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## "A Glimpse Into the Past": Communication, Cultural Tourism, and the Political Economy of Modern Gullah Preservation

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# **“A Glimpse Into the Past”: Communication, Cultural Tourism, and the Political Economy of Modern Gullah Preservation**

BRIAN GRAVES

All along the coastal region of the Southeastern United States, African American communities, known as “Gullah,” have retained more of their African cultural and linguistic heritage than any other large African American community.<sup>1</sup> From the times of slavery to the mid-twentieth century, Gullah communities lived in a Southeastern coastal landscape remarkably similar to the shores of Western Africa and constituted the majority of the Sea Islands’ population. According to William Pollitzer, “So many Africanisms survived in Gullah culture, that to some degree it was a re-creation of Africa within the New World,” including traditions of folklore, language, religion, arts and music, land use, food ways, architecture, and health practices (Cross 229). Today Gullah remains a unique and vibrant cultural enclave in the Southeastern region, though modern suburban, commercial, and resort developments have increasingly transformed the region’s physical, social, and economic geographies and threatened the culture’s survival.

In the wake of the recent and rapid erosion of Gullah culture, legislators, city planners, and entrepreneurs often tout economic development and public education through tourism as a viable means of cultural preservation. For example, the Charleston [South Carolina] Area Convention and Visitor’s Bureau distributes tourism literature in print and online that advertises the City’s sweetgrass basket markets, Gullah bus tours, Gullah cuisine, a Gullah Island Heritage Festival, Gullah arts and crafts, and other Gullah-related products and attractions. In terms of how tourism can help to preserve the culture, an article about

Charleston's African American heritage on the Bureau's website, bearing the slogan "Charleston: Where History Lives," purports:

Today, the Gullah people still live and practice their lifestyle in the areas that were once home to their ancestors. Despite encroachment of modern American traditions and increased expansion into their homeland, these special people continue to provide an important glimpse into South Carolina's past. When visiting our great city, visit our local museums and research centers and learn more about the traditions of the Gullah. By increasing awareness and education about the Gullah, we aid in the preservation of their unique heritage. (<http://www.africanamericancharleston.com/gullah.html>)

While packaging the culture for tourist consumption under a banner of cultural preservation, tourist trades in the region also often capitalize on images of the culture as providing a glimpse into the past. For example, according to the Greater Hilton Head/Bluffton [South Carolina] Visitor and Convention Bureau website:

Of course, the Lowcountry's storied and colorful past is a cornerstone of area culture, and the time-honored Gullah culture traditions of basket weaving, music and food can be enjoyed at a wide array of area locations. Each February, the Native Islander Gullah Celebration gives locals and visitors alike the opportunity to share in these rich Gullah cultural traditions and crafts. (<http://www.hiltonheadisland.org/see-and-do/arts-and-culture>)

Missing in much of the dominant social imagery of Gullah culture today, which either portrays a people who are somehow relics of the past or evokes nostalgia for a now obsolete way of life, is an adequate representation of the present and ongoing struggle of Gullah history, identity, and sense of place. While tourism can certainly contribute to public education and economic development in a region, Sea Islanders have complained that an overcommitted focus on tourism as a panacea for problems of development can also overlook more truly progressive and inclusive reforms that are needed within the political and economic system of landownership in the Sea Island region, such as development restrictions, and the reform of property taxes and heirs

property laws (See Faulkenberry, et al.). Achieving these fundamental types of structural reform will likely not be accomplished through more tourism; rather, it first requires fostering improved communication, common understanding, and deliberative action among key individuals, institutions, and cultural groups living in the Sea Island region. As Emory Campbell, who served as director of the Penn Center of Gullah history and culture on South Carolina’s St. Helena Island, writes:

We need a continuing dialogue between residents and property owners, real-estate developers, government officials, and new-comers interested in establishing new roots in our region. Unless we get all of these people in communication with each other, to recognize the values inherent in our culture, then the destructive elements and relationships will foster continuing problems. (Cross 228)

