the “unjust law” system; the Gullah-Geechee residents of St. Helena island even used to operate their own “jail”, a holding place for individuals to wait until they could meet with a praise house leader, that was completely separate from the state justice system.²⁴⁷ Even as late as 1991,

²⁴² Grabbatin, “Sweetgrass Basketry,” 38.

²⁴³ Morris Jenkins, “Gullah Island Dispute Resolution: An Example of Afrocentric Restorative Justice”, *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006), 310.

²⁴⁴ Patricia Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense? Plantation Membership on St. Helena Island,” *Transforming Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (1992), 7.

²⁴⁵ Jenkins, “Gullah Island Dispute Resolution,” 303.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.0

community members who took disputes to the secular courts lost their privileges as members of their religious community, such as singing in the choir or serving as an usher, and had to sit in the back of the church during services because they were thought to not truly desire harmony and healing in the community.²⁴⁸

In the 1950s, as development on Sea Island land began to gather speed, the number of praise houses decreased and the role of restorative justice diminished. On St. Helena Island, the number of praise houses dropped significantly, and on most other islands these integral community centers disappeared entirely.²⁴⁹ Additionally, after the bridge to the mainland was built, St. Helena Island residents reported that instances of “the community or praise house dealing with problems” decreased and instances of “reliance on the white man’s law” increased.²⁵⁰ Today, the Afro-centric system of restorative justice has disappeared on the highly developed Sea Islands, such as Hilton Head, and is in danger on other Sea Islands, such as St. Helena. In Jenkins’ 2006 study, the majority of St. Helena island residents aged 15-18 knew “nothing or very little of the dispute resolution techniques within the old culture.”²⁵¹

Transmission of Agricultural Knowledge

Finally, an aspect of Gullah community and cultural health that has been impacted as a result of development is the survival of agricultural knowledge. Up until 1950, the economies of the Lowcountry Sea Islands were agriculture and subsistence based²⁵²; families largely made a living from fishing, raising livestock, cultivating communal gardens, and selling agricultural produce on the mainland. The disappearance of Gullah farms is part of a wider national trend of the disproportionately accelerated exit of African Americans from the farming professions and loss of black farm land. The trend cannot be explained by general nationwide patterns alone²⁵³- poor access to quality legal services²⁵⁴, racial discrimination in the implementation of federal aid programs, and difficulties accessing equity and other benefits of landownership due to heirs

²⁴⁸ Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense?” 8.

²⁴⁹ Jenkins, “Gullah Island Dispute Resolution,” 308.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 313.

²⁵² Faulkenberry et al., “A Culture of Servitude: The Impact of Tourism and Development on South Carolina’s Coast,” *Human Organization* 59, no. 1 (2000), 88.

²⁵³ Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, “Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland,” 7.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

property ownership have compounded the effects observed by the national trend away from rural areas and into cities.²⁵⁵

For many Sea Island Gullah, the loss of farmland and access to the water and natural resources such as sweetgrass means the loss of a source of income. When people lose traditional access to maritime resources because of development and gated communities, they not only lose the ability to feed themselves with catch, but Gullah fishermen also lose their livelihood. When people lose or sell ownership to their land, they not only lose the ability to grow their own food in traditional yard gardens, but also to sell crops for profit. As a rural subsistence lifestyle becomes less optimal or less possible, individuals shift from agriculture to the service industry. This shift has its benefits; individuals who were previously isolated from many economic activities, or would have been in previous decades, now have more economic security and the opportunity to pursue full time employment. However on the Sea Islands in particular, Gullah farmers who enter the monetary economy full time often only have access to “seasonal, minimum wage service jobs that have little to no potential for advancement.”²⁵⁶ These individuals are usually not qualified for upper-level jobs in the tourism economy, and must compete with adolescent workers from newcomer families for even the higher-level service jobs; effectively, Gullah workers have become estranged from their agricultural roots and occupy the lowest paid and lowest valued professions on the Sea Islands.²⁵⁷

Simultaneously, the shared cultural knowledge associated with a rural subsistence lifestyle is also put at risk as individuals shift from agriculture to the service industry. According to anthropologists Faulkenberry et. al, this shift leads to a phenomenon known as “culture of servitude” in which a culture of self-reliance is eroded by the harsh power dynamics of the relationship between indigenous people, newcomers, and tourists.²⁵⁸ Whereas the Gullah people were once able to create a living on their own terms, however meager it may have been, individuals who no longer own land on the Sea Islands are now bussed into Hilton Head and other islands to do service work. This alone has a cultural impact, as self-sufficiency has

²⁵⁵ Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin, “Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland,” 11-13.

²⁵⁶ Faulkenberry et al., “A Culture of Servitude,” 90.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 91.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

traditionally been an important part of Gullah culture.²⁵⁹ Those who remain on the island are also largely employed by the service industry, and struggle to pass on agricultural traditions and skills such as carving boats, fishing, and growing gardens. Those who are able to stay on the islands and largely maintain aspects of the Gullah culture often become reliant on cultural tourism; some refer to this as “Gullah gawking” and disdain it, although it is their livelihood, because of the associated exotification.²⁶⁰

The common theme of these seemingly disparate examples is that development on the Sea Islands has led to land use and landownership changes that threaten the community health of the Gullah-Geechee people. This is consistent with the literature; numerous scholars have documented that rural black communities with higher rates of landownership have a stronger sense of community and a greater number of shared values and traditions.²⁶¹ From decreased ability to engage in traditional Gullah activities such as sweetgrass basket making, gardening, and fishing, to shifts away from community justice systems and towards a ‘culture of servitude’, reduced access to land and landownership due to development can be directly connected to negative impacts on Gullah culture and community health. In the words of Queen Quet:

There are so many things under the cover of night that have gotten many of our people away from their economic traditions. But when they write about us they act as if... the people just stopped fishing. The people just stopped making their baskets. The people migrated elsewhere. They never inform you of what forces the migration. And as a result of migration, the people are not in their homeland to be able to continue those traditional practices.²⁶²

The drastic example of Hilton Head, which has seen the most development and the most deterioration of Gullah culture among the Sea Islands, is only a sharp reflection of the wider problems affecting the entire Lowcountry.

