The Gullah Geechee Movement—Black Identity Politics and Intersectional Struggles for Justice in Contemporary United States

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> When I get lost, feel I've been crossed, you will be my salvation.
> When I feel low, I've nowhere to go, you'll be my inspiration.
> Oh, honey.

Abstract

The focus of this thesis are the intersectional struggles for justice among a culturally distinct African American population called Gullah Geechee. Gullah Geechee people are the descendants of enslaved Africans and African Americans who have been able to pass down knowledge and practices of their ancestors to a higher degree than most other African Americans. The demographic center of the group lies in the Southeast of the United States, a region commonly referred to as the Lowcountry, encompassing the coasts and barrier islands of southern North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. Gullah Geechee people have for long been stigmatized by mainstream society along the lines of race, culture, and class as "poor" and "backwards" countryfolk. However, in recent years there has been a growing political organization among the group. As a consequence, Gullah Geechee culture and identity have been transformed from a reason for shame to a source of pride not only for Gullah Geechee themselves but even for other African Americans. It is one of the central arguments of this thesis that these developments have to be understood as the formation and consolidation of a social movement. More specifically, and contrary to other academic studies, I argue that what I refer to as the Gullah Geechee Movement represents not merely a case of cultural revitalization but a multidimensional challenge to cultural, socio-economic, and political-legal dynamics of marginalization. The principal aim of this thesis is two-fold: first, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the intersectional struggles of Gullah Geechee activists and institutions and, secondly, to contribute to recent debates about the role of identity politics in the achievement of justice. To that end, I will examine the Gullah Geechee Movement's internal differentiation, its central actors, shared visions, goals, and politics, and its embeddedness in broader social dynamics.

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List of Cited Interlocutors

Chapter 1

Jasmine*, a cultural history interpreter from Beaufort in her mid-20s (2017)

Chapter 2

Henry*, a retired journalist from Charleston in his 60s (2017)

Lillian*, a public historian from the Beaufort area in her mid-60s (2022)

Belinda*, a retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2022)

Fred*, a historian in his mid-60s (2022)

Michelle Lanier, folklorist, Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commissioner for the state of North Carolina, and director of the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites (2022)

John Gardner, a public historian at McLeod Plantation from Beaufort (2022)

Chapter 3

Queen Quet, Chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2017, 2022)

Dean*, one of my White research participants from Charleston (2022)

Laureen*, an independent scholar from Charleston in her early-50s (2022)

Frank*, a retired administrator from North Carolina in his early-60s (2022)

Damon*, a cultural history interpreter in his late-30s (2022)

Latisha*, an educator in her mid-20s from Beaufort (2022)

Franklyn*, a retired Black scholar from Colombia in his 70s (2022)

Freya*, a White scholar from South Carolina (2022)

Brenda*, an educator in her early-60s (2022)

Belinda*, a retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2022)

Fran*, an artist in her late 30s from Savannah (2022)

Anita*, an artist in her 40s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, originally hailing from South Carolina and now living in Florida (2017)

Gillian*, an activist in her early-20s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2017)

Victoria Smalls, the third Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, July 2022 until November 2023 (2022)

Sharon Scott, assistant of the first Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (2017)

Janice*, an artist and writer in her late 20s (2017)

J. Herman Blake, a retired professor in sociology and the first Executive Director of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, 2015-2017 (2017)

Renée*, a visual artist from Savannah in her mid-30s (2022)

Steve*, a writer in his late-50s from Charleston (2022)

George Beatty, Chairman of the North Carolina Rice Festival (2022)

Michelle Lanier, Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commissioner for the state of North Carolina (2022)

Eulis Willis, former Vice Chairman of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor and current mayor of the town of Navassa, North Carolina (2022)

Sean Palmer, Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commissioner for the state of North Carolina (2022)

Gloria*, an African American folklorist from Boston in her 60s (2022)

Shane*, a fashion designer in his early-30s from North Charleston (2022)

Chapter 4

Sherry*, a retired accountant in her late-60s, from the greater Charleston area (2022)

Triss*, an actress in her mid-30s from Southport, North Carolina (2022)

Grace*, a public historian in her late-40s from St. Helena Island (2022)

Martha* and Willy*, both former educators in their mid-70s (2017)

Dwight*, a retired scholar in his late-70s who spent most of his childhood in New York City (2017)

Joshua*, an artist in his 60s from Charleston (2022)

Berta*, a sweetgrass basket maker from North Carolina in her 60s (2022)

Raimond*, an educator in his early-40s from West Ashley, Charleston (2022)

Shanice*, a sweetgrass basket maker and storyteller in her late-30s from Mt. Pleasant (2017)

Sonya*, a cultural history interpreter in her mid-30s from Beaufort (2017)

Albert*, a realtor in his late-60s from Savannah (2022)

Jessica*, a teacher in her mid-60s (2017)

Mariah*, a public history student in her mid-20s (2017)

Cheryl* and Hope*, two friends with whom I went to an autobiographical play at the MOJA Arts Festival in Charleston (2017)

Alyssa*, a Gullah Geechee heritage tour guide from Charleston (2017)

Jeffrey*, a Black historian from Charleston in his late-50s (2017)

Ian*, a political activist in his mid-40s from Charleston (2017)

Jake*, a White Uber driver in his early-40s, originally from Utah (2022)

Lionel*, a retired African American journalist from Georgetown in his early-70s (2022)

Queen Quet, Chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2017, 2022)

Ronald*, a sweetgrass basket maker in his mid-30s from Mt. Pleasant (2022)

Arianne*, a cultural history interpreter from North Charleston in her late-20s (2022)

Trisha*, an author in her early-40s from Johns Island (2022)

Belinda*, a retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2022)

Akua Page, one of the co-founders of Geechee Experience (2022)

Melissa*, a political activist and organizer in her late-20s from Charleston who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (2022)

Charlene*, a Seminole Negro Indian Scout descendant from Brackettville, Texas (2022)

Chris*, a social media activist in his late-30s from North Charleston (2022)

Anthony*, an activist and educator in his mid-40s (2022)

Joseph*, an African American janitor in his late-60s from Charleston (2022)

Lester*, an African American tour guide in his 50s from Savannah (2017)

Chapter 5

Al*, a politician in his late-60s from North Carolina (2022)

Dr. Jamal Touré, a historian, lecturer, artist, and professor at Savannah State University (2022)

Will*, a gardener in his late-60s from Charleston (2022)

Denise*, a small business owner from Savannah in her late-30s (2022)

Clarissa*, an accountant in her early-40s from Mt. Pleasant (2022)

Natalie*, a basket maker from Mt. Pleasant in her late-50s (2022)

Peggy*, a retiree in her late-70s from Mt. Pleasant (2022)

Faith*, a member of the Settlement Community Task Force (2022)

Monica*, an educator in her mid-30s from Charleston (2017)

Cindy*, a basket maker from Mt. Pleasant (2022)

Dr. David Pleasant, a scholar, musician, and political activist from Savannah (2022)

Francis*, an author in his late-60s from Charleston (2017)

John*, a retired scholar and activist in his-70s (2017)

Chapter 1: Introduction

> I think there is an opportunity right now for more people to understand what bigger role Gullah Geechee culture and Africa play for who we are as a people in this country. I think there is still a lot of room for that. And I think it is the same when it comes to the challenges we are facing as a community. Ignorance and gentrification are not just impacting Gullah Geechee people, but also other people of color and poor people, anybody really. And that is certainly something that is going to continue to perpetuate as the people with the money continue to be the people who call the shots. (Jasmine*, interview 2017)

Jasmine* and I first met in 2017 at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, the site of a former rice plantation northwest of Charleston, SC.[1] At the time, I was doing research for my Master's thesis. The broad question that I was pursuing, and which eventually led to the subject of this dissertation, was to understand the meanings and negotiations of Gullah Geechee identity in the 21st century, specifically in light of the groups' ambivalent position within public as well as academic discourses as the "most African" of all African Americans (see Matory 2015, 8).[2] Jasmine* was one of the co-organizers of a program at Magnolia that had caught my attention because it both engaged with the history of enslavement and its continuities and also included a presentation on the history and culture of Gullah Geechee people, held by Jasmine* herself. She was in her mid-20s then and worked as an educator with an Afrofuturist approach to cultural history interpretation.

During the lunch break of the program, we had a long conversation discussing her work on Gullah Geechee as well as broader matters revolving around race, socio-economic disparities, and culture in the United States. Both Jasmine's* presentation at Magnolia, which I will discuss extensively in chapter 4, and our conversations during that first as well as our next three meetings remained an ongoing inspiration to me. Perhaps most vividly, I remember our discussions about the parallels and differences between our positions, hers as a Gullah Geechee descendant whose cultural identity has always made her feel both different from other African Americans but, at the same time, engendered a deep connection with a collectively shared sense of Blackness and Africanity, and mine as an Afro-German who had looked to African American popular culture for a sense of belonging for much of his adolescence but also strongly experienced the imprint of his German socialization as he was faced with the actual social environment of the United States.

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[1] In order to protect the identity of my research participants I have pseudonymized their names. Cases where pseudonymization was applied are marked with an asterisk (*). Exceptions from this are, for one, public figures and, for another, interlocutors who have explicitly asked to be cited with their real names.

[2] Given this close thematic connection, some parts of this dissertation, first and foremost in chapters 4 and 5, are based upon sections from my Master's thesis, most of which, though, have been extensively revised during the writing process.

The citation at the beginning of this chapter is from one of these conversations and, in my view, perfectly captures Jasmine's* vision of the larger social significance of Gullah Geechee. As she asserts, an engagement with the group's history and culture may offer a deeper understanding, for one, of the impact made by the enslaved Africans and their descendants onto the United States on a cultural as well as economic level, and, for another, of ongoing relations of inequality that affect not only the group itself but society at large. One of the defining aspects of Jasmine's* work in that regard, as she later expressed in that same conversation, is to fundamentally challenge the view that Gullah Geechee culture was a "separate, little, funny thing that happened over there."

In the past couple of decades there has in fact been an increasing number of Gullah Geechee institutions and activists like Jasmine* who strive to re-define the meanings of Gullah Geechee-ness by subverting the once hegemonic notion of the group's marginality to broader social dynamics. Many of these endeavors are defined by a pronounced multi-dimensionality and revolve not only around matters of cultural identity and race but equally focus upon land loss, gentrification, the precarity of low wage labor, collective rights, and notions of deservingness. Importantly, political organization among Gullah Geechee, far from being discrete and regionally bounded, has achieved an unprecedented level of institutionalization and trans-regionality.

It is one of my central arguments that the above-described developments have to be understood as the formation and consolidation of a social movement. There are only few academic studies that engage with contemporary political dynamics among Gullah Geechee and most of them place a principal emphasis on efforts of cultural revitalization. This thesis, on the other hand, argues that what I refer to as the Gullah Geechee Movement has to be conceived as a highly intersectional challenge to cultural, socio-economic, and political-legal dynamics of marginalization. Moreover, taking inspiration from Jasmine's* and other Gullah Geechee activists' and community leaders' perspectives, I contend that the past and present struggles of Gullah Geechee, as regionally specific as they may seem at first glance, provide invaluable insights into the larger story of race, culture, and class in the United States (see Cooper 2017, 213).

The aim of my thesis is two-fold: First, I intend to contribute to the emerging critical engagement with the political history and contemporary struggles of Gullah Geechee, and, secondly, I seek to productively engage with more general discourses about the role of identity politics in the achievement of justice. To that end, I will investigate the Gullah Geechee Movement's internal differentiation, its central actors, shared visions, goals, and politics, as well as the movement's embeddedness in broader social dynamics. This empirical

analysis will be framed by and provide insights for a contemplation of theoretical debates about identity politics. Even though discussions of this topic are not a novelty, they have experienced little progress within the past couple of decades due to a lack of productive communication between advocates and critics of identity politics. I strive to build upon both perspectives to hopefully contribute to unsettling certain dichotomies that still dominate popular as well as academic views on the subject. While my explicit regional focus lies on the United States, the topic of this thesis is of utmost relevance to other contexts as well, as discussions about the role of identity politics, specifically in its relation to matters of class, have become central to debates about justice across the globe (see e.g. Escobar 2010; Evans 2017; Fukuyama 2018; Zenker 2011, 2022). Before moving on to the theoretical framework of this thesis, I will now first elaborate on my empirical focus, the Gullah Geechee Movement, as well as its broader socio-political context.

Empirical Focus

Gullah Geechee people are the descendants of Africans and African Americans who were enslaved on the plantations of coastal North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.[3] Due to a number of historical factors, geographical as well as socio-economic, the enslaved and later free people of this region, commonly referred to as the Lowcountry, were able to pass down institutions, knowledge, and cultural practices imported by their African ancestors to a greater extent than most other African Americans. To this day, Gullah Geechee culture exhibits pronounced continuities with various African cultures, among the most prominent examples of which is probably the Gullah Geechee language that evolved from different African languages and varieties of English (Mufwene and Gilman 1987; Mufwene 1997).[4]

[3] The meaning of the term, "Gullah Geechee," is among the central subjects of this thesis and will be discussed extensively over the course of my writing. For that reason, I only want to make a brief note on terminology at this point: Historically, the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee" were used separately and represented regional variants, the former used principally in North and South Carolina and the latter in Georgia and Florida, both describing the coastal Black populations in these respective regions (National Park Service 2005, 13). "Gullah Geechee," on the other hand, is an umbrella term of fairly recent origin. It was introduced by the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition and its leader Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine in 1996 and was originally written with a slash between "Gullah" and "Geechee." The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition (GGSIC) and the Gullah/Geechee Nation (GGN), which evolved from the former institution, place great importance on that particular spelling, as both entities understand the slash to signify the connection between all Gullah and Geechee people (Queen Quet 2017). The spelling of "Gullah Geechee" without a slash was, in turn, first used by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission in its Management Plan in 2012 (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 1). As the reader may have noted I have decided to use the latter spelling, which is not to be understood as a political statement of any kind, but is solely based upon the observation that it appears to have become the more common one. To pay respect to the vision and self-understanding of the GGSIC and the GGN I use these entities' preferred spelling in the first part of chapter 3 which is focused on their work. In addition to "Gullah Geechee," I use the terms "Gullah Geechee descendants" and "descendants" as synonyms.

[4] The Gullah Geechee language is often described as a creole language both within popular as well as academic discourses. The term "creole" refers to languages as well as cultures that emerged from intense contact between

Other examples include Gullah Geechee cuisine, certain crafts and art forms, such as sweetgrass basket making, as well as spiritual beliefs and practices, like the Ring Shout (Beoku-Betts 1995, 540; Jones-Jackson 1987, 31; National Park Service 2005, 59–67; D. Rosengarten 2008a). While the majority of descendants still lives in the Lowcountry there is also a significant Gullah Geechee Diaspora across the United States, particularly in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia (Campbell 2011, 82; Kiser 1969, 10). Due to this in- and outmigration and the fluid and changing nature of Gullah Geechee identity it is difficult to accurately assess the total population of the group. Recent estimates based upon projections of demographic developments among Gullah Geechee in relation to the total African American population in the Lowcountry vary from 200,000 to 1,000,000 people, not including mentioned diaspora (Binns 2021; Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 80–81; Moton, McDonald, and Ruiz 2022; National Park Service 2005, 54).

Gullah Geechee people have for long been stigmatized by mainstream society along the lines of race, class, and culture as "poor" and "backwards" countryfolk (Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 164; Goodwine 1998b, 9–11). Until the late 20th century, the very terms "Gullah" and "Geechee" signified grave insults and the group's language was mis-constructed as "broken English" (H. Frazier 2011, 19). Inextricably tied to this symbolic marginalization, and in many ways similar to the experiences of Black populations elsewhere in the United States, Gullah Geechee have furthermore been under near-constant socio-economic pressure since Emancipation (Queen Quet 2012d, 301). While the exposure of Gullah Geechee communities to dynamics of land loss, displacement, and exploitation following the end of Reconstruction varied depending on their respective geographical location and their degree

peoples with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, often, but not exclusively, in the context of the Transatlantic Trade with Enslaved Peoples. While the concept may seem useful to grasp the specific circumstances under which these languages evolved it is not without its critics. The Haitian scholar Michel DeGraff argues that the distinctions made between creole and non-creole languages are predicated on "sociohistorically rooted dogmas with foundations in (neo-)colonial power relations, and not [on] a scientific conclusion based on robust evidence" (2005, 576). The very concept of creole-ness, as he demonstrates, is inscribed with connotations of abnormality and degenerateness that are inextricably tied to the racial stigmatization of the speakers of these languages (DeGraff 2005, 537; 552-553). Curiously, both within Gullah Geechee Studies and among the group the categorization of Gullah Geechee as a creole language has for long been seen as a recognition of its status as a proper language opposed to its previous mis-construction as "bad" English" (see Hargrove 2000, 99). Within recent years, though, there has been a growing critique of creolization theory among Gullah Geechee people. One of the most prominent of these critical voices is Sunn M'Cheaux, a Gullah Geechee artist, activist, social commentator, and instructor of Gullah Geechee at Harvard (https://www.sunnmcheaux.com/). During my fieldwork in 2022 I attended a presentation by M'Cheaux where he made an argument very similar to that of DeGraff, pointing out the relatively arbitrary nature in which the languages of peoples in the Global South, specifically the languages of descendants of enslaved Africans, are referred to as creole, whereas no European languages are categorized as such, even though the latter may exhibit structural properties similar to the former. In light of this critique, I made the decision to refer to Gullah Geechee simply as a language and not as a creole.

of economic dependency on mainstream society, they all faced continuous challenges to their hard-won liberties. Given that landownership was widespread among the group many communities were still able to retain a relative autonomy. This gradually changed with the socio-economic transformations occurring over the course of the early and mid-20th century. The increasing industrialization, extensive construction of infrastructure, privatization, and the expansion of tourism in the Lowcountry fundamentally impacted Gullah Geechee communities. Many descendants who had until then lived self-sufficiently were pressured into low-wage labor and the group suffered greatly from the aggressive politics of real estate companies eventually leading to the loss of land among many rural as well as urban communities (Goodwine 1998a, 170; Hargrove 2005, 6–7, 2009, 98–99; Hurley and Halfacre 2011, 395; Thomas 1980, 2–3).

In resistance to these interlocking dynamics of socio-economic and symbolic displacement there has been a growing political organization and promotion of their culture among Gullah Geechee since at least the early 1980s (see Cooper 2017, 154–155; Matory 2015, 219–22; National Park Service 2005, 93–98; Smith 1991, 285). This involved the creation of numerous institutions that not only struggle for the group's economic empowerment, specifically with regards to the protection of Gullah Geechee people's land base, but that also seek to re-define Gullah Geechee identity as a source of pride, and even make claims for rights to self-determination based upon the group's cultural distinctiveness. These developments eventually culminated in the establishment of the two largest Gullah Geechee entities to date: the Gullah/Geechee Nation in 2000, the first transregional Gullah Geechee institution and the central advocate for Gullah Geechee nationhood, and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in 2006, a federally funded National Heritage Area that formally recognized Gullah Geechee as a distinct cultural minority.[5]

In the past couple of years many other political and cultural organizations followed and there has been a wealth of creative production focused on the group's history and culture, including TV-shows, films, books, art, and plays. While the stigma ascribed to Gullah Geechee have not yet vanished and mentioned processes of socio-economic marginalization persist, the group has undoubtedly achieved an unprecedented degree of formal institutionalization, support, and recognition. Once a reason for shame, descendants now appear to increasingly embrace their Gullah Geechee heritage, and even other African Americans who have not had any direct relationship with the group have begun to explore

[5] The official websites of the two entities: https://gullahgeecheenation.com/ and https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/.

possible ancestral connections with Gullah Geechee (Daise 2007, 12–13; Matory 2008, 950; Ruffins 2008, 231; Smalls 2012, 154).

To reiterate, I argue that the above-described developments have to be read as the formation and consolidation of a social movement—a coordinated and sustained effort by a collective of people sharing a common vision to transform aspects of society (Tarrow 2011, 10–11; Tilly 2004, 3–4). Hitherto, only a handful of other authors have adopted a similar perspective onto recent processes of political organization among Gullah Geechee, most of whom predominantly focus on dynamics of cultural revitalization (e.g. Matory 2015, 219; National Park Service 2005, 104; Smalls 2012, 154). This tends to come at the expense of an engagement with the socio-economic and politico-legal levels of what I refer to as the Gullah Geechee Movement and also loses sight of how the group's struggles are embedded within larger society. When developing the topic of this thesis, at first my concern was principally about gaining a comprehensive understanding of the Gullah Geechee Movement, its history, its central actors, and their visions and politics. Through my conversations with activists like Jasmine* though, I eventually became more and more aware of how much the struggles of Gullah Geechee descendants and their allies speak to broader discourses about justice as well. Consequently, I reoriented the focus of my investigation to also include these larger social questions. This pertains particularly to the recent rise in debates about the interrelations between matters of identity and class.

Broader Socio-Political Context

In the past few years, identity politics has come under increasingly heavy criticism. Numerous political analysists, journalists, politicians, and even scholars have blamed identity politics, more specifically politics of race, gender, and sexuality, for the current crisis of liberal democracy (e.g. Fukuyama 2018, xvi; Lilla 2018, 15).[6] Allegedly excessive demands for political correctness and attention to the "particularist" concerns of so-called minorities had alienated ordinary citizens, sidelined serious engagement with "hard matters" that are of universal relevance, i.e. economic questions, and weakened social cohesion, as the arguments commonly go (e.g. Carlson and Dore 2022; Fukuyama 2018, 113; Lilla 2018, 129–30). One of

[6] Curiously, arguments against identity politics can in fact be found across the entire political spectrum (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 2): from right-wing populist claims that often carry barely veiled sexist and racist undertones about the alleged threat of identity politics to majoritarian culture and values (e.g. Carlson and Bolsonaro 2022), to calls for a "return" to the "virtues" of liberalism by conservatives and centrists (e.g. Miller 2018, 35–37), to progressive critiques asserting that identity politics essentialized boundaries between people by reproducing hegemonic categories of difference and, thus, limited the potentials of projects of liberation (e.g. J. Butler 1999, 187–89), to assertions from Marxist (inspired) Leftists about the primacy of political-economic relations over matters of culture and identity (Garnham 2021). While it is of course crucial to distinguish these different political standpoints and, accordingly, the alternatives they propose to identity politics, the structural similarities between their arguments are striking.

the defining aspects of this criticism is that cultural injustice is conceived, at best, as derivative of and/or subordinate to economic inequality, if concerns with matters of identity are not seen as mere expressions of personal sensitivities entirely (see Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 1–2; Kelley 1997, 104–5). Following this line of thought, conservative and centrist critics interpret recent social movements, such as #BlackLives Matter and #metoo, as manifestations of narrowing understandings of sociality that confused socio-economic disparities with the targeted discrimination of certain groups of people and, consequently, pursued principally misguided attempts at transforming society.

I contend that much of this criticism is based upon a one-dimensional understanding of identity politics that tends to simplify the phenomenon's real-world complexities (Alcoff 2006, 35–36). Any serious engagement with the socio-economic inequalities between people of different racialized or gendered positions, for instance, reveals that a neat distinction between politics of class and identity is impossible (Combahee River Collective 1978, 4; N. Fraser 1998, 70; Kelley 1997, 11). Patriarchal White Supremacy, possibly the most impactful manifestation of reactionary identity politics, has been at the very root of the economic oppression and exploitation of subaltern people for centuries (Deloria 1988, 177; Kelley 1997, 121; Lugones 2007, 202–3; Mills 2007b, 173–74). Since matters of identity are commonly reduced to the struggles of "minorities" though, the identitarian foundations of seemingly universalist majoritarian politics continue to be systematically obscured. Moreover, while "minoritarian" identity politics may indeed have the effect of narrowing understandings of justice, movements among historically marginalized groups of people have time and again accomplished the very opposite (A. Y. Davis 2016, 35; Kelley 1997, 124, 2002, 8–9). So-called identity movements are often deeply intersectional, reflecting the complex lived realities of the people involved (Lorde 2017a, 124). The Gullah Geechee Movement represents a powerful illustration of this. While at first sight it may seem like a paradigmatic case of a "new social movement" that is narrowly focused on cultural concerns, closer inspection reveals a more complex picture. This becomes particularly evident from Gullah Geechee activists' struggles against land loss and displacement.

The ownership of land has always been not only of economic but also of profound cultural value to Gullah Geechee, as many of the practices considered traditional among descendants are tied to agriculture and the maritime environment of the Lowcountry. Continuous out-migration of younger descendants in combination with urbanization processes, however, both results of mentioned broader socio-economic changes that occurred over the course of the 20th century, have deeply affected the demographics of communities. While there remains a number of rural Gullah Geechee settlements, the vast majority of

descendants now grows up in urbanized areas and their lived experiences differ significantly from that of previous generations. Many younger descendants have little to no knowledge of the Gullah Geechee language nor of other practices explicitly considered to be part of the group's heritage. Efforts of this younger generation to connect with their culture usually involve re-traditionalization as much as innovation processes and often extend what is conventionally understood as Gullah Geechee. This does not only stimulate debates among the group about authenticity and intergenerationality but also about the socio-economic conditions necessary for the reproduction of the culture. To Gullah Geechee activists, gentrification and spatial displacement, not to mention the increasing threat posed by climate change to coastal communities, have never been separated from questions revolving around identity and vice versa. The intersectionality of the challenges that descendants are faced with have in this sense defined the Gullah Geechee Movement from its very beginnings and bred its focus on effecting change on multiple interconnected dimensions. As I will demonstrate over the course of my writing, valuable lessons can be drawn from the analysis of the movement both as regards the broader socio-political context of the United States as well as theoretical debates about the role of identity politics in the achievement of social justice.

In the following, I will engage with past and present academic debates on identity politics, to then discuss the relationship between identity and class politics, contemplate broader questions about justice, and, finally, propose a typology of different forms of identity politics. This will establish the conceptual framework of this thesis which will be referred back to and elaborated on over the course of my writing. To complete this introduction, I will discuss methodology and my position as an Afro-German anthropologist, before providing brief summaries of the individual chapters of the thesis.

Theoretical Framework

Past and Present Debates on Identity Politics

Critiques of identity politics commonly revolve around two interrelated claims: First, that identity politics was overly focused on difference and essentialized the boundaries between groups of people, contributing to a fragmentation of society, and, secondly, that identity politics sidelined questions revolving around class, thereby neglecting issues that pertain not only to the specific identity groups in question but to society as a whole (Alcoff 2006, 33–35; Bernstein 2002, 85; Kelley 1997, 11, 104–105; Modood 2013, 9–10; Ransby 2018, 158; Young 1998, 147–48)

Curiously, this line of argument is not of recent origin but has been made at least since the mid-20th century. It may likely be traced back, more specifically, to academic discourses

within social movement theory following the Civil Rights Struggles of the 1950s and 60s. At the time a number of scholars argued that a new kind of social movement politics had emerged whose claims for justice principally concentrated upon demanding cultural and legal recognition of hitherto disrespected identities (Calhoun 1993, 385-386, 414; Pichardo 1997, 412) .[7] These so-called "new social movements" were understood as organized around notions of difference and commonality between and among identity groups. Previous movements, on the other hand, as the argument went, were focused on matters of class and sought to further the integration of people from across the boundaries of their specific cultural, gendered, sexual, and racialized identities into the liberal democratic system (Calhoun 1993, 389–90). This distinction between old and new social movements and the idea that a period of class struggles and the success of liberal politics was replaced by particularistic contestations over culture fundamentally shapes views on identity politics to this day (e.g. Fukuyama 2018, 108–9; Lilla 2018, 59–61; Miller 2018, 35). However, upon closer inspection the accuracy of these claims becomes highly questionable.

As historian Craig Calhoun demonstrates, the differences between movements before and after the mid-20th century are not as pronounced as is commonly assumed (1993, 386–87; see also Buechler 1995, 447–48; Pichardo 1997, 425). Not only had there already been predecessors to contemporary identity movements in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as the abolitionist movement or the women's suffrage movement, but matters of identity also played a key role within labor movements which have never been as univocal as is often believed (Calhoun 1993, 391; see also Kelley 1997, 105; Rosaldo 2006, 125). Gender, race, and migration have in this sense always been inextricably tied to workers' struggles (Kelley 1997, 11). The seeming differences between old and new social movements can therefore be attributed less to historical fact than to academic discourse:

> "Identity politics" and similar concerns were never quite so much absent from the field of social movement activity—even in the heydays of liberal party politics or organized trade union struggle—as they were obscured from conventional academic observation. (Calhoun 1993, 388)

This not only shaped how the phenomenon is being socio-temporally located but also whom it is ascribed to. Commonly, the term "identity politics" is used specifically in reference to the struggles of historically marginalized groups of people and their allegedly "special interests," in opposition to majoritarian concerns (Kelley 1997, 108–9; see also D. Bell [1970] 2008, 67).

[7] The history of social concerns with identity, in terms of how the concept is understood today, is in fact longer and, according to Charles Taylor, may be traced back at least to the late 18th century when notions of an "individualized identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself […] along with an ideal, that of being true to myself and my own particular way of being" first emerged in Europe (1994, 28, 34-35).

The concept of a majority though, does not merely represent demographic realities but is also the product of the successful naturalization of the fact that one population has established itself at some point as the dominant identity group (Zenker 2022, 787; see also Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 51–52; Pateman 2007, 69). De- and postcolonial writers, Critical Race theorists, Feminists, and other critical scholars have shown time and again how majoritarian identity politics was and continues to be integral to the historical and ongoing oppression of women, queer people, people of color, and anyone else who is read as deviating from hegemonic ideals of personhood (e.g. Fanon [1967] 2008, 82–83; hooks 2015, 18–19; Lord 2020, 77; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 254; Matsuda 2018 [1993], 47–48; Mignolo 2007, 477–78; Mills 2007c, 88; Pateman 1988, 11–12; Tlostanova 2014, 160–61; Yuval-Davis 1997, 26–27). As Olaf Zenker writes on national identity and imaginations of the common good:

> Nationalism arguably denotes the ongoing or already successful attempt by autochthonous groups to usurp the very entitlement of the state itself, thereby often turning their own autochthonous self-definition into official state autochthony. Ironically, it is precisely this process of promoting the 'common good' for citizens thus defined in biased terms of the nationalist majority that typically has been at the root of discriminations against indigenous peoples [as well as other historically marginalized groups] in the first place. (2011, 76)

The recent resurgence of right-wing populism across the globe has been significantly fueled by a perceived threat to this very status quo of what defines the common good and among whom it is shared. In the United States, the rhetoric of Trumpism and the Far-Right, while claiming to speak for "the people," barely veils its identitarian politics that mobilizes supporters with the promise of safeguarding the heteronormative and patriarchal White family against the imagined onslaught of external and internal Others (Bjork-James 2020, 59–60). However, not only such extreme variants of majoritarianism need to be critically investigated with respect to their underlying identity biases. Calls for a "return" to liberal democracy and universalist politics by scholars, pundits, and politicians from both the moderate Right and Left operate with more or less explicit assumptions about identity as well. The notion that the tools of liberal theory had once steadily guided politics towards ever greater justice, only to be side-tracked by "culture wars," is premised on a highly idealized image of society that neglects the historical experiences of large parts of the world's population (see Mbembe 2019, 16–17; Mills 2017, 207–8). As noted earlier, not only has there presumably never been a point in so-called modern history when identity has not played a crucial role within politics, but much of the seemingly universalist liberal politics of the past systemically excluded people from their formal rights to citizenship based upon the color of their skin, their gender, their sexual preferences, and other markers of identity (Kelley 1997,

106). "Citizenship," Olaf Zenker contends, "cannot escape but merely instantiates identity politics in yet another variety, with differential effects on differentially located, identified and normatively committed people (as any other politics of belonging)" (2022, 787).

In the United States this, ironically, has had adverse effects not only on marginalized groups of people but also on society at large, as numerous policies that would have been beneficial to all were rejected on the grounds of resentment towards minorities. Universal health care, for example, had already been proposed in the US in the early 20th century. Its introduction failed, however, mostly due to the staunch opposition from Southern Democrats to an extension of social welfare to African Americans (Interlandi 2019). It is telling that over the course of the 20th century the expansion of civil and human rights has not resulted from an intrinsic motivation of the federal government's proclaimed liberal ideals but may be attributed to the struggles of progressive movements. A central part of these efforts, contrary to what dominant discourse conveys, have, importantly, also been radical socio-economic visions that went far beyond the concerns of only these respective groups and included, for instance, demands for free education, affordable housing, and often nothing less than a fundamental transformation of the capitalist economy (Alcoff 2006, 15–16; Kelley 1998, xii–xiii, 2002, 81-82,121-122,148-150; La Cadena and Starn 2007, 10; Rosaldo 2006, 119–20; K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 194–99). However, these socio-economic dimensions of what are commonly referred to as identity movements are being systematically neglected to this day. A prominent contemporary manifestation of this is the criticism levelled against #BlackLiverMatter that reduces the politics and aims of the movement to its alleged "general indictment of American society" and demands for recognition (Lilla 2018, 129–30). An assessment which, first and foremost, reveals a profound lack of understanding of the organizational structures and goals of the movement.

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement consists of numerous chapters and different institutions across the entire United States which are united by a shared vision of justice but also have their differences and act autonomously—not to speak of the many independent groups and individual activists who affiliate themselves with the movement but are not necessarily part of any of its institutions. Accordingly, there are many different approaches to politics within #BlackLivesMatter, some of which may indeed primarily focus upon protest, dissent, and claims for recognition. However, the umbrella organization, "Movement for Black Lives," a coalition of more than 50 individual groups, and many of the regional chapters themselves have developed think tanks and other institutions over the past years which explicitly focus on socio-economic policy, electoral politics, and the building of coalitions

across the boundaries of individual movements.[8] At its very core the #BlackLivesMatter Movement thus represents nothing less but a struggle for the holistic transformation of US-American society (see K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 217–19).