Tourism industries can play an important role in preserving Gullah culture, yet it is important to recognize that they do not necessarily stimulate and maintain substantive dialogue among the key groups that Campbell mentions. And while products of the tourist industry can usefully inform and educate consumers, they are often limited, both in their representational scope and in their communicative dimensions as one-way forms of address which must be consistent, controlled, and organized around imparting information for consumption. While it is important neither to diminish the progressive potential of tourism as a form of cultural preservation nor deny the very real political and economic constraints that require it, I argue that it is nevertheless necessary to critically question and examine the types of communication and preservation that tourism produces, particularly as lawmakers, city planners, entrepreneurs, and developers increasingly find it to be one of the most attractive, necessary, and economically feasible vehicles of cultural preservation. Accordingly, in the first part of this essay, I draw from ethnographic research with people living in the Sea Islands, historical archives, and scholarly literature to provide a critical perspective of some of the political and economic problems of modern Gullah preservation efforts, particularly in terms of their capacity as forms of communication

and political action. In the second part of the essay, I link these concerns to a broader cultural history of Gullah preservation, in which I examine some of the modern European epistemological and communicative underpinnings of the popular desire to preserve the culture and, by so doing, take issue with a reactionary preservationist concept of Gullah as an anachronistic folk culture in relation to the modern world. Finally, I present some conclusions about how more truly-progressive preservation plans might be imagined and implemented in the Sea Island region, particularly at the grassroots level.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MODERN GULLAH PRESERVATION:  
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

My own experiences of Gullah culture began in 1980, when I was five years old, and my family moved to a predominately white middle-class neighborhood on the eastern side of James Island, South Carolina. At that time, many sections of the Island had been commercially developed, mostly as shopping centers and suburbs, but these were surrounded by large tracts of undeveloped farm land, almost all of which lay fallow. In the island's rural pockets, I grew up hearing Gullah voices at places such as the Honey Hill, Sol Legare, and Grimball Farm neighborhoods, and the Clam Farm where I used to work during the summers, and found myself drawn to the culture, which seemed exotic and fascinating to me as an outsider. Living on the island, I developed an affinity for its people who were there before me, and as I have grown up, the sights and sounds of African American culture in the South Carolina Low Country have stuck with me; the cadence of the language, the people in the marshes and creeks harvesting oysters, crabbing, and throwing cast nets, the sweetgrass basket makers, and the storytellers. And in the centuries-old African American neighborhoods, I remember the mysterious beauty of old churches, agricultural lodges, hidden cemeteries, country stores, brightly painted blue-trimmed homes, and small farms tucked along winding dirt roads under canopies of ancient oak trees and Spanish moss.

In 2003, when I began graduate research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to investigate the influence of commercial development on Gullah culture, the United States real estate boom was in full force. All over James Island, properties were churned, and a large number of new suburban and commercial developments emerged almost overnight. For the first time, I witnessed large-scale development in and around many of the island's rural African American communities: a new public school was constructed in the African American community of Grimball Farm. Shortly afterwards, a development firm, the Ginn Company, cleared land for an upscale housing development in the neighborhood. A few miles from Grimball Farm, a large supermarket was constructed at the entrance of the African American community of Sol Legare. While these developments occurred, others communities and important sites of African American history were slated for future development: The Mcleod plantation, which contains the only remaining slave cabins on James Island, was sold to a School of the Building Arts, and Backman's Seafood, one of the largest black businesses on the island, was proposed as a site for waterfront condominiums. During that time, I spoke with many members of the African American community who were cynical about these plans and feared that they would ultimately lead to their displacement and the erasure of African American history and culture on the island.

In the summers of 2004 and 2005 and during the spring and fall of 2009 and 2010, I conducted about twenty interviews with people living in and around the Sea Islands to find out more about what they perceived as the benefits and problems of commercial development and cultural preservation in the region. Most of the interviewees were older African American men and women (ages 45-90), who were born and lived in the Sea Islands for most of their lives, and remember life on the islands before the recent period of rapid development. I also interviewed a number of younger African American islanders (ages 25-45) as a point of comparison, and spoke with town planners, educators, and Gullah political activists, all of whom provided additional insights into the

problems of development and cultural preservation. As my research progressed, I became increasingly interested in what the term cultural preservation means. The word preservation implies something of a state permanence and purity, which seems to be at odds with the dynamism and permeability of culture. Surely effective cultural preservation is not achieved by pinning a culture down like a butterfly, yet some forms of cultural identity and practice must arguably remain consistent over time if preservation is to be successful. Given the supposed permanent nature of preservation and the very personal issues of cultural identity at stake, it is important in every case of preservation to ask who is defining the preservation and for whom.