²⁵⁹ Josephine Beoku-Betts “We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity Among the Gullah,” *Gender and Society* 9, no. 5 (1995), 540.

²⁶⁰ Faulkenberry et al., “A Culture of Servitude,” 93.

²⁶¹ V Grim and A. B. Effland, “Sustaining a Rural Black Farming Community in the South: A Portrait of Brooks Farm, Mississippi,” *Rural Development Perspectives* 12 no. 3 (1997), 48; Jess Gilbert, Gwen Sharp, and M. Sindy Felin, “Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland,” 2.

²⁶² Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, “Gwine ta de Wata: Gullah/Geechee Pun de Sea”, Blog Talk Radio, Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, podcast audio, August 21, 2011, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/gullahgeechee/2011/08/22/gwine-ta-de-wata-gullahgeechee-pun-de-sea>.

Political Resiliency

Far from being passive victims of cultural erosion, the Gullah people have been actively striving to determine their own fate and write their own history during the past sixty years of development in the Lowcountry. Through education, legal action, and political and economic organizing on the local, regional, national, and international levels, the Gullah people have been able to assert agency and advocate for recognition and rights as a people. The political center of the Gullah-Geechee people is arguably St. Helena Island, a Sea Island just five miles northeast of Hilton Head Island. St. Helena is slightly smaller than Hilton Head in area and much smaller in population, comprised of 63.79 square miles and a year-round population of 8,709. Much unlike Hilton Head, 61% of St. Helena population is White and 33.9% are Black;²⁶³ while Hilton Head is now dominated by private communities, hotels, and luxury resorts, its northern cousin is home to just one hotel and one plantation of private residential communities. In the Gullah-Geechee literature, St. Helena Island is largely recognized as having the most cultural resilience and political power of any Sea Island in the face of the extensive development that has occurred in the region.²⁶⁴ Although the island has not completely escaped the negative consequences of development and the resulting land loss, it remains an exception to the general regional trend.

The Penn Center's Programs

One of the earliest examples of the political resiliency and success of community organizing on St. Helena Island is the Penn Center, formerly known as the Penn School. The Penn School was founded in 1862 as part of the Port Royal experiment; the goal was to educate newly freed enslaved people from the island and from other Sea Islands in the Lowcountry.²⁶⁵ For the first four decades of its existence the school was run by two Northern missionaries, Laura Towne and Ella Murray, and provided African Americans with one of the few opportunities to gain a formal education in the Lowcountry region.²⁶⁶ In the years after the first World War, St.

²⁶³ US Census Bureau, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics 2010: St. Helena Island CCD, Beaufort County, South Carolina," 2010.

²⁶⁴ John P. Smith, "Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah: A Black Social Movement in the Post-Civil Rights Era" *Rural Sociology* 56, no. 2 (1991): 285; Guthrie, "Where'd You Catch Sense?" 2.

²⁶⁵ Penn Community Services Center, "Organizational History," last modified 2012, <http://www.penncenter.com/>.

²⁶⁶ Jacob U. Gordon, *The African Presence in Black America*, (Africa World Press, 2004).

Helena lost approximately half of its (almost entirely Gullah) population due to migration as the island inhabitants became more connected to the mainland and the outside world and as the foundations of the Lowcountry tourism economy were laid.²⁶⁷ The Penn School was one of the very first organizations to recognize and attempt to address the problem of Gullah land loss on the Sea Islands due to development. In the 1930s the school changed its name to the Penn Normal, Agricultural, and Industrial School, and began focusing on offering courses in agricultural sciences and trades like cobbling in an attempt to stabilize Gullah landownership on St. Helena by teaching farmers how to create the most agricultural value from their land.²⁶⁸

In 1948 the school closed and became the Penn Community Services Center, a nonprofit organization that still exists today to “preserve the unique history, culture and environment of the Sea Islands through serving as a local, national and international resource center.”²⁶⁹ Again, in the 1970s the Penn Center was one of the first organizations to recognize that Gullah-Geechee land loss was rapidly becoming a serious problem on the Sea Islands, this time due to development and heirs property ownership on the Sea Islands. In 1972 the Penn Center convened a group of lawyers and community organizers to write *Black Land Manual: Got Land Problems*, the first publication to systematically describe how tourism development drove Gullah land loss on the Sea Islands through heirs property ownership, tax sales, and deception. The book not only provided this information but provided step-by-step instructions for Gullah landowners to start securing their property through writing wills, clearing landownership, agreeing upon family tax plans, knowing the laws, and avoiding predatory deals.²⁷⁰

Today the Penn Center continues to be a strong community center for the Gullah people. It serves as an education center for Gullah history, operates a museum and maintains an extensive collection of literature and documents on the Sea Islands. It is a champion for the preservation of Gullah culture, supporting the translation of the New Testament of the Bible into Gullah²⁷¹, hosting annual festivals on St. Helena in celebration of the Gullah culture, and holding after school programs and weekly workshops and to teach Gullah young people as well as

²⁶⁷ Jane Hutchinson, “Better Homes and Gullah,” *Agricultural History* 67, no 2 (Spring 1993), 104.