The above discussion is not to claim that the movements of marginalized groups of people were the "true" universalist politics, nor that, conversely, liberalism was inherently and irrevocably flawed. I simply contend that the histories of liberal theory and by extension of real-world liberal democracies are inextricably tied to histories of exclusion, disenfranchisement, exploitation, and other forms of violence, the various consequences of which have not yet been adequately grappled with. Therefore, if liberalism can play any part in solving the current political challenges we are faced with, which I do believe, the answer does certainly not lie in any kind of imagined return, but in a rigorous re-examination and, where necessary, re-conceptualization of its principles, as Charles Wade Mills argues, by building upon the insights from critical theories about the inextricable ties between liberal democracies and various forms of oppression (2017, 203–4). On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged as well that there are indeed subaltern movements that are particularistic, essentialist, and narrowly focused on matters of identity, some of which even contribute to the reproduction of structures of discrimination themselves (La Cadena and Starn 2007, 4; Kelley 2002, xi). This observation, however, does not allow us to draw any conclusions about identity politics per se but rather speaks to the need for a more nuanced differentiation of the phenomenon and its various manifestations. Most importantly, the premise upon which much of the criticism of identity politics is built, that there was some kind of inherent contradiction between, on the one hand, matters of identity and a critical engagement with difference, and, on the other, matters of class and a concern for what we share in common, presents us with a false choice that must be resisted, both in practice and theory.

An Intersectional Perspective on the Relation Between Identity and Class Politics

What could a more productive understanding of identity politics and its role within society look like, specifically with respect to its relation to questions revolving around class? As discussed above, most debates that construct identity and class as separate, if not even opposite phenomena, tend to conceive the former as "merely" symbolic or cultural, pertaining to shared values and ideational relationships among people; the latter, on the other hand, is commonly understood as referring to "tangible" concerns, such as the connection between

[8] See the official websites of the Movement for Black Lives, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, and, for instance, the Black Lives Matter chapter in Los Angeles: https://m4bl.org/, https://blacklivesmatter.com/, and https://www.blmla.org/.

labor and capital or disparities in income and wealth. The problem with this perspective is not the analytical distinction per se, which I do in fact agree is important, but its more or less explicit connotations that separate identity and class into "imagined" vs "real" or "soft" vs "hard" matters drawing a rigid and impenetrable line between the cultural and political economic. In the edited volume, *Reconsidering Identity*, the contributing authors develop what they refer to as a "critical realist theory of identity" that unsettles this dichotomy. A particularly insightful passage in the introduction of the book reads:

> Realists about identity [...] argue that identities are not our mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about ourselves in our world; moreover, they are not mere descriptions of who we are but, rather, causal explanations of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized. (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 6)

While identities, just as any social phenomenon, thus need to be understood as constructed and in principle malleable, they are, simultaneously, representations of relatively stable material conditions and social hierarchies. Identity politics then refers to contestations over these social locations, about the ways in which we position ourselves in relation to others and how these others position us in relation to themselves, which immediately affects how we treat each other, what we expect of each other, and what duties and privileges we ascribe to each other, regulating collectively shared notions of solidarity, deservingness, and responsibility, that in turn enable and/or limit people's access to and control of resources (see Appiah 2006, 16–17; Eidson et al. 2017, 341; Sánchez 2006, 32–33). Simply put, identities never merely concern the immaterial nor do they principally pertain to the private decisions we make about ourselves but always have to do with questions of power and the very real struggles we are engaged in about the material world (Alcoff and Mohanty 2006, 6–7; Sánchez 2006, 35). Identity politics, at best, can make visible these very societal divides and allows us to better understand the mechanisms through which people are being oppressed.

As briefly mentioned earlier, I do not want to imply that matters of identity and class were actually one and the same and that any differentiation between the cultural and the political economic spheres, to which they refer, should be abandoned. To the contrary, I believe that, as much as the two dimensions are inextricably linked to one another, an analytical distinction between them is crucial in order to gain a deeper understanding both of their respective inner workings as well as of their interrelations (N. Fraser 1998, 70–72; see also Sánchez 2006, 49–50). For as intimately as the cultural and political economic are

connected, they still need to be regarded as relatively autonomous social fields with their own particular rules and internal logic.[9]

My thinking in this regard has been deeply influenced by the philosopher Nancy Fraser and her distinction between cultural and socio-economic forms of injustice that each necessitate their own specific type of remedies: recognition, in the first case, and redistribution, in the second (N. Fraser 1998, 73–74, 2013, 193–94).[10,11] In that sense, progressive taxing, for instance, may be effective at addressing the distribution of wealth, but, in itself, would be an inadequate measure for combatting prejudice against racialized groups of people, as it does not affect, at least not on a structural level, the cultural system of a given society. Analogously, civic education against racism, for example, may be effective at contributing to a more inclusive and tolerant society, but, in itself, is ineffective at extending workplace democracy, as it does not affect, at least not on a structural level, the political economy of a given society. With that being said, due to the inextricable ties between culture and political economy, there can, at the same time, be "no [just] redistribution without [just] recognition" just as there can be "no [just] recognition without [just] redistribution" (N. Fraser 2003, 65,66). The equitable redistribution of wealth through social welfare, for example, depends not only on economic policy but equally on cultural norms of deservingness which fundamentally impact the former.[12] On the other hand, the adequate representation of socio-cultural diversity within the media, for instance, cannot be achieved through ideas and

[9] To provide an example, the so-called law of diminishing returns or inflation refer to economic phenomena whose specific manner of functioning is causally independent from cultural systems such as racial and gender hierarchies or kinship relations, and vice versa.

[10] The engagement with redistributive justice has a long and rich intellectual history that has brought forth many different perspectives on the matter (e.g. Bentham [1789] 2007; Dworkin 2002; Nozick 1986; Marx [1867] 1990; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Rawls [1971] 1999). Debates about recognition, on the other hand, are of more recent origin and therefore not quite as wide-ranging but have still been discussed from various angles as well (e.g. Habermas 1993; Honneth 2003; Kymlicka [1995] 2004; C. Taylor 1994). Some of these approaches diverge significantly from Nancy Fraser's understanding of the concepts of recognition and redistribution, and, naturally, they each have their own strengths and weaknesses. As I will elaborate below, a key advantage in Fraser's theory of justice, specifically in its application to my work, is its intersectional analytical pluralism that integrates insights from different debates about justice, combining critical theories of gender, race, sexuality, and class, with liberal political philosophy (2013, 192–93).

[11] In Fraser's understanding the concepts of recognition and redistribution each subsume different potential measures against specific forms of injustice: recognition refers to efforts that combat injustice within the cultural realm, amongst others, through "upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups, […] positively valorizing cultural diversity [and] the wholesale transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in ways that would change *everybody's* sense of self" (1998, 73). Redistribution, on the other hand, is understood by Fraser to describe remedies directed at, amongst others, "redistributing income, reorganizing the division of labour, subjecting investment to democratic decision-making, or transforming other basic economic structures" (1998, 73).

[12] One of the most powerful examples of this phenomenon in the US-American context is probably the myth of the culture of poverty among African Americans, that is reproduced not only by conservative but even centrist politicians, such as former president Barrack Obama, placing the responsibility for intergenerational economic deprivation among Black US-Americans upon the group itself, ignoring the systemic nature of racial socio-economic disparities, and, thus, having a devastating effect upon policy making (K.-Y. Taylor 2016, 8–9; see also N. Fraser 2003, 24; Perry 2011, 175–76).

discourse alone but also requires the provision of funds for their realization. Any analytical distinction between culture and political economy, and by extension identity and class, must therefore always be followed by an immediate interrogation of their intersections.

While I follow Fraser's argument on the analytical distinction between culture and political economy as well as her understanding of the terms, recognition and redistribution, for the most part, I also diverge from her theoretical framework in a few instances. Most importantly, I prefer to use to the terms, identity and class, instead of recognition and redistribution. This is not only because my thesis intends to speak to discourses about the relationship between identity and class politics, but also because, as I contend, a re-focusing on these concepts allows for a broader application of Fraser's theory.[13,14]

Identity and class describe the very phenomena which recognition and redistribution, conceived as measures to alter specific social arrangements, are targeted at. In other words, the former represent broader concepts, referring to social locations within the cultural and political economic field respectively (see Sánchez 2006, 35). Moreover, whereas Fraser ascribes a positive connotation to recognition and redistribution, I assert that they should rather be seen as analytical and not normative categories. Whether measures of recognition and/or redistribution are evaluated as just, that is, how we evaluate their effects upon identity and class relations, is ultimately a question of perspective. This is not a retreat from assuming a normative position on the matter, but much rather an effort to make visible, too, the role of recognition and redistribution within not only progressive but also reactionary identity and class politics.

In light of this difference in terminology, I would like to reformulate above quotation from Fraser and assert that there can be no just identity politics without just class politics, just as there can be no just class politics without just identity politics. The intention behind this statement, as in Fraser's original formulation, is to draw attention to the inextricable ties between the cultural and political economic sphere and the necessity of a multi-dimensional understanding of justice. To further illustrate the point, I suggest that we imagine a single axis that describes a spectrum between two political ideal types: on one end, we find the ideal typical identity politics which puts an exclusive focus on culture and, on the other, the ideal typical class politics with a sole concern with political economy. Both ends are lacking insofar

[13] It is for the same reasons that I will speak of political-legal framing instead of representation, below.
[14] Curiously, Fraser herself makes the same point in favor of the concepts of recognition and redistribution (2003, 12). This is principally due to the fact that her understanding of identity politics is narrower, referring exclusively to efforts of affirming group specificity (2003, 12). My own argument further below, on the other hand, points out that it is more productive, for one, to differentiate different types of identity politics and, for another, to use the concepts of identity and class politics as analytical and not normative categories.

as justice within the very sphere they relate to can never be fully achieved unless the respectively other kind of politics is integrated as well. Neither ideal type actually exists in reality, of course, as most politics are situated somewhere in between. I would therefore contend that from an analytical point of view overly generalized distinctions such as between identity and class/labor movements make little sense, since we can never adequately reduce any political project to only one of these dimensions. Rather, we should always be attentive to both the elements of identity and class politics contained within any kind of political demand or endeavor.

A final major problem with the dichotomy drawn between identity and class politics is that it creates the false sense of a binary order, thereby veiling a crucial third dimension of justice, the political-legal framing, or as Fraser would say, representation (2013, 196–97).[15] As she points out matters of recognition and redistribution—read identity and class—are of course in and of themselves political (2013, 195). However, here, political-legal framing refers to the constitution of the very "stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out" (2013, 195). First, this describes the ways in which decisions are being reached within a given social context, that is, who is able to participate in the decision making and under what conditions—an example would be voting rights and electoral politics within a representative democracy. The political-legal framing in this sense structures the very forms in which contestations over culture and political economy take place and can express themselves. Secondly, political-legal framing refers to the scale in which we situate a given matter of justice, such as regional, national, international, or beyond the notion of nation states entirely. Certain matters, as Fraser contends, can only be effectively acted upon on certain levels: financial markets or climate change, for example, require international or transnational approaches, as these phenomena are ultimately beyond the scope of any local or national government (see 2013, 197–98). Just as the political-legal framing fundamentally shapes identity and class politics, so do the latter impact the former. As a consequence, there can be no just identity and class politics without an adequate and just political-legal framing, nor can there be an adequate and just political-legal framing without just identity and class politics (see N. Fraser 2013, 199).

[15] In her earlier work, Fraser only dedicates little space to the discussion of the political-legal dimensions of justice, subsuming them either under matters pertaining to the economic or cultural sphere "depending on the context and perspective in play" (N. Fraser 1998, 72, see footnote 7). She first introduces the concept of representation in *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013).

Reflections on the Concept of Justice

Far too often we take for granted the (possible) meaning(s) of justice, presuming that it could only be served in one particular way, as we tend to look at the phenomenon exclusively from our own specific positions. There exist of course vastly different understandings of what a just society could or should look like and frequently, discourses about justice fail to communicate successfully, precisely because their respective premises are so vastly apart. I therefore want to engage, however briefly, with some alternative perspectives from which the topic of this thesis could have been approached. The intention is not to relativize but to further situate the case that I am making about the role of identity politics in the achievement of justice.

Justice has been discussed and defined in countless different and, moreover, quite often opposing ways over the course of history. To illustrate this point, I want to juxtapose three prominent perspectives on the subject within the Euro-American philosophical tradition—Libertarianism, liberal Egalitarianism, and Marxism. I did not choose these particular approaches because I regard them as somehow inherently more relevant than others, but because of how deeply they have shaped political discourse in the United States and beyond.

First, let us consider the libertarian view of justice, which, as is implied by the name, centrally revolves around the notion of liberty. Liberty, more specifically, the liberty of the individual, is regarded as the highest and most valuable good within society from a libertarian perspective. From this follows that justice is served as long as liberty is protected. With respect to equality, libertarians tend to focus on due process, that is the fair and equal treatment of each individual before the law, which is understood to be the principal domain of the state. Beyond that, any intervention of a government into the lives of its citizens should be kept at its barest minimum. Importantly, any unequal distribution of resources is seen as the responsibility of the individuals themselves, as it is assumed that if everyone has the same rights, one's position in life is solely the result of one's own decisions (and of one's innate abilities). For instance, according to libertarianism, if an individual chooses a profession which falls victim to structural changes in the economy and that person loses their job, it is not the state's or anyone else's responsibility to provide them with support, since the person's situation is seen principally as an outcome of their own decisions made freely within a market economy, however unfortunate their fate might be.

From a liberal egalitarian perspective, the relationship between liberty and equality is assessed quite differently. Liberal egalitarians place a greater focus on the role played by structural forces and their impact on agency which, in turn, has a direct bearing upon the degree of responsibility ascribed to individuals in a given context. Any inequality that follows

from factors that are considered as being beyond the control of the individual, which also includes innate abilities and bad luck, should be balanced out by the state in order to provide each and every member of society equal opportunity in life. In other words, egalitarians have a more substantive understanding of equality that puts a stronger emphasis on outcomes as compared to the proceduralist/formalist perspective of libertarians. In the above-described scenario, for example, an egalitarian view would understand a person who loses their job because of structural changes in the economy to be deserving of aid from society, which would be mediated through redistributive measures by the government. In general, the state is ascribed with the responsibility to play an active role in offsetting market effects as well as any other structural shocks. A just society from a liberal egalitarian point of view would therefore be one where a relative balance is struck between the liberty of the individual and substantive equality among the collective—how this very balance is arranged, whether slight priority is given to the former or the latter is where egalitarian approaches differ.

Commonly, neither libertarian nor liberal egalitarian approaches question, at least not fundamentally, the capitalist foundation of modern liberal democratic societies. Marxism differs significantly in that regard. Marxist approaches criticize the very structure of capitalist political economies, identifying an inherent tension in the democratization of the political sphere but continued existence of strict hierarchies within the economy. According to Marxism, capitalism is defined by a principal contradiction between labor and capital, or put differently, between the working class which provides its labor power but has little to no authority over production, on the one hand, and capitalists who own the means of production and thus possess authority over the conditions of labor, on the other. From a Marxist point of view, it is necessary to dissolve this class structure and extend democracy to the economic sphere in order create a just society. Different especially from libertarian but also going further than liberal egalitarian approaches, Marxism thus places principal emphasis upon the significance of structural forces as compared to the agency of the individual. The former is understood as the central driver of social development. Therefore, any sustainable change must be focused on the systemic level. While Marxist approaches may be seen as egalitarian, they are commonly highly critical of liberal egalitarianism for its focus upon redistribution after the fact. Instead of off-setting market effects, Marxism argues that the very basis of economic re-production had to be transformed in order to actually provide each and every member of society with equal opportunity. A just society, from a Marxist perspective, would thus be one wherein each and every individual would not only be treated equally before the law and would not only receive certain basic economic protection, but where each and every

individual would have an equal voice in political as well as economic matters in order to fully realize the ideals of Egalitarianism.

The above, albeit crude, summary of only these three schools of thought should have already demonstrated how significantly views can differ, (a) on what constitutes justice, (b) on how justice can be achieved and maintained, (c) on the conditions under which individuals (and collectives, if the latter are even identified as viable subjects of justice) are deserving of aid from society, and (d) on who is responsible to render justice, depending on the specific approach to the subject. Each of these three positions would evidently have taken quite a different approach to the topic of my thesis. What they have in common though is that none of them ascribe any actual relevance to matters of culture and identity, a blind spot that I have already pointed out above as inherent to most of Eurocentric political and legal philosophy. Much of what I discuss as matters of (cultural) justice would probably either be reduced to concerns of the private sphere by libertarians and to issues of redistribution/class by liberal egalitarians and (orthodox) Marxists, or even dismissed entirely.[16] This is of course exactly what I observed as symptomatic of current academic and public discourses on the relationship between identity and class politics.

The point that I am making is not that these three briefly sketched approaches to justice are obsolete. To the contrary, I believe that invaluable lessons can still be drawn especially from liberal Egalitarianism and Marxism, as I am convinced that in order to achieve a just society, we need multidimensional approaches. This naturally involves incorporating different perspectives, wherein I would emphatically include the universalist ideals of liberal political philosophy and the political economic theory from the Marxist tradition. There are in fact a number of approaches to draw from which combine elements of mainstream Euro-American political philosophy with social critiques on race, gender, and class from marginal positions within and/or without Western academia (see e.g. Alcoff et al. 2006; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Matsuda et al. 2018 [1993]; Mignolo 2007; Mills 2017; Pateman and Mills 2007). One such example is Nancy Fraser's multidimensional concept of democratic justice that I discussed earlier. What Fraser achieves is to bring into dialogue liberal egalitarian universalism with, for one, a Marxist critique of the inherent danger posed by the capitalist political economy to those very ideals and, for another, critical theories on race, gender, and sexuality that reveal the ways in which both aforesaid approaches fail to realize the centrality of cultural norms to the functioning of both the political-legal and economic spheres (see e.g. 1998, 78–91, 2013, 116–23). To summarize Fraser's understanding of justice in a fashion

[16] There are of course numerous sub-disciplines, such as Feminist Marxism or Revisionist Liberal Egalitarianism, that seek to amend the blind spots of these theoretical traditions.

analogous to my above descriptions of Libertarianism, liberal Egalitarianism, and Marxism: a just society, based upon a multidimensional concept of democratic justice, would be one in which each and every member of society is treated with equal respect, is given equal economic opportunities, is equal before the law, and enjoys equal access to decision making processes—a perspective that I would wholly subscribe to (see 2013, 208).[17]

Of course, countless questions remain with regard to how this could actually be translated into policy making, and such practical concerns are of crucial importance for, as we will see in my analysis of the Gullah Geechee Movement, there is often less a scarcity of ideas but much rather of ways to implement them effectively, be it due to a lack of political will and/or limited resources. Still, I am convinced that as much as theory is pointless without practice, practice likewise lacks direction without theory. To borrow from Robin Kelley,

> any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity [...]. (2002, 193)

Outline of a (New) Typology of Identity Politics

What is still left to discuss in this section pertains to the distinction between different kinds of identity politics. Whereas debates of redistributive justice have a long history, and differentiation between equitable and exploitative class politics are therefore commonplace, similarly nuanced views of identity politics are rare. Building upon the various points made above, I propose to differentiate between two basic types of identity politics, inward- and outward-oriented.[18] Inward-oriented identity politics principally focuses its attention, as the terms suggests, onto the group's own concerns and seeks to consolidate, if not even narrow the existing boundaries of the group in question. An important internal distinction of this

[17] I also want to highlight at this point the influence that the work of Charles Wade Mills has had upon my perspective on justice (see Mills 2017; Pateman and Mills 2007). Mills follows a multidimensional approach that is quite similar to that of Fraser revolving around the same three core dimensions: cultural, economic, and political-legal (2017, 214). Where he might have inspired my thinking the most is in his subversive reading of liberal political philosophy, in which he radically criticizes the blind spots of Eurocentric liberal theory but also seeks to build upon its strengths. Amongst the central theoretical tools that he develops in the process is the "revisionist veil of ignorance" that, in distinction from John Rawl's original concept, begins from a position of awareness of the "ill-ordered" nature of real-world society and its structures of injustice (2007a, 119). This, as Mills contends, represents the necessary starting point for the development of a theory of "corrective justice" that seeks to abolish disparities of any kind and to compensate for past harm, as opposed to the approaches developed by Rawls and other ideal theoretical liberal political philosophers that are more narrowly focused on matters of redistribution and formal justice (2007a, 119–21).

[18] My development of the categories of inward- and outward-oriented and aggressive and defensive sub-types of identity politics was influenced by Stuart Hall's essay "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" (2019). While he does not use the terminology that I propose, except from the term "defensive," I drew great inspiration from how he analyzes the struggles of historically oppressed groups of people for the re-appropriation and re-creation of their collective selves in the face of the marginalizing practices of majoritarian society (2019, 73–74).

type of identity politics is to what extent it exhibits a principally aggressive or defensive orientation. The former is commonly, but not only, the case with inward-oriented majoritarian identity politics that purposely ostracizes those whom it regards as other and less- or even non-deserving, the effects of which are usually dramatic because of the power differentials involved. Defensive identity politics, on the other hand, tends to be practiced by historically oppressed groups of people who in reaction to previous and/or ongoing aggression have effectively been forced to take up identity matters in a manner that prioritizes their own group (see Hall 2019, 73–74). There are, of course, also cases of aggressive subaltern identity politics which actively exclude other groups of people and further discrimination, be it internally along the lines of gender and sexuality or externally against other racialized groups, for instance (see Anzaldúa 1987, 19; Grosfoguel 2006, 178; hooks 2014, 40–42; James [1938] 2012, 93).[19]

In contrast to that, outward-oriented identity politics places a fundamental emphasis on building bridges between different identity groups. This does not mean though, that it is per se beneficial. Just as is the case with the inward-oriented ideal type we may differentiate between aggressive and defensive or rather non-aggressive sub-types. A prime example for an aggressive outward-oriented identity politics would be integrationist approaches within liberal democratic states that impose a seemingly universal identity upon its citizens in an effort to assimilate difference (see Modood 2013, 149–50; Zenker 2011, 76, 2022, 787). The non-aggressive sub-type may in principle be practiced by both majorities and minorities, however, it has historically been furthered for the most part by political endeavors that arise from experiences of oppression on multiple levels, such as in the case of feminist movements of color (e.g. Combahee River Collective 1978). A non-aggressive outward-oriented identity politics' engagement with difference, as opposed to the inward-oriented type, serves primarily as a means of identifying and, eventually, overcoming societal divides and does therefore not stand in the way of creating a broader sense of commonality.[20] Quite the opposite, this type of identity politics does in fact represent a necessary prerequisite for any universalist political project, as an understanding of the specificity of our social locations is essential to the development of visions of justice that include each and every member of society (see Kelley 1997, 124; Sánchez 2006, 33–34) .

[19] It is another matter, of course, how the respective identity politics frames itself. A defining feature of majoritarian, aggressive identitarian politics is in fact to mis-construct itself as defensive, which becomes most evident perhaps in nationalist discourses on migration and multiculturalism that are defined by imagery that portray migrants and refugees, specifically People of Color, as existential threats to the safety and integrity of the nation (Campt 2003, 322–23; Evans 2017, 218–19; Modood 2013, 180–81).

[20] In my understanding it is both possible that a non-aggressive outward-oriented identity politics may strive to ultimately retain the given identity categories or deconstruct them.

As we will see in the analysis of my empirical material, the actual attainment of a non-aggressive outward-oriented identity politics as well as the balanced engagement with matters of both identity and class within the appropriate political-legal framework is in reality a highly challenging task, especially if the political actors in question have historically been marginalized and continue to be in a position that creates pressures towards maintaining a more exclusive focus upon themselves. As Fraser points out:

> Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group, and then of affirming the value of that specificity. Thus, they tend to promote group differentiation. Redistribution claims, in contrast, often call for abolishing economic arrangements that underpin group specificity. (An example would be feminist demands to abolish the gender division of labour.) Thus, they tend to promote group de-differentiation. [...] Here, then, is a difficult dilemma. I shall henceforth call it the redistribution–recognition dilemma. People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity. How, if at all, is this possible? (1998, 74)

It is this very dilemma which tends to be mis-constructed as a fundamental dichotomy between identity and class politics. What we are faced with is not so much a contradiction though between culture and political-economy but the challenge of redressing past injustice, which importantly involves the naming of difference. I would therefore disagree with Fraser in one crucial regard, namely that the dilemma is not per se one between recognition and redistribution, since the same problem also arises within the respective spheres themselves. Any critique of economic exploitation, for example, presupposes the differentiation between, at least, the producers (workers) and the non-producers (owners of capital). It is only based upon this claim of difference that demands for equality can be made. How then, I could ask, mirroring Fraser's line of argument, is it possible for workers to both assert their specificity as a distinct class of people within the political economy and, at the same time, (seemingly) deny this very specificity by claiming that all should have an equal right to economic opportunity? This question of course only becomes more complicated as identities along the lines of gender, ethnicity, or race are added and further claims to specificity and the compensation of past injustice are made. However, this only increases the challenge, while the dilemma remains the same, irrespective of whether we are engaging with cases of only cultural or economic injustice, or both. A decisive question that is closely tied to these deliberations is whether it is ultimately necessary to dissolve difference in order to achieve justice, such as in a class-less or post-racial society, and if so, which differences in particular would have to be transcended; or, whether difference per se does not stand in the way of

justice, as it may "simply" be a matter of how differences are socially activated, meaning that they could, and perhaps even should, remain?

While I will try to provide possible answers to the above posed questions over the course of my writing, they can, in my view, only be solved in practice. Perhaps the most valuable contribution that academic debate can make is therefore to illuminate the search for solutions by the people leading these very kinds of struggles on the ground—the very deed I hope to accomplish with my analysis of the Gullah Geechee Movement.

Methodology

Self-Positioning and Ethico-Epistemological Approach

> Let us say, then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. (J. Baldwin [1955] 2017, 15)

In the passage from the essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" from which this quote was taken, James Baldwin describes his understanding of the responsibility of a writer, that, as he contends, should lie in their absolute commitment to truth. Baldwin carefully distinguishes the above concept of truth as devotion to humanity from truth as devotion to a "Cause" [sic] ([1955] 2017, 15). The latter, as he argues, inevitably leads to the subordination of the complexity, ambiguity, and value of human life to simplified and reductive doctrines ([1955] 2017, 15–16). As a scholar, my own understanding of truth is, first and foremost, linked to epistemology—the study of knowledge. More specifically, I understand truth to be inextricably tied to the concept of objectivity, that is the degree of correspondence between knowledge systems and the reality that surrounds us (see Russell 2001, 15–16). While this may at first seem quite removed from Baldwin's above-described concern with what I would call political and ethical truth, there is in fact a close connection. This pertains to how the conditions under which knowledge is produced, in my case, how the political and ethical truths that I hold, influence which parts of the reality that I encountered during my fieldwork I decide to focus upon and in what manner I do so. For regardless of how much we may try to minimize the subjective factors that influence our research, we may never wholly render them ineffectual, lest even identify them in their entirety. This is especially true when we ourselves are the central "instrument," as is the case in anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 2014, 28). Instead of trying to uphold an illusion of absolute impartiality I therefore draw inspiration from methodological approaches—specifically as formulated in Critical Race Theory, critical minority studies, feminism, and anthropology—that actively engage with and make use of the positionality of the scholar (e.g. Alcoff 2006, ix–xi; D. Bell 1995, 898–99;

Haraway 1988, 595–96; Zenker 2016, 303–5). With that being said, I will not go as far as engaging with my own position as a central object of study. While I appreciate the virtues of autoethnography, I prefer to center the people and phenomena I encountered.

Tying this back to the above quote, my engagement with the Gullah Geechee Movement does not serve as a mere illustration of a theoretical debate or as an exercise in a particular school of thought, which, in the context of academic research, would represent the very subordination of my interlocutors' experiences to a "Cause" that Baldwin cautions against. Instead, I hope that my thesis sheds light on the complexity of my research participants' visions of and aspirations for a better future. This is not to say though that I subscribe to all of the views expressed by the people I interacted with, nor that I pretend that I had no political motives myself (see Zenker 2018, 107). Over the course of my writing, my own understanding of justice should become quite clear: I oppose every form of oppression and believe that a just society is defined by the extent to which each and every of its members can freely and equally participate in it (see N. Fraser 2013, 208; Mills 2017, 214–15). A major factor in the development of my perspective on these matters, apart from my specific academic and political socialization, are my own experiences of exclusion as an Afro-German, which, in fact, also fundamentally influenced why I chose the particular topic of this thesis.

Growing up in majority White Germany, most of my childhood idols were African Americans. This was not because there were no Black role models in Germany, but because African American popular culture was far more present, especially through music and film, which is undoubtedly where my interest for the United States stems from. My work on Gullah Geechee began in 2016 when I had to choose a topic for my Master's thesis. At the time, my wife, who studied US-American literature and culture, had a seminar in linguistics and one of their sessions focused on the Gullah Geechee language. When she told me what she had learned in class I was absolutely fascinated. It soon became clear that I had found the topic of my Master's thesis, and the question that stood at its beginning is still at the core of my research today—what does it mean to be Gullah Geechee in the 21st century? The focus of my Master's thesis eventually narrowed down to cultural heritage tourism and public representations of Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity, specifically in the greater Charleston area, but already then I knew that I wanted to pursue my research further. During fieldwork for my Master's thesis, I became aware not only of the complexity of the concrete struggles that Gullah Geechee descendants are engaged in, but also of their relations to broader social questions around justice, class, culture, and race. These interconnections eventually became the central concern of my PhD project. As is most often the case, much of why I chose to focus on Gullah Geechee thus evidently had to do with myself, with my

personal history that evoked a deep interest in matters of identity in general and matters of Blackness and African heritage in particular.

Apart from the development of the topic of this thesis, my position as a Black scholar also had a major impact on the relationships that I was able to form during my fieldwork. Several of my interlocutors remarked that the fact that I was Black and could easily be imagined as my research participants' brother, cousin, son, or grandson, "opened doors" for me that would have been closed otherwise. This, in fact, worked both ways. I felt a strong connection with the people I worked with, many of whom have become close friends and extended family, which of course was not only because of perceived similarities in physical appearance but, perhaps more importantly, due to shared experiences of racism and the feeling of being rootless as well as a significant overlap in interest in music, food, films, literature, and other things that might perhaps be best described as African American popular culture. Another significant factor was, undoubtedly, that I trained myself to speak U.S. American English when I grew up, and many of the people I met, at least at first, thought that I was African American. All of the above had a profound influence on the development of trust between me and the people I interacted with and affected their openness to tell their stories to me. Curiously, for many of my White research participants the fact that I was from Germany appeared to play a more important role for how they related to me than it did for my Black interlocutors. They appeared to look at me as an outsider with whom things could be discussed differently, perhaps in some ways, more openly as well.

Having commented on my own positioning as a Black scholar from Germany doing research in the United States, I want to return briefly to the matter of knowledge production, more specifically the concept of epistemic symmetry. Epistemic symmetry refers to the relation between the capabilities of knowledge production and understanding of the scholar, on the one hand, and the subjects of their research, on the other. In contrast to positivist approaches, which assume that the scientist had a fundamentally privileged access to truth due to their training, the notion of epistemic symmetry treats the capabilities of the observing scholar and the observed actors as being principally alike, that is symmetrical (Zenker 2016, 304–5). This is to say that the knowledge I produce is not per se "better" or "truer" than that created by my research participants. Rather it should be highlighted that the knowledge that was shared with me by my interlocutors allowed me to write this thesis in the first place. Moreover, many of the people I interacted with are undoubtedly more knowledgeable than I am as regards numerous of the topics discussed herein.

What is there for me to add, then? While I fully support the stance of epistemic symmetry, especially as formulated by Olaf Zenker in his broader political and ethical vision

of a "recursive anthropology," I also believe it is important to stress the particularities of the position occupied by intellectuals (2016, 306). As Noam Chomsky contends:

> Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. (2017, 16)

As Chomsky argues, these opportunities confer responsibility—the responsibility "to speak the truth," which brings us back to my initial discussion of Baldwin (Chomsky 2017, 17). As much as I stress my own positionality and the limitations as well as potentials that it entails with respect to my work, my writing is academic and I have followed standards of not only critical reflexivity but also of reliability, representativeness, transparency, and exactitude to the best of my abilities. There will inevitably be flaws and incoherence, as in any study, but my explicit aim is to speak the truth both by producing knowledge that corresponds as much as possible with the reality of the social phenomena I have encountered as well as by addressing structures of oppression and advocating for freedom and justice.

Methods and Empirical Data

The empirical data for this thesis was gathered during two separate stays in the United States. The first round of research, which was for my Master's thesis, took place between August and October 2017, and the second between January and September 2022. In 2017, I lived in Charleston, South Carolina, and conducted all of my fieldwork in the Charleston metropolitan area. My second fieldwork was multi-sited, involving extended stays in Los Angeles, Charleston, and Savannah, Georgia, as well as several visits to Wilmington, North Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida, and the surrounding areas. The principal methods employed were participant observation and different forms of interviews, mainly narrative and semi-structured interviews. During my time in Los Angeles, my main activity was participation in #BlackLivesMatter weekly protests in order to gain broader contextual knowledge for my engagement with the Gullah Geechee Movement. In the Lowcountry, both the methods employed and the contexts that I investigated were more varied. My principal aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived realities of Gullah Geechee descendants and of the work of Gullah Geechee institutions and activists across all of the four Lowcountry states. For that purpose, I participated in a number of different public events, including cultural festivals, conferences, organizational meetings of various political institutions, community meetings, and cultural heritage tours, and, furthermore, visited several museums

and historic sites. As part of my investigation of the historical origins of the Gullah Geechee Movement, I also conducted archival work at the Avery Research Center in Charleston. After an exploratory and preparatory phase of about three months, I began to conduct interviews with actors from various fields, amongst others, with Gullah Geechee activists, chefs, public historians, community leaders, and artists, White and Black allies, scholars, political representatives, and a number of other people I met during my travels with different kinds of personal connections to the struggles of Gullah Geechee communities. In addition to formal interviews and structured observations, also conversations and participant observation in informal contexts, such as private meetings and events, were of utmost importance, as is the case for any anthropological study. Altogether, I carried out 58 narrative and semi-structured interviews in addition to 115 rather informal yet thematically focused conversations. Part of my activities in 2022 also took place virtually due to the then still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The virus represented an immediate threat both to human lives and the cultural memory of Gullah Geechee, as particularly Elders were highly vulnerable to the disease. A number of organizations therefore continued to rely on online meetings at least for the first few months of 2022, if not longer.