According to many of the people whom I interviewed, effective preservation of Gullah depends foremost on maintaining the culture's ties to the land. Gullah political activist Marquetta Goodwine writes, "For Gullahs, land is an extension of themselves," and historically, "land has played a central role in their everyday lives. All aspects of Gullah and Geechee culture are tied to the land, and it serves as a psychological reminder of their connection with the ancestors and their communal plantation lives" (Cross 57). Today, much of the marshy waterfront property that was considered undesirable and therefore given<sup>2</sup> or sold to former slaves by plantation owners has become some of the most highly valued property on the Southeastern U.S. coast, and economic pressure to develop in these areas has increased in unprecedented ways. New market value assessments and subsequent tax burdens, as well as unclear property deeds, make it difficult for recent generations of farm families to continue their way of life on these large tracts of land, particularly along the waterfront. Increasingly, a livelihood based on farming and fishing has been replaced with more urban employment, and the field of social and economic opportunities for black families has shifted radically.

Although Gullah communities have become wary of the more exploitative practices of development, they do not seek to preserve their culture by isolating it from the modern world; rather, they are working to maintain their cultural traditions while taking selective advantage of

what the modern world has to offer. According to Campbell, “It is not that they [the Gullah] resist change, but they are concerned about the change that has taken place and how it will continue to fluctuate” (Cross 57). While development arguably brings many benefits to the islands, such as improved education, new jobs, and public and private services, it also brings new challenges. According to Cornelia Bailey, a resident of Sapelo Island, Georgia, people are often persuaded “that this company is coming in, and it’s going to provide jobs, and people will be able to take care of their families and afford better housing and everything else.” Commercial developments, however, are also “giving people a new set of problems to work with,” Bailey continued. “I got a paycheck this week, but at what price? Because you bring more people into the area with different ideas . . . and you’ve got a whole different set of problems you never thought possible.” Tax increases, displacement, Eurocentric public education, and a cash economy that introduces “poverty” and crime to the region have all become significant problems.

Rather than trying to survive in a disadvantageous political and economic situation, younger generations of Gullah families often move away or assimilate into “mainstream culture.” John Tibbetts writes:

It’s the oldest American story, told countless times. For generations, an ethnic or religious clan, tightly knit by language and religion, huddles in a New World rural enclave or urban ghetto, enduring prejudice and poverty. Then abruptly ancient bonds fray. Strangers move in and disrupt local traditions, elders complain about their heritage’s neglect and the exploitation of outsiders, while young people leave home in droves to gain better jobs and education. (3)

During the latter part of the twentieth century, many people in the Southeastern U.S. region have seen the Gullah language and culture largely disappear. Tibbetts notes that, for some, “the Gullah language remains just a lingering remnant, a museum piece. Within another generation it could disappear altogether” (12). However, he also notes that others do not see Gullah so much disappearing as transforming and taking new forms in the modern world, and he points out “that all



cultures change constantly with new influences and people. . . . Gullah life, which began as the blending of various traditions and ethnic groups, is just taking another vibrant form within the melting pot of modern America.” While there is apparent truth to each of these views, both can be problematic insofar as they overlook important political dimensions of cultural preservation, historical continuity, and the distribution of resources among people of the Sea Islands. A culture does not simply “disappear,” and neither does it adapt into a new and “vibrant form” without departing from its traditions to some degree. Caroline White, a woman who grew up on James Island and practices the art of Gullah storytelling warns, “We don’t want our children to forget our culture; where the ancestors came from, where they came to, what they had to do to make a living; that these children today are surviving off some of those same things.” Many Gullah people believe that their culture can and should be preserved, but its preservation will be possible only if people can hold onto their land and language and pass the culture down to the next generation.