²⁶⁸ Jane Hutchinson, “Better Homes and Gullah,” 105; Penn Community Services Center, “Organizational History,” last modified 2012, <http://www.penncenter.com/>.

²⁶⁹ Penn Community Services Center, “Organizational History”, last modified 2012, <http://www.penncenter.com/>.

²⁷⁰ Harold R. Washington, *Black Land Manual: Got Land Problems?* Penn Community Services. 1973.

²⁷¹ Cathy Harley, “Healin Fa Da Soul’ Gullah Bible Readings Released,” *Island Packet*, November 5, 2011, <http://www.islandpacket.com/2011/11/05/1853142/healin-fa-de-soul-gullah-bible.html>.

tourists traditional knowledge such as sweetwater basket baking and cast net sewing. Finally, the Penn Center continues to provide direct community services to Gullah people living on St. Helena Island, focusing on landownership. The center's Land Use and Environmental Education program, for example, directly assists residents with issues surrounding taxes, heirs property, and farming and fishing law in an effort to "assist native Sea Islanders in preserving and maintaining their land and cultural practices in the midst of environmental changes."²⁷²

The Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition

One of the most powerful manifestations of political resiliency that has risen from St. Helena Island recently is the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition. In 1996, after planning the "Ourstory and Heritage Conference: Sea Island Survival", several leaders from St. Helena Island communities gathered to form this new organization with the intent to "promote and participate in the preservation of Gullah and Geechee history, heritage, culture, and language, work toward Sea Island land re-acquisition and maintenance, and celebrate Gullah and Geechee cultures through artistic and education means electronically and via 'grassroots scholarship'."²⁷³

Since 1996, the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition has grown to become one of the most authoritative voices on the issues and culture of the Gullah-Geechee people. The organization operates out of Hunnuh Home on St. Helena Island, which doubles as a research center for students and scholars and houses the Alkebulan Archive, the only archive in the world exclusively dedicated to the Gullah-Geechee people. In addition to Hunnuh Home, the GGSIC is in the process of constructing a new project in Cross, SC called the Gullah-Geechee International Camp Meeting Center, which will host guests who travel to learn more about the Gullah-Geechee people and serve as a meeting center.²⁷⁴ Additionally, the coalition hosts book readings and cultural performances throughout the year, as well as the annual Gullah-Geechee International Music and Movement Festival, which is held in a different Lowcountry location

²⁷² Penn Community Services Center, "Organizational History", last modified 2012, <http://www.penncenter.com/>.

²⁷³ Marquette Goodwine, Email to Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition Supporters, December 27, 1996, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/178.html>.

²⁷⁴ Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, *De Conch* newsletter, July 2011, 5 <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1sugv/DeConchJuly2011Queen/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Ffree.yudu.com%2Fitem%2Fdetails%2F358630%2FDe-Conch-July-2011-Queen-s-Edition--Gullah-Geechee-Sea-Island-Coalition-ezine-%3Frefid%3D106830>.

each summer to celebrate the musical and artistic traditions of the Gullah people.²⁷⁵ Politically the GGSIC works to build connections between the Gullah-Geechee people and other small indigenous groups throughout North America, such as the Seminole of Mexico and the creole people of the Gulf coast, and to gain recognition and resources for the Gullah-Geechee people nationally and internationally.²⁷⁶

Formation of the Gullah-Geechee Nation and Declaration Before the United Nations

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of political resiliency that has arisen from the people and organizations of St. Helena is the formation of the Gullah-Geechee Nation. When Marquetta Goodwine spoke before the United Nations in 1999 on behalf of the Gullah-Geechee people and the IHRAAM, she and many of the politically active Gullah-Geechee people in the Lowcountry made a case for the cultural self-determination of their people internationally, but were not satisfied with walking away and counting on the United Nations or the United States government to make it happen. When the leaders of the GGSIC returned back to the Lowcountry, they began to lay the groundwork for what they would later call the Gullah-Geechee Nation.²⁷⁷ The individuals involved felt this would be appropriate based on the draft version of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People²⁷⁸, Articles 3 through 5, which state:

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Indigenous people, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

²⁷⁵ Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, *De Conch* newsletter, July 2011, 10.

²⁷⁶ Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, "United Nations Indigenous Rights and Gullah-Geechees", Blog Talk Radio, Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, podcast audio, May 23, 2011, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/gullahgeechee/2011/05/23/united-nations-indigenous-rights-and-gullahgeechee.s>

²⁷⁷ Goodwine, Marquetta, interview by Rachel Martin, "Interview U-0399."

²⁷⁸ United Nations Commission on Human Rights, "The Right of Peoples to Self Determination and Its Application to Peoples Under Colonial or Alien Domination or Foreign Domination," (Geneva, Switzerland, March 18, 2004) <http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/%28Symbol%29/E.CN.4.2004.NGO.258.En?Opendocument>; Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, "United Nations Indigenous Rights and Gullah-Geechees."