Finally, I want to highlight two important biases of my study: First, while I have done my best to include people of different ages and with different educational biographies and socio-economic positions, the majority of my interlocutors were in their 30s and older, middle class, and had a relatively high formal education. This may represent an important empirical observation in itself, but I must also consider the possibility that the demographics of my research participants are the unintended result of the choices I made during my fieldwork—for instance, which events I chose to visit, whom I approached and to whom these people then referred me, where I chose to live, which sites I visited etc. Secondly, even though I also did fieldwork in North Carolina and Florida, I lived in South Carolina and Georgia only, and there I mostly concentrated on the cities of Charleston and Savannah. A specific focus on urban areas was deliberate, but my original intention was to add extended stays in Florida and North Carolina. However, due to the difficulty of finding accommodation and since I had to shorten my fieldwork for personal reasons from 12 to 9 months, I was not able to realize that plan. The situation of Gullah Geechee communities within the four states of the Lowcountry, while of course being similar in many regards, also exhibits certain differences, specifically as regards the development of a positive relationship among descendants to their cultural heritage and, by extension, the creation of Gullah Geechee organizations. Populations in North Carolina and Florida had rarely been considered part of Gullah Geechee culture before the early 2000s, which is why various Gullah Geechee related institutions are

more prominent in South Carolina and Georgia, including small businesses, such as restaurants, as well as political organizations. Accordingly, there is a relative dearth of academic literature that engages with Gullah Geechee in North Carolina and Florida, especially compared to South Carolina, the prototypical site of Gullah Geechee Studies. I tried as best as I could to compensate the regional imbalance in my fieldwork by intentionally conducting additional interviews with descendants from North Carolina and Florida. Nonetheless, more research which specifically focuses on the situation in these two states is greatly needed.

A last note on anonymization and personal data: In order to protect the identity of my research participants I have pseudonymized their names. Cases where pseudonymization was applied are marked with an asterisk (*). Exceptions from this are, for one, public figures and, for another, interlocutors who have explicitly asked to be cited with their real names. Finally, it can be assumed that my interlocutors are Gullah Geechee descendants whenever I refer to them without any additional qualification.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2, "On the History of Gullah Geechee People and the Emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement," provides the reader with a comprehensive historical context on the genesis and evolution of Gullah Geechee culture, the struggles of the group's enslaved and later free ancestors, and the eventual emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement towards the end of the 20th century. My principal contribution lies in the re-examination and re-interpretation of existing historical material. The chapter is structured into three main sections, which each concentrate on one specific dimension of Gullah Geechee history and historiography. The first section serves as a brief introduction to and critical review of academic and popular historical discourses around Gullah Geechee with a focus on the widespread misconception of the group as a historically isolated, rural population. In the second subchapter, I provide a chronological overview of Gullah Geechee history from the period of enslavement and the emergence of Gullah Geechee culture in the late 17th century, up until the Black Liberation Struggles of the decades following WWII. A particular focus will be placed on illuminating the often-neglected political history of Gullah Geechee communities and on investigating Gullah Geechee people's place in the larger tradition of Black resistance within the United States. Finally, the third section will explore the specific conditions that ultimately led to the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement and its evolution over the past couple of decades. I will pay particular attention to the central actors and institutions in its early history as well as their shared visions, goals, and politics that

shape the movement to this day. This will lay the foundation for the empirical analysis of contemporary dynamics that is to follow in chapters 3 to 5.

Chapter 3, the first of the three empirical chapters, "On the Political-Legal Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement," examines the Gullah Geechee Movement on an organizational and politico-legal level. I will discuss the institutionalization processes that have taken place within the movement over the past years, the political-legal status of the group, and the broader context in which Gullah Geechee activists and institutions situate their claims for justice. The empirical focus is principally placed upon the two largest and most influential Gullah Geechee entities to date, the Gullah/Geechee Nation (GGN) and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission (GGCHCC). The chapter is divided into three sections: In the first part I focus on the Gullah Geechee Nation, its history, its visions and central aims, its organizational structure, and the specific political projects that it engages in, as well as views among my research participants about the GGN. The same structure is then applied in the third part, where I turn my attention to the GGCHCC. The middle section, on the other hand, is dedicated to a critical analysis of the ways in which different actors draw connections between Gullah Geechee-ness and the concept of indigeneity as well as the implications of this process of (re-)indigenization. While ultimately the movement is to be regarded as highly heterogenous, I will argue that the work and vision of the GGN and the GGCHCC reflect many of the elements that define collective action among Gullah Geechee today. Moreover, they may also be read as representing two of the major approaches to achieving justice within the movement.

Chapter 4, "On the Cultural Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement," seeks to illuminate the heterogeneity and multi-various effects of Gullah Geechee identity politics. More specifically, I will focus on the growing valorization of Gullah Geechee identity and the ambivalent dynamics entailed by its evolution from a reason for shame to a source of pride. I argue that, based on the notion of Gullah Geechee as the "most African" of all African American populations, the group has become a central object of what I refer to as a politics of "ethnic Blackness"—efforts of Black US-Americans to free themselves from racial stigmatization by invoking concepts of Black ethnicity. The chapter engages with four different manifestations of this dynamic: First, the use of Gullah Geechee as a means of status distinction, secondly, the normalization of Gullah Geechee-ness as a regional African American identity, thirdly, the significance of Gullah Geechee as a restorative and connective identity, and, finally, tendencies of Native American marginalization within certain counter-hegemonic narratives among Gullah Geechee activists.

Chapter 5, "On the Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement," focuses on the political economy of Gullah Geechee communities, efforts among the group to resist socio-economic marginalization, and the visions of economic justice that are being formulated within the movement. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section I will discuss the current political-economic situation of both rural and urban Gullah Geechee communities and examine the major forces underlying the dynamics of land loss, overdevelopment, gentrification, and the precaritization of labor relations in the Lowcountry. The second part engages with concrete efforts of resistance among Gullah Geechee and their allies against these processes. I will concentrate, for one, on the work of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, based in Charleston, South Carolina, that provides legal support to descendants in their struggles for land retention, and, for another, on three different community led projects, in Beaufort, Hilton Head Island, and Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, that oppose dynamics of gentrification and displacement by conceiving possible solutions to the challenges they are faced with and making specific policy suggestions to their local governments. The third and final section focuses on the tourism industry both as a possible means of economic empowerment but also as one of the major causes of the socio-economic predicament of Gullah Geechee communities. The central topics in this discussion will be tensions between what has been perceived by several of my interlocutors as "merely symbolic" versus "actual" socio-economic change, the various possible consequences of the commodification of culture and, closely tied to the latter, debates about authenticity.

Chapter 6, "Conclusion," reflects upon my findings from chapters 2 to 5 and seeks to further transcend the empirical analysis. By connecting the different levels on which the struggles of the Gullah Geechee Movement are taking place and by situating its politics and visions as regards their structural relation to the status quo, I will discuss the lessons that may be drawn from the movement for broader questions about the role of identity politics in the achievement of justice.

Chapter 2: On the History of Gullah Geechee People and the Emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement

This chapter provides the reader with a comprehensive historical context on the genesis and evolution of Gullah Geechee culture, the struggles for liberation of the group's enslaved and later free ancestors, and the eventual emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement towards the end of the 20th century. It is structured into three main sections: The first serves as a brief introduction to popular as well as academic discourses about Gullah Geechee history with a particular focus on the widespread misconception that the group had lived isolated from mainstream society in rural pockets of the Lowcountry until the mid-20th century. The second subchapter will then present a chronological overview of Gullah Geechee history from the period of enslavement until the mid-20th century. I will engage with the ways in which Gullah Geechee were involved in larger political struggles as well as with how the political economy of the group evolved. Finally, in the third section, I will investigate the origins of the Gullah Geechee Movement and trace its evolution over the past couple of decades.

Gullah Geechee Historiography and the Persistence of the Narrative of Isolation

> Isolated on South Carolina's Sea Islands for generations, the Gullah Geechee preserved more of their heritage than any other African-American community in the United States. Today, native islanders are still serving up flavorful Gullah dishes, weaving [sic!] baskets from sweetgrass and sharing their heritage in tours, galleries and museums. (Mc Aden 2024)

Isolation is likely the most widespread motif in discourses about Gullah Geechee history with far reaching consequences for how the past, present, and future of descendants are being imagined. A critical engagement with this narrative is therefore crucial to any historical discussion of the group. The reader may note how the above citation from South Carolina's official website on tourism, "Discover South Carolina," constructs isolation as the defining feature of Gullah Geechee history. Isolation, according to this account, is what allowed for the "preservation" of the group's cultural heritage, implying that Gullah Geechee culture had remained almost unchanged throughout its history. An online travelogue formulates this idea even more explicitly, promising visitors to the Sea Islands to find "food cooked the way it was 150 Years ago" (Jordan 2018). In a similar vein, yet another internet article describes Gullah Geechee as "a forgotten people of the Sea Islands […] whose way of life is now facing

extinction," because of the "modern world and development [...]" (Farberov 2014).[21] While the existence of pronounced continuities between the culture of Gullah Geechee and their African ancestors' knowledge and practices is factual, the problem with portrayals such as the above that rest on the notions of isolation and preservation is their tendency to render Gullah Geechee a mere relic of the past, intransient to change, and, in essence, incompatible with modernity (see Cooper 2017, 1–2).

One of my interlocutors, Henry*, a retired journalist from Charleston in his 60s, said that he believes the narrative of isolation remains so persistent because of its romanticized othering of the group:

> I think the typical images of Gullah people are somewhat romanticized. It is accurate in the sense that people grew rice, that they were self-sufficient, they fished the waters, all of those things. But you know, in downtown Charleston the Mosquito Fleet was fishing off the coast of South Carolina. So, you had urban instances where people lived off the land. But I guess the idea of people living in an isolated rural setting is much more poetic than somebody in an urban environment. (Henry*, personal communication, 2017)

Henry* not only identifies a possible reason for the persistence of the narrative of isolation—a romantic desire for alterity—but also draws our attention to another closely connected aspect within public representations of Gullah Geechee history and culture. As he points out, Gullah Geechee is almost exclusively represented as a rural culture. A central part of this notion is the belief that the locus of the paradigmatic Gullah Geechee community was the Sea Islands and that all Gullah Geechee, at least historically, had been self-sufficient farmers. While not entirely incorrect, as Henry* notes, this image is greatly simplified and effectively turns Gullah Geechee into a monolith. Still, it has proved to be very compelling, so much so that even scholars have neglected the history of urban Gullah Geechee populations.

The origins of the above discussed motifs can be traced back to artistic, literary, and academic efforts in the late 19th and early 20th century to document, interpret, and "preserve" Gullah Geechee heritage (Cooper 2017, 8–9; Ruffins 2008, 216–17). Particularly the work of White Southern novelist Julia Peterkin had a far-reaching impact upon popular views of the group (Cooper 2017, 19–20; see also Ruffins 2008, 221–22). Peterkin was part of the so-called Charleston Renaissance, a revivalist movement between World War I and II, characterized by its nostalgic representation of the Antebellum South (Ruffins 2008, 220–21). At the time, Gullah Geechee had not yet been recognized as a culturally distinct population but were, at

[21] The article from which this quotation is taken draws attention to the pressing concerns of land loss among Gullah Geechee and the devastating effects of overdevelopment, however, the way in which it frames the topic is fundamentally rooted in essentialist imagery.

best, seen as "peculiar" Black countryfolk. As such, Gullah Geechee played an important function within efforts to re-create the White Southern self. Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory contends that the group was instrumentalized as a "classical emblem of southern white cultural identity and moral goodness [...] in the face of a perceived assault on the local hierarchy by northern white military force and capital" (2008, 976). Although some authors credit Peterkin as one of the first White authors to "take black life seriously" (e.g. Ruffins 2008, 221–22), Melissa Cooper categorizes her work, first and foremost, as expressive of the racial fantasies of the time (2017, 22). Published during the 1920s and 30s, each of Peterkin's novels focuses on the fictional Gullah Geechee community of Blue Brook Plantation, which she represents as almost entirely isolated from the rest of society. Cooper argues that Peterkin's accounts therewith systematically "erased white people, Jim Crow racism, and oppression from Blue Brook and from the lives of the Gullah folk she imagined" (2017, 21).[22] Her characters' world thus bore little resemblance to the actual lived realities of Gullah Geechee, which, however, may have been the very reason for her work's popularity.[23]

The writing of scholars from the early 20th century also contributed to the reproduction of stereotypes about the group, even though their underlying motivations were quite different from that of nostalgic White Southern artists.[24] What stimulated the study of Gullah Geechee people at the time were debates among intellectuals, particularly from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history, about the survival of an African cultural heritage among African Americans. Anthropologist Melville Herskovitz, one of, if not the most prominent advocates of the view that enslaved Africans had indeed been able to reproduce their culture despite the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement, identified Gullah Geechee as the perfect example to prove this point:

> Next on our table we should place such isolated groups living in the United States as the Negroes of the Savannahs of southern Georgia, or those of the Gullah islands off the Carolina coast where African elements of culture are still more tenuous. (1930, 149–50)

This search for "African survivals" was not only an academic endeavor but also an explicitly political project to disprove racist claims that African and African descended people neither possessed a culture nor a history of their own (Cooper 2017, 31, 60–61). Ironically, it was this

[22] Cooper highlights that Peterkin's last novel, *Bright Skin* (1932), differs slightly from her earlier work by representing the Gullah Geechee community at its center as less isolated and as being aware of the structures of racial oppression and socio-economic disparities within mainstream society (2017, 22).
[23] Peterkins' winning of the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, in 1929 may be seen as evidence for how effectively her work spoke to her White audience's romantic desires for difference.
[24] It should be noted that there are direct overlaps between fiction writing and early academic studies on Gullah Geechee. Anthropologist William Bascom, for instance, cited Peterkin's work as a credible ethnographic source (Bascom 1941, 49).

singular focus on identifying a link to the past in Gullah Geechee culture that ultimately led many academic writings to homogenize and mis-represent the group.

One prominent student of Herskovitz's, who would go on to do fieldwork on African American folklife in the South, was Black writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. While Hurston did not explicitly work on Gullah Geechee, Melissa Cooper asserts that her ethnography, *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, left a visible mark on the studies of the group that followed (2017, 62–63). Cooper argues that Hurston's ethnographic work, although highly critical of White reductionist perspectives on African American culture, itself unwittingly reproduced primitivist discourses about Black Southerners in its determination to identify "voodoo" practices (Cooper 2017, 64–66). As Cooper writes, "like many whites who collected folk material she [Hurston] ignored other aspects of their lives such as the travails of Jim Crow and crushing poverty, and instead focused on cultural characteristics" (2017, 66). Cooper's point is not to single out any individual scholars as having particularly fueled the stereotyping of Gullah Geechee and Black Southerners. Rather, as she argues, it is crucial to understand how the cultural obsessions, racial fantasies, and anxieties of the time shaped White and even Black writers' perspectives on Gullah Geechee (2017, 11, 49).

While the broader social context under which Gullah Geechee historiography took place would undergo fundamental changes, the question of how and to what extent descendants were able to pass on the cultures of their African ancestors would remain central to academic studies until the late 20th century, reaching its height in the 1970s and 80s, after which the matter was eventually regarded as having been solved for the most part. It has since become generally accepted in academia that the following conditions were central to the emergence and reproduction of Gullah Geechee culture (Matory 2008, 955–56):

a) The large labor force necessitated by the rice plantation economies that dominated the region and led to a "Black majority" on Lowcountry plantations, that is, an overwhelming numerical majority of enslaved people, as well as the particular system of labor assignment deployed there, the task system, which allowed the enslaved a marginally higher degree of autonomy compared to other labor systems (see e.g. Crook 2001, 26; Wood 1975, 36–37);

b) the absenteeism of the White plantation owners due to the heat and humidity of the subtropical climate and the spread of potentially terminal diseases, malaria and yellow fever, which were introduced with the importation of enslaved people from Africa (see e.g. National Park Service 2005, 36; Opala [1987] 2009, 8–9);

c) the continuous (illegal) importation of enslaved people directly from Africa that lasted through the Antebellum Period; (see e.g. Brabec and Richardson 2007, 153; Creel 1988, 193);

d) and the relative ecological similarities between the regions from which the enslaved Africans originated and the Lowcountry, a circumstance that is believed to have facilitated the adaptation of cultural practices to their new environment (see e.g. Matory 2008, 955; Wood 2008, 79).

To this day, however, the most pervasive explanatory principle, which is often even seen as subsuming some of the above-described points, remains the narrative of isolation. The following quotations from academic texts demonstrate its decades-long perseverance:[25]

> ⌈T⌋he "Gullah" dialect, which at once arouses the interest of the visitor, the superstitions, the "praise house" and the "just law" ⌊…⌋ have been able to persist in a mechanical and scientific age, largely, by virtue of the fact that St. Helena has been geographically cut off from the ways of the mainland. (Kiser 1969, 64–65)
>
> These factors ⌈"semitropical climate," "system of rice agriculture," and "disease environment"⌋ combined almost three hundred years ago to produce an atmosphere of geographical and social isolation among the Gullah which has lasted, to some extent, up until the present day. ⌊…⌋ ⌈T⌋heir isolation and numerical strength enabled them to preserve a great many African cultural traditions. (Opala ⌈1987⌋ 2009, 8,9)
>
> The isolation of sea island communities from outsiders was vital to the survival of Gullah/Geechee community cultures. (National Park Service 2005, 13)
>
> Before the construction of modern bridges allowing regular and convenient access, Gullah Geechee people residing in the Sea Islands were isolated and able to maintain their culture in close-knit, rural communities. (Ghahramani, McArdle, and Fatorić 2020, 1–2)

Curiously, only a few scholars have challenged this view. Kenneth Brown, one such author, offers an intriguing argument against conventional understandings of Gullah Geechee history as a history of isolation (2004). Brown refutes the claim that Gullah Geechee people had been isolated during the period of enslavement, arguing that interaction between Whites and Blacks occurred regularly, even if in a limited manner (2004, 84). He does not, however, entirely reject the notion of isolation. The main thesis of his essay is that an exclusive focus on the uniqueness of African retentions in Gullah Geechee culture had obscured the similarities between the socio-economic conditions of Gullah Geechee and other African American populations during the period of enslavement (2004, 79–80). As he demonstrates,

[25] See, for further examples: Bascom 1941, 43; Beoku-Betts 1995, 539–40; Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 156; K. L. Brown 2004, 84–85; Cross 2008, 16; Hargrove 2007, 44; Pollitzer 1999, 189.

plantations in other parts of the South also had a vast Black demographic majority and saw a continuous (illegal) importation of enslaved Africans lasting through the Antebellum Period (2004, 84). Therefore, as he asserts, it could very well be possible that other African American communities apart from Gullah Geechee were able to reproduce the cultures of their ancestors (2004, 79). Brown's analysis of archeological findings from the sites of a former plantation in Texas, indeed, strongly suggests that certain cultural practices and institutions existed in the local African American community that might have been very similar to elements of Gullah Geechee cultural heritage (2004, 85,87-88). The central question for Brown thus shifts from the conditions of the emergence of Gullah Geechee culture to that of its reproduction. He arrives at the following assessment, which, despite its modification of the conventional narrative, ultimately reaffirms the explanatory value of the motif of isolation:

> That they [Gullah Geechee] appear to be unique in modern times is not solely the result of their special adaptation to enslavement but, rather, to the unique history of isolation provided by the Sea Islands of the South Carolina and Georgia coasts since the mid-1860s. (K. L. Brown 2004, 85)

The first and one of the only scholars to have flatly rejected the narrative of isolation is anthropologist J. Lorand Matory.[26] Based on his critical analysis of historical evidence as well as contemporary developments among Gullah Geechee, Matory asserts that Gullah Geechee people, "far from having 'preserved' their African culture through isolation," had given it "a new social reality" as the subject of recent cultural revitalization efforts (2008, 970). In his essay, "The Illusions of Isolation," Matory thus makes not only a compelling argument against the narrative of isolation but also raises more general questions about the dynamics underlying the social construction of Black cultural identities in the 21st century (2008).[27] His work has in fact been an important influence on my own thinking in many regards. Matory's case against isolation in particular, which I will elaborate on in more detail further below, seemed highly convincing to me. Over the course of my research, however, I did not only encounter the motif of isolation in tourism ads and other outsider depictions of the group's history, but also in the self-descriptions of descendants and Gullah Geechee organizations, which eventually made me re-evaluate the matter. On the website of the Gullah Geechee

[26] Melissa Cooper's work, *Making Gullah,* should also be mentioned in this regard (2017). Her critical engagement with the social construction of Gullah Geechee identity and culture explicitly draws from and extends Matory's work (2017, 12).

[27] Matory later published an extended and slightly modified version of this essay, under the title "Islands Are not Isolated: School, Scholars, and the Political Economy of Gullah/Geechee Ethnicity," as a chapter in his monography *Stigma and Culture* (2015, 177–230).

Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, for instance, one of the two largest Gullah Geechee institutions to date, it reads as follows:

> The nature of their enslavement on isolated islands and coastal plantations created a unique culture with deep African retentions that are clearly visible in the Gullah Geechee people's distinctive arts, crafts, foodways, music, and language. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2024)

In an interview with CNN, Elder Carlie Towne, Minister of Information of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, the second major Gullah Geechee political entity, states along similar lines:

> [W]e've been able to hold onto that [African traditions] because of isolation, because of the strong will and our self-determination. We still eat the same foods [as] our ancestors [when they] came from Africa. (Chen and Kermeliotis 2012)

Many of my Gullah Geechee research participants likewise explained the cultural differences between themselves and other African Americans by reference to isolation. As Lillian*, a public historian from the Beaufort area in her mid-60s, emphasized during a conversation we had about the history of St. Helena Island: "it was isolation that saved us, from outside cultural influences and from racial oppression on the mainland" (Lillian*, personal communication, 2022). What particularly challenged my perspective on the narrative of isolation were conversations I had with some of my interlocutors about the greater extent to which certain Gullah Geechee communities have been able to reproduce the cultures of their African ancestors more so than others. There are clearly observable differences between, for example, the presence of Gullah Geechee culture in North Carolina in comparison to South Carolina, or within South Carolina, between the Myrtle Beach and Beaufort areas, where in both instances Gullah Geechee is far more prominent in the latter places.

Based upon the logic of the narrative of isolation, one might simply reason that some parts of the Lowcountry have been more isolated than others. However, if we refute isolation as a viable explanatory principle, how do we explain this geographical variance? Could the greater presence of Gullah Geechee culture in some parts of the Lowcountry "actually" be the result of locally bounded revitalization efforts? Have fictional and academic representations of Gullah Geechee history been so effective then that even Gullah Geechee people themselves unwittingly reproduce a "false" narrative about the reproduction of their culture? Or could it be that not all people mean the same when they speak of isolation? More specifically, could there be a difference between the isolation that descendants speak of, on the one hand, and that which was constructed by outsiders, on the other? Is there, maybe, also a difference between what early academic texts meant by isolation compared to what later studies tried

to grasp with the term? And, finally, perhaps most importantly, could after all the notion of isolation, indeed, hold some explanatory value?

I am asking these questions not simply as a rhetorical gesture but to put under scrutiny that which seems given about Gullah Geechee history. At the very beginning of my research in 2017, Veronica Gerald—one of the architects behind the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, founding director of the Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies, and retired professor of English—cautioned me to "always think about what happens, when other people decide that your story was told, that all about you is known already" (2017).[28] Gullah Geechee historiography has almost unquestioningly relied on the same concepts about the origins and the reproduction of Gullah Geechee culture as well as about the overall course of the history of the group for decades. As I pointed out above, this pertains specifically to the narrative of isolation, which has greatly obscured the visibility of Gullah Geechee people's involvement in broader social dynamics. One of the greatest dangers of presuming that a "story" was complete, in this sense, lies in the fixation of its people in an eternal past. And yet, the critique of the narrative of isolation requires a thorough re-evaluation, as there are indeed certain questions that may be left unanswered if we refute it entirely.

In the following, I will engage in a historical discussion that does not simply strive to re-examine the factual basis of the narrative of isolation but that seeks to contribute to the writing of a political history of Gullah Geechee people. I will investigate how Gullah Geechee were involved in larger political struggles as well as how the political economy of the group evolved from the era of enslavement until the present. Over the course of this discussion the question of isolation will necessarily return to focus which will lead me to critically reconsider both the historical evidence provided by Matory in his argument against that narrative as well as the writing of other scholars. In this regard I should highlight in particular the work of Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, [1997] 2009, [1998] 2015, 2006a, 2012e, 2018a; Goodwine and The Clarity Press Gullah Project 1998). Although she is not only a pioneer in the writing of a political history of Gullah Geechee but may very well be among the authors to have provided the most important contributions to situating Gullah Geechee within broader social dynamics, Queen

[28] The Charles Joyner Institute for Gullah and Diaspora Studies was established at Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, in 2016. It is the first and only research institution, worldwide, to be specifically dedicated to the study of the group. The institute is named after Charles Joyner who is considered one of the most important historians to have engaged with the lived realities and culture of the enslaved ancestors of Gullah Geechee, most famously in his book *Down by the Riverside* (1984). See the official website of the Charles Joyner Institute: https://www.coastal.edu/joynerinstitute/.

Quet's work is commonly not counted among the canon of Gullah Geechee Studies—an omission that I hope to help rectify.

A (Brief) Political History of Gullah Geechee People

The Colonial Era and the Antebellum Period

The history of the continued presence of a larger population of Africans and their descendants in the Lowcountry begins in the year 1670 with the settlement of Charles Towne by British colonists (R. M. Brown 2013, 43; Wood 1975, 20–22).[29] Enslaved Africans, European colonists, indentured Europeans, and enslaved Native Americans labored side by side during the first years of colonization when efforts were principally focused upon survival and the establishment of a stable infrastructure, that is agricultural production and the building of houses, roads, docks, and fortifications (National Park Service 2005, 21).[30] In the early phase of the colony, the most influential among the White colonists were the Barbadian British. Barbados had been colonized by the British in 1627, and with the establishment of a sugar plantation economy quickly became one of the richest of the British colonies in the Americas (Wood 1975, 6–8). Representing the first stop from Britain en route to the Americas, Barbados functioned as "the gateway to America" from where colonization of the Carolinas and much of the Caribbean, such as Jamaica and British Guiana, took place (Alleyne and H. Fraser 2016, 21). Barbadian British colonists had already begun exploring the Carolina coast in the mid-1660s but permanent settlement failed (Wood 1975, 17–18; see also Alleyne and H. Fraser 2016, 25–26). While a substantial number of the colonists who founded Charles Towne had come directly from Britain, by 1671 already half of the White population consisted of immigrants from Barbados, who eventually gained control of the provincial government and determined the politics of South Carolina until the mid-18th century (Alleyne and H. Fraser 2016, 28,31,38; see also Wood 1975, 18). This profoundly shaped the evolving plantation economy of the colony: not only did the majority of enslaved who were imported to Carolina during the first decades of its existence come from Barbados, but also the legal codes that determined the status and treatment of Africans were replicas of the rigid racial hierarchy of colonial Barbadian society (Alleyne and H. Fraser 2016, 38–40; R. M. Brown 2013, 71; Littlefield 1981, 2; National Park Service 2005, 18; T. Rosengarten 1992, 21; Wood 1975, 6,20). In light of these close ties between Carolina and Barbados, historians view the

[29] Earlier efforts by the Spanish to establish a colony, San Miguel de Gualdape, in what is now Georgia failed in 1526 (Wood 1975, 3–5). Still, strictly speaking, the enslaved people whom the Spanish colonist had brought with them were the first Africans in the Lowcountry and on the North American continent.

[30] The population of Africans rose quickly from 30 out of 200 people in 1670, to 200 out of 1,000 in 1680, and in 1690, the group already represented a demographic majority with 1,500 out of 2,400 people (R. M. Brown 2013, 43; National Park Service 2005, 21).

colony, particularly the city of Charleston, during its early period less as the Southeastern part of the North American colonies but rather as the Northwestern tip of a political and economic network centered around the Caribbean and extending east to Britain (Littlefield 1981, 1–3; Queen Quet [1998] 2015, 19; D. Rosengarten 2013, 289)

From the very beginning, the colony of Carolina was designated as a so-called for-profit colony that prioritized the production of wealth for its investors (National Park Service 2005, 21–22). The cash crop that would dominate the plantation economy of not only Carolina but of the entire Lowcountry was not sugar, as in Barbados, but rice.[31] Experimentation with rice had already begun in the 1680s, but it would take another number of decades before it replaced cattle raising, naval stores, and timber as the principal sources of economic revenue for the colony (National Park Service 2005, 22; see also Carney 2001, 102; Fields-Black 2009, 157). At first, rice was grown on dry land in upland areas using rainfall for irrigation, a method that had already been deployed in the colony of Virginia and was thus familiar to the European colonists (Carney 2001, 102). With the further expansion of the plantation economy in Carolina, wetland irrigation was introduced, which eventually became the principal system of production (Carney 2000, 126–27; Fields-Black 2009, 157–58). The spread of this method occurred simultaneously with the increased importation of enslaved people, and while scholars were slow to recognize the fact for much of the 20th century, it is now undisputed that this highly complex technique of rice production is of African origin (Carney 2000, 135, 2008, 101; Fields-Black 2009, 159; Littlefield 1981, 76–78; Wood 1975, xvii–xviii). As geographer Judith Carney describes:

> Wetland rice farming […] demands a sophisticated understanding of lowland landscapes and their skilled manipulation for irrigation, drainage and tidal farming. West Africa is the likely source of origin for the wetland rice system that emerged in South Carolina during the early colonial period. (2000, 128)[32]

Carney, moreover, emphasizes that the rice plantation economy rested upon a gendered knowledge system that had its roots in West African societies and allotted women central roles in the production process (Carney 2000, 138,142, 2001, 19-21,120-121; see also Fields-Black 2009, 50). It was the enslaved women who represented the majority of the field labor

[31] Apart from rice, indigo production would also play an important role in the colony's economy (National Park Service 2005, 23; Queen Quet [1998] 2015, 108; Wood 1975, 75). However, since Britain was the main buyer, it was only grown in greater quantities for a fairly brief period between the 1740s and the US-American War of Independence, after which India became the central global supplier for the dye.

[32] The raising of cattle is another example of the role of African agricultural expertise in the development of the plantation economy: Europeans, as opposed to Africans, did not have any experience with open range grazing which, however, proved to be better suited to the environmental conditions in Carolina and thus soon became the predominant method of raising livestock (Carney 2001, 85; National Park Service 2005, 22; Wood 1975, 30–31).

force that tended to rice cultivation (Carney 2000, 138). More specifically, female Africans were largely responsible for the sowing of the seeds, for weeding and hoeing, as well as for the processing of rice, that involved milling and winnowing, and its preparation (Carney 2000, 138–39).[33] This gendered expertise was in fact so crucial to the system that Carney believes this to be the reason why Carolina imported more women than any other plantation economy (2000, 142).

Due to its higher yield, the wet rice farming system, or tidal system, had replaced rain fed farming by at least the mid-1700s (Carney 2000, 128). Since this method of irrigation relied on the rise and fall of the tides, production had to be moved closer to the coast, more specifically to the lower stretches of rivers between the Cape Fear River in North Carolina and the St. John's River in northern Florida (Carney 2001, 78; National Park Service 2005, 27).[34] The amount of labor that was required to clear entire swamps and build dikes, floodgates, and other infrastructure that was necessary to make use of the tides was colossal and cost the lives of countless enslaved Africans (National Park Service 2005, 22–23). With the expansion of rice production, therefore, also came a vastly increased demand for an enslaved workforce. Since the system not only relied on the physical labor of the Africans but just as much on their agricultural skills and expert knowledge, enslavers developed preferences for people from specific regions (Carney 2001, 90–91; Fields-Black 2009, 171; Littlefield 1981, 113). The majority of Africans who were imported directly to South Carolina and Georgia came from West Africa, specifically the rice growing regions of Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, but also Ghana and Nigeria, as well as from West-Central Africa, predominantly from regions that now constitute Angola and the Democratic Republic of

[33] Sweetgrass or Seagrass baskets, which have become one of the icons of the Lowcountry tourism industry and highly sought-after pieces of art, were originally tools used in the production of rice, specifically in the winnowing process (D. Rosengarten 1997, 1–2, 2008a, 107–8, 2008b, 140–43, 2018, 99). A more extensive discussion of sweetgrass baskets and their role in Gullah Geechee culture and the political economy of the Lowcountry follows further below.

[34] North Carolina was established as a separate colony in 1712 and Georgia in 1733, whereas Florida at the time was still under control of the Spanish.

Congo.[35,36,37] This system of human trafficking and the plantation economy it sustained made the Lowcountry, particularly South Carolina, home of some of the richest families in North America. Already by the early 18th century the city of Charleston had become the largest market on the continent for the Transatlantic Trade with Enslaved People (National Park Service 2005, 18–19). Today it is estimated that at least 40 percent of African Americans can trace their roots back to the Charleston area (National Park Service 2005, 19).

