

Gentrification and Resistance in Gullah Country

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Cutting east off the I-95 freeway between Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina, even the casual visitor will be struck by the decidedly "foreign" feel of the region known variously as the Sea Islands or the Low Country. The area, located at this edge of the American mainland, is home to an African American community variously referred to as the Gullah or Gee-chee.

Researchers interested in cultural survival have long been interested in the Gullah region, and it was brought to a wider attention by Julius Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. But even if you are already familiar with the images from that movie, as you drive through Beaufort County's Jacaranda trees and plantation style houses, it is hard to presage the dramatic shift that occurs as you leave the mainland and enter the island chain that is home to the Gullah people.

Crossing into St. Helena Island, one of the largest in the chain of Sea Islands that stretches along the coast from South Carolina to Florida, the humidity and dense vegetation make it immediately clear why the Gullah were able to live in relative isolation for as long as they did. On the islands, which local whites shunned as uninhabitable, the Gullah developed a culture both African and American, typified by a creole language and other unique cultural practices in their coastal homes.

Since the 1950s, however, developers have continuously encroached into Gullah lands to promote tourism in the region. Hilton Head Island, once home to a significant Gullah population, is now a leading tourist destination. With demand for coastal

access steadily increasing, tremendous pressure is being placed on the Gullah to develop the area for tourism or to sell their land to those who would.

The Sea Islands, once characterized by its relative isolation from American life, now have the same problems as many other communities of color across the US who face death by gentrification. Extensive bridge and road networks are being laid across the Sea Islands, which some fear will turn the entire region into a massive tourist paradise, complete with an "exotic" indigenous culture for their entertainment. According to Liz Santagati, a local resident and Director of the South Carolina Coastal Community Development Corporation, tourist development is the largest issue affecting the islands today. Although proponents of tourism point to the increase in local economic activity that usually accompanies such development, Santagati warns that the question is not one of bringing jobs to the region, which everyone supports, but rather, what type of jobs are coming. "The tourist economy is a service economy with jobs that are low paying and without benefits," she points out.

The community faces other pressures as well, such as the increasing reliance on migrant labor to work in the area's agricultural sector. Driving through Gullah country, it is impossible to ignore the vast tomato farms with their cluster of silver and beige trailers burning in the Carolina sun. The trailers house Latino migrant workers, who compete with locals for extremely low paying, physically draining work.

For the Gullah people, isolation is both savior and setback. They have been able to develop an original cultural drawing on traditions from the West African coast and the Americas. But the community suffers from the cultural dislocations caused by its separateness; too many young people see no options beyond

leaving the Sea Islands (often to join the military) or staying and falling into the traps of low education rates and high drug and alcohol abuse.

If the community is to survive, the people here will have to win the battle over land. Although poor, many Gullah have managed to hold onto significant land holdings that have been passed down through generations. Although generally recognized as the owners of the property, most of the locals lack the proper legal documentation of that ownership, meaning they can't apply for loans to develop their land, and leaving them without a say in how the islands get developed.

But in spite of, or perhaps due to, the pressures exerted against them, the African American communities of the Sea Islands have learned how to organize and fight back. Recently, media mogul Ted Turner dropped a lawsuit against a group of Gullah calling themselves the Lands End Group whom he had sued over ownership of 68 acres of land that the group claimed had been purchased by their ancestors more 80 years ago.

The [Penn Center](#) on St. Helena Island has become a central base for Gullah activism. Originally developed as a school for former slaves, the center functions as part museum, part spiritual retreat and part organizing center. Set on an idyllic corner of St. Helena Island, the entire center is now a National Landmark Historic District and boast a long and proud history as an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and several of his deputies frequented the place to retreat and organize their plan of action. You can still feel the spiritual presence here.

While many national organizations fret over the loss of the distinct

Gullah culture, locals insist that their community must be seen as a living people, and not as cultural relics. For young people, the struggle is doubled, as they often must leave the islands to pursue a higher quality of life, while retaining their ties to a community they feel a duty to help preserve.

"Millions of dollars are being thrown around for tourism development and the youth want a say in how this process is undertaken," says Emery Wright, an educator at the Penn Center. "It is not like they are afraid of change, they just want to a part of that change."

About the Author

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