According to Gerald Mackey, a professor of English who was raised in a Gullah community on Johns Island, South Carolina, older, middle-aged, and younger generations of Gullah people each tend to relate to the culture differently:

[Gullah’s] a part of the older generation, so it’s just innately preserved... The middle generation is trying to preserve the culture through storytelling, song, dance, and music.... For many of these people, this preservation has become a way of life, so they do get paid for their service, unlike the older generation who got no money for the service.... They see this as a business. People want to hear it. They want to make money from it. The younger generation is still struggling with the culture. It’s something they don’t buy into readily. They accept it, but it’s just there: “It’s a part of my history, but I’m not interested in promoting it for other people to see, hear, and remember it.”

Ironically, as Gullah disappears from the places in which it has traditionally existed, it proliferates as never before in popular arenas, such

as folk festivals, films, television, and books. While the popularization of Gullah can have great value, in terms of increased historical, cultural, and social awareness and public understanding, there can also be problematic aspects of marketing the culture for audiences. According to Eugene Frazier, a historian and author who was “born and raised” on James Island, South Carolina, “I don’t think some of it is portrayed in the exact form that it was. I think some people try to spicy it up a little . . . the things that I see to be honest with you, I think people are trying to market things” (Frazier). Many Gullah people are not sure how to react to the relatively recent increased public exposure of the culture and a consequent shift in public perceptions, due in large part to its increasing mediation in popular venues. According to Goodwine, the Gullah people are somewhat confused about their new popularity. The label “Gullah” was once derogatory, and connoted a primitive culture. Sea Islanders were often told “Don’t be who you are,” yet now the same people say “Look, Gullah is the greatest thing ever!” (Tibbetts 12). A popular celebration of the Gullah is arguably positive, yet can also be problematic to the degree that it elides a deeper understanding of the culture, including its post-colonial history, present struggles with modern development, and recent commercialization within culture industries. Part of the more important and difficult work of cultural preservation is, as Goodwine says:

really educating people about what Gullah/Geechee culture is, how it’s represented, who are the real people who live the culture; not somebody who if you came and offered them some money to be on a festival stage, or offered them an opportunity to be seen in a movie that they’re going to dress up and say that they’re Gullah.

While images and products of Gullah culture are sold for entertainment and tourism purposes, the industries that package and capitalize on the culture do not necessarily give back to the communities that they supposedly help to preserve through public education and economic development. Of the commercialization of Gullah/Geechee culture within the tourist industry, for example, Bailey explains:

You got people that comes with money and means in the pocket ... [who say], “I went to this quaint little community and we had this delicious deviled crab, and we talked to these guys that were speaking Gullah or Geechee,” and so forth, and they brag about it for the next umpteenth years, but then, they never see past that. They never ask questions past that. That’s part of their tourist route. So that’s a tourist thing to do, to pass through. And we’re still left holding the bag. They don’t spend much money when they come through tourist places at all. I mean, they may go to Hilton Head and spend hundreds of dollars a night to stay in a hotel, plus having meals in the white area you live in, and then you come in the black community and “oh and ah,” on a [tour] bus or something, and buy a five dollar deviled crab, so you’ve done your little bit... They put their commercial out, that we’re part of the tourist attraction.

While tourism can be a feasible and profitable option for cultural preservation, at least for those involved in the tourist industry, it often comes with a price for local communities. Numerous studies conducted in various places have examined cultural tourism’s negative environmental, social, and economic impacts, including uneven development, pollution, an influx of culturally insensitive outsiders, and minimal economic benefits for local people.<sup>3</sup> A number of studies have also examined the detrimental effects of tourism on Gullah communities more specifically. In *Culture for Sale: Marketing Gullah Identity in the South Carolina Sea Islands*, for example, Melissa Hargrove examines how tourism literature, brochures, and postcards of the Charleston tourist industry problematically portray an exoticized image of Gullah sweetgrass basket makers as frozen within the time and space of the plantation era and thus undermine the ability of Gullah women to represent themselves. Another study, *Culture of Servitude: The Impact of Tourism and Development on South Carolina’s Coast* (Faulkenberry, et al.), investigates ways in which commercial development and tourism in Beaufort County simultaneously erode traditional local culture and economic practices while instituting a “culture of servitude” in which local people must assume menial positions within the service industry in order to survive.