While the vast majority of enslaved people were of African origin, European colonists also captured Native Americans and forced them into labor, particularly in the early history of the colony (R. M. Brown 2013, 187–88; Wood 1975, 38–40).[38] There were a number of reasons in addition to the above discussed agricultural expertise for the preference of enslaved Africans over Native Americans, amongst others Native Americans' high susceptibility to the numerous non-native diseases that came with the arrival of Europeans and Africans, as well as their familiarity with the environment which facilitated escape (Wood 1975, 38–40). The relationships between the enslaved Africans and Native Americans were highly complex and varied over time and space (R. M. Brown 2013, 37–38): As mentioned above, the two populations worked next to one another during the early period of colonial Carolina, and African American oral history recounts how Native Americans shared knowledge about the environment, plants, and wildlife with the Africans that proved crucial to their survival (Toby Smith, Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator at McLeod Planation, interview, 2022). When the enslavement of African peoples became predominant and demand for labor increased at the beginning of the 18th century, a number of Native American groups negotiated peaceful relations with the European colonists and hunted down escaped Africans (R. M. Brown 2013, 37–38). In other cases, the refugees found shelter among Native

[35] The relative numbers of Africans who were deported from these regions varied over time: Between 1716 and 1744, 18,697 enslaved people were imported directly to (South) Carolina with the majority documented as coming from Angola (51 percent); between 1749 and 1787 the total number of imported Africans rose to 54,564 with most people deported from Senegambia (25.2 percent), the Windward Coast (16.7 percent; the coastline of modern day Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ivory Coast), and Angola (14.6 percent); finally, between 1804 and 1807, 24,046 people were imported with a majority coming yet again from Angola (52 percent) and the Windward Coast (17.9 percent) (R. M. Brown 2013, 72–77; see also Fields-Black 2009, 175–76; Pollitzer 1993, 57).

[36] Enslaved Africans were also imported directly to Georgia and North Carolina, even though the numbers were much lower than for (South) Carolina. In Georgia, between 1755 and 1798, a total number of 6,121 enslaved people arrived through the port of Savannah, the majority of which were deported from Senegambia, the Windward Coast, Sierra Leone, and the Caribbean (K. C. Bell 2018, 91–92). For North Carolina, it is estimated that approximately 2,000 enslaved people, who came either directly from Africa or the Caribbean, were imported into the ports of Brunswick, Roanoke, and unspecified other cities—no exact data exists on the origins of these African peoples, though it appears likely that the majority were deported from Senegambia and the Windward Coast (Minchinton 1994, 24–25)

[37] See also the following databases: https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database and https://libguides.brown.edu/slavery.

[38] In the colony of Carolina, the enslaved Native Americans made up 100 out of a total population of 3,900 people in 1690, reaching its highest number in 1720 with 2,000 people out of 18,400, and then dropping to 500 people out of 30,500 in 1730 after which no exact numbers are documented (R. M. Brown 2013, 43).

Americans and fought alongside them against the Europeans (R. M. Brown 2013, 37; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 22, [1998] 2015, 97). Probably the most prominent example of such military cooperation occurred in northern Florida.

Florida was a Spanish colony from 1523 until 1763, when it was ceded to the British, and returned to Spanish rule from 1783 to 1821, after which it became part of the United States. With the aim to destabilize the British plantation economy, the Spanish crown issued a series of edicts beginning at the end of the 17th century, which promised enslaved Africans their freedom if they escaped to Florida, converted to Catholicism, and aided the Spanish in protecting the northern border against the British (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 45; National Park Service 2005, 23; Wood 1975, 306–7; Porter 1996, 4–5). This encouraged hundreds of Africans in the Carolinas and later Georgia to try and escape south (National Park Service 2005, 23; Porter 1996, 5–6). The fact that the enslaved knew about the edicts is only one of the many examples of their acute awareness of and participation in broader political developments. By 1738, a settlement called Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, two miles north of St. Augustine, had been established by a group of about 100 formerly enslaved people from South Carolina (National Park Service 2005, 23; Wood 1975, 306).

Apart from these Africans, different groups of Native Americans had begun to migrate into northern Florida at around the same time. Over the course of the 18th century, members of these formerly separate populations, the majority of them Creek, united and formed the Seminole (Hancock 1980, 306). Some of the Africans who escaped enslavement settled close to the Seminole but remained separate, while others became part of their communities (Hancock 1980, 306; Porter 1996, 6). Scholars commonly categorize the status of the formerly enslaved among the Seminole as semi-independent, as they were given considerable freedom, being able to own homes, farms, and cattle, and to marry, with the limitation that, similar to a vassal, they had to cede part of their produce to the Seminole (Hancock 1980, 306; Porter 1996, 6).

The Stono Rebellion, the largest uprising against enslavement during the colonial period, was likely inspired by this promise of liberty in Spanish Florida (R. M. Brown 2013, 81; James [1938] 2012, 52; Queen Quet 2006a, 123; Thornton 1991, 1102; see also Wood 1975, 259–60). On September 9, 1739, a group of about twenty enslaved Africans, who presumably came from Congo, broke into a store near the Stono Bridge, killed the shopkeepers, and armed themselves with guns (National Park Service 2005, 25; Queen Quet 2006a, 123–24; Thornton 1991, 1102–3; Wood 1975, 314–15). They marched south towards St. Augustine, on their way successfully mobilizing more enslaved people to join them, but

were eventually attacked and defeated by a military force sent by the governor of South Carolina (National Park Service 2005, 25; Thornton 1991, 1103; Wood 1975, 315–17). Nearly all of the Africans died in the ensuing fight or were captured and executed afterwards. Even though the escapees did not reach their destination, the Stono Rebellion served as a major inspiration for coming insurrections (Wood 1975, 308–9). Already one year later, a group of 150 to 200 enslaved people rebelled close to Charleston, probably with the same aim of escaping to Spanish Florida (National Park Service 2005, 25; Wood 1975, 321–22). While 50 of them were captured, nothing is known about what happened to the remaining 100. The Africans who successfully fled south during that period and settled at Fort Mose played a crucial role in defending St. Augustine during a large-scale British attack in 1740 (National Park Service 2005, 25). When Florida was ceded to the British in 1763, this population was relocated to Cuba, where some of its descendants live to this day (National Park Service 2005, 26).[39] In the decades that followed, enslaved people would continue to escape south particularly after Florida returned to Spanish rule in 1783 (National Park Service 2005, 26). The Africans who had remained in northern Florida with the Seminole and those who joined them later would play a central part in what historiographers commonly refer to as the Seminole Wars at the beginning of the 19th century, which I will return to further below.

The 18th century thus saw the transformation of the political economy of the Lowcountry from small farms to large scale plantations with up to hundreds of enslaved workers. It was this development which eventually brought about the emergence of Gullah Geechee culture.[40] Scholars estimate that Gullah Geechee evolved as a distinct language and culture over the course of the 18th century from the forced cohabitation of Africans with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their interaction with Europeans under the most brutal power differentials (National Park Service 2005, 39; see also Hackert and Huber 2007, 284–85; Mufwene 1997, 70). The linguist Salikoko Mufwene describes the conditions during that time as follows:

> Europeans and their descendants and Africans and their descendants interacted less and less. Life expectancy dropped quickly, the labor population kept growing more by importations from Africa and Europe than by birth, and the speech models for the

[39] Several of my interlocutors described the descendants of these Africans and African Americans who were relocated to Cuba as part of the larger Gullah Geechee Diaspora.

[40] There are different theories about the exact origins of the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee," some tracing them back to the names of places and peoples in Africa, whereas others identify connections with the social and geographical context of the Lowcountry (see Cooper 2017, 23–24; Holm 1983, 305; Jones-Jackson 1987, 133; Opala [1987] 2009, 20). What can be said with certainty is that these ethnonyms emerged as pejorative categories that were ascribed to Gullah Geechee by White elites, journalists, and scholars (Barnes and Steen 2012, 196–98; Cooper 2017, 25). It was not until the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement that the terms were used self-affirmatively.

> newcomers were often restructured further and further away from the metropolitan and earlier colonial models. (1997, 70)

As implied in this quote, the populations of Africans that lived on the rice plantations were not only highly heterogenous but their ethnic composition also fluctuated. It is therefore nearly impossible to reliably identify the exact origins of individual practices and knowledge within contemporary Gullah Geechee culture (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 46; Opala ⁅1987⁆ 2009, 11).[41,42] In their historical analysis of the origins of the Lowcountry seagrass baskets, Dale Rosengarten and Enid Schildkrout highlight how transnational connections and re-indigenization efforts during the latter part of the 20th century additionally complicate efforts at tracing the ancestral connections of basketmaking (Schildkrout and D. Rosengarten 2008, 43). As Matory cautions similarly, "⁅i⁆ntentionally or not, genealogies are often re-made in the light of present-day social relationships and scholarly priorities or misjudgments" (Matory 2008, 968).

Mufwene's quote also returns our attention to the role of interaction in the genesis of Gullah Geechee culture, or rather, the specific quality of interaction. Since the owners of plantations were absent for extended periods of time, they tasked so called overseers, often other White Europeans and European Americans, to monitor the enslaved Africans. Interaction between Africans and Europeans and their respective descendants therefore took place regularly (K. L. Brown 2004, 84). However, not only were Whites in the overwhelming minority but the relationships between Whites and the enslaved were defined by extreme inequalities in power and status. Racial segregation was a central condition for the emergence of Gullah Geechee, as Mufwene contends, just as for any other languages and cultures that evolved in the context of enslavement throughout the entire Atlantic (1997, 70–71). The

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[41] There are a number of different theories about the evolution of the Gullah Geechee language: While some scholars assert that Gullah Geechee and other languages that emerged in the context of the Trade with Enslaved People in the Americas, such as Jamaican, or Bahamian, evolved independently from one another, most authors argue that these languages share a common linguistic ancestor, disagreeing only on whether it had its origins on the West African coast or in the Atlantic (Greaves 2010, 2–3; also compare Cassidy 1980, 14; and Opala ⁅1987⁆ 2009, 15–16; with Hancock 1980, 323). It has so far not been possible to conclusively prove one of these theories as correct.

[42] As pointed out, the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee" refer explicitly to African descended people. While some of my research participants have told me about rare cases of local White US-Americans who identify as Gullah Geechee, they are in general neither recognized as such by the group itself nor by scholars. Historically, small numbers of Europeans and European Americans lived in close proximity to Gullah Geechee and some of them even learned to speak the language. Still, there has never been a merging of these communities and none of the continuities with African cultures that define Gullah Geechee heritage can be found to a significant extent among White populations (Mufwene 1991, 239). An interesting argument made by Barnes and Steen is that the entire Lowcountry may be seen as having been profoundly impacted by the different cultures of the enslaved Africans to such an extent that so-called creolization processes not only influenced the Africans and their descendants but also Europeans and European Americans (2012, 203–4). However, the authors do not go as far as speaking of a White Gullah Geechee population.

ancestors of Gullah Geechee had to navigate, for one, a highly confined social space in which interaction took place between them and their oppressors and, for another, transcend the cultural differences among one another to create a shared means of communication, value systems, and identity. Against this backdrop, the very creation of Gullah Geechee culture in the face of dehumanization and utmost deprivation may be regarded as an act of resistance in itself (K. C. Bell 2018, 3) . As Barnes and Steen observe:

> Resistance through education, running away, work stoppages or delays, or practicing traditional religious or spiritual customs provided a way in which enslaved African Americans created an internal cultural identity. (2012, 190)

The Gullah Geechee language, for instance, is a case in point as it allowed the enslaved to transmit messages unnoticed by, or at least unintelligible to their oppressors (Joyner 1984, 209; Matory 2008, 965).

While spatial and social segregation were crucial for the emergence of Gullah Geechee culture, the enslaved Africans and their descendants were not isolated in the strict sense of not having had contact with anyone outside their own group. As stated above, there was regular interaction with the few Whites who lived on the plantations. Furthermore, although it is often assumed that the geography of the Lowcountry principally restricted mobility, the enslaved people were highly adept at moving through this environment. Consisting predominantly of marshland intersected by numerous rivers and creeks, as well as of the hundreds of tidal and barrier islands off the shore, the coastal geography undoubtedly posed certain challenges to traveling. At the same time, the many waterways provided the enslaved and later free inhabitants with great mobility between the peninsulas, islands, and the mainland allowing them to move between plantations and form community ties across widespread areas (Botwick 2018, 201–2; Matory 2015, 203–4). The plantation owners were unable to wholly restrict this kind of movement since the very mobility of the enslaved was vital to the plantation economies (Matory 2015, 204). Enslaved people used the rivers to move about as guides for the Europeans and their descendants, to dispatch letters, and to fish for their owners, or even themselves, if they were able to purchase free time (Bishop, Ulrich, and Wilson 1994, 334; Wood 2008, 83; Matory 2008, 960).

Matory contends that during the period of enslavement the whole region was, in fact, one of the best connected areas in the United States, as trans-local flows of people, goods and ideas, not only from Europe and Africa, but also from the Caribbean, concentrated in the major port cities (Matory 2015, 203–4). Enslaved people regularly moved between rural and urban areas in service to their enslavers and some acquired knowledge of multiple European languages. Moreover, the Africans and their descendants seldomly belonged to one owner for

their entire lives and were usually influenced by different "plantation subcultures" (Matory 2015, 203). Finally, some of the enslaved served as seafarers which allowed them to travel even greater distances and made them highly aware of global socio-political developments. This becomes particularly evident from the ways in which the enslaved people navigated conflicts between different factions among their oppressors in order to gain freedom, as seen in the above discussion of the role of Spanish Florida. The US American War of Independence is another case in point. Some enslaved people chose to fight alongside the United States, others with the British. Soldiers from the latter group, who are commonly referred to as Black Loyalists, were granted their freedom after the war and migrated to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, the Bahamas, or even Sierra Leone (Hackert and Huber 2007, 285–86; Queen Quet 2006a, 136; National Park Service 2005, 28–29).[43]

Yet another striking example of the enslaved peoples' awareness of global political events is the Vesey Insurrection in 1822 (Matory 2015, 204). Denmark Vesey, the leader of the attempted rebellion, a seafarer who had been able to buy his freedom from his owner, was familiar with the Haitian Revolution and even maintained regular contact with some of its leaders (National Park Service 2005, 26). The radical visions of that uprising presumably served as inspiration to his plans of overthrowing the Charlestonian White elite (James [1938] 2012, 53–54). It is estimated that Vesey was able to recruit between 6,600 and 9,000 people for his planned rebellion. However, the group was betrayed by one of its members and the insurrection failed (National Park Service 2005, 26). In response to the attempted rebellion new laws were passed that, for one, closed loopholes in the manumission laws, making it virtually impossible to free an enslaved person, and, for another, forced Black sailors upon disembarking in Charleston to remain detained in prison until their ships would set sails again (National Park Service 2005, 26–27). While the monitoring of and restrictions placed upon the movements of the enslaved were thus increased severely, the plantation economy, as pointed out above, necessitated at least a minimum of mobility among the enslaved which prevented the enslavers from curtailing movement of the Africans and their descendants altogether. The entire Antebellum Era was marked by such rising anxieties among the White elite about rebellions among the enslaved.[44] As the plantation economy expanded—notably, as cotton became increasingly prevalent in the early 1800s—so did resistance to the

[43] Just as in the earlier described case of African descendants who relocated from Florida to Cuba, several of my interlocutors referred to the descendants of the Black Loyalists as part of the Gullah Geechee Diaspora.

[44] Some historians suggest that the Vesey Insurrection might have been an expression of such anxieties among the enslaver elite and was fabricated as a pretext to increase the restrictions placed upon the enslaved. The evidence brought forth for this argument still seems inconclusive though (S. Lewis 2009, 131; T. Rosengarten 1992, 36).

institution, and especially the above-mentioned Haitian Revolution and the abolition of the Trade with Enslaved People by the British in 1807 shook the authority of the enslavers profoundly.

Another series of events which added to the fears of the so-called planters and posed a serious threat to the institution of enslavement were the Seminole Wars.[45] The term refers to three wars that were fought at the beginning of the 19th century between, on the one side, the Native American Seminole and the Black Seminole, and, on the other, the United States Army (Hancock 1980, 307–8). The US government perceived the presence of the Native American Seminole and the free Africans in northern Florida as a disruptive influence upon the bordering "slave states" and tried to invade their territory several times, which eventually ignited the first war in 1816 (Hancock 1980, 307). By the end of that conflict in 1818 the Seminole and Black Seminole had been able to fend off the US army but had also sustained heavy casualties themselves and were pushed further south.[46] In 1821 Spain ceded Florida to the United States and the US government continued to pressure the Native Americans and the formerly enslaved to leave Florida. The second war lasted from 1835 until 1842 and resulted in the forced migration of the majority of Seminole and Black Seminole to Oklahoma as part of the so-called Trail of Tears (Hancock 1980, 308). Those who stayed in Florida moved yet further south, but renewed pressure from the US government led to a third war in 1855, which lasted for three years and led to further displacement of Seminole and Black Seminole people. Still, some of the Seminole and Black Seminole successfully escaped the US army and their descendants live in Florida to this day.[47]

The Black Seminole who were forcefully relocated to the west experienced aggression from other Native Americans tribes in Oklahoma, in reaction to which the group along with some of its Seminole allies migrated further to Mexico. In 1870, five years after the end of the Civil War, the US government invited some of these Black Seminole to serve as scouts and defend territory claimed by the United States against Native Americans in southern Texas. Those who followed this call were referred to as "Seminole Negro Indian Scouts" (Opala

[45] The Seminole Wars have been re-interpreted in recent years by some scholars and Gullah Geechee activists as a central part of the struggles of the Africans and their descendants against the institution of enslavement (e.g. Kly 2006b). Central to this argument is the claim that it would be more accurate to refer to these armed conflicts as "Gullah War(s)." As I will discuss in Chapter 4, despite the counter-hegemonic intention behind this effort of subverting hegemonic historiography, the narrative of the Gullah War(s) also entails certain dynamics of Native American marginalization.

[46] Some of the Black Seminole also fled to the Bahamas, specifically Andros Island (Holm 1983, 307; Opala [1987] 2009, 24) Their descendants, too, were referred to by several of my interlocutors as part of the Gullah Geechee Diaspora.

[47] See the website of the Seminole Tribe of Florida: https://www.semtribe.com/.

[1987] 2009, 24).[48] To this day, descendants of Black Seminole live in Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma and continue to demonstrate close cultural connections, particularly on a linguistic level, with Gullah Geechee people.[49]

Civil War and Reconstruction

The struggle against the institution of enslavement culminated in the Civil War whose outcome finally brought freedom to the Africans and their descendants across the United States. During and after the war, Gullah Geechee in rural as well as urban areas came into close contact with military officials from the Union Army, representatives of the Freedmen's Bureau, who organized early projects of land redistribution and administered general support to the liberated people, and missionaries and educators from the North (K. L. Brown 2004, 80; Matory 2008, 961–62; National Park Service 2005, 47–49; Ruffins 2008, 216–17). Gullah Geechee also actively participated in the fighting themselves, prominently as part of the 1st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiment (National Park Service 2005, 44). Curiously, the short period after the end of the Civil War until the early to mid-20th century is often described by historians as the time during which the group was allegedly isolated the most (see Matory 2008, 960). However, federally sanctioned humanitarian projects such as the above did not simply halt. The most famous example for the ongoing impact of institutions established during the Civil War is Penn School (National Park Service 2005, 118).

Penn School was created in 1862 on St. Helena Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina, and was the first school in the South to explicitly serve the formal education of freed African Americans. It exists to this day even though its function has changed over the years, from being a school to serving as a community center (National Park Service 2005, 118–20).[50] The majority of the teachers at Penn School, especially in the initial phase, were White Northerners, at least two of whom, the co-founders and abolitionist missionaries Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, remained on St. Helena Island until their deaths in 1901 and 1908 respectively (Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 129).

[48] See also: https://www.seminolecemeteryassociation.com/ and https://www.seminolenegroindianscouts.org/.

[49] Especially the work of Ian Hancock and Joseph Opala on the connections between Black Seminole and Gullah Geechee has to be highlighted in this regard (Hancock 1980; Opala [1987] 2009). Both have made invaluable contributions not only to making visible the historical ties between the two populations but also to efforts among Black Seminole to revitalize their language (Hancock, interview 2022; Opala, interview 2022). Furthermore, Opala aided Black Seminole and Gullah Geechee in the organization of cultural reunions (interview 2022). From among Gullah Geechee people themselves one of the individuals who has furthered the re-establishment of connections between the groups the most is Queen Quet, Chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, who personally visited the Black Seminole community in Bracketville, Texas several times (see Queen Quet 2015b).

[50] See also: https://www.penncenter.com/.

Furthermore, as Matory demonstrates, the regional networks of trade that had already been established during enslavement were still maintained after the Civil War (2008, 960–61). Seafaring skills remained critical to the survival of Gullah Geechee who depended on boats to move between islands and cities on the mainland and to sell their agricultural and maritime produce and their basketry (Campbell 2011, 81; Matory 2008, 960; D. Rosengarten 2008a, 115). Even before the building of bridges, ferries provided people who were not able to sail themselves with the ability to travel the region (H. Frazier 2011, 22). A good example for these maritime connections is the Mosquito Fleet—a group of Black men who fished off the shore of the Charleston peninsula throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (Bishop, Ulrich, and Wilson 1994, 332). First referred to in 1817, its predecessors consisted of enslaved as well as free Africans and their descendants who fished for their owners and/or themselves (Bishop, Ulrich, and Wilson 1994, 334). The case of the Mosquito Fleet does not only exemplify the continued mobility of Gullah Geechee people throughout the Ante- and Postbellum Periods but also serves as a concrete historical example of urban Gullah Geechee culture.

The political economies of coastal Black communities during the Postbellum Period differed depending on the specific region and, contrary to most popular representations, were not only defined by land ownership and self-sufficiency but also by relations of varying degrees of dependency, like tenant farming, sharecropping, employment in the timber industry or the emerging mining and fertilizer operations, craftwork, such as blacksmithing, care labor, predominantly in White households, or longshoring, and fishing (K. C. Bell 2018, 75; H. Frazier 2011, 55; Gibbs 2006, 24; Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 51–52; Hoskins-Brown 2020, 36–37; Kouri 1994, 6–7; Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 143, 2006a, 242–44; Willis 1993, 71-76, 115). Given these heterogenous socio-economic positions, different qualities and degrees of interaction existed between Gullah Geechee and mainstream society (see Kouri 1994, 54). In the town of Navassa, North Carolina, for instance, which is still home to many Gullah Geechee descendants to this day, the growth of a local fertilizer industry that provided employment to a large part of the community was also inextricably tied to the expansion of the railway system (Willis 1993, 71–76). Already in the 1840s, connections were established between the nearby city of Wilmington, the economic center of the region, and the North, and soon after also with South Carolina. With the emergence of fertilizer production in Navassa after the Civil War, railway stops were also added right next to the town itself, which allowed citizens to easily travel to Wilmington and beyond (Willis 1993, 111–12). Certain areas within the Lowcountry were thus highly

connected with the rest of the country and Gullah Geechee living there regularly interacted with other populations.

In other parts of the region, especially on the Sea Islands, where a higher percentage of liberated Black people than anywhere else in the South was able to purchase land, communities lived autonomously and sold their agricultural surplus in the nearby towns and cities, being able to choose when, where, and how to get into contact with mainstream society (Botwick 2018, 202; K. L. Brown 2004, 80–81; Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 62, 142). Still, like other freed Blacks Gullah Geechee had to continuously defend this autonomy against different forms of outsider aggression, including state sanctioned oppression. Many African Americans lost their newly acquired land right after the Civil War when President Andrew Johnson took office and, in an effort to appease Southern elites, returned much of the property to its former owners (Kouri 1994, 26–27; National Park Service 2005, 48). The fact that Black families were still able to hold on to their land and/or even buy new property can be read as a testament to their perseverance.

Finally, just as among other African Americans, the era of Reconstruction was defined by extensive political organization among Gullah Geechee (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 52–53). Particularly the cities of Charleston, Savannah, Wilmington, and Beaufort saw an emerging Black middle and upper class and brought forth a number of political leaders, which also included a "Gullah Geechee gentry" to use the words of Michelle Lanier, folklorist, GGCHC Commissioner for the state of North Carolina, and director of the North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites (Lanier, interview 2022; see also Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 48–49, [1997] 2009, 66-72, 80-81, 2006a, 237–39). Possibly the most prominent example for the significant role played by descendants in politics at the time is Robert Smalls.

Smalls was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, to Lydia Polite, an enslaved house servant. It was thanks to her efforts that his owner agreed to send Smalls to the city of Charleston as a youth, where he acquired seafaring skills and taught himself to read and write (National Park Service 2005, 45). He eventually became the pilot of a transport steamer, the Planter, which was under contract to the Confederate Army (National Park Service 2005, 46). On the night of May 12th-13th, 1862, the White officers of the Planter went ashore to attend a party and left the African American crew to guard the ship. Smalls identified the situation as a chance to escape, smuggled his wife and children on board, and took command of the ship (National Park Service 2005, 46). Thanks to his seafaring experience and intimate knowledge of the codes of communication of the Confederate Navy, Smalls succeeded in leaving the harbor and delivering the Planter to the Union, which awarded him with official command of

the ship until the end of the war (National Park Service 2005, 46). After the war, he entered politics, and served, amongst others, as a member of the South Carolina Legislature and the United States House of Representatives where he dedicated himself to the protection and extension of the hard-won liberties of African Americans (National Park Service 2005, 46; Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 67–70).

The End of Reconstruction and the Early 20th Century

The end of Reconstruction marks the dismantling of most of the progress in racial justice that had been accomplished since the Civil War. Black political participation was forcefully repressed and entire neighborhoods that had flourished with businesses and community life were destroyed by White terrorists and mobs. Still, or, rather precisely for that very reason, Gullah Geechee and other African Americans continued to found small autonomous settlements throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see Gibbs 2006, 7–9; National Park Service 2005, 49). Within the larger political economy, the turn of the century saw the White owners of former plantations seek out new opportunities of economic revenue leading to the development of an early tourism industry which, by the 1920s and 30s, had already become one of the biggest sources of income for the city of Charleston (Doddington 2016, 57–58; T. Rosengarten 1992, 38). It was during that time that Gullah Geechee were first instrumentalized as exotic props within romanticized representations of the Antebellum South (Ruffins 2008, 219–20).

The greatest impact upon the livelihoods of Gullah Geechee in the early 1900s, however, came from industrialization and early privatization processes. Small fishermen and shrimpers had to increasingly compete with the capital of large commercial fishing enterprises from the North, so that by the 1950s, work in the industry was explicitly discouraged within families that had fished for generations because of the harsh working conditions (Hoskins-Brown 2020, 37, 41; National Park Service 2005, 83). On land, it was truck farming that contributed to the decline of small farmers who had already been hit hard by a series of depressions (D. Rosengarten 1997, 370). Furthermore, at around the same time, wealthy Northern industrials began to purchase property from the bankrupt owners of former plantations, which in a number of cases led to the displacement of the Gullah Geechee families who still lived on that land (H. Frazier 2011, 20; National Park Service 2005, 49, 82-83; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 57). Finally, the building of bridges between the Sea Islands and the mainland, beginning in the late 1920s, made the region more easily accessible and further stimulated the above-described processes (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 53; Ruffins 2008, 229; Smith 1991, 293).

This new infrastructure, however, also entailed some unexpected consequences, ushering in a wave of tourism down the coast that eventually built an audience for "all things Gullah Geechee" (Dale Rosengarten, interview 2024). Most notably, construction of the Cooper River Bridge in 1929, which connected Charleston with Mt. Pleasant, the latter still a rural area at the time, created an opportunity for Mt. Pleasant basket makers to sell their products to travelers on their way in and out of Charleston (D. Rosengarten 2008a, 120, 2018, 99–100; see also National Park Service 2005, 65). The women who built their stalls along Highway 17 were able to make important financial contributions to their households during times of economic hardship and, moreover, kept the art of basket making alive (D. Rosengarten 1997, 349–50, 2008a, 120; see also Hurley and Halfacre 2011, 390). Some of these very stalls exist to this day.

The Great Depression in the 1930s brought Gullah Geechee yet again in increased contact with officials from the federal government which planned a series of work programs in the Lowcountry. On the Sea Islands specifically, projects were implemented that increased the size of arable land, introduced new machinery, and explicitly encouraged the population to integrate into the capitalist economy. These developments did not necessarily improve the economic situation of communities though, as they also resulted in the further loss of land among descendants (Smith 1991, 293).

The above described socio-economic processes, but also increased mobility, ultimately incentivized many Gullah Geechee to leave the rural South as part of the so-called Great Migration (Kiser 1969, 82–83; National Park Service 2005, 52–54). In his study of migration movements among the population of St. Helena Island, demographer Clyde Vernon Kiser identified five chief destinations of Gullah Geechee migrants in the early to mid-20th century: New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in the North, and Savannah and Charleston in the South—several of my interlocutors from Florida emphasized that Jacksonville should also be added to that list (1969, 10). While Savannah and Charleston were often to serve as stepping stones to continue North, many Gullah Geechee eventually remained in these cities. As Kiser found, the relations between the migrated people and their friends and family who had stayed in the rural areas of the Lowcountry usually remained very close and involved regular visits, particularly from the North to the South (1969, 83). Michelle Lanier, whom I cited earlier on the history of urban Gullah Geechee, told me about what she referred to as "micro migrations" of descendants between the different states of the Lowcountry, especially from South Carolina and Georgia to North Carolina and Florida, which played a crucial role for the development of Gullah Geechee communities in these regions (Interview 2022). These connections between urban and rural areas, different parts of the Lowcountry, and between the Gullah

Geechee Diaspora in the North and communities in the South are being maintained to this day (Campbell 2011, 82; H. Frazier 2011, 223).

The Decades Following WW-II

After World War II, several of the above-described processes accelerated further. The post-war economic upturn led to increased investments into infrastructure, such as the highway system and additional bridges, facilitating the expansion of residential areas (Botwick 2018, 202). This and the wider availability of air conditioning stimulated both the in-migration of large numbers of White middle-class US Americans as well as a significant increase in tourism (National Park Service 2005, 49–51; T. Rosengarten 1992, 38). These changes in turn were inextricably tied to, on the one hand, projects of urban renewal which involved the construction of urban freeways and public housing, and, on the other, efforts to restore historic architecture, particularly in the port cities of Charleston and Savannah (Hargrove 2005, 165–67, 2009, 97–98). Both of these state sanctioned developments systematically displaced African Americans and Gullah Geechee as well as poor Whites under the guise of improving the quality of life of urban dwellers (Doddington 2016, 57–59; T. Rosengarten 1992, 21). Meanwhile, rural areas saw the beginnings of resort tourism of which Hilton Head Island, to this day, remains one of the prime examples. Construction of the first resort on Hilton Head, Sea Pines Plantation, started in 1957 (Ruffins 2008, 229). After that, gated communities, golf courses, and other recreational facilities began to emerge all along the coast and ever further infringed upon Gullah Geechee communities. Descendants increasingly came under pressure from real estate companies who took advantage of their economic vulnerability and of specific legal loopholes in property law, ultimately forcing many to sell their land (National Park Service 2005, 83; Smith 1991, 293–94). The intersection of this development with the above-described industrialization processes pushed Gullah Geechee into seeking employment in the larger wage labor economy. While the expansion of military facilities in the Lowcountry provided some additional job opportunities, they mostly consisted of menial labor. Apart from these, the largest employers were the new coastal resorts which likewise offered only service job positions to Gullah Geechee and other African Americans (Botwick 2018, 202; Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 53–54; Smith 1991, 293–94). The overall economic situation therefore further accelerated the dynamic of outmigration (see Beoku-Betts 1995, 540; Mufwene 1997, 77–78).

On a political level, the status quo in the Lowcountry was profoundly shook by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, in which, contrary to sociologist John Smith's assessment, Gullah Geechee were deeply involved (Smith 1991, 288). Professional organizers,

students as well as ordinary citizens from among the group engaged in a wide range of activities, including sit-ins, marches, and the organization of mutual aid societies (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 53; Willis 1993, 118). A prominent example for the involvement of Gullah Geechee communities in the Civil Rights Movement, was the role of Penn Center on St. Helena Island as a central site for the organization of educational programs and retreats by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), starting in 1963 (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 54). Famously, Dr. Martin Luther King participated in each of the annual staff retreats of the SCLC from 1965 to 1967 at Penn Center during which organizers planned the Poor People's Campaign. In addition to that, a number of influential freedom fighters hailed from Gullah Geechee communities, including Septima Poinsette Clarke, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins, who led highly successful voter registration and educational projects in the region (Queen Quet 2006a, 299–300; Ruffins 2008, 225–27). The effects of these struggles and, importantly, the experiences gained by Gullah Geechee activists at that time would eventually play a central role in the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement.

Conclusion

From the Era of Enslavement, throughout the post-Emancipation Period, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, Gullah Geechee people have always been deeply involved in larger political struggles. Time and again, the Lowcountry, in fact, represented a key site of significant historical events, such as the Port Royal Experiment during the Civil War, Black political participation and leadership during Reconstruction, or the organizational meetings and programming by the SCLC leadership on St. Helena Island during the 1960s. And far from being bystanders living idly on some remote islands while the rest of the world was changing around them, Gullah Geechee took an active role in these social dynamics to which, after all, their own fates were tied inextricably. I therefore argue, contrary to cultural reductionist readings of Gullah Geechee history, that the group's cultural heritage cannot be interpreted separately from these centuries of resistance and should be understood as a manifestation of what anthropologist Cedric Robinson refers to as the "Black Radical Tradition:"

> [...] a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality" of the African Diaspora. ([1983] 2000, 171)

Robinson stresses that the Black Radical Tradition does not simply mean a "variant of Western radicalism," but a "specifically African response" to European oppression and

exploitation ([1983] 2000, 73, 245-246). He identifies this "specifically African" element within the "cultural" sphere of Black Liberation Struggles, that is, within those dimensions which Eurocentric historiography commonly fails to recognize as political given its tendency to trivialize the histories and cultures of Peoples of Color (see Robin D. G. Kelley, preface to James [1938] 2012, 6). The specific form of this Black Radical Tradition in the case of Gullah Geechee manifests itself, amongst others, in the religious heritage of the group, such as the legacy of the praise houses where spiritual gatherings and political organization have always been interwoven, a tradition that lives on in churches; in the Gullah Geechee language, which, as mentioned above, not only served the purpose of communication among the group but also to conceal meaning from its enslavers; in the specific kinship relations created by Gullah Geechee in opposition to a system of oppression that, as one of its central strategies, tried to destroy these very bonds; in the countless efforts of the enslaved ancestors of the group to escape and create free settlements, such as in northern Florida; and, closely tied to the latter, in the numerous uprisings and liberation struggles against enslavement (cf. Robinson [1983] 2000, 245-256, 310-311).[51] As I will argue in the following section, this tradition of resistance fundamentally shaped the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement and inspires activists to this day.