Indigenous people have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.²⁷⁹

Over the next year various elders and activists worked to craft the structures and symbols of this new “nation”, such as the official flag and seal. They also crafted a constitution and a governmental structure, deciding the Gullah-Geechee Nation would have a royal head of state, a Wisdom Circle Council of Elders to serve as the cabinet for the head of state, and an Assembly of Representatives. With the intention of electing a head of state, the GGSIC circulated a ballot titled “Who Speak Fa We” on the internet and at Gullah events up and down the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida for a year. At the close of the ballot, the group held a ceremony to enthrone Marquetta Goodwine as Queen Quet.²⁸⁰ The ceremony was purposefully held on July 2nd²⁸¹, the same day freeman Denmark Vessey was executed in 1822 after leading a failed slave rebellion that intended to burn down the city of Charleston²⁸², and on Sullivan’s Island which was the largest slave port in North America and the disembarkation point for all captured Africans who were traded to Lowcountry plantations.²⁸³

The nation refers to its borders as stretching from Jacksonville, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida and maintains that under the UN treaty, which is supported by the United States, the Gullah-Geechee Nation should have sovereignty over its own local and internal affairs.²⁸⁴ As Gullah-Geechee Nation Elder Carlestine Denson explained in a 2008 interview, although Gullah people are officially citizens of the United States, they can now claim dual citizenship with both the United States and the Gullah-Geechee Nation.²⁸⁵ When asked what the purpose of the Gullah-Geechee nation is and what she hopes to achieve as head of state, Queen

²⁷⁹ United Nations, “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” (March 2008) www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

²⁸⁰ Goodwine, Marquetta, Rachel Martin, “Interview U-0399.”

²⁸¹ Marquetta Goodwine, “Rise of the Gullah-Geechee Nation,” last accessed April 20, 2012, http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/GG_RISE.HTM.

²⁸² PBS, “Denmark Vesey”, last updated 2003, http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/denmark_vesey.html.

²⁸³ Sullivan’s Island Property, “History of Sullivan’s Island,” last accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.sullivanislandproperty.net/history-of-sullivan-island/>.

²⁸⁴ Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, “United Nations Indigenous Rights and Gullah-Geechees.”

²⁸⁵ Denson, Rachel Martin, “Interview U-0399.”

Quet replied, “To empower our people... to keep our people on their land, and keep our culture going. My purpose as head of state is to never let the people be blind.”

The Gullah-Geechee Fishing Coalition

I believe the industry is dying. Politicians get involved in it, and they’ll kill it. If nobody speaks up about it, they’ll just do what they want and regulate you out. They go by the book studies, but that’s not all that counts... you can’t study these things and say what’s going to happen the next year. It takes people like us to tell them... this is how it is going to be. And this is what we are asking y’all to do to keep us in business.

-Captain Mark Smith, St. Helena Island native, Shrimper, President of the Gullah-Geechee Fishing Association²⁸⁶



Fig 2. A South Carolina Gullah Fisherman uses a traditional hand-made cast net²⁸⁷

In 2010, the Environmental Defense Fund’s Ocean Programs Fellow approached the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition to form a partnership to study the challenges facing African American fishermen in the Southeast. At first, Queen Quet was skeptical, wondering if the EDF, which embodies mainstream environmentalism, was another organization that wanted to study the Gullah-Geechee people and then leave.²⁸⁸ When she realized that the EDF and GGSIC had

²⁸⁶ Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, “Gullah/Geechee TV Gullah/Geechee Nayshun Nyews with Queen Quet Ep 37 Pt 4,” October 16, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0hxsmhQ&feature=player_embedded.

²⁸⁷ National Park Service, “Low Country Gullah Culture,” 72.

²⁸⁸ Environmental Defense Fund, “A Voice for African-American Fishermen in the Southeast: EDF Finds Common Ground with Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah-Geechee Nation,” last updated December 13, 2010 <http://apps.edf.org/article.cfm?contentID=11448>.

similar dedication to supporting African American fisherman, the organizations teamed up to host a series of four ‘listening sessions’ across the Lowcountry region to hear the concerns of black commercial fishermen and learn more about the challenges they face as they make a living on the sea and struggle to pass down the traditions of their trade.²⁸⁹ As fishermen from across southern North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida shared their stories, they began to realize that they had many issues in common, and although partnering with the EDF would be beneficial, they also needed to capitalize upon the power they held as a group and work to support one another. From this series of meetings the Gullah-Geechee Fishing Association, based on St. Helena Island, was born.²⁹⁰ The GGFA is now the official fishing association of the Gullah-Geechee nation; it is open to “traditional commercial fishermen and women and seafood industry workers of African descent in the United States southeast and the Gullah-Geechee nation” and works to support such workers, share fishing traditions with the next generation, and change laws that make it difficult for workers to continue practicing traditional fishing.²⁹¹ While the use of traditional Gullah fishing boats and hand sewn cast nets is an important part of Gullah-Geechee culture, more important to the organizers of the GGSIC and GGFA is that Gullah-Geechee fishermen are empowered to continue traditional practices of seasonality and sustainability.²⁹²

As part of its mission to support those in the seafood industry the GGFA holds ‘Fishermen Exchanges’, bringing together fishermen from the Lowcountry, the Gulf, Mexico, and elsewhere who use traditional fishing methods. At these exchanges people share best practices, learn about new fishing regulations and restrictions for their regions, and build a supportive network where effective strategizing can take place. The association also prioritizes passing “down this traditional knowledge to the next generations so that for generation and generation and generation to come Gullah-Geechee will be here in our waterways upon dis here

²⁸⁹ Environmental Defense Fund, “Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and EDF Host Fishermen Listening Session in Beaufort, SC,” last updated January 28, 2010.

<http://blogs.edf.org/edfish/2010/01/28/queen-quet-chieftess-of-the-gullahgeechee-nation-and-edf-host-listening-session-for-gullahgeechee-fishermen/>.

²⁹⁰ Environmental Defense Fund, “A Voice for African-American Fishermen in the Southeast.”

²⁹¹ http://web.me.com/gullahgeecheenation/Gullah_Geechee_Fishing_Association/Goals_and_Mission.html.