In order to be a more truly progressive form of cultural preservation, tourism must be carefully planned in conjunction with local communities, and pursued with senses of integrity and social responsibility, so that it “addresses the concerns and values of multiple groups, not just one or the dominant one, and does so in a way that each of these constituencies can learn from components beyond its own sphere” (Longstreeth 9). Tourists often attain only a superficial understanding of the culture through their limited interactions with local people in structured tourist settings. According to William Green, a chef at Gullah Grub restaurant on St. Helena Island, for example:

One of the main things I always see, especially with the restaurant, is people coming in, and they’ll go on a tour, visit the Penn Center, speak with some people, and now, from the day they’ve spent, now they think they know enough to start giving opinions on this and that, on what you need to do with your culture and this and that. You need to make more money off your culture; other people are going to do it. But there’s a fine line between loving, preserving, and showing people about your culture, and exploiting yourself.

And according to Bailey:

Most people have a superficial understanding of the problems of the community. We don’t wear our problems on our sleeve.... So the tourists, they’re only here for twenty minutes and they’re only going to see the bare surface.... We only let you see what we want you to see, because we don’t know if you’re genuine or not. And if you’re genuine, and you stick around long enough, we’ll let you see the whole package.

Although communication does occur among different cultural groups within commercial preservation efforts, the problem may be that the communication which occurs is too often not of the right type. More specifically, while Gullah culture industries have the potential to stimulate communication among diverse groups of people, those interactions often happen quickly, within a moment of consumer exchange, and may not always be very productive in terms of having the types of lengthy cultural exchange and substantive political dialogue that are needed to achieve a

deeper understanding among different cultural groups.

In addition to a fuller consideration of the political and economic issues that Gullah communities face, more effective cultural preservation requires a fundamental understanding of some of the epistemological and communicative underpinnings of Gullah preservation itself. It is only within the context of modern development's technological, political, and economic delivery of "progress" that the cultural concept of Gullah as a kind of folk culture in need of preservation emerges and is given meaning. Moreover, the idea of Gullah itself is then available to serve as a cultural category against which modernity is defined. Historically, the production of knowledge about Gullah culture warrants skepticism in so far as it over-privileges Eurocentric interpretation and assumes that the culture is separate and "other" from European modernity.

#### A CULTURAL HISTORY OF MODERN GULLAH PRESERVATION

The recent popular fascination with preserving Gullah can often overlook a larger historical context, in which the culture has fought to preserve its African influences since its beginning in slavery. In many cases, authorities who observed and studied Gullah culture misunderstood, and even denied, the culture's African heritage. For example, according to E. Franklin Frazier, when "the Negroes were captured in Africa and enslaved, they were practically stripped of their social heritage" and "the capture of many of the slaves in inter-tribal wars and their selection for the slave market tended to reduce to a minimum the possibility of the retention and transmission of African culture" (108). Of this questionable assumption, Tibbetts writes that many "historians agreed that slavery and segregation had been so devastating to African Americans that their cultural traditions had been completely crushed . . . so they absorbed those of European Americans" (8). And according to Charles Joyner, for decades "the consensus was that there wasn't much black culture" (Tibbetts 8).<sup>2</sup> Black intellectuals of the twentieth century recognized the error of the idea that African culture had vanished among blacks in

the United States. Ralph Ellison wrote in 1958, “The white American has charged the Negro American with being without past or tradition” (108). Further, he noted that white Americans often misunderstood and degraded their own traditions, while showing enormous respect for supposedly more enlightened European culture.

Written and oral accounts of Gullah culture describe how it was practiced unselfconsciously by Islanders, who did not consider themselves as an African folk culture until they were brought into contact with the outside world. In her essay in *James Island Childhood: Africanisms Among Families of the Sea Islands of Charleston, SC*, for example, Janie Gilliard Moore writes:

For many years of my childhood I lived, believed in, and loved this Sea Island experience, but at the time, like most Sea Islanders, I did not consider it unusual. We did not see ourselves as a unique group of people with a rich surviving African culture; we did not know that our way of living was so African, for we were just being ourselves. (107-108)

Moore continues, “[A]s I progressed through high school and afterward college, I ‘discovered’ (as I thought) that many of our practices were superstitious and ignorant. Educated people, I came to feel, simply did not believe and act as we did” (108). Cultural outsiders often considered the Gullah language to be a peasant form of speech that was rural, backward, and culturally deficient. According to Goodwine, “this condemnation and pity of Gullah-speaking Sea Islanders had an overwhelming and almost devastating impact” (9). As Moore continued her studies, she began to understand the African roots of her culture, and the error of an education that rejected them. As a student at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, she came into contact with other African students and realized just how many cultural practices they shared. She writes, “[T]he similarities between Sea Island attitudes and customs have been astounding. Even some quite minute practices are the same—which proves four hundred years of the ‘diaspora’ have not decultured us as a people” (108).