Evidently then, Gullah Geechee have never been isolated in the strict sense of the term. There has always been some kind of contact between the group and mainstream society. And neither does a critical historical analysis support the representation of Gullah Geechee as a solely or essentially rural culture. The communities of Africans and African Americans who were enslaved on Lowcountry plantations were indeed defined by agriculture. However, there was also an urban population of enslaved people, and, as we have seen for instance in the biography of Robert Smalls, the ancestors of Gullah Geechee sometimes moved between country and city. After Emancipation, some communities may have continued to rely on agriculture, either as independent landowners, tenant farmers, or sharecroppers, while others, particularly on the mainland, sustained themselves through employment in branches that had emerged from early industrialization processes in the South, such as mining and fertilizer production, and yet others lived in towns and cities and followed a wide spectrum of professions which allowed some Gullah Geechee to become part of an emerging Black middle class. The so-called Great Migration would dramatically increase the size of the latter group over the course of the 20th century. All of this is not to deny the profound influence of

[51] I do, by no means, intend to exhaustively summarize all the elements that may be identified as constituting the Black Radical Tradition among Gullah Geechee. Undoubtedly, many more aspects may be added, such as the musical heritage of the group, to name only one example.

agricultural ways of life on Gullah Geechee culture but rather to counter the tendency in popular as well as academic discourses to represent the group as a homogenous population.

With all that being said, while most of my argument relies on and refines the case made by Matory, there is one major point of critique that I raise against his rebuttal of isolation. The entirety of his argument is based on the premise that ethnic identities emerge from interaction (2008, 969–70). However, in his effort to prove the embeddedness of Gullah Geechee into broader social dynamics, Matory ultimately conflates ethnogenesis with cultural reproduction and discourses about culture with its material substance. What he therefore fails to recognize is that geographical and social distance from mainstream society—to suggest an alternative conceptual framework to isolation—were indeed crucial for the reproduction of the group's culture.

Due to the geographical specificities of the Lowcountry in combination with a high degree of landownership, many Gullah Geechee communities were less subject to the exploitative and oppressive daily interactions with Whites than other African Americans, which provided the group with greater cultural autonomy. This is what explains the observation that Gullah Geechee have been able to reproduce their heritage to varying degrees across the Lowcountry, as this was exactly tied to the factors—location and land ownership—which ultimately determined the frequency and, more importantly, the quality of interaction between Gullah Geechee and mainstream society. Georgia and South Carolina are commonly seen as the states with the most coherent and concentrated Gullah Geechee communities. The regions that are often highlighted in particular are the greater Charleston area and Beaufort with its surrounding Sea Islands, in South Carolina, and the Savannah area and Brunswick with the nearby islands, in Georgia. Regions like these stand out because land retention was especially high and the geography allowed Gullah Geechee to maintain distance, in a geographical as well as social sense, from mainstream society (see Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 62). The situation in North Carolina and Florida is different, in part because of a comparatively lower degree of land ownership, but mostly because communities lived in greater proximity to and higher economic dependency on mainstream society (see Willis 1993, 85–86). This is not supposed to question the "quality" of Gullah Geechee culture in Florida and North Carolina but to explain the wide spectrum along which it manifests itself today. There are obvious regional differences, for example, in the degree to which Gullah Geechee was reproduced as a distinct language or has transformed into a dialect, or to which people have passed on certain crafts within their families. Several of my research participants have explained these differences precisely in terms of assimilation pressures, which were

higher wherever Gullah Geechee had to conform to White cultural ideals, for instance, by speaking what is considered standard English (Mufwene 1997, 77–78).[52]

While I would thus conclude that the term isolation is undoubtedly problematic and misleading, I also argue that some aspects of what other scholars and Gullah Geechee people themselves try to grasp with the term, namely the relative freedom from racial oppression and the concomitant assimilation pressures, are in fact instrumental to our understanding of the historical reproduction of Gullah Geechee culture. It seems necessary to distinguish between an everyday and common sensical use of the term by descendants themselves, which is not necessarily to be taken literally as appears to me based upon my fieldwork experiences, and isolation as an academic category for descriptive and analytical purposes, for which it is clearly not appropriate. As remarked above, I suggest to speak of varying degrees of geographical and social distance between Gullah Geechee communities and mainstream society instead, which was clearly a major factor in the group's history.

The drastic socio-economic changes experienced by many descendants within the past decades are in this sense indeed tied immediately to the loss of that distance, or more specifically, the loss of control over when, where, and how interactions with mainstream society take place. Most tangibly this manifests itself in the loss of land and access to maritime resources (Matory 2008, 950). The beginning of these processes, as I have shown above, can be traced back to the early 20th century and the growing mechanization of the primary sector in the Lowcountry and rising interest in the acquisition of private property in the region. All of these developments then greatly accelerated after World War II, further expediting the integration of formerly self-sufficient and (semi-)autonomous Gullah Geechee communities into the capitalist wage labor economy, wherein they were relegated primarily to menial and service labor (Hargrove 2005, 43–44). It was the intersection of these socio-economic processes with the advent of Black Liberation Struggles in the 1960s and 70s that, as I will argue in the following, eventually stimulated the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement.

The Emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Hitherto, only a handful of other scholars have interpreted the recent increase in political organization and cultural promotion among Gullah Geechee as the formation and consolidation of a social movement (Hargrove 2005, 246–47; Matory 2008, 971–72; National

[52] Historically, speaking the Gullah Geechee language was discouraged in schools, which of course was a more relevant factor in urbanized areas where greater access existed to formal education for much of the early to mid-20th century. I will elaborate further on the stigmatization of Gullah Geechee culture and identity in Chapter 4.

Park Service 2005, 93; Smalls 2012, 154–55; Smith 1991). And even the majority of these studies engages only to a limited extent with the theoretical and historical context necessary to develop a deeper understanding of collective action among Gullah Geechee. As a consequence, both the history of what I refer to as the Gullah Geechee Movement as well as its present configuration have been engaged with insufficiently, a lacuna that I hope my thesis will help to fill. This section is concerned with shedding light upon the conditions of the emergence of the movement, which will lay the foundation for the empirical analysis in the three following chapters focused upon contemporary dynamics.

The only academic text that comprehensively engages with the history of the movement was written by John P. Smith more than 20 years ago and is not only in dire need of an update but also rests on a number of misconceptions about the political history of Gullah Geechee people (1991). Smith's essay is predicated upon the assumption that Gullah Geechee had lived isolated in rural pockets of the Lowcountry until the latter part of the 20th century (1991, 291–92). He therefore hypothesizes that the emergence of what he understands as a "preservation movement" among Gullah Geechee had not been influenced by other major Black Liberation Struggles, such as the Civil Rights Movement, but had developed separately during the 1970s from highly localized efforts to protect people's land base (1991, 288–289, 296). As we have seen in the preceding section, this image of Gullah Geechee history is fundamentally flawed. Despite these limitations, Smith raises several important points about the early stages of the Gullah Geechee Movement, which I will return to below.

Another central text on the subject is the Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study conducted by the National Park Service (NPS) (2005).[53] While dedicating only five pages to the analysis of the recent growth of political institutionalization among Gullah Geechee, the study has probably had the greatest impact upon how the movement is currently being framed within academia (National Park Service 2005, 93–98). The authors analyze the increase of collective action among Gullah Geechee in terms of anthropologist F.C. Wallace's concept of revitalization movements (National Park Service 2005, 93). Wallace's original article from 1956 sought to explain the occurrence of movements within different geographical and social contexts that all similarly focus on what he referred to as the re-arrangement of "cultural systems" (1956, 264). He argued that revitalization, which in Wallace's understanding can take different forms, such as messianism or traditionalism, serves the function of allowing groups to cope with increased external pressures and re-establish a cultural equilibrium that enables the respective people to better make sense of their

[53] The NPS study was instrumental for the establishment of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in 2006, which I will discuss extensively in Chapter 3.

changing environment (1956, 266–67). The NPS study applies this model of revitalization in order to describe and explain how Gullah Geechee people "grapple with the increasing forces of modernization, urbanization, and globalization that endanger their collective cultural memory and their traditional social identities" (2005, 93).

This notion of cultural revitalization was taken up by several studies that followed, and though not all of them explicitly reference the NPS study or Wallace's work, I contend that a connection is likely (Barnes and Steen 2012, 204; Matory 2008, 971; Smalls 2012, 154–55). Notably among these is the work of anthropologist J. Lorand Matory already mentioned earlier in this chapter (2008, 2015). While Matory principally focuses on the concept of isolation, he also engages with recent dynamics among the group. In his analysis, Matory speaks of a "Gullah/Geechee Renaissance," which, he contends, "like all renaissances and revitalization movements, is as much a novel invention as a rebirth" (2008, 971). Matory examines several instances of such revitalization within the movement, some of which I will return to in the following chapters. This social constructionist perspective on Gullah Geechee was then further built upon by anthropologist Melissa Cooper (2017). Her historical ethnography, *Making Gullah*, engages with how certain intellectual and popular discourses, such as the earlier discussed search for African survivals or Black Feminism in the 1970s, profoundly impacted understandings of Gullah Geechee culture and identity over the course of the 20th century (2017, 10–12).

All of the aforementioned scholars' work greatly influenced my own effort to trace the history of the Gullah Geechee Movement. That being said, I also contend that they share a major limitation: each of the cited authors frame political organization among the group, first and foremost, as revolving around culture. Accordingly, they categorize the Gullah Geechee Movement as one of revitalization or cultural renaissance. This framing potentially contributes to earlier discussed tendencies within both academia and popular discourses to neglect the group's involvement in politico-legal and socio-economic struggles and the intersections between these spheres and matters of culture. This is not to say that efforts of cultural revitalization do not play a central role in collective action among Gullah Geechee, but rather that to identify the entire movement with that concept does not adequately grasp the core struggles the group is engaged in. At this point, I want to highlight again that Queen Quet, Chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, should be regarded as a pioneer in the writing of Gullah Geechee political history as well as in the identification of continuities between past Black Liberation Struggles and contemporary collective action among Gullah Geechee people (e.g. Queen Quet 2006a, 323–25). Her work has fundamentally informed the argument that I will be making in this section.

As I will demonstrate over the course of my writing, the Gullah Geechee Movement represents a multi-dimensional struggle that seeks to effect change on politico-legal, economic, as well as cultural levels. It is for that very reason that I chose to use such a broad descriptor—Gullah Geechee Movement—so as not to inscribe any particular emphasis. Moreover, no established term for the movement yet exists among Gullah Geechee themselves. While most of my interlocutors would certainly agree with the argument that there is a movement among the group, and several explicitly said so, it is not common practice (yet) to speak of a Gullah Geechee Movement. I thus want to leave open the opportunity for multiple readings of how the movement may be further qualified. One might of course pose the question why it is necessary to speak of a movement at all. As we will see in the following, political organization among Gullah Geechee did not just occur spontaneously but evolved as interconnected, highly coordinated, and sustained collective efforts that over the past decades, led to the creation of several transregional institutions. The concept of a social movement allows to make visible these very connections, counter the tendency in public discourses to represent Gullah Geechee history and culture as marginal, and, thus, contribute to a deeper understanding of collective action among the group.

From White Preservationism to Gullah/Geechee Nationalism

The earliest explicit efforts to "preserve" Gullah Geechee culture can be found in the late 19th century. Motivated by the perceived threat of its impending disappearance, a wide range of actors, including Federal military officers, government officials, civilian photographers, nostalgic planter elites, and leftist folklorists, sought to document Gullah Geechee heritage (Ruffins 2008, 216). In the early 20th century, as discussed in the previous section, Gullah Geechee became of central concern to academic debates on race, history, and the African Diaspora as well as to nostalgic representations of the Antebellum South (Cooper 2017, 19). The relationships between these scholars, journalists, writers, and other early "preservationists," on the one hand, and Gullah Geechee people, on the other, were defined by highly unequal power relations. Throughout this entire period, it was outsiders to Gullah Geechee communities, predominantly European Americans, who directed efforts to record, interpret, and "protect" the groups' heritage (Ruffins 2008, 216). Gullah Geechee people themselves principally functioned as objects of study or as characters in fictional romanticized accounts of the past. As Fath Davis Ruffins observes, these early representations were ripe with "paternalistic condescension, socio-political misrepresentation, African romanticism, unabashed artistic celebration, and outright stereotyping—sometimes by black outsiders" (Ruffins 2008, 216; see also Cooper 2017, 66–67).

A major turning point was Lorenzo Dow Turner's seminal study of the Gullah Geechee language (1949). Often described as the "father of Gullah Geechee Studies," Turner, an African American linguist, was the first to provide concrete evidence of the continuities between the enslaved Africans' cultures and the practices, institutions, and knowledge of their Gullah Geechee descendants (Campbell 2011, 77–78; Cooper 2017, 102). He not only established Gullah Geechee as a distinct language—consisting of elements from a range of African languages and different variations of English—but also as a culture in its own right.

The advent of the Black Liberation Struggles in the 1950s, stimulated further crucial developments both in academia and among Gullah Geechee communities. More specifically, Black Studies, Afrocentrism, and other Black intellectual movements led to major shifts in regard to the authors and the focus of works on Gullah Geechee (Campbell 2011, 81; Cooper 2017, 163–64) . Scholars as well as fiction writers developed a particular interest in the group as a case of African Diasporic perseverance and resilience in the face of the inhumanity of enslavement (Cooper 2017, 155). Melissa Cooper highlights the importance especially of the work of the Black Feminist writers, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall, who reinterpreted early 20th century writings about Gullah Geechee folklore to create accounts of Black survival and the restorative power of African roots (Cooper 2017, 164–65; M. Lewis and Cooper 2020, 220).[54] All of these works, both academic and fictional, contributed greatly to a transformation of the image of Gullah Geechee from a sign of "backwardness" and reason for shame to that of a distinct culture and source of pride which people were willing to embrace and fight for.

Parallel to these developments in academia and literature, Gullah Geechee communities themselves were engaged in struggles on the streets. As demonstrated in the previous section, the group did not only bring forth prominent Civil Rights leaders, such as Septima Clarke and Esau Jenkins, but was involved collectively in the fight for liberation (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 53). A number of major events that occurred in the Lowcountry during that period, such as the Cigar Factory Strike (1945-46) and the Hospital Workers' Strike (1969) in Charleston, shook the status quo and left a strong mark on the early generation of activists who helped shape the Gullah Geechee Movement (see Queen Quet 2006a, 307). Their involvement in these struggles, as several of my older Gullah Geechee research participants recounted, and learning about the continuities between the practices and knowledge of their African ancestors and Gullah Geechee culture

[54] See in particular: *Song of Solomon* (Morrison 1977), *Praisesong for a Widow* (Marshall 1983), *Mama Day* (Naylor 1988) and *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1991).

awakened a new pride in their Blackness and ancestry (see e.g. Blake and Simmons 2008, 5–6, 14; Campbell 2010, 288–89, 2011, 81; Willis 1993, VII).

In addition to these changes and events on a political and cultural level, the already mounting socio-economic pressures on Gullah Geechee communities through automatization and increasing privatization, were further exacerbated by the economic recessions during the 1970s and 80s (Smalls 2012, 155; Smith 1991, 294). This stimulated various local efforts among Gullah Geechee communities across the Lowcountry to organize and protect their land base, which, as Smith observes, was commonly led by "a returning black leadership cadre with a heightened interest in cultural survival and land preservation" (1991, 285). Contrary to Smith's premise that until that point Gullah Geechee had lived in isolation, it was the described involvement of the group in broader social dynamics that produced this very "cadre" of leaders. The experiences that early Gullah Geechee activists made as part of larger Black movements provided them not only with inspiration but also with the organizational skills and expertise necessary to mobilize supporters and establish institutions for the protection of Gullah Geechee communities. Moreover, it may be argued that the success of Civil Rights litigation which formally secured basic citizenship rights paved the way for the more specific endeavors that characterize the Gullah Geechee Movement, such as land rights claims.

Another major structural influence upon the formation of the movement that has so far been almost entirely neglected by other authors was the emergence of indigeneity as an influential political and legal category during the 1980s. In the wake of the various liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s saw the emergence of what some authors refer to as a "global indigenous movement" (La Cadena and Starn 2007, 10). In 1982, these struggles for the rights of indigenous peoples prominently gained support from the United Nations through the establishment of its Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which significantly contributed to the transformation of the notion of indigenous peoples into a powerful legal concept (La Cadena and Starn 2007, 10; J. L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 2009, 47; Povinelli 2002, 22–23; Yeh 2007, 69). The ways in which the notion of indigeneity has since then been used by indigenous groups of people in their demands for collective rights to land, the recognition of cultural differences, and the right to self-determination, fundamentally informed how Gullah Geechee activists frame their own claims for justice as well as their self-identification, specifically in relation to other African Americans.

I argue that it was the intersection of all of the above influences that eventually stimulated the creation of institutions that explicitly understood and referred to themselves as "Gullah" and/or "Geechee." The first of these were cultural festivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Cooper 2017, 178–79; Smith 1991, 295–96). The oldest among them is the

Georgia Sea Island Festival on St. Simons Island, Georgia, created in 1977 by Mable Hillery and Bessie Jones of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, followed by the Heritage Days in 1981, held by Penn Center on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, and the Gullah Festival in 1986, founded by Rozalie Pazant, her three daughters Charlotte Pazant Brown, Lolita Pazant Harris, and Reba Pazant, and Marlena McGhee in Beaufort, South Carolina. Curiously, each of these festivals had its roots in other long standing community celebrations which brought together the respective local populations, such as Harvest Day or Decoration Day.[55] The shift in focus onto Gullah Geechee heritage took place only during the late 1970s and 80s as the result of above-described broader social developments.

While at first it may seem as if these festivals were principally cultural events, celebrating musical and culinary traditions, handicrafts, and storytelling, their programming, to this day, has always also included workshops on economic empowerment that focus on topics such as land retention or personal finance. Furthermore, the very affirmation of Gullah Geechee identity at a time when the terms were still widely regarded as insults, has to be regarded as a countervailing political act in itself. The festivals provided the opportunity for Gullah Geechee and other African Americans to come together, reclaim their identities, and empower themselves. As one of my interlocutors, Belinda*, a retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s, shared with me in a conversation about the Gullah Festival:

> It [the Gullah Festival] was a safe space, it was a Black event. It was a space where we could be ourselves and feel safe and not be bothered by White people." (2022)

As implied by the names of the founders of these festivals, it was usually women who spearheaded such efforts. Beoku Betts observes that there is in fact a long history of female leadership particularly in the religious and cultural sphere among Gullah Geechee communities (Beoku-Betts 1995, 536; see also Carney 2000, 138–40; National Park Service 2005, 75; D. Rosengarten 2018, 103–4). A case in point and crucial example of another early effort of affirming Gullah Geechee identity, even preceding the cultural festivals, is Vertamae Smart-Grosvenors cookbook-cum-memoir *Vibration Cooking: Or, the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970). While Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity are not the explicit focus of her book, Smart-Grosvenor's autobiographical writing creates a hitherto non-existent space for experiences like hers, re-appropriating Geechee as a central part of her identity (1970, xvi–xxi). A similar example can be found in the work of female sweetgrass basket makers. In the 1970s sweetgrass basket making became the focus of a number of documentaries, craft

[55] See the official websites of the festivals: https://ssiheritagecoalition.org/ga-sea-islands-festival/, https://www.penncenter.com/heritage-days, and https://www.originalgullahfestival.org/.

development programs, and exhibits, propelling a number of basket makers from Mt. Pleasant into the national and in some cases even international spotlight (D. Rosengarten 2018, 105).[56] Yet again, the contribution of these women did not principally lie in a direct focus on Gullah Geechee but rather in their assertion of basket making as an art form, as a cultural tradition that is worthful and reason to be proud of one's heritage.

Moving on to the 1980s, one of the most important institutions, apart from the cultural festivals, to struggle for the protection of Gullah Geechee livelihoods and culture was Penn Center. Penn Center, as described in the previous section, was founded in 1862 as Penn School on St. Helena Island, SC, and from its very beginnings played a central role in efforts to "preserve" Gullah Geechee heritage. Its impact during its early period, however, was highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it actively supported the continuation of basket making, on the other, it discouraged its students from speaking Gullah Geechee, deeming the language a sign of "ignorance" (Hargrove 2005, 97–98; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 52; Smalls 2012, 152–53). The school closed in 1948 and was reopened two years later as Penn Center with its first African American director, Thomas Barnwell (National Park Service 2005, 154). Its work then began to focus on community services which over the years included, amongst others, community health care, counseling on land use and property law, sustainability, as well as different educational services and workshops on various topics. Under the leadership of Emory Campbell, who served as director from 1980 to 2002, Penn Center developed programming explicitly centered on Gullah Geechee history and culture, prominently the above-mentioned cultural festival, Heritage Days.[57]

Penn Center also played an important role in organizing a series of "homecomings" of Gullah Geechee people to Sierra Leone (National Park Service 2005, 118–19). The initiator of these visits was the US-American anthropologist Joseph Opala (Matory 2008, 968–69). Through his work on the role of Bunce Island, Sierra Leone, in the deportation of African peoples to Charleston, Opala came to identify close historical and cultural ties between Sierra Leone and Gullah Geechee ([1987] 2009). In collaboration with Emory Campbell, he facilitated a visit of Joseph Momo, then president of Sierra Leone, to Penn Center in 1988. Momo in turn first invited a small group of people led by Campbell and Opala to come to Sierra Leone, after which followed the first official homecoming in 1989 (Opala, interview 2022). This and the following homecomings as well as the documentaries which were made

[56] The film "Gullah Baskets" from 1971, released by South Carolina ETV, featuring basket maker Enda Rouse, and narrated by James Clyburn, future author of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Act, is yet another case of an early appropriation of the identifiers "Gullah" and/or "Geechee" (D. Rosengarten 2018, 104–5).
[57] See also the official website of Penn Center: https://www.penncenter.com/.

about these visits had a great and lasting impact upon Gullah Geechee people's connection with their African ancestry.[58] As Opala told me in an interview, to directly experience the ties between African cultures and Gullah Geechee heritage, through, for instance, hearing the similarities between Krio and the Gullah Geechee language, made a lasting impression upon the people who went on these journeys (Interview 2022). As a result, the relationship between Gullah Geechee and Sierra Leone is still imagined as particularly close, visible, amongst others, in the frequent identification of the country as the place of origin of sweetgrass basket making in the leaflets available at many basket makers' stands.[59]

In the early 1990s, Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* and the Nickelodeon show *Gullah Gullah Island*, created by Ronald and Natalie Daise, popularized Gullah Geechee well beyond the Lowcountry. Dash's film, set in a fictional Gullah Geechee community on the coast of South Carolina, is seen as a classic among Black independent movies. Anthropologist Melissa Cooper views the film as historic not only because of its decidedly female Black gaze, but also since, as she argues, it "cut through many of the negative assumptions about Black Low Country communities and their connections to slavery and Africa" (M. Lewis and Cooper 2020, 219). Some Gullah Geechee descendants, however, express ambivalence towards the film. The movie is well known for its scenes of Black people dressed in white clothes against the backdrop of mystical rural settlements and beautiful beaches. Several of my research participants struggled with this highly stylized image of Gullah Geechee, feeling that it was not only a monolithic but also inaccurate portrayal of the culture, even if the intention was to represent it in a positive manner (see also Hargrove 2000, 105–6). What particularly bothered people who work in the field of public history is their regular experience of visitors coming to the Lowcountry with the expectation that Gullah Geechee look exactly as in the movie and can be "visited" somewhere on an island sitting on the beach, clad in white. One of my research participants, Fred*, a historian in his mid-60s, furthermore expressed frustration about the incorrect representation of the language: "I do not know what it was, but that was certainly not Gullah in the film but some Hollywood version of it" (Interview 2022). Nonetheless, several of my interlocutors also emphasized that the film still played an important role in creating awareness about the group and represented a great improvement over earlier depictions of Gullah Geechee.

[58] See the documentaries: *Family Across the Sea* (1991), *The Language You Cry In* (1998), *Priscilla's Legacy* (2014) and *Gullah Roots* (2020.

[59] Curiously, as Dale Rosengarten and Enid Schildkrout convincingly argue, the cultural origins of the specific basket making techniques used among Gullah Geechee most likely lie in the Senegambia region and Angola and not Sierra Leone, despite certain similarities (Schildkrout and D. Rosengarten 2008, 24-27, 42-43).

Gullah Gullah Island was a highly popular children's TV show, which aired on Nickelodeon from 1994 to 1998. It was written by Ronald and Natalie Daise who also played the main characters and had already been involved in education about Gullah Geechee history and culture for several years prior. In 1986, Ronald Daise, who hails from Beaufort, South Carolina, published his first novel *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage* based upon which he and his wife, Natalie, created a multimedia traveling show, *Sea Island Montage*, that sought to create awareness about Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity through music, dances, and theatrical sketches (1987). To this day the Daises are among the most highly regarded Gullah Geechee cultural performers, artists, and activists. Most of my younger African American interlocutors said they first encountered Gullah Geechee culture through *Gullah Gullah Island*. At the time, it was a favorite among Black kids across the nation and several of my Gullah Geechee research participants stated that it was formative for their personal journey of self-discovery.

With this significant growth in awareness of Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity in the latter decades of the 20th century, the 1990s and early 2000s eventually saw the beginnings of the institutions that characterize the movement today: In the late 1990s a so-called "Gullah Consortium" was created by a number of community leaders, consisting of Gullah Geechee and non-Gullah Geechee from various walks of life, with the aim of determining how federal assistance might be gained in protecting Gullah Geechee livelihoods and culture (H. Frazier 2011, 209–11; National Park Service 2005, F33). At around the same time, in 1996, Marquetta Goodwine created the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition (GGSIC), a transregional organization that seeks to bring together Gullah Geechee organizers and communities from across the Lowcountry (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 58). Four years later, in 2000, the Gullah/Geechee Nation, one of the two largest Gullah Geechee entities today, was founded with the election of Marquetta Goodwine as Queen Quet and head of state (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 65–66). The work of the Gullah Consortium and the efforts of other community leaders, prominently among them also Queen Quet, Marquetta Goodwine, eventually culminated in the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in 2006, the second of the two major Gullah Geechee institutions and a federally designated National Heritage Area managed by a Commission constituted of Gullah Geechee community leaders and experts (H. Frazier 2011, 209–11). A detailed analysis of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and their central role within the movement will be at the center of the first of the three empirical chapters that follow.

In the last couple of decades, the movement has thus experienced a significant increase in formal institutionalization. And even though many challenges remain, in comparison to the earlier described beginnings of "preservation" efforts in the early 20th century, Gullah Geechee people have gained an unprecedented degree of control over the narrative of their past, present, and future.

Conclusion

Evidently, the Gullah Geechee Movement did not emerge from a vacuum. Contrary to John P. Smith's analysis of the history of the movement I contend that broader social dynamics were highly influential in its formation. Centuries of resistance, during the period of enslavement, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow created an infrastructure, for instance, in the form of praise houses and churches as gathering spaces for political organization, or also in the form of music, that Gullah Geechee activists were able to have recourse to. One such example with a far-reaching impact is the Lowcountry spiritual "Keep Your Hands on the Plow," which was transformed into one of the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" (Queen Quet 2006a, 300–301). As argued in the preceding section, I understand this infrastructure as a particular manifestation of what Cedric Robinson referred to as the Black Radical Tradition—a "collective consciousness," in the sense of shared values, knowledge, and attitudes, as well as concrete practices shaped by the historical struggles for Black Liberation ([1983] 2000, 171). The protests and organizing of the 1960s and 70s represent the most immediate context of that kind and made a formative impression on the early generation of Gullah Geechee activists. We have seen, too, that the movement was not only inspired by a Black tradition of resistance but also by transnational indigenous struggles, which, as I will engage with in more detail in the following chapter, fundamentally informed Gullah Geechee entities and activists both on the level of self-identification as well as in terms of how descendants frame their claims for justice. In addition to the impact of these social movements, the works of academics and writers, particularly Black Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, greatly supported the development of a positive self-consciousness among Gullah Geechee as a culturally distinct group. Finally, the increase of socio-economic pressures in the 1970s, which accelerated the already ongoing dynamics of displacement, further stimulated organized resistance among Gullah Geechee communities.

Against this backdrop, we can identify the beginnings of institutionalization processes and collective action explicitly focused on the protection of the Gullah Geechee people's livelihood and culture, for one, in the citizen groups and public education programs created in response to dynamics of socio-economic marginalization, and, for another, in the early

cultural festivals established in the late 1970s and 1980s, the first institutions specifically dedicated to Gullah Geechee culture and identity. These two developments were in fact closely tied to one another insofar as the festivals also included programming on economic empowerment and land rights, and as land struggles among the group have always been inextricably linked to the protection of communities' cultural integrity. Far from being solely or even principally concerned with cultural matters, the Gullah Geechee Movement, from its very beginnings, was thus defined by efforts to effect transformation on multiple levels, an observation that I will elaborate on further in the main part of the thesis (see Smith 1991, 294–95). Another crucial aspect to be emphasized here is the central role occupied by women within the Gullah Geechee Movement both in the early institutionalization processes and at present. As we have seen above, female leaders often stood at the very center of political organization among the group. This includes Civil Rights leaders, founders of the early Gullah Geechee festivals as well as cultural innovators such as sweetgrass basket makers. John Gardner, a public historian at McLeod Plantation, explained that there is in fact a long tradition of female leadership within Gullah Geechee communities (Interview 2022). And, as we will see in the following, most of the central Gullah Geechee institutions today are still led by women.

Recent developments, specifically the founding of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the creation of the GGCHC, show how far the movement has come since its beginnings. Gullah Geechee have clearly achieved an unprecedented degree of institutionalization and public recognition of their culture. Still, communities face a number of challenges. Apart from the ongoing socio-economic pressures, several crucial concerns—such as who can legitimately speak for the highly heterogenous group, how exactly communities should relate to state institutions, what it means to be Gullah Geechee in the 21st century, or how the increasing commodification of the culture should be dealt with—are not unanimously agreed upon. To understand the contestations around these and other matters, as well as the central visions that animate the movement, its central actors, the relations among them, and the ways in which the movement is integrated into broader social dynamics, represents the central objective of the thesis and will be engaged with in the three following chapters.

Chapter 3: On the Political-Legal Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

This is the first of the three empirical chapters that are concerned with contemporary dynamics around the Gullah Geechee Movement. Each of them is explicitly dedicated to one of the dimensions of justice that I discussed in the introduction—politico-legal, cultural, and socio-economic—though at the same time, the engagement with intersections will play an integral role as well, given the earlier described ties between these dimensions.

The starting point of my analysis is the internal differentiation of the Gullah Geechee Movement on an organizational and politico-legal level. I will discuss the institutionalization processes that have taken place within the movement over the past couple of years, the political-legal status of the group, and the broader context in which Gullah Geechee activists and institutions situate their claims for justice. The chapter will place a particular focus on the two largest Gullah Geechee entities to date, the Gullah/Geechee Nation (GGN) and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission (GGCHCC). They are currently by far the most prominent and influential Gullah Geechee institutions connecting numerous central actors within and beyond the Lowcountry. Curiously though, there are very few studies that critically engage with these two entities and none that employ a comparative perspective onto them. While the movement is ultimately to be regarded as highly heterogenous, I will argue that the work and visions of the GGN and the GGCHCC reflect many of the elements that define collective action among Gullah Geechee today. Moreover, they may also be read as representing two of the major approaches to achieving justice within the movement.

In the following, I will first focus on the Gullah/Geechee Nation, its history, organizational structure, vision, and concrete projects that it is engaged in as well as views about the Gullah/Geechee Nation shared by my interlocutors. The same structure—history, organizational structure, vision, concrete projects, and views among my interlocutors—is applied in the third part where I turn my attention to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. The middle section, on the other hand, will engage with the notion of Gullah Geechee as a quasi-indigenous group that has become central to the work of most actors within the movement as well as to the ways in which Gullah Geechee institutions frame their claims to justice and self-understanding.