²⁹² Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, “Gullah/Geechee Fishing Traditions and the Essence of the Environment”, Blog Talk Radio, Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition, podcast audio, October 25, 2010, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/gullahgeechee/2010/10/25/gullahgeechee-fishing-traditions-and-the-essence-of-the-environment>.

land and thing likka dat to carry on we tradition.”²⁹³ As part of achieving this mission, the GGFA hosts annual Gullah-Geechee Seafood Festivals on St. Helena island with food, music, and demonstrations and workshops on traditional Gullah fishing methods.²⁹⁴

Finally, the association works to breakdown legal barriers that are now preventing traditional commercial fishers from participating in the industry as they have for years. As Queen Quet explains, “They come from other places to the Gullah-Geechee Nation with huge commercial ships and then the next thing we know we’re being told there are all these laws because there’s not enough of this or there’s not enough of that. And we’re like- how? Our ancestors have been here for four hundred years and we’ve never had depletion.”²⁹⁵ Because of the influx of commercial fishing from outside the Gullah community, traditional fishermen are being hit with new regulations that are affecting the economic basis of their businesses. For example, where fishermen were once able to sell fish that measured 14-16 inches, they are now only permitted to sell fish that measure more than 20 inches.²⁹⁶ Regulations like these, along with high levels of mercury and the privatization of boat ramps necessary for successful clamming, are among the many issues that the Gullah-Geechee Fishing Association organizes around.

Factors in the Exceptionalism of St. Helena Island

While also impacted by the development of tourism and private residential communities, the Gullah on St. Helena Island have resisted those impacts and organized around the preservation of their land and culture much more effectively than the Gullah community on Hilton Head Island, and arguably more effectively than the Gullah-Geechee community on any of the Lowcountry Sea Islands. As development continues and the traditional Gullah-Geechee way of life is increasingly threatened, it is important to analyze the factors that led to such different outcomes on Hilton Head and St. Helena. These factors include the history of landownership and sense of place on St. Helena Island since the Port Royal experiment, the

²⁹³ Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, “Gullah/Geechee Fishing Traditions and the Essence of the Environment.”

²⁹⁴ Environmental Defense Fund, “Gullah-Geechee Fishing Association Hosts Seafood Festival,” last updated November 11, 2010, <http://blogs.edf.org/edfish/2010/11/03/gullahgeechee-fishing-association-hosts-seafood-festival/>.

²⁹⁵ Gullah-Geechee Riddim Radio, “Gullah/Geechee Fishing Traditions and the Essence of the Environment.”

²⁹⁶ Nicole Smith, Environmental Defense Fund, “Last Stop- Sea Breeze, NC,” last updated April 23, 2010 <http://blogs.edf.org/edfish/2010/04/23/last-stop-sea-breeze-nc/>.

presence of an educational center, and a generation of charismatic young leaders who have left the St. Helena community and returned with a passion for seeing it live on.

Land and Belonging

A key to the differential Gullah landownership outcomes on Hilton Head and St. Helena islands is the distribution of land during and directly after the Port Royal Experiment. Freedmen on Hilton Island were distributed or were able to purchase approximately one third of the island from the US federal government; the remainder of the land on the island was purchased by northern prospectors and eventually found its way into ownership by the Frasers. Conversely, one hundred percent of St. Helena Island became legally owned by freedmen during Reconstruction.²⁹⁷ This singular fact has undoubtedly played a role in the percentage of black landownership that exists on each island today; because all of St. Helena was still owned by Gullah communities in the 1950s, there was little space for developers to easily purchase land.

Another important factor is the unique way that relationships between Gullah people and the land developed on St. Helena. On both Hilton Head and St. Helena islands, communities and landownership were organized according to plantation boundaries. Although some plantation boundaries are still present on Hilton Head, the heavy occupation of the island by the United States government during and after the Civil War is one possible factor that lessened the significance of plantations as geographic markers for the residents of the island. On St. Helena Island the geographic divisions of plantations were maintained, and the residents of the island also chose to maintain these geographic divisions as community divisions with social meaning.²⁹⁸

As of 1991 all of St. Helena Island, excluding the campus of the Penn Center and some strips of commercial land, was divided into plantations; there were forty five plantations still existing on the island at that time. Forty-three of these plantations were primarily populated by Gullah individuals, except for one uninhabited plantation and Dataw Island, which is a private gated residential community.²⁹⁹ Because of the continued existence of these plantations delineations, Gullah people on St. Helena Island have been able to preserve the concept and practice of ‘catching sense’. The continuation of this system on St. Helena Island even after the

²⁹⁷ Guthrie, “Where’d You Catch Sense?” 3.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

end of slavery has resulted in a strong sense of place, and a spiritually and socially significant relationship with a very specific area of land for individuals from the island. This is also a potential factor that has affected the differing percentages of Gullah residency and landownership on Hilton Head and St. Helena islands.

Education and a Generation of Leaders

A third factor that may have contributed to the exceptional level of cultural and ecological preservation on St. Helena Island is the existence of an educational center on the island in the form of the Penn School and later the Penn Center Community Services Center. The Penn School existed to serve African Americans on all of the Sea Islands, but in a situation where the islands were significantly isolated from each other and the mainland until the 1950s at the earliest, the residents of St. Helena had a significant advantage over residents of other islands when it came to access to quality education. If this is the case, original Gullah freedmen and later Gullah people of St. Helena would have been more literate, had more agricultural science knowledge, been more capable of effective community organizing around pressing issues, and, especially because the Penn School emphasized ensuring that students learned Standard English, been more able to leave St. Helena and flourish in the economy and educational institutions of the mainland. Smith argues that the cultural preservation movement on the Sea Islands has been largely led by “former island residents and the grandchildren of slaves” who left to attend college or find employment on the mainland and who later returned to the island in the 1970s and 1980s, what Smith calls a “returning black leadership cadre with a heightened interest in cultural survival and land preservation.”³⁰⁰ If St. Helena Island had a higher percentage than other Sea Islands of people with basic levels of education who could leave the island and then return after working or gaining higher levels of education, the island would have also had a higher percentage of people with a passion for preserving the Gullah culture returning home just as programs and campaigns to address Gullah land loss began to be formed.