Until relatively recently, much of the scholarship on the Gullah language was conceived from within a European modernist perspective and measured the culture by English standards that framed the language and culture as backward and racially inferior. Writing in 1922, Ambrose E. Gonzalez, for example, remarks:

Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier Colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia. (10)

Another example is found in the writings of Mason Crum (1940), who did not recognize the importance of Gullah's defining West African influence, and instead measured the language in terms of English standards:

Gullah speech is conspicuous for its short cuts. Its grammar, which is but an abbreviated and mutilated English grammar, knows no rule except to follow the line of least resistance, take its own tack, violate all rules of logic, and just say that which is natural and to the point. (121)

While a number of serious studies of Gullah were undertaken in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, almost all were unsuccessful in fully exposing the importance of the culture's West African roots. Margaret Wade-Lewis successfully demonstrates in her 2007 book, *Lorenzo Dow Turner: Father of Gullah Studies*, that it was not until the publication of African American linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner's groundbreaking 1949 work, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, that the study of Gullah was reoriented toward a more Afrocentric perspective. Through careful research and extensive travels in Africa, Turner clearly demonstrated Gullah's direct connections to languages of West Africa, and with remarkable geographical specificity:

The slaves brought to South Carolina and Georgia direct from Africa came principally from a section extending along the West coast from Senegal to Angola. The important areas involved were Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Gold Coast, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Angola. Today the vocabulary of Gullah contains words found in the following languages, all of which are spoken in the above mentioned areas: Wolof, Malinke, Mandiha, Bambara, Fula, Mende, Vai, Twi, Fonte, Ga, Ewe, Fon, Yoruba, Bin, Hausa, Ibo, Ibibio, Efik, Kongo, Umbundu, Kimbundu, and a few others. (1-2)

Through his study, Turner also clarified the Eurocentric error of much of the previous scholarship on Gullah and initiated a new way of studying and understanding the culture in the United States:

Many Americans who have attempted to understand Gullah have greatly underestimated the extent of the African element in this strange dialect. Observing many elements in common with certain British dialects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they have not considered it necessary to acquaint themselves with any of the languages spoken in those sections of West Africa from which the Negroes were brought to the New World as slaves, nor to study the speech of those Negroes in those parts of the New World where English is not spoken; but rather have they taken the position that the British dialects offer a satisfactory solution to all the problems presented by Gullah. (5)

Recent generations of Gullah scholars, such as Charles Joyner, have worked to correct the idea that African culture had ceased to exist in the United States and, instead, to demonstrate cultural continuity with Africa in the New World. Joyner's *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* illuminated particular, concrete, and detailed examples of a thriving African slave culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry. While more recent Gullah scholars provided valuable insight and correction to previous scholarship that failed to recognize the pervasive influence of African culture in the New World, “some scholars began to lose sight of the destructive power of slavery and segregation” (Tibbetts 8). Joyner realized that his work and that of other scholars was misinterpreted by a new generation of students who “didn't know how horrible slavery



and segregation could be” (Tibbetts 8). Current scholars are working to provide a “harsher depiction of slavery,” while “also acknowledging the survival of black culture” (8).

According to Goodwine, the perception of Gullah as a backwards culture benefited developers who wanted to bring “progress” to the land, and “who said [Gullah] was backwards, who said it was ignorant, who said the people were ignorant, and that they just didn’t know what to do with the land, so we would show them what to do with the land.” Within a generation, Gullah people have seen public perceptions of their culture transformed in a twist of historical irony from a stigma of ignorance to a marketable commodity. Underlying these apparently different views of the culture, however, is a common cultural perspective that favors a linear notion of modern development within which Gullah appears to be somehow behind. The contradictory desires for preservation and progress—preservation: trying to preserve or protect community and local culture from modernity, and progress: trying to modernize under a general banner of progressive social and economic change—reflect two ongoing forms of colonization at work, in the sense that both are a forced contextualization of people and places within certain systems of knowledge that privilege a particular modernist sense of linear history. Just as the concept of a culture that is somehow behind the curve of modern progress can be used to form the basis of a stigma, it can also serve as the basis for creating a tourism, news, and entertainment commodity. According to Bailey:

We don’t deliberately dress up and speak a different dialect for you all’s entertainment. When we are speaking among ourselves that’s us. When we walk around bare feet, that’s just us. We don’t want people taking pictures and saying, “Oh look at those people walking around with bare feet. They’re quaint, walking up a dirt road,” and writing this little article so people can buy it, you know. I prefer to walk bare feet because it feels good. I like being next to nature. It has nothing to do with me not having shoes and being backwards in relation to time.

In many ways, the popular desire to preserve Gullah culture occurs

within, rather than outside, the context of European modernity, and it is important to recognize that commercial preservation efforts do not counter the forces of capitalist development in the Sea Island region; rather, they are symptomatic of them.

COMMUNICATION AND THE FUTURE OF GULLAH PRESERVATION

Too often, preservation is mediated and imposed upon communities “from above,” without sufficient regard and understanding for the community’s own history, culture, and communicative practices. Outside of the dominant political and economic discourses of development and preservation, alternative forms of knowledge are available, including from within Gullah communities themselves. Identifying with Gullah roots has been one of the ways in which people of the Sea Islands have organized in resistance to development and the commercialization of their culture. Recent legislation, political movements, and grassroots organizations such as the Gullah/Geechee Nation, offer different, often aligned, though sometimes conflicting, organizations through which democratic communication and Gullah activism take place.

Currently, an unprecedented large scale effort to preserve Gullah culture is underway with the recently passed Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor Act, which is slated to receive ten million dollars over ten years to develop a Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor in the Southeastern United States. Although the act represents a public preservation effort that will involve tourism as a source of revenue, it is being carefully planned in collaboration with Gullah communities, will be administered by the National Park Service, and is aimed at promoting socially responsible development in the Sea Island region. While the act promises to be heavily informed by those living in Gullah communities and is designed to deliver much needed political and economic reform in the region, some people within Gullah communities have expressed concerns. According to Whitney Dangerfield, for example, “many Gullah know very little about the corridor” (1). And according to Goodwine, “People who are

aware of the corridor are very skeptical of it. . . They think, ‘What do they want? Do they want to help us or help themselves to our culture?’” (1). Dangerfield adds, “[The Gullah] have, after all, learned from their past . . . now that millions of dollars are involved, some Gullah worry that the commission will include profiteers instead of those genuinely interested in helping” (2).

As the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor Act moves part of Gullah culture further into the American mainstream, it is crucial to question the shapes that Gullah preservation will take. Pollitzer writes that the Gullah people “are not a museum piece, relics of the past, but rather survivors of enslavement, bondage, discrimination, and white privilege—fellow human beings entitled to work out their own destiny.” Considering the preservation of the culture, he adds, “Hopefully the best of sea island life language and customs can be preserved, even as people take advantage of new opportunities and move into mainstream America” (Pollitzer 201). And according to Goodwine, “I hope [the Commission] understands the full extent of the law to protect, preserve and continue the culture, and not make it a tourist area, not to have it museumized” (Dangerfield 2). Rather than transforming the culture into a tourist and entertainment spectacle, Goodwine hopes that fund monies will be spent on concrete plans that help the Gullah people, such as a land trust, an heirs property law center, community economic development, and historic preservation sites.

As I reflect on my own experiences in learning about Gullah culture and its preservation, I am struck by how much I was surrounded by the culture growing up, yet in so many ways remained ignorant of it. In my education all the way through high school, I was only taught the sparsest lessons about African American history and culture, and it was not until years later that I really discovered and developed a great appreciation for the rich traditions of African American literature, music, food, and art. As I continue to educate myself about Gullah in particular, I find that culture industries provide many excellent and engaging resources in various forms such as books, films, news stories, bus tours, festivals, and

more. But the most valuable and enriching resource in my educational journey has been conversations with individuals: educators, town planners, political activists, and particularly with African American elders who have lived the culture. Many times, as a James Islander and a researcher, I have discovered the truth of an old African proverb that says, “When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.” And as I consider the importance of preserving the culture, I am reminded of the words of Charles Joyner (1999):