The Gullah/Geechee Nation

Vignette

Queen Quet emerges from the back of the room, wearing a simple dress and balancing a basket on her head. She moves towards and into the circle we formed, singing,

> Oh freedom,
> oh freedom,
> oh freedom over me,
> and before I'd be a slave,
> I'd be buried in my grave,
> and go home to my Lord,
> and be free![60]

She places the basket onto a bench at the edge of the circle and after a moment of silence begins to speak, her voice deep and mournful. She speaks of enslavement, the hardships the African ancestors had to face laboring on the plantations, and the countless contributions they made to the history of the country. She speaks of community life and of resistance, the Stono Rebellion and the ancestors' constant struggle for freedom. She speaks of the misconstruction of Black people as "lazy" and "ignorant" and of the stigmatization of Gullah/Geechee within the educational system. She speaks of social media and the ways in which large tech-companies have come to profoundly impact our lives, of false friends, and virtual realities. She speaks of the danger of forgetting where one comes from and who came before, stressing the importance of guidance by one's elders. And she speaks of the value of the collective, of how it was the people who constitute and define the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

Queen Quet speaks in Gullah/Geechee. I miss some of the details but understand the main points she makes, even if only roughly. The jokes, which I can often only identify as such when others start to laugh, are the most difficult to follow. I have to concentrate just to pick up a few words here and there, and not only because of the speed at which Gullah/Geechee is commonly spoken. From time-to-time Queen Quet converses with some of the other representatives of the Nation and with people from the audience, her performance seamlessly moving between past, present, and future, between the imagined, re-enacted, and real. Mid-sentence, Queen Quet switches to English and directly addresses the audience, saying that the language we just heard was Gullah/Geechee, the native tongue of her people, but that since the majority of visitors were not Gullah/Geechee speakers she would use English for the remainder of the opening ceremony. She notes that it was sometimes difficult to come to Charleston because people in the urbanized areas of the Lowcountry were not as

[60] The lyrics cited here are from the English version of the Spiritual "Oh, Freedom," which Queen Quet sang in Gullah/Geechee.

free and expressive as in the rural parts. She says that we were asked to stand in a circle for that very reason, so that we come together in a form different from the "Western linear way of thinking." She says that here, in this moment, we could shout, clap, dance, and articulate ourselves whenever and however we needed.

The atmosphere does indeed loosen up considerably soon after. As Queen Quet begins to discuss how the internalization of oneself as inferior serves as a crucial tool of control and domination and speaks of the importance of embracing one's heritage and seeing oneself as worthful, the audience's reactions become more and more lively, and a steady background of emotional responsiveness evolves out of calls, applause, people snapping their fingers, and other expressions of wonder, surprise, and affirmation. I, too, begin to share this growing feeling of excitement that Queen Quet incites with her performance and words. In that moment I feel that I am witness to and part of something relevant, that I am within a space of radical social critique and empowerment.

***

The above experience left a lasting impression upon me. I chose it as the opening vignette for this section not only because it encapsulates several of the central elements of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's vision—communalism, respect for the ancestors and elders, spirituality, and radical social critique—but also because in that situation I actually felt the power of that vision, which, as I contend, showcases one of the greatest strengths of the Gullah/Geechee Nation: it moves people. The event was a Black History Month celebration taking place at the Cannon Street Arts Center in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2022. We were about 40 to 50 people of different ages, the majority Black and from Charleston. When I entered the building only a few people had arrived yet. Several stands had been placed along the sides of the rectangular room with different small Gullah/Geechee businesses offering paintings, natural oils, lotions, and other body care products, clothes, jewelry, as well as literature, quilts, shirts, and other products sold directly by the Gullah/Geechee Nation. After a while, as the room had gotten more crowded, we were asked to come together in a circle by a representative of the Nation, Elder Carlie Towne, Minister of Information, after which Queen Quet began the above-described performance.

Queen Quet in fact begins any events, ceremonies, or presentations by first speaking in Gullah/Geechee. Dean*, one of my White research participants from Charleston, observed with regards to the performative effects of this, "people do not understand a word and then she [Queen Quet] switches to perfect English, and it just hits people how these are two different languages and how [Gullah/Geechee] people are actually bilingual" (Interview 2022). As he notes, to hear the Gullah/Geechee language in immediate comparison to English

gives the audience a vivid experience of the cultural distinctiveness of the group as well as of the ability of Gullah/Geechee speakers to effortlessly move between these two languages, subverting mis-constructions of the group as "ignorant" and of its language as "bad English." During Queen Quet's performance it was, curiously, so-called standard English that appeared as an aberration, since she only used that language when impersonating how White oppressors deprecated Gullah/Geechee. Gullah/Geechee was thus transformed into the norm and her later speaking of English with the audience represented a courtesy, the opening up of an intimate place to us as outsiders. This assertion of an autonomous discursive space may be seen as representative of much of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's politics. Another case in point is the clear difference Queen Quet drew between what she referred to as Western modes of thought and practice, on the one hand, and Gullah/Geechee culture, on the other. This was, amongst others, signified through the circle we were asked to form—a crucial symbol of the communal and holistic vision of justice of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Queen Quet's social critique mirrored this circularity, moving back and forth between past and present, making visible both the continuities of oppression and resistance. This radical vision is complemented by her captivating performances and presentations, as I vividly experienced myself, not only at this event, but repeatedly over the course of my research. It is that combination of a highly charismatic leader and a fundamental critique of the status quo which is at the very heart of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

In the following I will elaborate further on the points briefly touched upon above and, first, engage with the history of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, discuss its self-understanding, demands, and aims, after which I will analyze contestations among the community over the Nation's claims to authority, and, to then finally, focus on its concrete projects and vision of justice.

A Brief History of the Gullah/Geechee Nation

The institutional foundations for the Gullah/Geechee Nation were paved by Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition (GGSIC), created 1996, in St. Helena Island, South Carolina, by Marquetta L. Goodwine, who has since been enstooled as Queen Quet of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a, 2016; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 58, 65-66; see also Hargrove 2005, 248, 252-253; Matory 2015, 219–20; National Park Service 2005, 95–96). The GGSIC was the first Gullah/Geechee organization to operate across regional borders within and beyond the Lowcountry as well as the first institution to contain both the words "Gullah" and "Geechee" (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2016). Until that point the efforts of many Gullah/Geechee institutions had been bound regionally, the term "Gullah" had been used

principally for and by people from South Carolina, whereas "Geechee" referred to communities in Georgia, and neither the descendants from Florida and North Carolina nor the diaspora of Gullah/Geechee in other parts of the United States and the Caribbean had yet been regarded as part of the larger collective.[61] Foreshadowing one of the foundational principles of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, the GGSIC envisioned all of these descendants as belonging to one cultural community. The institution's self-described mission reads as follows,

- advocate for the rights of all Gullah/Geechee people around the world,
- promote and participate in the preservation of Gullah/Geechee history, heritage, culture, and language,
- work toward Sea Island land re-acquisition and maintenance,
- celebrate Gullah/Geechee culture through artistic and educational means electronically and via "grassroots scholarship. (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2016)

While the GGSIC has since been succeeded by the Gullah/Geechee Nation as the central representative entity of its followers, the former is still active to this day, collaborating with the Nation amongst others by sponsoring and organizing various events and projects (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2016).

The other major institution that laid important groundwork for the GGN is the Gullah Geechee People Foundation (GGPF)—later renamed Gullah/Geechee Angel Network (GGAN)—founded by Carlie Towne, now Elder of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and Minister of Information, in Charleston in 1998 (Hargrove 2000, 132).[62] The GGAN focuses on arts, education, digital literacy, and health, and it serves as the official 501(c)(3) non-profit of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2022b). From its very beginnings the GGAN, then as the GGPF, worked very closely with the GGSIC. As described on the Gullah/Geechee Nation's website, apart from the efforts of Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine and the GGSIC, Elder Carlie Towne's work in collaboration with the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities was instrumental for the early nation building process:

> From 1999 to 2000 Elder Carlie Towne worked under the guidance of the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities (IHRAAM) to lead

[61] It should be noted that there still are and always have been variations to the use of the terms, "Gullah" and "Geechee." While most of my Gullah/Geechee research participants did indeed rather connect "Gullah" with South Carolina and "Geechee" with Georgia, some said that in their understanding "Gullah" refers to the language and "Geechee" to the people, and yet others, among them also descendants from South Carolina, stated that they had heard the term "Gullah" for the first time in the early 1990s and had only used "Geechee" before, both for the language and the people.

[62] See also the official website of the Gullah/Geechee Angel Network: http://www.gullahgeecheeangelnetwork.com/home.htm.

> native Gullah/Geechees in standing up for their right to self-determination. (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020a)

Created against the backdrop of the rise of transnational indigenous movements in 1985, the IHRAAM is an international NGO with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.[63] Its self-described aim is to "assist individuals, minorities, unrepresented peoples and nations to become familiar with and gain access to international human rights law and its enforcement mechanisms."[64] The IHRAAM submits written and oral interventions, reports, and petitions, and supports historically marginalized groups of people to participate in international fora and defend their human rights, focusing on the situation of "African Americans, Gullah/Geechees, Puerto Ricans, Kashmiris, the Lil'wat and other indigenous nations in Alaska and Hawaii."[65] Specifically, the leadership of the late Dr. Y.N. Kly (1935-2011), co-founder of the IHRAAM, had a profound impact upon the founding of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (see Hargrove 2005, 248–49). Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine writes in her foreword to the book *Invisible War*, edited by Kly:

> He [Kly] was the person that sounded the drum that drew me into the halls of the United Nations to not only learn the stories of other freedom fighters, but to tell the story of the Gullah/Geechee and our continued journey to freedom. (2006b, xviii)

Kly, an African American professor of political science and international law (last working at the School of Human Justice, University of Regina, Canada), wrote extensively on the rights of oppressed groups of people. He particularly advocated for the extension of minority rights to self-determination for African Americans as a means to overcome historically accumulated disparities (see Hargrove 2005, 248). The collaboration between Kly and Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine began with the book project, *The Legacy of Igbo Landing*, in 1997 (see Hargrove 2005, 249). In the years that followed, Kly's and the IHRAAM's support proved crucial to the creation of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Anthropologist Melissa Hargrove, who worked closely with the Nation, describes how Kly and the IHRAAM were directly involved in the development of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's Constitution and, furthermore, facilitated Queen Quet's participation in international dialogues on minority and indigenous peoples' rights (2005, 262–63). A central event in this regard was the United Nation's invitation of Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine to speak before the assembly in Geneva as a delegate of the IHRAAM and representative of the GGSIC, where she formally requested support from the UN Commission on Human Rights in the struggles of Gullah/Geechee to retain their

[63] See the official website of the IHRAAM: https://ihraam.org/about-ihraam/.
[64] https://ihraam.org/about-ihraam/.
[65] https://ihraam.org/about-ihraam/.

land base and ways of life (Hargrove 2005, 250–52; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 65; United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1999, 414). Since then, Queen Quet regularly represented the GGSIC, and later the Gullah/Geechee Nation, before the United Nations and other international institutions, and herself became a member of the IHRAAMs directorate.[66]

As mentioned above, the nation building process that followed collaboration with the IHRAAM was co-directed by Elder Carlie Towne. It was under her leadership that the GGPF finally created a petition in 1999, entitled "Who Speak fa We," that called for a democratic voting process to create a Gullah/Geechee nation:

> [The petition] was placed online for voting and delivered in person to numerous Gullah/Geechee businesses, events, and institutions so that native Gullah/Geechees locally and those that were around the world could vote fa a "head pun de bode of de Gullah/Geechee." (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020a)

After a year-long voting process, as stated on its website, the Gullah/Geechee Nation was officially created on July 2, 2000, with the enstoolment of Marquetta Goodwine as Queen Quet, Chieftess, and head of state, and the establishment of its administrative center on St. Helena Island, South Carolina (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a). Since its foundation the Gullah/Geechee Nation has built an extensive national and international network of collaborators, sponsors, and followers from various fields and has had a profound impact upon the Gullah/Geechee Movement. However, it also represents a highly polarizing entity which incites both great admiration but also sharp criticism, a tension I will return to further below.

Self-Understanding and Claims to Authority

At the center of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's self-understanding lies its assertion that it represented "a nation within a nation" that existed "from the time of chattel enslavement in the United States until [it] officially became an internationally recognized nation" (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a). At present though, the Nation does not possess any rights to self-representation, self-government, nor to a political territory under United States law. One of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's central demands is therefore to gain "official recognition of [its] governance (minority) rights necessary to accomplish [its] mission" from the federal government (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a). The entity's self-described mission and aims as formulated in the Gullah/Geechee Nation Declaration read as follows:

> **Mission**
>
> To preserve, protect, and promote our history, culture, language, and homeland and to institute and demand official recognition of the governance (minority) rights necessary to accomplish our mission to take care of our community through collective

[66] https://ihraam.org/about-ihraam/directorate/.

efforts which will provide a healthy environment, care for the well beings of each person, and economic empowerment.

Goals

As we are the authentic original Gullah/Geechee Nation with direct linkage to our ancestral legacy, we stand as custodians of Gullah/Geechee culture and protectors of our human rights. Henceforth, being the ONLY and TRUE keepers of the Gullah/ Geechee cultural legacy, upon us falls the responsibility to promote in an accurate and positive manner all aspects of Gullah/ Geechee culture by emanating knowledge and healing souls. This process is guided through the release of the full story of the foreparents of Gullah and Geechee ancestral souls and the wisdom of our elders.

WE intend to protect the development and construction of Gullah/Geechee culture through the establishment of appropriate institutions and law by the exercise of our human rights. Presently this is being achieved through and during conferences, workshops, festivals, and other celebrations of culture and the continuation of oral traditions, living history, crafts, skills, and reconnection to the soil. The establishment of this Constitution will guarantee the continuation by the exercise of our minority right to self-determination.

WE will link with organizations, other nations, and institutions that are contributing positively to the cultivation of our nation, insuring [sic] that those connections are carried out with dignity and honor.

In the tradition of our foreparents we will record in written form OURSTORY as a living testament to our Gullah/Geechee legacy. We will also broaden our continuum through the use of electronic and video and audio means of documentation. Through the exercise of our human rights, we will be the keepers of this material as we accept the responsibilities of defining ourselves and our ancestors.

We will preserve, maintain, and reclaim ALL elements of our homeland which will FOREVER be our base of existence as we carry out these goals. With these goals in mind, Gullah/Geechee people take formal recognition of their nation and their human right to self-determination within the context of their minority governance rights, and thereby, the Gullah/Geechee Nation Wisdom Circle Council of Elders, by its hands, spirit and soul undertakes the task of creating and ratifying the first Constitution of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a)

I want to draw the reader's attention to a number of key elements in the Gullah/Geechee Nation Declaration. As its states in the above citation, one of the guiding principles of the Nation is to "promote" and "record" the group's history and heritage and make visible the African ancestors' struggles for liberation, in order to "heal" the wounds suffered from centuries of oppression. The Gullah/Geechee saying "hunnuh mus tek cyare de root fa heal de tree"—one must take care of the root in order to heal the tree—which, amongst others, can be found on the back of all of Queen Quet's books, is representative of this circular understanding of the relationship between past, present, and future and the centrality of empowerment through memory to the Gullah/Geechee Nation's politics. At each of the Nation's events that I attended, in person as well as online, Queen Quet interwove discussions

of past and present forms of racial oppression and the long and ongoing history of Gullah/Geechee people's resistance thereto.[67]

In addition to this corrective perspective onto hegemonic narratives of the past, also the commemoration of the African ancestors and of deceased Elders and family represent an integral part of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's self-understanding. One of the most important forms in which this takes place at events and gatherings organized by the Nation is the libation ceremony—the ritualized pouring of water into the soil while calling the names of deceased individuals (Hargrove 2005, 257). It is a very solemn process which, in my own experience, makes present the sacrifices and love of the ones who came before and paved the way for present struggles. Libation ceremonies are also employed by many other Gullah/Geechee organizations and, moreover, represent a general phenomenon in the African Diaspora, specifically among liberation movements—the #BlackLivesMatter chapter in Los Angeles, for instance, also pours libation at each of its meetings, as I experienced during my stay there.

Libation ceremonies are, moreover, one of many expressions of the centrality of spirituality to the Nation. As Queen Quet states in her book *Gawd Dun Smile Pun We: Beaufort Isles*, "'Spiritual power, pride, and endurance' have been the forces of emancipation and preservation in the Gullah/Geechee Nation" (Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 165, 10). In her brief analysis of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's politics, anthropologist Melissa Hargrove observes that the struggles of the Nation take on a "sacred nature, which should not be misinterpreted as religious or fundamentalist [...], but based on a moral claim of universal liberation and freedom from injustice and oppression (see Carnegie 2002)" (Hargrove 2005, 247). In many ways this can be traced back to earlier discussed intersections within the Black Radical Tradition between religious/spiritual life and political resistance among not only Gullah/Geechee but African Americans in general. Spirituality is also of utmost importance to most other Gullah/Geechee organizations, even if not always as explicitly as in the case of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. The institution of the church in particular, described by Patricia Jones-Jackson as "probably the most important social organization in the Sea Island communities," has always had a central role in Gullah/Geechee communities, and, as I argue contrary to John Smith, also played a major part in the political organization and mobilization that contributed to the emergence of the Gullah/Geechee Movement (Jones-Jackson 1987, 24; see also Guthrie 1996, 113; Kouri 1994, 44–45; National Park Service 2005, 80).

[67] This is of course also what defines her historiographies about the group that, as discussed in the previous chapter, pioneered the reading of Gullah/Geechee political history as a radical tradition of resistance.

Another, and certainly one of the most salient features of the self-understanding of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, are its demands for minority rights to self-government. As described above, collaboration with the IHRAAM, provided Queen Quet and other community leaders, prominently among them Elder Carlie Towne, with crucial inspiration as well as concrete strategic advice on how to pursue their aim of protecting the integrity of Gullah/Geechee communities by situating the Gullah/Geechee Nation's claims for justice within the globalized framework of indigenous and human rights laws. Several reasons may be identified for this strategic choice. Marginalized groups of people commonly have great difficulty achieving recognition, not to speak of compensation, for the oppression they experienced from the respective governments of the countries they live in. While Gullah/Geechee political entities, specifically the Gullah/Geechee Nation, have gained certain legal and political concessions on a local level, the overall political climate in all four states of the Lowcountry is conservative, especially in South Carolina, which several of my research participants described as still being in the grip of the "Old White men's club." And without minimizing how great of an achievement the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor was, the corresponding law, the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, has several major limitations, as will be discussed further below, which make its scope significantly narrower than the radical claims made by the Gullah/Geechee Nation. The international forum, on the other hand, provides the opportunity to connect with other historically marginalized groups of people as well as to find sponsors and supporters which might ultimately aid in applying pressure onto national political actors.

Not surprisingly then the Gullah/Geechee Nation formulates many of its claims by reference to international human and indigenous peoples' rights discourses: the Nation emphatically highlights its cultural distinctiveness, its "authenticity" and "direct linkage to ⁅its⁆ ancestral legacy" as well as its inseparable territorial ties to the Lowcountry as its "homeland" and "base of existence" (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a). In several of its writings, the Nation, moreover, explicitly refers to Gullah/Geechee as an indigenous group of people (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2018, 2020b, 2022a, 2023c; Queen Quet 2012b).[68] The central aspects upon which this self-categorization is based are, first, that Gullah/Geechee and their African ancestors have lived continuously in the Lowcountry since the very beginnings of European colonization, secondly, that Gullah/Geechee culture evolved in the United States, and, finally, that Gullah/Geechee people have been able to sustain their cultural heritage to this day (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020b, 2022a; Queen Quet 2006a, 183, 2012b, 47–48).

[68] See also the following interview with Queen Quet:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtsJFCbkM_k&list=PLE43AB5CFB9EAFA1D&index=2.

While there are several arguments supporting a case for the indigeneity of Gullah/Geechee, this categorization also entails certain pitfalls, specifically with regard to the group's relationship to Native Americans. Since the concept of indigeneity is also central to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, in fact to the Gullah Geechee Movement at large, I postpone further discussion and will return to the topic when transitioning to the next section.

In line with its above-described demands for minority rights to self-government, the Gullah/Geechee Nation regards itself as the sole legitimate representative of all Gullah/Geechee people, "being the ONLY and TRUE keepers of the Gullah/ Geechee cultural legacy" (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a). Apart from the earlier described election, the Nation rests this claim largely upon the understanding that it stood in a direct genealogical line with the resistance movements against enslavement among the group's ancestors:

> Just as there had to be a gathering of Gullah/Geechees from different walks of life to pull together the Gullah/Geechee Nation in the year 2000, there was a pulling together of the enslaved and the free during the many years of enslavement. (Queen Quet 2006a, 140).

Connected to this view is above cited assertion that the Gullah/Geechee Nation was the most, if not the only, authentic Gullah/Geechee entity concerned with the protection of the group's heritage. This exclusive claim to authority has led to certain tensions between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and other Gullah/Geechee political entities, specifically with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission as well as some younger organizations.

There have once been direct ties between the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (GGCHC) and the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Not only have Queen Quet and the Nation made important contributions to the creation of the Corridor, amongst others through grass roots mobilization and organizational support, but Queen Quet was even among the first members of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and served as Commissioner for South Carolina until at least 2012 (Cooper 2017, 191,199; Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 235). However, she eventually left the Commission for reasons not disclosed to the public and has been a critic of its work ever since. At the Gullah/Geechee Music and Movement Festival in 2017, for instance, that I attended in person, Queen Quet criticized that the funds available to the GGCHC were not being distributed directly to communities. As she is well familiar with the limitations of the GGCHCC, this is to be read as a systemic critique of the operational possibilities and purpose

of the entity, since it does not have and never had any redistributive powers. This fundamentally critical stance towards the GGCHCC also becomes apparent from several of her essays on the official website of the Gullah/Geechee Nation: Queen Quet argues that the Commission discursively divided the community by having replaced the slash between "Gullah" and "Geechee" with a space and that the contributions made by the Gullah/Geechee Nation to the creation of the Corridor had been deliberately sidelined (Queen Quet 2017, 2018b; see also Gullah/Geechee Nation 2019b).

The central critique though, that the Gullah/Geechee Nation wages against the GGCHCC is that of opportunism (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2019b; Queen Quet 2017; Scott 2016). The Nation perceives the work of the GGCHCC as lacking in commitment to making demands for self-determination and thus as not far-reaching enough, if not, at worst, as harmful to the community (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2019b). Along the same lines, the Nation outspokenly criticized that leading positions within the GGCHCC were held by people not born and raised in the Lowcountry (see Scott 2016). Relations between the GGCHCC and the Nation improved recently during the tenure of Victoria Smalls as Executive Director of the Corridor Commission (July 2021 to November 2023), a native of St. Helena Island who has been involved in the promotion and protection of Gullah/Geechee history, culture, and identity her entire life. Still, Queen Quet sees a clear hierarchy between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the GGCHCC. At public events, such as the above-described Black History Month Celebration in 2022, and in several of her writings she refers to the Corridor as "running through" the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2023a; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 66, [1997] 2009, 157).

Contestations over Legitimacy and Practices of Nationhood

With all that being said, the legitimacy of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, particularly of Queen Quet, is a highly contested matter itself. The Gullah/Geechee Nation puts great emphasis on having been created through a democratic and internationally observed election process (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 65–66, 2006a, 324–25). However, several of my research participants, from across all four states, said that they had never heard of an election taking place at the time and do not recognize the Nation's claim to authority. Some even went as far as doubting whether an election had ever taken place at all, referring to Queen Quet as "self-appointed," or as a "queen in name only." Laureen*, an independent scholar from Charleston in her early-50s, said upon my asking what she knew about the election process that she believed that it was "only relatives and close friends who selected her [Queen Quet] as queen" (Interview 2022). Frank*, a retired administrator from North

Carolina in his early-60s, stated along similar lines that he had heard that "she [Queen Quet] sent voting cards only to a select group of people" (Interview 2022).

In addition to such doubts about the election process, some of my research participants even questioned Queen Quet's background, specifically her manner of speaking Gullah/Geechee and whether she actually came from the Lowcountry. Damon*, a cultural history interpreter in his late 30s, shared that he had met an elderly woman at a church event who angrily complained that, "she [Queen Quet] dares to call herself queen, when she is actually from New York" (Interview 2022).[69] Yet other people I spoke with believed that Queen Quet had received money from the United Nations which she is not sharing with the communities, while others doubt that she had ever spoken before that entity at all. Finally, several of my interlocutors said that they believed that Queen Quet single-handedly led the Nation and that there were actually no other representatives nor any separation of powers within the entity.

Several observations can be made about these perceptions: It appears that particularly elderly people as well as people from the same generation as Queen Quet are outspokenly critical of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. This might be the case because many members of these generations were themselves greatly involved in the establishment of Gullah/Geechee institutions during the early period of the movement in the 1980s and 90s. Part of the described tensions could therefore be read as arising from conflicts over authority. Two people who, in one case, went to school with Queen Quet, and, in the other, had worked with her, expressed their frustration to me that even they were asked to address Marquetta Goodwine as Queen Quet when meeting her again after she had been enstooled.

Among younger people, on the other hand, according to one of my research participants, Latisha*, an educator in her mid-20s from Beaufort, the Gullah/Geechee Nation appears to have a solid base of support:

> I think a lot of young people do [identify with the Gullah/Geechee Nation], so a lot of my contemporaries identify with that. And I get why it is appealing, I think it goes back to that idea of wanting to be special, so it's like, yeah, "I'm part of the Nation." But I just don't buy into that. (Interview 2022).

My own experiences and conversations with other people confirm that impression, especially the motive of "wanting to be special." However, there also exist intergenerational tensions

[69] I want to emphasize that Queen Quet is in fact a native of St. Helena Island (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 58). She did move to New York for her studies in mathematics and computer science and after graduating continued to live and work there for some years (Bowers, September 05, 2012). In the 1980s she became involved in the promotion of Gullah/Geechee history and culture, eventually founded the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition in 1996, as described earlier, and returned to full-time residence on St. Helena Island in 1999 (Bowers, September 05, 2012; National Park Service 2005, 95).

between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and younger organizations, which I will elaborate on further in the following chapter.

While the concept of a nation might be appealing to some, it does in fact also represents a major point of critique to others. One of my research participants, Franklyn*, a retired Black scholar from Colombia in his 70s, stated that, to him, "as an academic, the whole idea of a Gullah/Geechee nation is strange, since it is a fiction" (Interview 2022). Latisha* similarly expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's claims to nationhood:

> I compare it [the Gullah/Geechee Nation] to Haiti. I was telling you, when I learned about the Haitian revolution—that was a real revolution, they really liberated themselves, and they're still paying today for the nerve and the audacity they had to be free. That is a nation, that is not what happened in America, slavery didn't end like that here. And so, one, I don't even think it is fair to identify as a nation when, the blood we shed didn't turn out like that. And that is not to say that we were "less than," it is just based on history. There are actual Black nations and this is not one. (Interview 2022)

The Gullah/Geechee Nation may indeed be regarded as a "fiction," not only insofar as it is a fairly recent invention but also since there have in fact not been any historical precedents of the like among Gullah/Geechee people (see Matory 2008, 971). Still, I would contend that this line of argument is misguided, given that, as scholars on nationalism agree, any nation is, ultimately, a social construct (Anderson 2006, 4; Eriksen 2010, 121–22; Hobsbawm 2016, 5; Zenker 2011, 76–77). Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, for example, describes how many of the cultural traditions that have come to define Norwegian nationhood were "designed by nationalists early in the twentieth century" (2010, 124). An observation that can be made about all so-called modern nations. As Benedict Anderson argues in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities*, nations are cultural "artefacts" that were first created towards the end of the 18th century and in this sense, as he famously writes, they are, inherently, "imagined political communities" (2006, 4, 6-7). As such, he continues, they are defined by a fundamental paradox between the "objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists" (2006, 5). Similarly, Ernest Gellner asserts that "[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist" (1964, 168). Whether a nation is "real" or not is thus less determined by historical accuracy but by socio-political contestations over whether this fiction is taken to be the truth and the existence of concrete structures that have come to define nation states.

In this regard we can observe a number of ways in which the Gullah/Geechee Nation does in fact practice certain aspects of nationhood: the Nation possesses a constitution and governmental apparatus, it has diplomatic relations with several international entities, specifically with other recognized national minorities, it provides "its citizens" with certain services, especially through its "state media," the "Gullah/Geechee Riddim Radio," and "Gullah/Geechee TV," "the official TV station of the Gullah/Geechee Nation," and, finally, its head of state, Queen Quet, regularly travels the Lowcountry both to engage in direct dialogue with and to offer logistical aid to Gullah/Geechee communities as well as to represent "its people" before various state institutions.[70] On the other hand, as noted earlier, the Nation is subject to United States law under which it does not have any political autonomy or redistributive powers and is therefore neither able to make nor enforce laws for its citizens or otherwise impact their livelihoods through political-legal means. This is not to make a case for or against the Nation's claims, which quite evidently is a highly complex matter. I would, in this regard, concur with anthropologist Melissa Hargrove who contends that it is problematic to criticize the Gullah Geechee Nation's very choice itself to claim nationhood as this would apply different standards to the entity than to European and Euro-American nationalist movements (2005, 253–54).

What Hargrove herself therefore focuses upon is to contextualize the Gullah/Geechee Nation's self-understanding within the tradition of Black Nationalist Movements, more specifically, she makes an argument for a particularly close connection between the Nation's ideology and Garveyism. She rests this claim upon the identification of "three crucial parallel elements" in the Nation's vision and Garvey's "transnational model": "(1) situating local struggles within a global quest for black unity; (2) empowerment through knowledge exchange; and (3) the sacred nature of the struggle" (2005, 247). While I would agree with Hargrove's point that the Gullah/Geechee Nation may indeed be seen as standing in continuity with Black Nationalisms, often making quite explicit references to Black Nationalist leaders, such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, her case for a special connection with Garveyism is not fully convincing. First and foremost, because above cited "parallel elements" have also been defining of many, if not most, other Black Liberation Struggles of the 20th century (Kelley 2002, 31-32, 45-46, 62-63, 126-127, 148-150, 191-193); and,

[70] Through the cited media the Nation provides information and support on various topics, ranging from financial literacy and economic empowerment, land rights and environmental justice, to health, gender equity, and advice on matters such as hurricane preparation or safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. See: https://www.blogtalkradio.com/gullahgeechee and https://www.youtube.com/@GullahGeecheeNation/about.

furthermore, because there are important differences between the Gullah/Geechee Nation's vision and politics and Garveyism.

First, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association was deeply patriarchal, whereas a defining feature of the Gullah/Geechee Nation is the central role played by women, as is the case with many other Gullah Geechee institutions (see Kelley 2002, 25–26). Secondly, the place of Africa within Marcus Garvey's and the Nation's visions differs significantly. While Garveyism was decidedly Pan-Africanist and strived for the creation of a homeland in Africa, the Gullah/Geechee Nation, regardless of its emphasis on the global unity of African descended people, clearly sees its place within the United States, as discussed above (see Kelley 2002, 23–24). The Nation's claims first and foremost pertain to the US-American context, specifically the Lowcountry as the birthplace of Gullah Geechee culture. In this regard the Nation actually shares more similarities with other Black Movements, such as early 20th century Black Nationalism and Black Communism as well as late 1960s and 70s Black Liberation Struggles, like that of the Republic of New Africa, which made demands for the creation of an independent Black Nation within the so-called "black belt" states in the US South (Kelley 2002, 49-59, 124-125). It should be reiterated, too, though, that not only Black social movements influenced the Gullah Geechee Movement but also indigenous struggles. At closer inspection, the way in which the Nation envisions its autonomy shows strong parallels with the federal accommodation model that has come to define the relationship between Native American nations and the United States (Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 29)—the Gullah/Geechee Nation does not strive for secession but for territorial sovereignty within the broader polity, a form of semi-autonomy. As stated in Chapter 2, the Gullah Geechee Movement was shaped by multiple historical influences and it is therefore impossible to construct any unilinear continuities.

Curiously, Hargrove only very briefly engages in a historical contextualization of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, not going further than establishing above-described connection with Garveyism. She explains this decision by arguing that it would be inadequate to further interrogate the political organization chosen by her research participants (2005, 253). However, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Gullah/Geechee Nation as well as of the movement at large it is, in my view, indispensable to engage with how and under what conditions it constructs its nationhood. Moreover, the specific claims made by the Nation have real-world effects which may very well be critically examined. I would in fact contend that Hargrove's reluctance to more extensively investigate the Gullah/Geechee Nation's claim to and construction of nationhood is representative of some of these very effects. During my fieldwork I observed a certain tendency among, especially but not exclusively, White

academic allies of the Gullah/Geechee Nation to almost unquestioningly, it appeared, accept the Nation's claims to be the sole representative of Gullah/Geechee people. And almost none of these White scholars had ever had any closer interaction with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission nor any other Gullah/Geechee entities. Many therefore seemed ignorant about the tensions within Gullah/Geechee communities as regards the exclusive claims to authority by the Nation.

Freya*, a White scholar from South Carolina and one of the exceptions from above observation, said that she finds it highly problematic that the Nation represents itself as the sole authentic representative of Gullah/Geechee (Interview 2022). She told me that she had met many researchers who talk about Gullah/Geechee as if they were organized like a Native American nation with a clearly defined leadership. A mis-perception, which in turn distorts these scholars' representations of Gullah/Geechee within their own work. My impression from the interactions I had with academic allies of the Nation mirrored what Freya shared with me. The great online presence of the Gullah/Geechee Nation probably also contributes to many researchers learning about the Nation first, which was, in fact, my own experience as well. All of the Nation's White academic allies I interacted with had a genuine desire to do collaborative work with "the community." It appeared though that as soon as they had found their "native" collaborator in the Gullah/Geechee Nation they stopped short of actually engaging with the politics in the community since that was "the people's own business," as one of them put it. The problem, though, is that "the community" is equated with the Gullah/Geechee Nation, which effectively reduces the community's voice to a single perspective, albeit a highly influential one. This ultimately leads to a blind collaboration that brackets certain, in my view, essential questions, such as whether one's support may actually contribute to a reproduction of certain problematic dynamics within the respective community one is working with.