The Gullah Movement for Preservation and Recognition and the Civil Rights Movement

It is clear that the development of tourism and private residential communities on the Lowcountry Sea Islands has had a devastating impact on the landownership and culture of the

³⁰⁰ John P. Smith, “Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah,” 285.

Gullah people, with Hilton Head Island being the most poignant and extreme example. Yet, it is also clear that the Gullah people have not been complacent with nor resigned to these impacts. In fact, over the past forty years a type of social movement has arisen around the land issues of the Gullah people and the recognition of their culture; St. Helena Island has undoubtedly been the center of the development of this movement.

However, it is difficult to categorize this movement. Is it an extension of the black Civil Rights Movement, taking off in the early 1970s on the coattails of the struggle for political rights, equal access to public and private spaces including those in nature, and recognition of the importance and beauty of the broader African American culture? Is it an unrecognized part of the land rights branch of the environmental justice movement that blossomed and entered public consciousness around the same period, part of the wider struggle for equal protection from the harmful consequences of development and respect for indigenous sacred spaces and sovereignty? Or, is the organization of Gullah people around the preservation of their land and culture something else entirely?

There are substantial similarities between this movement and the Civil Rights movement. As the Civil Rights movement demanded equal rights in the civil arena, this movement is organizing to protect the right of Gullah landowners; as the Civil Rights movement demanded the end of segregation and equal access to education, parks, and employment,³⁰¹ this movement is reacting to increasing segregation of communities and loss of access to natural space and traditional economic activities as entire islands are privatized; as those in the Civil Rights movement fought to abolish housing discrimination and redlining,³⁰² this movement strives to protect communities from predatory land purchases and enable families to capitalize upon the full equity of their homes; and finally, as those in the Civil Rights movement declared ‘Black is Beautiful’ and demanded recognition that African American culture is valuable,³⁰³ those in the ongoing Gullah-Geechee movement want recognition of the importance and distinctiveness of their culture. Yet, sociologist John P. Smith argues that although the cultural and ecological

³⁰¹ William Terence Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance* (NY, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 111; Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 106.

³⁰² Michael Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*. (ABC-CLIO, 2009), 92; Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance*, 89.

³⁰³ Carl Leon Bankston, *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America: Vol 1* (Salem Press Inc., 2009), 161.

preservation movement of the Gullah people has many parallels to the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately it is distinct for many reasons.³⁰⁴

First, it is difficult to conceptualize the social movement of the Gullah people as a continuation of the Civil Rights movement simply because the Lowcountry Sea Islands were almost completely isolated from the Civil Rights Movement.³⁰⁵ In the late 1960s and early 1970s most of the Sea Islands were not only still physically isolated from the mainland, but the islands were also at that time still predominately home to Gullah people and therefore socially isolated from mainstream America and much of the personal and institutional racism faced daily by other African Americans. As Charles Simmons Jr., a participant in a panel on the culture of Hilton Head before the height of development noted,

In the early days we didn't know anything about segregation and discrimination. I thought about the thing after I got to be much older- we had one white child going to (his own) school. He was the only one in the school. And I thought come to think of it, they did have a school for that one student on Hilton Head. And that's really the only form of segregation or discrimination that we have experienced on the island. That same fella after he got out of school... he played with us... he didn't have anybody else to play with!³⁰⁶

Additionally, the Gullah movement is distinct because of its structure and strategies. The central organizing forces of the Civil Rights movement were the black church and large-scale professional organizations such as the NAACP.³⁰⁷ In contrast, although the Christian church and spirituality are very significant features of the Gullah culture, the church and church leaders have not played a prominent organizing or leadership role in the Gullah movement for preservation and recognition.³⁰⁸ Additionally, the leadership in the Gullah movement has been significantly more grassroots and local.³⁰⁹ While larger organizations have been called upon for help and coalition building -- such as the assistance of the NAACP and the Audobon Society in defeating

³⁰⁴ John P. Smith, "Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah," 284.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.

³⁰⁶ *Hilton Head Before the Bridge*, (Beaufort County Public Library, 1983), VHS.

³⁰⁷ Alden D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (The Free Press, 1984), 4.

³⁰⁸ John P. Smith, "Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah," 289.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

the BASF facility on Hilton Head, and the assistance of the Environmental Defense Fund in bringing together fishermen to form the Gullah-Geechee Fishing Coalition -- and while the leadership of the movement has taken the causes of Gullah people as far as the international level, the leadership and demands themselves have been overwhelmingly local and grassroots.

Finally, I argue that the Gullah movement is and has been separate from the Civil Rights movement because of the substantial differences between the goals of the two movements. Smith asserts that the Civil Rights movement was “bound together by goals and values that revolve around equal opportunity for blacks and removal of the barriers of discrimination.”³¹⁰ Broadly speaking, the movement was about wanting to be recognized as the same as the dominant population, to have equal status and equal access to goods and services- including public natural spaces and resources. The Gullah movement for preservation and recognition is fundamentally a movement to be recognized as different and distinct. As equal civil rights are now guaranteed, it is a movement to resist assimilation into mainstream, to maintain a physical separateness, and to *maintain* access to natural resources, and to keep those resources public.