The old talk and the old tales, the old prayers and the old personal expressiveness are more than just quaint cultural artifacts. They have provided the islanders with a sense of continuity with generations gone before, a precious lifeline to courageous ancestors who survived slavery and endured generations of poverty. That heritage is a source of strength that has enabled them to cope with the hail and upheaval of life. As we drift further and further out upon the sea of modernization, that heritage may be as crucial to our sanity and survival as to theirs. The Sea Islanders and their folk culture have something precious to offer us if we do not destroy them first. (281)

Without communication there can be no culture, no common understanding, and no common ways of life. Communication forms the basis of culture itself, and hence the basis of cultural preservation. In the case of modern Gullah preservation, the problem is not a lack of communication, as more communication surrounds the culture than ever before. The problem is that the communication which occurs is too often not among the right people in the right places, and is mediated through industries that conceive of preservation as an information product or a service good, rather than a democratic process involving constructive dialogue and concrete reforms in public policy. While lawmakers, entrepreneurs, developers, and city planners need neither devalue nor discard tourism as a form of cultural preservation, they should recognize that it does have limits in terms of the types of communication and cultural preservation that it produces. Furthermore, while tourism can be an effective tool of cultural preservation, it must always be pursued with senses of integrity and social responsibility and in tandem, rather

than to the exclusion, of continuing democratic dialogue with local communities and more fundamental structural political and economic reforms affecting landownership.

Creating more public spaces, whether they be classrooms, town meetings, or other fora, in which people can engage in democratic communication and begin to imagine and implement more truly progressive political and economic reform in the Sea Island region is a good starting point for the work of cultural preservation that still needs to be done. The more difficult and ongoing work, however, will be maintaining those sites as spaces in which different individuals, institutions, and cultural groups can meet to have conversations, educate and be educated, and develop a common sense of Gullah culture's history, purpose, and meaning. While a democratic dialogue surrounding the preservation of Gullah history and culture in the Sea Island region has begun, and with encouraging results, preservationists, political organizations and activists, tourism and entertainment industries, city planners, developers, and island newcomers need to interact and engage still further with Gullah communities to more fully understand, interpret, honor, and preserve their history and culture. An effective dialogue also requires understanding, not only how improved communication among individuals, institutions, and cultural groups may be achieved within current preservation efforts, but also how communication constructs preservation itself.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The African American slaves who inhabited the Georgia coast were often called “Geechees,” yet had “essentially the same culture as the Gullahs” (Creel 18). In his study of Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, linguist Lorenzo Turner lists “gisi” as a Mende word, and defines it as “a language and a tribe of the Kissy country (Liberia)” (*ibid*). Other scholars have theorized that the word derives from the Ogeechee River in Georgia. As a symbol of national pride, the term Gullah/Geechee has been used extensively to describe peoples of the “Gullah/Geechee Nation,” a territory which extends from the southern North Carolina Coast to Jacksonville, Florida.
- <sup>2</sup> General Sherman’s “Special Field Orders, No. 15” (1865) confiscated 400,000 acres of arable land along the Southeastern coast and distributed it to 18,000 freed black landowners in 40 acre parcels, sometimes along with an Army plow mule.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Tourism, Recreation, and Sustainability: Linking Culture and the Environment* (McCool, S.F., & R.N. Moisey, Eds., 2001), *New Tourism in the 3rd World* (Mowforth, M. and Ian Munt, 1998), *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (MacCannell, D., 1992), *Tourism Community Relationships* (Pearce, P.L, Moscardo, G., & Ross, G.F.,1996), *Contemporary Issues in Tourism Development* (Pearce, D.G. & Butler, R.W., Eds., 1999), *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* (Honey, Martha., 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> There have, however, been notable exceptions. Melville J. Herskovitz (1941), for example, recognized that African American cultural enclaves could not be understood “in their present forms without a reference to a preceding cultural heritage” (109). And in his *African Civilizations in the New World* (1972), Roger Bastide wrote, “The slave ships carried not only men, women, and children, but also their gods, beliefs, and traditional folklore” (23).

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