The above is by no means to be understood as an argument against collaboration with the Gullah/Geechee Nation. As I have mentioned earlier and will elaborate on further below, the Nation has done and continues to do highly important work. The point I am making is that there are multiple, and at times also opposing, perspectives within the Gullah Geechee Movement none of which should be prioritized *a priori* at the expense of others. In an interview with Melissa Hargrove, Queen Quet herself argued along similar lines:

> I'm not against people writing books or whatever, I just think they need to do it in a respectful manner and they need to put some of their own personal insight into it [...]. Let somebody know and learn from your experience and insight instead of making it hollywood-ized. Or just sticking to the two people you interviewed who were nice to you and fed you dinner, and you wanna act like they are the King and

> Queen of the Sea Islands and they're not! And one of the things they can do is that, if they're going to write a book [...], then at least put in there the Coalition's address [...]. (Hargrove 2000, 115–16)

Returning to the analysis of above cited views of several of my research participants about the Nation, it is noteworthy that many of those who voiced critical opinions about Queen Quet expressed these based upon what they had "heard someone say" about her and the Nation. The following quotation from Latisha*, earlier cited educator from Beaufort, may serve as a case in point:

> The narrative of the election presents this idea that we are this monolithic group, that she [Queen Quet] could have somehow contacted all the Gullah/Geechee Elders, four states, not to mention the ones who don't live in the four states. Do you know Edward*? He is a historian, and he said he was at the ceremony where she became queen, and it all took place at the beach. And she went under the water and then she came up out of the water and then she was the queen. But he said that he heard some woman say that the only reason she [Queen Quet] became queen was because that other woman didn't want to do it. That's just gossip and hearsay, but it just speaks to…I don't know…my grandmother was not among the Elders that called her to be that. (Interview 2022)

As Latisha* puts it, there is a lot of "gossip" and "hearsay" about Queen Quet and the Gullah/Geechee Nation. And while, at the end of her sentence, she struggles to put into exact words what the main issue is, Latisha's*, reference to her grandmother as an example of an elder who apparently did not elect Queen Quet, as well as her critique of the Nation as constructing Gullah/Geechee as monolithic, indicate what is actually at the heart of most people's disagreement with the entity: its assertion of absolute definitional authority over Gullah/Geechee history, culture, and identity. Not only does this claim minimize if not discard the contributions of other institutions and activists but it can also have the effect of limiting the ways in which people can imagine and express themselves as Gullah/Geechee. What the many stories and rumors about Queen Quet also reveal is a relative confusion among many of my interlocutors about the actual structure of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

Leadership in the Gullah/Geechee Nation is officially shared between, first, Queen Quet, holding executive and representative powers, secondly, the Assembly of Representatives, an elected body of representatives from different communities across the Lowcountry, and, thirdly, the Council of Elders, which exercises judicial authority by safeguarding the continuation of traditions and the integrity of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's constitution (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012a; see also Hargrove 2005, 254–55). A number of Elders and Representatives are regularly involved in public events organized by the Nation, the most prominent among them being probably Elder Carlie Towne from Charleston.

Gullah/Geechee within the Nation are referred to as "citizens," and several of my interlocutors remarked that the Nation provides them with actual passports. While I could not locate any explicit information about how the Gullah/Geechee Nation funds itself, it is my understanding that it principally relies on donations, grants, the sale of handicrafts and literature, as well as community tourism.[71] Beyond that, however, I was not able to gather further information about the inner workings of the Nation.

There is no comprehensive list with the names of all the Elders and Representatives, I was not able to procure any documents on how citizenship is regulated, nor is the Gullah/Geechee Nation's constitution openly accessible. And while I could ascertain both that an election took place, as evidenced by newspaper articles and photos and confirmed by people who participated in the ceremony, and that Queen Quet did in fact speak before the United Nations in 1999, all this information was not easy to gather, since the Gullah/Geechee Nation does not have a central archive of official documents open to the public (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020a; United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1999, 414). It should be noted though that the official website of the Nation fulfills this function to a certain extent, insofar as essays, reports, and news from the Nation have been archived there since 2012. The reasons for the relative obscurity of its internal structure might simply be financial and logistical constraints that limit the Gullah/Geechee Nation's ability to build an infrastructure that would allow for more transparency. However, it could in fact also be a conscious decision. Given the long history of exploitation and mis-representation, Gullah/Geechee institutions and communities, especially the Gullah/Geechee Nation, are rather apprehensive with respect to sharing vital information about themselves with outsiders, particularly journalists and scholars. One of my research participants, Brenda*, an educator in her early-60s, stated that in her understanding Queen Quet, as head of state of the Nation, was intentionally put in the spotlight so that the privacy of others would be protected (Interview 2022). Whatever the exact reason, the lack of information that is easily accessible to the public is a major cause for the described "gossip" and "hearsay" about the Gullah/Geechee Nation and, based upon my observations, appears to detract from its credibility among various people.

Still, while some of my interlocutors maintained that Queen Quet had "no support among the people at all," the Gullah/Geechee Nation does in fact have a large number of followers across all four states of the Lowcountry and beyond. Many of the supporters of the

[71] See also the online-stores: https://gullahgeechee.ecwid.com/ and https://www.queenquet.com/online-store.

Nation whom I met had pronounced Afrocentric views, were highly critical of the status quo, and accordingly advocated visions of justice that demand transformational changes. When distinguishing the Nation from other entities, Queen Quet herself, both at events and in her writing, frequently emphasizes that citizens of the Gullah/Geechee Nation "actually" live the culture, that they actually wear their traditional clothes in their daily lives, that they actually eat the food they serve, and that they actually speak the way they do at events, meaning that none of what they present is "just" for show. Queen Quet, for example, often wears a Kauri shell headdress, an Ankh necklace, elaborate earrings, and African print dresses, regardless of the context and function in which she appears in public.[72]

Whereas some people, as mentioned above, are highly critical of the decorum of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, such as that Queen Quet is to be addressed as "queen," or that people are to stand when she enters the room, supporters of the Nation ascribe great meaning to these symbols, and not just as ends in themselves. One of my interlocutors, Belinda*, a retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, shared with me that she once invited Queen Quet to visit her school and give a brief presentation to one of her classes. She told me that the White teachers did not understand why she asked the children to stand when Queen Quet entered the room:

> And when she [Queen Quet] came, I told the children to stand, because she was a queen. and our White teachers were offended. So, after we went back…in the meeting afterwards I asked them, 'why were you all offended for the children to stand.' 'She's not a real queen, why should they stand?,' they responded. And I said, she's the queen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and I had to explain everything, that we are a nation of people, we are a nation of Black people, we are a nation of coastal people, transcending all the way back to Africa and all the tribes that came through the waterway. (Interview 2022)

Two of my other research participants, one White, the other a Gullah/Geechee descendant, told me of encounters with Queen Quet where they were also asked to stand and refused to do so for the same reason, because they did not regard her as a "real queen." However, what bothered Belinda* was, curiously, not so much about the question whether Queen Quet "actually" is a queen or not. Upon my asking what she thought about the title, "queen," Belinda* responded that "she [Queen Quet] can call herself however she wants, that is her business." The issue in the above-described situation in school was rather that, to Belinda*, the unwillingness of the White teachers to acknowledge the way in which the leader of the Gullah/Geechee Nation chose to designate herself was disrespectful to the history and culture

[72] See also her website: https://www.queenquet.com/

of the group at large.[73] As evident from the latter part of above quotation Belinda* places particular importance onto the fact that Gullah/Geechee are a distinct group of people with a long and rich cultural history. Later in our conversation she came back to that topic stating that European traditions were never as scrutinized as African or African Diasporic ones. The matter was thus one of recognition both of the cultural differences of Gullah/Geechee as well as of the value of the group's heritage within a social context that is still very much dominated by White hegemonic ideology. It is against this backdrop that the value of identifying as a *citizen* of the Gullah/Geechee Nation as opposed to being a *member* of an organization becomes apparent: descendants have a chance to identify as part of something larger, as part of something that, through the terminology of the nation state, places Gullah/Geechee history, culture, and identity on an equal level with White hegemonic constructs of European civilization (see also Toure 2012, 35).

Projects and Visions of Empowerment

A central reason for people's admiration of Queen Quet is that her work focuses on matters that are immediately relevant to people's lives. Even several of my interlocutors who were critical of her and the Nation readily stated that she "does the work," "shows up at all the meetings," and "always fights for the culture." Fran*, an artist in her late 30s from Savannah, said that she believed that "this [the work Queen Quet does] is exactly what keeps her critics from being more vocal publicly" (Interview 2022). Queen Quet has been highly active in various fields over the years, first and foremost, but not exclusively, in human rights discourses, environmental protection, memory politics, land retention struggles, and the strengthening of Gullah/Geechee and Black businesses. She lobbies state institutions and politicians, organizes the writing of petitions, conducts workshops, collaborates with various educational institutions, and even heads a think tank for the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2013, 2019b, 2020a).

As already noted above, education and knowledge production are amongst the major areas of the Gullah/Geechee Nation's and Queen Quet's work. While one of my interlocutors, a retired Black scholar from Charleston, described Queen Quet as "hostile towards academicians," my own observations at the Coastal Cultures Conference in 2022 on St. Helena Island was rather that she simply has a very critical understanding of academia, its historical

[73] I should note that I have not experienced White US-Americans to be less supportive of the Nation in general. As I observed at several events organized by the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and as also becomes evident from her online videos, Queen Quet has been able to establish a strong network of White allies, especially among academics and environmentalists, as we have also seen earlier.

relationship with oppressed peoples, and collaboration. To delve into a deeper discussion of this I shall briefly recount my experiences from that event.

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At the beginning of the conference, which took place at the St. Helena Branch Library, we were asked to gather outside under the shade of live oak trees and, as always is the practice at Gullah/Geechee Nation events, formed a circle. After the libation ceremony, Queen Quet told us, "what to expect and what not to expect from the event." She emphasized that this was not like a usual academic conference, that this was not "a place where people promote themselves and show off their titles and intellect." She said that there are many people present with degrees and profound knowledge and that if someone had "signed up only to show off, they are at the wrong conference." They would also be at the wrong conference, she continued, if they "signed up to experience death by Powerpoint," just as "if they expect that this was some private time with Queen Quet." She explained that unfortunately she had often made these exact experiences, and added that while there will be some PowerPoint there will also be a lot of talking with one another as well as walking and "hands on experiences." Queen Quet then critically discussed the historical relationship between academics and Gullah/Geechee. She said that many academics had come into Gullah/Geechee communities over the decades and extracted knowledge without ever coming back, without ever giving back, "as if the natives don't exist," but had instead distorted and misrepresented the group. When academics then articulated their thoughts and observations "with more words than necessary, using 50 words for what could be said with just one," suddenly "the natives are spoken into existence." However, when the natives themselves tried to address their matters of concern, they were often seen only as "the emotional natives" and silenced. Queen Quet emphasized that this had particularly been the case as regards climate change and that the Nation had warned of the threat of global warming for decades but decisions makers would not listen. Now, suddenly, more and more people would call her and wanted to learn from the group's "indigenous knowledge." This knowledge could only be shared though, she stressed, if collaboration followed certain standards, such as that the communities themselves benefit from the research and that they decide how and for what purpose data is being used.

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Evidently and not surprisingly, Queen Quet's views about scholars are strongly shaped by the negative experiences made by Gullah/Geechee communities in the past. However, she does not oppose academia per se. Her critique is directed at exploitative academic practices and the neoliberal structures within the field which incentivize a single-minded focus upon furthering one's career and distinguishing oneself. In opposition to that, she advocates

respectful collaboration and the re-appropriation of knowledge and knowledge production by historically marginalized groups of people—demands that reflect what has been voiced by countless other indigenous and post- and decolonial writers as well.

This perspective of demanding one's share and bringing control back into the hands of the community is also a defining feature of the Nation's socio-economic vision of justice. Queen Quet is a radical critic of neoliberal capitalism and its marginalizing effects upon Gullah/Geechee communities, identifying numerous continuities with past dynamics of oppression:

> The Gullah/Geechees had and continue to build the huge plantation houses and clubhouses of the very people that enslaved their ancestors and many that seem to be coming forth to re-enslave them to positions of servitude in gated resorts and retirement areas. Enslavement during the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s was fueled by the same energy that caused the displacement of Gullah/Geechees in mass during the 1900s—financial greed. (2006a, 20)
>
> Many that now come to live in Charleston and other parts of the Gullah/Geechee Nation today still carry on the business of being "absentees" in that they purchase homes on this wealthy peninsula which is now the historic City of Charleston and they live in the area only part time. [...] [Their] concern is focused on personal gain and economic advancement with little or no concern about what is happening to other human beings. (2006a, 63–64)

Queen Quet coined the term "destructionment" to describe the deeply harmful nature of the seemingly positive concept of development which prioritizes, as she argues in the above quotation, the "personal gain and economic advancement" of a few individuals over the wellbeing of the collective and the environment (Goodwine 1998a, 174; Queen Quet 2006a, 21–22). She identifies this "mentality" as a western "agenda of individualism" that stands in opposition to the Nation's principles of communalism and care for the environment and accordingly represents a threat to its "cultural continuation" (Queen Quet 2022b).

One of the greatest achievements of Queen Quet and her allies in this regard, then organized under the GGSIC, was their contribution to the creation of a Cultural Protection Overlay District in Beaufort County (CPO) in 1999 (National Park Service 2005, F31). The CPO limits development of gated communities, resorts, and commercial recreational facilities, such as golf courts, on St. Helena Island and its surrounding areas, and established a zoning law exception that allows for a higher density of residential units enabling Gullah/Geechee communities to maintain land use patterns for family compounds (National Park Service 2005, F31; Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 35). While these regulations have been highly effective in preventing excessive development and privatization on St. Helena Island over the last couple of decades, Gullah/Geechee communities regularly have to defend the maintenance of the ordinance in its full scope (Queen Quet 2023; Kukulich 2023).

Another central dimension of Queen Quet's and the Gullah/Geechee Nation's work is to connect communities within and beyond the Lowcountry. When the GGSIC was founded in 1996, Gullah/Geechee were still imagined as being tied principally to South Carolina and Georgia, more specifically, to the Sea Islands. Queen Quet was among the first to understand communities in North Carolina and Florida as part of the culture as well as to create an awareness of Gullah/Geechee in urbanized areas ([1995] 2009, 10, 2018a, 5). As Anita*, an artist in her 40s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, originally hailing from South Carolina and now living in Florida, said about the role of the Gullah/Geechee Nation in this regard:

> It was pretty much that Georgia and South Carolina were connected. Florida and North Carolina, you know, they weren't connecting and the Gullah/Geechee Nation actually brought everybody along the coastal way to learn history, to protect the land, to protect the waterways (Interview 2017)

As I learned during my fieldwork, many communities in North Carolina and Florida have still just begun to re-connect with their Gullah/Geechee heritage, and the Nation is one of the central entities which supports these processes. I attended the "First Official Gullah/Geechee Ring Shout" in Bolivia, North Carolina, in 2022 whose organizer had invited Queen Quet to speak at the occasion. It was one of the first events of its kind in the area and it was evident that the focus was on the community itself. The vast majority of the people attending were Black and from the region and the atmosphere was very familial. The structure of Queen Quet's speech and performance mirrored what I observed at other events, as described above. What was particularly noteworthy to me was the gratitude that the attending people expressed towards Queen Quet, especially the organizer and his family. The people were visibly moved to hear and learn about Gullah/Geechee history and culture, which, for some, as I was told later, was the first time that they had access to this knowledge. Queen Quet and other representatives of the Nation have, moreover, not only travelled across the Lowcountry but through the entire nation and even to various Caribbean Islands, connecting with what may be understood as the broader Gullah/Geechee Diaspora among the Black Seminole in Texas and on the islands of Barbados and the Bahamas (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2012b, 2019a; Queen Quet 2012f, 2015b, 2019).

While the Gullah/Geechee Nation clearly has an ambivalent standing among Gullah/Geechee communities, it has undeniably had a profound impact in numerous regards and continues to play a major role within the movement. As Gillian*, an activist in her early-20s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, said:

> It [the Gullah/Geechee Nation] became a nation that you could use to protect the land, to protect the waterways, [...] to bring all people together as a unifying force to protect the things that were stolen—others would possibly say misappropriated, but I will say stolen—and to learn the laws of how to protect your land, how to do it as a unit, how to do that as a family. (Interview 2017)

Black Indigeneities and Native Marginalization

As described in the previous chapter, the understanding of Gullah Geechee as a culturally distinct Black population played a crucial role for the emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement and continues to be one of its defining aspects. Curiously, the particular cultural distinctiveness ascribed to the group has come to exhibit pronounced similarities to the concept of indigeneity. The view that Gullah Geechee are not only different from mainstream society but also from other African Americans has in fact been part of public perceptions of the group since at least the post-Civil War era and the beginnings of preservation efforts by White Southerners, as we have seen in the previous chapter. It was then in the early 20th century that scholars in the emerging field of African American studies as well as in anthropology for the first time advocated the view that Gullah Geechee have a "more direct" link with African cultural traditions than other African Americans. This view eventually dominated academic studies as well as fictional literature from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. Probably the first entity to actually use the term, "indigenous," to refer to Gullah Geechee people, was the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Most other Gullah Geechee institutions and activists have since also adopted at least parts of this perspective. Within this framework, Gullah Geechee identity is commonly understood as being inextricably tied to the group's "ancestral land" and coastal environment, the Lowcountry, where Gullah Geechee culture as such evolved (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 5-6, 8, 2020b, 25; National Park Service 2005, 100–103; Queen Quet 2012b, 47–48). Gullah Geechee activists and institutions often emphasize that the group has lived in the region for centuries and possesses a stronger connection to the land than later comers, especially White Northerners who only migrated to the area in the latter half of the 20th century. To many Gullah Geechee entities and activists the ownership of land is indispensable to the reproduction of the group's heritage and culture. As Queen Quet is cited in a recently published essay:

> We have 400 plus years of collective consciousness and knowledge about how you keep the environment healthy thereby you keep yourself healthy, these are inextricably tied. You cannot have Gullah/Geechee culture without the land and without the water. We are inextricably tied to this coast. You can't move us anywhere else, you cannot sustain the same culture somewhere else. We need this environment. (Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 6)

In relation to other African Americans, Gullah Geechee is commonly conceived as a kind of archetype and its people as "protectors of what is distinctly African in African American ethnicity" (Clarity Press Gullah Project 1998, 7; see also Cooper 2017, 7–8; Hargrove 2005, 58; Toure 2012, 35). Closely tied to this primordialist image, Gullah Geechee are usually represented to have lived in stable harmony with their environment for centuries, as evident from the above citation, disrupted only by the intrusion of capitalist society. This notion is also closely connected to the narrative of isolation and the symbolic ruralization of the group which, as discussed in the previous chapter, are still widely seen as prerequisites for the "survival of Africanisms" within Gullah Geechee culture.

The above described notions about Gullah Geechee people's history, heritage, and culture mirror the core aspects of most international definitions of indigeneity: First, a special relationship with land, which is usually accompanied by the notion that the group in question has resided in the respective territory first or at least longer than other local populations, secondly, cultural distinctiveness, thirdly, efforts to maintain one's heritage, and, fourthly, the experience of historical marginalization (Queen Quet 2012b, 47; United Nations 2013, 2–4). These similarities do of course not come as a surprise given the close connections between the evolution of the Gullah Geechee Movement and international discourses on indigenous people's rights. This is not to imply though, that understandings of Gullah Geechee had simply followed the internationally recognized codifications of indigeneity, instead of the group rightfully belonging into this category. Much rather I want to draw attention to the profound influence of global political and legal frameworks upon the likelihood that the claims for justice by historically oppressed groups of people will be heard by state actors.

Political and legal anthropologist Olaf Zenker argues that being conversant in the specific linguistic register of indigenous peoples' rights discourses represents a crucial pre-requisite for successful recognition of the demands of indigenous groups of people (2011, 75–76). It is for that very reason that the collaboration between the IHRAAM and the Gullah/Geechee Nation has been of such importance. Zenker goes on to observe that claims to indigeneity always "require authentication by experts" (2011, 75–76). And, indeed, as described above, academia has played and continues to play a central role in establishing and affirming the cultural distinctiveness of Gullah Geechee. The National Park Service (NPS) study, published in 2005, which served as the ethnographic basis for the creation of the GGCHC, needs to be particularly highlighted in this regard, as it might very well have been the first academic study to explicitly engage with the question of whether Gullah Geechee might be understood as an indigenous group of people:

> Strictly speaking, Gullah/Geechee people are not indigenous to North America. The point may be made, however, that despite ancestral roots in Africa, Gullah or Geechee culture developed in America as a distinct "creole" society. In this respect, Gullah/Geechee language and culture could be said to be "indigenous" to the Low Country and the Sea Islands. Whether or not they are "indigenous," Gullah/Geechee people presumably are covered by the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities," as Goodwine (1998) has suggested. (National Park Service 2005, 96)

Despite remaining slightly inconclusive with regard to the question of whether Gullah Geechee should be regarded as indigenous or not, the authors of the study ultimately affirm the claims made by the Gullah/Geechee Nation for minority rights. The Nation therefore frequently cites the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act as confirming the legitimacy of its demands (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 66, 2012b, 48). Since the publication of the NPS study, several other authors have also begun to refer to Gullah Geechee as quasi-indigenous or even as indigenous (Ghahramani, McArdle, and Fatorić 2020, 1; Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 3; Fuller 2019, 89). Most, however, do not go beyond a descriptive level of engagement with the concept, principally re-iterating the argument that Gullah Geechee culture emerged in North America and may therefore be seen as native or (quasi-)indigenous to the Lowcountry.

One notable exception engaging in a deeper discussion of the subject is Sharon Fuller's essay "Don't Know Nothin' 'bout Subsistence" (2019). Fuller argues that Gullah Geechee profoundly unsettle the native–colonial settler binary insofar as the group extended its African "roots through routes," or as she puts it in another passage, "[t]hey are simultaneously a diasporic African people who imported indigenous practices and applied them in an intimate material relation to a particular North American place" while struggling against racial oppression by colonial forces (2019, 94–96). While she therewith draws attention to a number of crucial factors that distinguish the special case of indigeneity represented by Gullah Geechee, the conclusion Fuller arrives at is not fully convincing, in my opinion. She contends that "Gullah Geechee sovereignty is not based on traditional claims [of indigeneity] through treaties, legal constructs, or biological inheritance as are most indigenous claims; rather it is constituted culturally" (2019, 90). However, not only is cultural distinctiveness also a defining aspect of most other understandings, and, importantly, self-definitions of indigeneity, but as demonstrated above legal constructs do in fact play a crucial role for the conception of Gullah Geechee as indigenous. Moreover, also biological distinctiveness, or rather a particularly high genetic proximity to African peoples, has been claimed by physical anthropologist William Pollitzer as a defining feature of Gullah Geechee-ness—even if his argument should be regarded as highly problematic, as I will elaborate on in the next subchapter (1993, 62, 1999, 19–20). And while historical treaties in the strict sense

of the term do not apply in the case of Gullah Geechee, the Gullah/Geechee Nation frequently cites General Sherman's Field Order 15, colloquially referred to as "40 Acres and a Mule," as supporting their rightful claim to the land (Queen Quet 2012d, 301, 2015a). Fuller's categorization thus does not adequately differentiate the kind of indigeneity that may be ascribed to Gullah Geechee from more "regular" cases. Her concept of extended "roots through routes," that is the involuntary "importation" of "indigenous practices" by the enslaved Africans as well as her argument that Gullah Geechee do not fit into the native–colonial settler binary, though, represent a valuable starting point for further discussion (2019, 90, 94–96).

As Olaf Zenker implies, it might be advisable to abandon the distinction between "first-" and "late-comers" that is often a defining aspect of notions of indigeneity for a more nuanced analytical distinction along a gradual spectrum of imagined "earlier" and "later comers" (see 2011, 75–76). This is not supposed to weaken claims made by indigenous groups of people for having been there first, but rather to allow for a more differentiated analysis of such claims given that the history of forced migration and displacement through colonialism resulted in the formation of numerous "post-contact indigenous groups" (Prud'homme-Cranford 2022, 25–26). The decisive factor that has to be taken into account in such cases is that of domination. Chelsea Vowel, a Métis public intellectual, writer, and educator, contends:

> Sometimes [the] disruptions [caused by the Europeans] were so severe, they nearly decimated existing communities, and survivors were integrated into other groups, or new cultural practices arose to cope with changing conditions. […] For groups to become distinct, post-Contact Indigenous peoples, a distinct culture had to arise and this is certainly true of the Lumbee, Comanche, Seminole, Oji-Cree…and Métis. (Vowel 2016)

While this might not have been precisely the case for Gullah Geechee, there still are numerous parallels: the communities of their ancestors, too, were disrupted, familial ties were violently severed, and they were cast into a foreign environment which necessitated the creation of new shared values, means of communication, and cultural practices that had recourse to cultural systems elsewhere. Ultimately, this, of course, applies to all African Diasporic cultures which emerged in the Atlantic context of enslavement. In recent years there have been a number of publications, specifically on the Caribbean context and the notion of "creole indigeneity," interrogating the relationship between the construction of Black indigeneity, nation building, and the discursive displacement of Native peoples, which, as I argue, provide valuable insights also for the case of Gullah Geechee. I want to briefly discuss two such studies.

In the essay "Returns to a Native Land" Melanie Newton critically engages with the ways in which the marginalization of Native Caribbeans' history and culture represents an

integral part of postcolonial nationhood in anglophone Caribbean countries (2013). She argues that much of Caribbean studies and literature, which significantly informed nation-building processes, was defined by an "aboriginal absence," the more or less explicit assumption that Native Caribbeans had been entirely "destroyed" by European conquest and that, as a consequence, there was "no retrievable precolonial or aboriginal culture" (2013, 112–13). Afro-Caribbeans were in turn constructed as the "new bearers of indigenous culture" (2013, 113). Newton observes that "this aboriginal extinction narrative" may in fact be seen as one of the many traces of colonial knowledge, which, even if unwittingly, have been "incorporated into anticolonial intellectual projects" (Newton 2013, 121,109). As such this narrative does not only have effects on a symbolic level but, potentially, even real-world consequences, as she contends, by pointing to the Guyanese Amerindian Act from 2006, which significantly weakened the rights of Native Americans in Guyana based on the claim that "aboriginal Caribbean people have no special claim" to the category "indigenous" (Newton 2013, 120).

The work of Shona Jackson places a slightly different emphasis but, overall, her and Newton's argument may be seen as complementary (2012). In her monography, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean*, Jackson uses the concept of "creole indigeneity" to disrupt both the native vs. colonial settler and the master vs. enslaved binaries, arguing that from the very beginning there was "a dialectic [...] *among* those who came and *between* those [who came and those] who were always here" (2012, 74). She argues that also the enslaved, albeit themselves having been dominated, have to be understood as (subaltern) settlers, especially since their descendants now hold power within postcolonial Caribbean states and "contribute to the "disenfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples" (2012, 3, see also 211). On a discursive level then, the role of Native Caribbeans within the imaginaries of these postcolonial nations is to serve as "internal others," who signify the "past of postcolonial time" (2012, 41-42, 67-68). The specific indigeneity assumed by Afro-Caribbeans and Indo-Guyanese is thus not based upon claiming to be first-comers. As Jackson points out "creole indigeneity" is instead predicated upon the notion that the labor of the enslaved Africans and indentured Indian laborers was what created the postcolonial state which hence is seen as their legitimate inheritance (2012, 2-4, 121). This may also be understood as a specific postcolonial variant of what Zenker describes with the concept of state autochthony—the hegemonic system of belonging within nation states that was created through the assertion of control over the state apparatus by the respective dominant group(s) of people and that now rests upon a naturalization of the relationship between this/these dominant group(s), the political territory, and citizenship rights (2011, 76; see also 2022, 787). The cases of

postcolonial nations in the Caribbean are special insofar as the groups holding state power, as discussed above, were involuntary settlers who have been oppressed and exploited for centuries themselves. Jackson therefore argues that "creole indigeneity" may be seen as expressing a "particular ontological need: of the urgency of transforming exile into the substance of belonging" (2012, 213).

While there are a number of differences between the situation of Gullah Geechee and that of the descendants of formerly enslaved people in the Caribbean, most importantly, that Gullah Geechee do not have control over the state nor do they represent a demographic majority, there are, yet again, also important parallels: Native Americans in the Lowcountry, too, are, for the most part, mis-constructed by hegemonic discourse as having been entirely displaced and/or killed and, thus, as principally belonging to the realm of the past. To a certain extent, the Gullah/Geechee Nation, even if unwittingly, may be seen as reproducing this narrative of absence and extinction and, similar to postcolonial states in the Caribbean, predicates its construction of nationhood upon the replacement of Native Americans as the "new indigenous:"

> Charleston, South Carolina's islands were the place of both the death of indigenous or Native American culture along its coastline and the birth of the Gullah/Geechee culture from and on its soil. The Gullah/Geechee Nation came together through the vision of many that dwell on these islands and was solidified on Sullivan's Island (Queen Quet 2006a, 183).

Furthermore, the Gullah/Geechee Nation as well as other Gullah Geechee entities see the grounds for their legitimate rights to the land in the history of exploitation of the labor of their enslaved ancestors, which they understand as having fundamentally contributed to the wealth of the United States (Queen Quet [1998] 2015, 24–25, 2006a, 20). Finally, while Gullah Geechee principally identify as Black and African-descended, the fact that the group also has a certain degree of Native American ancestry is noted regularly by Gullah Geechee institutions and activists, especially by the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 20; Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 10, [1997] 2009, 89–90, 2012c, 5).

One possible reading would thus suggest that there are tendencies of a discursive Native American marginalization similar to what is inscribed into postcolonial Caribbean states within parts of the Gullah Geechee Movement, most pronounced in the construction of nationhood by the Gullah/Geechee Nation. In other instances, however, references to Native Americans by Gullah Geechee political entities and activists clearly represent acknowledgement. In several of her publications, Queen Quet herself writes not only about

Native American absence but also of their resistance to oppression, about alliances with the enslaved Africans as well as of the contributions of their labor to the plantation economy ([1995] 2009, 22, [1998] 2015, 97, [1997] 2009, 34). Another case in point is the work of Herb Frazier, a journalist and former Commissioner of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, who dedicates an entire chapter in his book, *Behind God's Back*, to Native American history (2011, 34–42). Importantly, he does not only engage with the past of Native Americans in the Lowcountry but also includes an interview that he conducted with Heidi Varner, a member of the Wassamassaw Tribe, centered in Varner Town, Monck's Corner, South Carolina, in which she describes her community's ongoing struggle for justice (2011, 40–42). Yet another example is the work of Toby Smith, the first Gullah Geechee descendant to serve as Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator at McLeod Plantation. Smith has made the critical engagement with Native American history, in particular with the historical collaboration between Native Americans and the enslaved Africans, an integral part of the larger story told at the site.

Ultimately though, there still remains a rather ambivalent relationship between the notion of Gullah Geechee as (quasi-)indigenous and perspectives upon Native American indigeneity within the movement, where tendencies of Native American marginalization exist alongside potentials for multi-directional memory and a critical engagement with the struggles of both Native Americans and Gullah Geechee—a matter that I will engage with from yet another angle in the following chapter.

To a significant extent, tensions between different claims to indigeneity arise from their broader political and legal context, which ties back to earlier discussion of international indigenous peoples' rights discourses. In her book, *The Cunning of Recognition*, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli argues that state recognition does not necessarily entail only benefits for indigenous groups of people but may also put them into a position of another kind of vulnerability (2002). More specifically, she observes that indigenous rights legislation tends to require indigenous groups of people to conform to impossible ideals of authenticity, therewith being turned into "melancholic subjects of tradition," desiring to identify with what was seemingly lost to time (2002, 6, 39). The consequence is a highly ambivalent and power-laden entanglement of the respective population with the state that Povinelli refers to as "multicultural domination" (2002, 6). She contends that this particular kind of domination imposes upon indigenous groups of people to identify with their heritage "in a way that just happens, in an uncanny convergence of interests, to fit the national and legal imaginary of multiculturalism" (2002, 8). This "national and legal imaginary" is commonly defined by rather static understandings of cultural distinctiveness and groupness that reflect Eurocentric

discourses of otherness, preclude social change and demand of the respective group(s) of people, paradoxically, as Jonas Bens notes, to appear not only "not too similar on the one hand and not too foreign on the other," but also "both similar and foreign at the same time" (2020, 186, 199). The burden of responsibility to prove this paradoxical and hence impossible ideal is then imposed upon indigenous groups of people by the multicultural state (Bens 2020, 55). As liberal multiculturalism commonly represents itself as particularly inclusive, this form of domination may further be categorized as an aggressive type of a seemingly outward-oriented identity politics, as defined in the introduction.

This political and legal framework neither fosters multiple understandings of indigeneity nor any kind of fluid constructions of identity and belonging in general. It is no surprise then, that specifically the Gullah/Geechee Nation, as the Gullah Geechee entity with the most radical claims to self-determination, tends to draw more rigid boundaries in its official language and, as noted above, at times exhibits certain tendencies to discursively marginalize Native American indigeneity. Upon closer inspection though, as hinted at above, differences between formal statements that conform to static legal codes and other discourses that show more nuance, as is the case especially in everyday contexts, become readily apparent. Citizens of the Nation often expressed quite fluid notions of who may be identified as Gullah Geechee and the writing of Queen Quet herself has contributed greatly to the extension of understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness (see also Smalls 2012, 156). This speaks less to an ambivalence within the Gullah/Geechee Nation's politics but much rather to the inadequacy of dominant legal concepts of indigeneity and cultural identities.