The Gullah Movement for Preservation and Recognition and the Environmental Justice Movement

This social movement of Gullah people for the preservation of their lands and the recognition of their culture also has much in common with the US environmental justice movement. This is especially in regards to the movement’s concern for an indigenous people and the dispossession of these people from their land and culture. I argue that such similarities make this Gullah movement a part of the broader environmental justice movement. Most importantly, strong connections can be made between the Gullah movement’s goal of achieving cultural, political, and economic community health for a marginalized land- based population and the goals of indigenous environmental justice communities organizing for justice and sovereignty over their land and their land based cultures.³¹¹ Additionally, these movements have grown in size and influence over roughly the same period of time, and have very similar structures and strategies. Like the Gullah movement, the environmental justice movement is largely grassroots, with local leadership. Just as most communities participating in the environmental justice

³¹⁰ John P. Smith, “Cultural Preservation of the Sea Island Gullah,” 288.

³¹¹ Luke W. Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (NY, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 26.

movement, the Gullah people have used some of the resources of the Civil Rights Movement and the larger environmental movement yet kept their distance and agency.³¹²

Furthermore, the formations of community economic alliances, the recent declaration of Gullah-Geechee nationhood, the efforts to establish an area of land as the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, and the testimonies before the United Nations by the Gullah-Geechee people parallel the strategies of indigenous people facing similar issues- demanding agency and sovereignty and politicizing landownership as a cultural issue. I argue that this is being done intentionally. Queen Quet, for example, knew what a stir it would cause to declare a Gullah-Geechee nation and host an election for a queen. In a 2008 interview she explained, “We put (the election) online. We sent it out as much as we could. We had a lot of US media who said, ‘What? We don’t believe this. They gonna do a queen here in the US? These black folks, what do they mean self-determination? And that started being international media.”³¹³ The use of Gullah-Geechee culture and its precarious position in the Lowcountry as a reason to push for implementing changes to preserve Gullah land and landownership is intentional, strategic and effective. As anthropologist J. Lorand Matory notes, “far from dying out, Gullah-Geechee culture has become a potent weapon in the struggle to maintain landownership and access to resources.”³¹⁴

By negatively impacting cultural and economic relationships to the land, development on the Lowcountry Sea Islands, exemplified most strongly on Hilton Head Island, is damaging the health of Gullah communities. These land-based community health effects- the loss of landownership and other economic capital, culture, skills, and common values, are pressing environmental justice issues. When not only the ecological and human health implications of changes in the land are incorporated into the equation, but the vast socio-cultural implications as well, the number of communities around the world who are dealing with unaddressed environmental injustice swells significantly. The case of the Gullah people and the growth of tourism and private residential community necessitates that scholars and activists alike think

³¹² Michael R. Redclift, *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2010), 174.

³¹³ Goodwine, Rachel Martin, “Interview U-0399.”

³¹⁴ J. Lorand Matory, “The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah-Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the America,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 4 (2008), 950.

more broadly about environmental justice and about the relationship between peoples and their land.

Epilogue

In 2006, the United States Congress passed the National Heritage Act of 2006 and designated the coastline from Wilmington, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida as the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, one of the nation's forty National Heritage Areas.³¹⁵ National Heritage Areas are areas that hold "natural, cultural, and scenic" significance for the nations, that represent that American experience "through physical features... and the traditions that have evolved in them," and that are preferably still in use by the people who helped shape the landscape. A National Heritage Area is both a place and a concept, and requires the National Park Service to engage the protection of both the landscape and the culture of an area.³¹⁶

This significant achievement for the Gullah-Geechee people was the result of many years of community organizing and lobbying done by the Gullah-Geechee Sea Island Coalition and their supporters. In 2000, South Carolina Congressman Rep. James E. Clyburn recommended inclusion of a study to determine "the national significance of the Gullah culture, as well as the suitability and feasibility of adding various elements of Gullah culture to the National Park System" as a line item in the 2000 Department of the Interior Appropriation Budget.³¹⁷ The unprecedented study commenced, resulting in the release of the *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement*, which catalogues the significance of the Gullah culture to the United States. The goals of the study as outlined by the National Park Service were:

1. To analyze the multi-faceted components of Gullah culture (known as Geechee in Georgia and Florida) using the established criteria for the study of areas for potential inclusion in the National Park System and;
2. To evaluate the resources of the Gullah/Geechee people and cultural landscape for potential national significance and;
3. To determine how these resources could be protected, interpreted, and used for the benefit of the Gullah/Geechee people and the general public

³¹⁵ "Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor," National Park Service, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/index.htm>.

³¹⁶ "Frequently Asked Questions," National Park Service, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/guge/faqs.htm>.

³¹⁷ Michael Kenneth Davis, "Unless God Take My Life, I'm Going to be at Those Meetings: A Rhetorical Analysis of the 2000 National Park Service Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study," (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Dissertations, 2005,) 14.

4. To make recommendations to Congress based on those criteria.³¹⁸

As part of the study, the NPS set out to determine what would be the best option for federal intervention to help protect and support the Gullah-Geechee Culture. The NPS held a series of meetings up and down the southeastern coast, talking with Gullah-Geechee community members and their supporters, intentionally striving to make them as open and welcoming to the community as possible.³¹⁹ The response was intense, with hundreds of people showing up to the hearings and expressing their views on what needed to be done to preserve Gullah-Geechee culture. The main themes that surfaced from these meetings were that the Gullah-Geechee desired more outlets to tell their story for themselves, and wanted more credence given to their personal experiences instead of just scholarly accounts of the community,³²⁰ that increased access to historical lands and traditional resources is critical for the survival of the culture,³²¹ that resources to provide cultural outreach to younger generations is necessary, and that the government should play a role in helping the tourism economy of the region be economically empowering for the Gullah-Geechee.³²²

As a response to this study, the National Park Service considered four different alternatives. Alternative A called for the creation of Gullah-Geechee Coastal Heritage centers across the Lowcountry to serve as focal points for cultural renewal and collaboration between the government, nonprofit organizations, and the community, as well as the distribution of grants to assist with local preservation projects;³²³ Alternative B called for culturally and historically significant sites in the region, such as the Penn Center, to be designated as small National Heritage Areas, listed by the US Government as important places to visit, and managed by local organizations;³²⁴ Alternative C called for the creation of one large National Heritage Area, with designated sites of significance, substantial partnership between local organizations and the NPS, and the creation of a Gullah-Geechee Cultural Commission to manage the preservation of

³¹⁸ National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. “Low Country Gullah Culture: Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement” (Washington D.C., 2005), 115.

³¹⁹ Davis, “Unless God Take My Life,” 15.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³²² *Ibid.*, 62.

³²³ National Park Service, “Low Country Gullah Culture,” 120.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

landscape and culture within the area;³²⁵ finally, the NPS proposed Alternative D, a blend of Alternatives A and D.

Ultimately, after review and receiving community input the NPS determined that Alternative C was the best option for both the environment and the Gullah-Geechee culture, and created the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. This is a momentous achievement for the Gullah-Geechee people. The community was the subject of a type of study unprecedented in the NPS, which brought considerable attention and understanding to the needs of the people and the value of the Gullah-Geechee culture. The establishment of the cultural corridor represents the introduction of Gullah-Geechee issues into the public consciousness and the official recognition of the Gullah-Geechee by the federal government as a people with a culture that is important to the history and future of the United States, and one that needs protecting. Through the process of the study and the implementation of the final recommendation, the Gullah-Geechee people have been able to gain increased protection, political power, and validation for the borders of the Gullah-Geechee Nation.³²⁶

Figure 3. **The Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor**³²⁷



While the formation of the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Corridor is a significant milestone, it does not represent an endpoint; the Gullah-Geechee movement for recognition and conservation

³²⁵ National Park Service, “Low Country Gullah Culture,” 12.

³²⁶ Davis, “Unless God Take My Life,” 179.

³²⁷ National Park Service, “Management,” Last accessed April 23, 2012,

<http://www.nps.gov/pwr/customcf/apps/maps/showmap.cfm?alphacode=guge&parkname=Gullah%2FGeechee>.

continues to grow. In December of 2001, during the process of this research, a nonprofit organization called the Harris Neck Land Trust was heard before the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs of the Committee on Natural Resources of the U.S. House of Representatives.³²⁸ The Harris Neck Wildlife National Refuge is 2,672 acres of habitat currently protected by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.³²⁹ The area was previously distributed to Geechee freedmen as part of the Port Royal experiment; a community of Geechee people lived on the land until 1942, when it was confiscated by the U.S. Government to build an Army airfield.³³⁰ The airfield was never constructed, and in 1961 the government transferred it to the Fish and Wildlife Service and established it as a refuge.³³¹ The Harris Neck Land Trust, composed of seventy families descended from the original Geechee inhabitants, assert that the land was improperly seized by the Government without fair notice and without the required amount of compensation, and are currently pushing for the land to be returned to Geechee ownership.³³²

The issues faced by the Gullah-Geechee people and their increasingly successful movement for recognition of their culture and the protection of their land rights is not relevant only to the Lowcountry. In Hawaii, Native Hawaiians face similar challenges with land and resource sovereignty. Like American Indians, Native Hawaiians have been historically dispossessed of their land through colonization, broken treaties with the U.S. government, and forced relocation. Like the Gullah-Geechee people, many Native Hawaiian communities still struggle to maintain property rights due the phenomenon of heirs property and the influence of tourism development on their islands, resulting in the steady erosion of the physical base of their culture.³³³ The recommendations suggested by the Gullah-Geechee people who attended NPS community meetings in 2000 should be heeded by a variety of communities and nation states.

³²⁸ "Testament of David Kelly," U.S. House of Representatives, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://naturalresources.house.gov/UploadedFiles/KellyTestimony12.15.11.pdf>.

³²⁹ "Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge," U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=41627>.

³³⁰ "Return Harris Neck Land to Rightful Owners," Harris Neck Land Trust, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://www.change.org/petitions/return-harris-neck-land-to-rightful-owners>.

³³¹ "Former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver Fights for Land and Justice," *Conduive Chronicle*, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://cchronicle.com/2010/07/former-black-panther-kathleen-cleaver-fights-for-land-and-justice/>.

³³² "Testament of David Kelly," U.S. House of Representatives, last accessed April 23, 2011, <http://naturalresources.house.gov/UploadedFiles/KellyTestimony12.15.11.pdf>.

³³³ Parker, *Native American Estate*, 52.

Listening to the voices of historically marginalized people, establishing supportive infrastructure for land-based cultures, and most importantly preserving access to traditional lands and resources are important steps to take in order to care for the broad community health of culturally endangered communities.

Most importantly, the cultural erosion experienced by the displacement of marginalized communities with land-based traditions, even from privately owned land, is an issue of environmental justice. When the concept of what it means for a community's health to be degraded is expanded to include economic, political, and cultural health, it is clear that this is an environmental injustice issue facing multiple communities, from the indigenous communities of Hawaii, to the *acequia* farmers of Colorado. The story of the Gullah-Geechee people and their relationship with the land is full of setbacks and tragedies like the erosion of Gullah culture on Hilton Head Island; yet the resilience of the people, their culture, and their dedication to their land give a hopeful outlook to the future of this environmental justice problem.

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