While this section was not principally about making a case for or against understanding Gullah Geechee as an indigenous group of people, but about illuminating the context of this question and important points of contention, I do not only concur with the authors of the NPS study that Gullah Geechee people fall under the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, but would go further and contend that the group also widely fits the United Nations' definition of indigenous groups of people (United Nations 2013, 2–3). This is not to say that the same kinds of rights extended to recognized Native American tribes should apply to Gullah Geechee as well. I would argue that multiple understandings of indigeneity with accordingly varying rights should be thinkable. As Povinelli asserts, if the multicultural state seriously followed its ideals, more flexibility in indigenous rights legislation could very well be possible:

> Lawyers can argue that even though a local group does not perfectly match the requirements of a piece of legislation they can nevertheless be seen as fulfilling the

> spirit of the law. The spirit of the law is, after all, to recognize local traditional social organization, not to use an outdated anthropological model to discipline the local. [...] The spirit of the law is what cares for indigenous people. (2002, 267–68)

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission

Vignette

„De Fada Oonah Can Luk Bak, De Fada head Oonah Can See," reads the first slide from Executive Director Victoria Smalls' presentation, the background showing a wide, blue ocean and the sky, complementing her white blouse and deep blue pants.[74] The occasion for her speech is the International Gullah Geechee and African Diaspora Conference (IGGAD) in February 2022 at the Coastal Carolina University in Conway, SC. The conference was opened the previous day with a keynote from Michael Allen, a retired National Park Ranger and one of the architects behind the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (GGCHC). His talk felt both like an homage to the many community leaders who contributed to the creation of the Corridor and their long and arduous road to success as well as like a passing on of the torch to Smalls. Due to the pandemic the conference is her first major public event since she took office as Executive Director of the GGCHC in July 2021. Smalls begins her presentation by honoring those who came before her, amongst others, Michael Allen, Veronica Gerald, a Gullah Geechee community leader and the first director of the Charles Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies, Ronald and Natalie Daise, two of the most influential cultural performers and educators on Gullah Geechee history and culture, as well as Smalls' predecessors, J. Herman Blake, the first Executive Director, and Heather Hodges, the second person to lead the Corridor. Smalls' following speech is deeply personal sharing as much about her own biography and family as about her vision for the Corridor.

Before becoming the head of the GGCHCC Smalls worked for the National Park Service which "had always been her dream," she says. One day she got a call from one of the Commissioners of the Corridor, Smalls recounts, and was offered the position of Executive Director. After some nudging from other community leaders and Elders, she accepted the position, becoming the first Gullah Geechee who was born and raised in the Lowcountry to lead the Commission. Smalls then speaks about how she grew up on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, showing photos of her family. She shares that she first went to an "all-Gullah school" where they were not discouraged to speak the language. Later, when her family moved to Hilton Head, however, she was mocked for her speech and thus gradually adapted to standard English. She also describes how in school they were once asked to create a family tree, and

[74] This Gullah Geechee saying roughly translates to "the further one can look back, the further ahead one can see."

while she could trace the family on her mother's side, who was White, without much trouble to the 16th century, she realized that she was only able to trace back the ancestors of her father for two generations. Not being able "to fill these gaps" made her feel ashamed, an experience, Smalls says, that not only Gullah Geechee but most African Americans can probably relate to. Much later, she eventually did a DNA test with her family and they discovered that they have ancestry from many different African countries, as would be the case for most descendants, she says. She also speaks about conflict resolution in the community when she was little and how people went to the praise house to resolve grievances amongst themselves instead of going to the local courthouse where sentences would usually be harsher, though sometimes "the judge even sent you back to the praise house to find a solution." She then addresses several of the major contemporary challenges faced by Gullah Geechee communities—land loss, gentrification, global warming and sea level rise as well as the intergenerational transmission of knowledge—and affirms the Commission's continued determination to aid communities in these struggles. She closes her speech by acknowledging that the Commission made certain mistakes in the past, not having listened sufficiently to the people, the youth in particular, and promises that moving forward they would seek to strengthen bonds with the entire community.

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As highlighted above, Victoria Smalls was the first Executive Director of the Corridor Commission to be not only of Gullah Geechee ancestry but also to have been born and raised in the Lowcountry. This is highly significant given the earlier described apprehension towards outsiders that still exists among not only the Gullah/Geechee Nation but many Gullah Geechee institutions and communities in general. The ongoing importance of kinship relations among the group, especially to the older generation, and of knowing who the person one interacts with belongs to, was frequently emphasized by several of my interlocutors (see also Guthrie 1996, 31–32). I have often made the experience that at the beginning of meetings with my research participants the first questions they would ask were about my family and my personal connection to Gullah Geechee. Smalls' extensive sharing of her own biography and journey is to be read against this wider background, especially since the Commission was in the past sometimes perceived by people as being "detached," as I will discuss further below. As Smalls mentioned in her presentation, and as she then elaborated on in a conversation we had on another occasion, she wanted her tenure to particularly focus upon healing and connecting the community. I chose the above situation to introduce this section because it both captures certain aspects that have continuously been at the center of the Commission's self-understanding but also marks the transition towards a new leader whose own particular

vision profoundly shaped the Corridor's work during her tenure from July 2021 to November 2023.[75]

In many ways the International Gullah Geechee and African Diaspora Conference may be seen as representative of the overall (educational) approach pursued by the Commission, a combination of academic perspectives and voices from the community. While the entire first day of the conference took place at the campus of the Coastal Carolina University featuring, for one, academic presentations and, for another, speeches from community leaders and activists on their matters of concern, the second day, the "Community Day," took place in Conway focusing on the work of small businesses, artists, crafts people, and cultural performers. I was, unfortunately, only able to attend the opening reception and the presentations on the first day, since earlier-described Black History Month Celebration by the Gullah/Geechee Nation took place at the same time as the Community Day.

Another central aspect of the GGCHCC's approach is collaboration with other organizations, the conference itself being a case in point. Victoria Smalls explained in her speech that the IGGAD had originally been an idea of Heather Hodges, her predecessor, which was then realized together with the Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies. Many other of the GGCHCC's events are likewise organized in close cooperation with other institutions. Also in regards to its internal structure, the Commission is defined by plurality: no single individual is at the center of its work but there is a multitude of prominent actors who helped build and lead the Corridor. At the same time the Commission is guided by certain principles laid out in its Management Plan that safeguard the continuity of its work (2012). Accordingly, several of the issues addressed by Victoria Smalls in her speech have been at the heart of the Commission's efforts from its very beginnings—fighting the stigma that are still tied to Gullah Geechee culture and identity, aiding descendants in learning about their ancestry and heritage, and contributing to the economic empowerment of communities.

In the following I will, analogously to the first section on the Gullah/Geechee Nation, first, briefly engage with the history of the GGCHC Commission, its self-understanding and aims, then discuss views about the institution among the community, and, finally focus on its concrete projects and visions of justice.

[75] Since February 2024 Djuanna Brockington serves as the Corridor's interim-director (H. Frazier 2024a). The exact reasons for Victoria Smalls' departure have not been disclosed to the public (H. Frazier 2023). However, Smalls filed a lawsuit in June 2024 against the Corridor alleging that she had been wrongfully fired (H. Frazier 2024b). As of the writing of this thesis no further information has yet been made public.

History, Organizational Structure, and Mission Statement of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor

The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor was created in 2006 as a federally designated National Heritage Area, the first of its kind dedicated to the protection of a living culture, encompassing the coastal areas of southern North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 7–8). The establishment of the Corridor was the result of the collective efforts of numerous different Gullah Geechee community leaders, activists, and allies. What was frequently described to me as the most important institution in this process was the "Gullah Consortium," created in the late 1990s. The Gullah Consortium was a group which consisted of both Gullah Geechee descendants and non-Gullah Geechee allies from various different fields, such as journalism, education, academia, art, the National Park Service (NPS), and politics (National Park Service 2005, F33). The group sought to determine possible measures that would strengthen Gullah Geechee, create a network of communication between communities across the Lowcountry, and foster education on the group's history and culture (H. Frazier 2011, 210–11). For that purpose, the Consortium organized a series of community meetings in several coastal cities in the Lowcountry and in Columbia, South Carolina (H. Frazier 2011, 211). The meetings showed that there appeared to be a lack of communication both between communities as well as between historic sites and museums relevant to Gullah Geechee history and heritage. Soon after, a coalition of community leaders consisting of, amongst others, Jannie Harriot, member of the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission, Queen Quet Marquetta Goodwine, then leader of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition (GSSIC), Michael Allen, at the time still working as a National Park Ranger, and Emory Campbell, former director of Penn Center, as well as White allies, John Tucker, Pinckney historic site superintendent for the NPS, and anthropologist Joseph Opala established contact with House Representative James Clyburn to determine whether support by the federal government in the promotion and protection of Gullah Geechee could be gained (H. Frazier 2011, 211).

Clyburn, not only a high-profile politician on the federal level but also himself African American and a native of South Carolina, proved instrumental in mobilizing aid in the political arena. In 1999, he was able to secure Congressional funding for an extensive study on Gullah Geechee directed by the National Park Service (Cooper 2017, 193; National Park Service 2005, 1). Michael Allen, the historian Cynthia Porcher, as well as Penn Center and the GGSIC facilitated the development of the study in close collaboration with the community (H. Frazier 2011, 211). Congress "directed the NPS to determine the national significance of Gullah culture, as well as the suitability and feasibility of adding various elements of Gullah culture

to the National Park System" (National Park Service 2005, 1). The study resulted in a 435-page document, published in 2005, that probably represents the most comprehensive research on Gullah Geechee to date, if only in terms of the people involved in its creation, which included several scholars from various disciplines and numerous Gullah Geechee communities from across all four states (Matory 2008, 972). Community members were able to participate and voice their matters of concern as well as share recommendations on how the government could best provide aid through a series of public meetings (National Park Service 2005, 3–9).

One of the crucial points emphasized by communities was that any kind of solution should centrally involve their perspectives and allow them to re-gain control over their own narrative (National Park Service 2005, 5). The other major concerns voiced in the public meetings revolved around family history, the promotion of Gullah Geechee culture in general, the protection of historic sites, land retention, and economic empowerment (National Park Service 2005, 5; see also Cooper 2017, 202–3). Based upon this feedback, the study concluded with the recommendation to create a National Heritage Area (NHA) which

> would be established to connect and associate Gullah/Geechee resources. The NPS would provide startup and related administrative assistance for the heritage area. Overall management of the heritage partnership would eventually be administered by one or more local entities that would guide and oversee the goals and objectives of the heritage area. (2005, 3)

As discussed earlier, the notion of Gullah Geechee people as a culturally distinct group of people plays a central role in the argument of the NPS study for the need to provide federal assistance in the protection of the group's livelihood and heritage (National Park Service 2005, 96, see also 10). Anthropologist Melissa Cooper pointedly observes that the study was "unquestionably the culmination of the construction of Gullah identity coded as ethnographic fact" (2017, 194). In their statement on the national significance of Gullah Geechee culture the authors of the National Park Service study write the following:

> Gullah/Geechee people are the most African of African Americans in physical type, language, and culture; yet, they are a uniquely American cultural type formed by the fusion of African cultural heritage and American experience. Through the diffusion and expansion of their population, the Gullah/Geechee people have become the source for many elements noted in other African American cultures. Of all African American cultures in the United States, the folk customs, oral history and literature, crafts and arts of the Gullah/Geechee people show the strongest continuities with indigenous cultures of Africa. The Gullah/Geechee culture also bears strong similarities to creole and maroon cultures of the Caribbean. (2005, 100)

While the authors, importantly, make a strong case for the historical significance of Gullah Geechee, part of their argument also contributes to essentialist discourses about the group.

The cultural heritage of Gullah Geechee clearly exhibits pronounced continuities with the cultures of their African ancestors—possibly more so than is the case with any other African American population today. However, the notion of Gullah Geechee being "the most African of all African Americans" is strongly reminiscent of earlier discussed academic searches for "African retentions" in the early 20th century and of the rather static understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness that still define much of popular discourse. Even more problematic though, is the authors' emphasis of the alleged biological distinctiveness of Gullah Geechee through their reference to "physical type." The study extensively cites the work of the late William Pollitzer, a physical anthropologist, whose book, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, published in 1999, seems to be held by the authors as one of "the most authoritative, contemporary published stud[ies]" on the group, as Melissa Cooper observes (Cooper 2017, 195). While much of Pollitzer's work lies in synthesizing findings of historical, linguistic, and cultural research of previous decades, he also engaged in a physical study of Gullah Geechee, comparing, amongst others, blood types, the rate and frequency of sickle cell anemia, and physical features, such as nose length, skin color, and lip thickness, in "four populations:" "Charleston" "Afro-American," "West African," and "White" (1993, 64; see also 1999, 207–9). He reaches the problematic conclusion that "[i]n both morphology and inherited blood factors the Gullah are closer to western Africa and further removed from whites than are other African Americans" (National Park Service 2005, D3).

Certain empirical data, such as the demographic history of the Lowcountry, indeed suggests that at least until recently Gullah Geechee descendants tended to have a lower degree of European ancestry than other African Americans. However, both the methodology behind Pollitzer's work as well as his conclusion are highly questionable. Not only do the categories "White," "Afro-American," "West African," and "Gullah" as applied by Pollitzer suggest monolithic populations and neglect the heterogeneity within the respective groups, but his work also dangerously returns "the conversation about [Gullah Geechees people's] cultural distinction to quasi-biological racial origins," a perspective which has long been refuted in science (Cooper 2017, 195). Given that the NPS study uncritically references Pollitzer's work but, at the same time, emphasizes the dynamic and changing nature of the group's culture, there is a certain tension between essentialist rhetoric and social constructionism at the very heart of the report—an ambivalence that, in fact, characterizes much of the academic work produced on Gullah Geechee within the last couple of decades (National Park Service 2005, 66, 93-95).

In 2006, U.S. Congress followed the recommendations of the study and passed the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Act, written by Clyburn, to establish the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor,

> a cultural and linguistic area along the southeastern coast of the United States from the northern border of Pender County, North Carolina, to the southern border of St. Johns County, Florida, and 30 miles inland. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 8)

Therewith, the Act seeks to recognize "the important contributions made to American culture and history by African Americans known as the Gullah/Geechee who settled in the coastal counties of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida [...]"(U.S. Congress 2005, 2). Fath Davis-Ruffins contends that the state thus, formally included the group's history and culture "in the official narrative of the nation" (2008, 217). One year later, in 2007, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, tasked with managing the Corridor, was created (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 13). Its primary duty is to "assist federal, state, and local authorities in the development and implementation of a management plan that would carry out the purpose for which the Corridor was designated" (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 10). The Commission is composed of 15 members that fall into two categories: firstly, those nominated by State Historic Preservation Officers from each of the four states, and, secondly, those recommended by anyone from the public to the NPS (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 13). The Commissioner's terms are commonly not to exceed three years and they work on a voluntary basis receiving no remuneration—only the Executive Director and her two assistants are paid staff. Commissioners are recruited from various fields, such as academia, cultural education, public history, art, law, or politics, and each of the four states receives its own representatives. The Corridor's office was located on Johns Island, South Carolina, until 2022 when it was moved to Beaufort, South Carolina.

The first Commissioners were mostly from among the members of the "Gullah Consortium" that brought about the realization of the Corridor. After its establishment, the Commission embarked on a multi-year long management planning process to determine how the aims of the GGCHC can be realized most effectively (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 13–14). As part of that process, it received technical assistance workshops from the NPS, organized numerous public meetings across the Lowcountry to receive yet more input from the community, and reached out to other stakeholders and potential sponsors (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 13). Based upon the community meetings, the Commission then developed its Management Plan, which

was eventually published in 2012. It contains the vision, principles, and methods which have guided the Commissions' work ever since. In his speech at above-described opening reception of the IGGAD conference, Michael Allen proudly referred to the document as "the blue book," which, as he stated, was developed in close communication with the community and thus "spoke with the voice of the people." The self-described mission of the GGCHC Commission as stated in the Management Plan reads as follows:

CORRIDOR MISSION

- To nurture pride and facilitate an understanding and awareness of the significance of Gullah Geechee history and culture within Gullah Geechee communities.
- To sustain and preserve land, language, and cultural assets within the coastal communities of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida.
- To promote economic development among Gullah Geechee people.
- To educate the public on the value and importance of Gullah Geechee culture. (2012, 22)

Based upon this statement, the Management Plan identifies three central "interdependent pillars" of the Commission's efforts: "(1) education, (2) economic development, and (3) documentation and preservation" (2012, 113). These pillars in turn guide the concrete work of the GGCHC, which includes the provision of logistical assistance to other Gullah Geechee institutions and to communities in order to help them realize their own projects, the connection of actors across the Lowcountry, the organization of educational events on a wide range of topics (such as Gullah Geechee history and culture, genealogical research, matters pertaining to land rights and financial literacy), partnerships with educational institutions, specifically in the academic field, and support in the development of community based tourism. Moreover, the Commission has continued to regularly invite the public to provide feedback and express their concerns, holding quarterly public meetings since its inception, which take place successively in each of the four states. Apart from providing an opportunity for communities to participate, the meetings serve to inform the public about recent developments pertaining to the protection and promotion of Gullah Geechee in all of the four states. The Commission gives reports on current community projects, discusses requests, and the meetings also serve to socialize and get in touch with one another. In addition to these general meetings, there are also so-called business meetings which are open to the public as well, but focus principally on internal organizational issues—more specifically, the Commission's budget plan, applications and grants, outreach and communication, and

governance. Finally, the GGCHC Commission issues a newsletter informing about these meetings as well as other events taking place across the Lowcountry.[76]

Expectations and Political Realities

Since the community had been involved in the formation of the GGCHC to such a significant degree, expectations were high from the very beginning. In addition to that, many people, including community members and even some scholars, held a number of misconceptions about what the legislation actually effected, such as that funds would be made available directly to communities (e.g. Hargrove 2007, 46). Among the foremost concerns of descendants has always been the protection of their livelihoods, aid in legal matters regarding land retention, and economic empowerment. Accordingly, people hoped that the GGCHC Commission would possess redistributive powers to give out funds directly to communities and possibly even be able to provide legal aid with struggles over land titles (Cooper 2017, 202–5). However, the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act does not equip the Commission with any such powers. The legislation even contains a section that explicitly addresses these matters, making it unmistakably clear that the creation of the Corridor does not mean the extension of any kind of political or jurisdictional authority to the Commission, nor that it has any bearing upon existing property rights:

> SEC. 11. PRIVATE PROPERTY PROTECTION.
>
> (a) Access to Private Property.—Nothing in this Act shall be construed to require any private property owner to permit public access (including Federal, State, or local government access) to such private property. Nothing in this Act shall be construed to modify any provision of Federal, State, or local law with regard to public access to or use of private lands.
>
> [...]
>
> (c) Recognition of Authority to Control Land Use.—Nothing in this Act shall be construed to modify any authority of Federal, State, or local governments to regulate land use.
>
> [...]
>
> (e) Effect of Establishment.—The boundaries designated for the Heritage Corridor represent the area within which Federal funds appropriated for the purpose of this Act shall be expended. The establishment of the Heritage Corridor and its boundaries shall not be construed to provide any nonexisting regulatory authority on land use within the Heritage Corridor or its viewshed by the Secretary or the management entity. (U.S. Congress 2005, 14–15)

Many community members were frustrated when they learned of the limited powers of the Commission, wondering what relevance their input to the NPS study had when seemingly

[76] See also the official website of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission: https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/about-us/.

nothing had changed on a political and legal level (Cooper 2017, 202–6). The creation of the GGCHC as a National Heritage Area was in fact not the only option presented by the NPS study, but only one of the following five alternatives: A) the creation of three permanent heritage centers dedicated to Gullah Geechee history and culture in close collaboration with Gullah Geechee communities, B) the expansion of the focus on Gullah Geechee history and culture at existing sites managed by the NPS, C) the creation of a National Heritage Area, D) a combination of options A and C, and E) that no action be taken in cooperation with the NPS (National Park Service 2005, 107, 125, 129, 132, 133). The NPS study ultimately recommended option C, the creation of a National Heritage Area, which, according to its authors, was based upon feedback from community participants but also upon the fact that it was the most "cost effective" alternative (National Park Service 2005, 136). The other options would not have given the Commission the authority that community members had hoped for either, however, option D would have evidently been more far reaching. Without minimizing the achievements of the Corridor, both the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Act and the recommendation by the NPS evidently speak to the structural constraints arising from economic and politico-legal interests by the federal and state governments that the GGCHC has been subject to from its very beginnings. As Povinelli observes in her analysis of the multicultural state in Australia regarding the limits of symbolic recognition:

> ⁅N⁆ational pageants of shameful repentance and celebrations of a new recognition of subaltern worth remain inflected by the conditional (as long as they are not repugnant; that is, as long as they are not, at heart, not-us and as long as real economic resources are not at stake). (2002, 17)

The Corridor's connection with the state represents, furthermore, a major point of contention for its critics, first and foremost the Gullah/Geechee Nation. As described earlier, the Nation was not only instrumental in the creation of the Corridor, but Queen Quet was a Commissioner herself until at least 2012. Since then, she has become one of the most outspoken critics of the GGCHCC, asserting that it represented an opportunist institution whose vision was not far-reaching enough to effect the changes necessary to liberate Gullah Geechee communities (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2019b; Queen Quet 2017). Queen Quet has also voiced criticism over the very process of the Corridor's creation, specifically with respect to the role of the NPS, writing that the "mission" of the agents of the National Park Service had been "to "museumize" and further commodify ⁅Gullah Geechee⁆ culture" (Queen Quet 2006a, 190). In a similar vein, several of Melissa Hargrove's interlocutors expressed their frustration with how, as they felt, their concerns had not really been taken seriously by the authors of the National Park Service study (2005, 27–28).

Some of my own research participants were skeptical, too, about the connection of the GGCHC to state institutions. In light of the history of state sanctioned racial oppression, they doubted that any organization connected to the government could ever be transformational enough to adequately address their concerns. Some also wondered about the finances of the Corridor and criticized that "none of the money from the government had reached any of the communities yet," as one of my interlocutors put it. This perspective is evidently tied to above mentioned misconceptions about the Corridor's powers. How the entity is being financed though, is in fact highly transparent. Funding received via the National Heritage Area program, as described in the Management Plan, was approximately $150,000 per year between 2008 and 2012, the entirety of which was used for the management planning process (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 139).

The creation of the management plan was not only the Commission's priority for logistical reasons but its submission was necessary in order to further qualify for federal funding (U.S. Congress 2005, 10). As detailed in the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, federal funding is provided only for up to 50 percent of the total costs of any activity and may not exceed $1,000,000 for any fiscal year and $30,000,000 in total—the latter sum is tied to the extended period of authorization of the Corridor until 2031, when an application for re-authorization will become necessary to secure ongoing federal support (U.S. Congress 2005, 16, 2021, 1–2). As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the GGCHC relies on private sponsoring and donations to meet the assistance received from the federal government; and, importantly, it is not able to distribute funds directly to communities.

The Commission regularly informs about its current financial situation in its above-mentioned business meetings. As I was told by the Commission's staff during my fieldwork in 2017, during its first years the capabilities of the Corridor were quite limited due to financial constraints. The funds barely sufficed to pay for the office, its staff, the creation of an infrastructure, and the organization of events, as Sharon Scott, the then assistant of the Executive Director shared with me (Interview 2017). While the writing of grants still represents a constant and pressing task, the Commission has been able to build a far more extensive network of sponsors in the last couple of years and has thus gained more room to maneuver.

Another critique voiced explicitly by some of my younger research participants was that they feel that the Commission could do a better job in trying to include voices from their generation, for instance, by focusing more on social media or by updating their website. As Janice*, an artist and writer in her late 20s, told me in 2017, upon my asking what she thought of the Commission:

> I don't care for it at all. I know that there was good stuff, people were excited, and there were all these things that they intended to do. But then it became very clear that it is just about having meetings, they just want to have meetings, and have more meetings. And it's really sad and it's really disappointing. The only cool thing is that now we know the four states. We can say that's the Corridor. Besides that, I don't think they are doing much of anything and I really think it certainly is a situation where there are not enough young people. But even so, I don't know what they are about actually. (Interview 2017)

Several of my younger interlocutors, during both of my stays in 2017 as well as 2022, shared Janice's* feeling of not really understanding what the Corridor's work consists in, speaking to mentioned disconnect between the Commission and that younger generation. Moreover, Janice* was clearly frustrated about what she perceived as a lack of overall progress made by the Commission. As described earlier, people's high expectations soon conflicted with the limited capabilities of the Corridor, especially in its beginnings. In my conversation with J. Herman Blake in 2017, the first Executive Director of the Corridor and a retired professor in sociology, he openly acknowledged the limitations of the Commission and shared that he regards the Corridor to be "a forty-to-fifty-year project" that will need time to "grow its roots in the community" (Interview 2017). In the last couple of years, the Commission has indeed made significant progress in this regard.

The organization has become far more active and was perceived by the majority of my research participants in 2022 as an indispensable institution for the protection of Gullah Geechee livelihoods and culture. My interlocutors often described it as being very open to anyone regardless of the specific stage they are at within their own journey of self-discovery and re-connection to their heritage. Moreover, signs of the Corridor now line most of the major highways in the Lowcountry and many of the larger visitor centers, historic sites, and museums have information material about the entity. Communication with the public has become more frequent and extensive since the expansion of the Corridor's newsletter, which is now disseminated via email every few months. And while some people may still have a critical perspective on the Commission's connection to state institutions, most of my research participants actually viewed its recognition by the government as a sign of credibility. As Renée*, a visual artist from Savannah in her mid-30s, said upon my asking what she thinks of the Corridor Commission: "To me the director of the Commission seems like an official leader. There is the Corridor tied to it and there are the signs and markers" (Interview 2022).

The extension of this infrastructure largely took place under former Executive Director Heather Hodges who succeeded J. Herman Blake in November 2017. When she assumed office, the Commission had laid most of its groundwork and started to concentrate on extending its network of collaborators and sponsors. Under Hodges' leadership the

Corridor increasingly worked together with various other cultural institutions, prominently cooperating with the Charles Joyner Institute at the Coastal Carolina University for the IGGAD, and it began focusing more on younger people's voices through the organization of events that specifically featured artists and educators from that generation. In 2017, the Commission also started organizing its annual "Watch Night and Emancipation Day Celebration" commemorating how the enslaved Africans waited for Emancipation Day on the eve of December 31, 1862. In 2022, the event took place not only in Charleston, South Carolina, but also in Wilmington, North Carolina, and, in 2023, also in Jacksonville, Florida, as part of the Commission's efforts to connect communities and create awareness across the entire Corridor. This aspect was noted by several of my research participants as one of the greatest contributions of the Commission. Steve*, a writer in his late 50s from Charleston, described the Corridor as "the central pipeline for Gullah Geechee communities across the Lowcountry" (Interview 2022). The Corridor's public meetings take place once in every of the four states per year and put a particular focus upon the respective state in which the Commission comes together. This and the fact that each state has its own Commissioners greatly contributed to promoting Gullah Geechee history and culture beyond South Carolina and Georgia.

Still, in an online public meeting in April 2020, George Beatty, Chairman of the North Carolina Rice Festival noted that "when people think of rice production, they think of South Carolina and of Georgia first and not of North Carolina or Florida." Furthermore, in several other of the GGCHC's public meetings participants stressed that communities in North Carolina and Florida are still very much in the process of re-appropriating Gullah Geechee identity. Georgia and South Carolina, especially the latter, were often described as "far ahead in terms of recognizing the history and the culture," as one participant put it. However, one person from Liberty County, Georgia, commented in the above-mentioned online meeting in April 2020, that there also differences within South Carolina and Georgia. They said that there were "certain communities who are doing things, like in Savannah, Charleston, or Beaufort, but there are so many communities that are not recognized, and people don't know that they're Gullah."

Evidently then, while much progress has been made with respect to creating awareness of the history and culture of the group across the Lowcountry, there are still pronounced regional differences as well as a reluctance among some descendants to embrace their Gullah Geechee heritage at all. This appears to pertain not only to communities that lie outside of what are commonly seen as the core regions of Gullah Geechee culture, but also to urbanized areas. As Commissioner Dionne Hoskins-Brown shared with me, in towns and

cities certain cultural activities may have always been more concentrated, but at the same time urban populations have also faced stronger pressures to assimilate. For that very reason, as Commissioner Michelle Lanier told me, the "Commission has a central role to play as a cross spatial entity" connecting these communities and creating spaces for the many varied forms of Gullah-Geechee-ness (Interview 2022).

Another of the Corridor's major effects in that regard pertains to the Commissioners themselves. As Eulis Willis, former Vice Chairman of the Commission and current mayor of the town of Navassa, North Carolina, told me, "I only really got aware of the North Carolina connection with Gullah Geechee in 2006, when the Corridor was created and I was asked to sit on its Commission" (Interview 2022). In 1993, Willis had published a book on the history of his hometown Navassa, which, to his surprise, as he said, was then cited in the National Park Service Study as evidence for the ties between Gullah Geechee and North Carolina. He said that his book engaged with the history of the group but did not explicitly speak about the culture, which is why he had never made the connection. Willis shared that serving as part of the Commission was what gave him the privilege to travel and learn about his own heritage. Several other Commissioners have similarly described their work for the Commission as an integral part of the "recovery of their heritage," as Sean Palmer, Commissioner for the state of North Carolina, phrased it (Interview 2022).

Projects and Visions of Empowerment

Apart from its earlier described focus on cultural education the Corridor is deeply engaged in efforts of economic empowerment. For one, it partners with several institutions supporting communities in their efforts for land retention, amongst others, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation (CHPP), and, for another, the Commission has begun to increasingly concentrate upon the development of community tourism. As discussed above, the Corridor's powers regarding matters around land struggles and socio-economic marginalization are highly limited. However, by connecting communities with organizations such as the CHPP, co-organizing workshops on land rights and financial literacy, and creating awareness of grants and government programs that support small businesses and farmers, it still has a significant impact upon the livelihoods of Gullah Geechee communities. These efforts have culminated in the creation of a "Strategic Plan to Promote Preservation of Gullah Geechee Land Ownership in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor" (2020b). In February 2020, the Commission organized a strategic planning meeting in order to:

- Defin[e] the core values and a vision concerning heirs' property and the socio-cultural elements of land management and economics in the Corridor; and

- Craft […] implementation goals, measurable objectives, and strategies to support land preservation and ownership in the Corridor. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020b, 24)

Based upon this meeting and feedback from landowners, a five-year plan for the period of 2020 until 2025 was formulated envisioning three central goals:

1) Encourage the preservation of Gullah Geechee lands and built heritage to foster cultural preservation.
2) Inspire family-centered land management in the Corridor.
3) Promote entrepreneurial land ownership as a form of economic development. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020b, 8)

Concrete strategies to achieve these objectives include the facilitation of access to vital information regarding property laws, supporting communities in receiving legal aid, and the extension of the Corridor's educational programming on land retention, specifically through the development of training programs to strengthen and promote entrepreneurial land ownership (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020b, 30–32). It is still too early to assess the effectivity of this plan, especially due to the profound economic impact of the pandemic, but it is evident that the Commission understands the urgency of economic questions to Gullah Geechee communities.

In addition to the above, another of the central pillars of the Corridor's work is the development of community tourism. Given the tourism industry's large share of the market within the Lowcountry, already the NPS study had explicitly identified Gullah Geechee community's involvement in this sector as a potentially central means of economic empowerment (2005, 108, 129). Likewise, the Management Plan of the Commission regards heritage tourism as an opportunity:

> The rapid development of tourism in the past 50 years has positioned the industry as one of the major global economic activities. Tourism is now either the main source or an important subsidiary source of revenue for many destinations and their surrounding communities. […] If tourists are drawn by a living culture, the culture can serve as a justification to preserve that environment against contrary developments, while still providing economic benefits. In this way, the culture is retained without sacrificing economic security. […] The challenge that many tourist destinations around the world, including the Corridor, are facing is finding balance between increased development and visitation, and conservation of culture and traditions, as well as social and economic improvement. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 190, see also 95)

While clearly recognizing the potential pitfalls of the tourism industry, the Management Plan argues that it is principally a matter of finding the right balance. From this perspective, the vices of commodification can be turned into virtues, since the services and products of Gullah

Geechee heritage tourism that are necessary for sustained profitability rest upon the group's culture and the environment, which may provide an additional incentive to protect the latter.

Under the leadership of Heather Hodges this focus upon tourism was greatly expanded. In 2019, the Commission began to partner with Mandala Research, a consulting company specialized in African American heritage tourism.[77] Its director, Laura Mandala, led a market study to determine the economic potential of the tourism sector in the Corridor. Based upon numerous surveys with travelers, interviews with Gullah Geechee communities and businesses as well as with tourism bureaus across the four states, the study was published in 2020, identifying a growing awareness and interest in Gullah Geechee history and culture among travelers and a multi-billion-dollar spending potential in the Corridor (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020a, 14-15, 36-37, 42). The following year, in 2021, the Commission created a "Tourism Alliance" with the purpose to bring together community members and businesses, potential donors, potential partnering institutions, and other stakeholders in the tourism industry.[78] Since then, there have been multiple meetings, several of which focused upon the specific situation in each of the four states respectively. The general picture which emerged from these conversations confirmed above-described differences in the presence of Gullah Geechee between South Carolina and Georgia, one the one hand, and North Carolina and Florida, on the other. Whereas many initiatives and projects related to Gullah Geechee heritage tourism already exist in the former two states, the current major task in the latter two is to identify in the first place sites and business that are connected with the group's history and culture. In that sense, one of the central endeavors of the Alliance is to make Gullah Geechee related sites and businesses more visible, which, however, also entails certain challenges, such as questions revolving around naming and authenticity, which I will discuss more extensively in Chapter 5.

In general, the commodification of Gullah Geechee culture is a highly debated topic within the community. Some regard the tourism industry first and foremost as one of the major sources of the community's socio-economic struggles. Others, while recognizing its dangers, also see it as part of a possible solution to the group's predicament. A point often made by supporters of an active engagement in heritage tourism is that "tourism is there to stay" and that Gullah Geechee communities can either decide to take "a seat at the table and receive their fair share of the market" or not. The Gullah/Geechee Nation is one of the entities that are highly critical of this view. While the Nation does engage in some small-scale community tourism, it vehemently opposes any expansion of the commodification of Gullah

[77] See also the website of Mandala Research: https://mandalaresearch.com/.
[78] See also the Corridor Commission's website: https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/tourism-alliance/.

Geechee culture (Queen Quet 2006a, 190, 2012a, 7–9). In several of her publications, Queen Quet analyzes the tourism industry as an integral part of neoliberal capitalism and, thus, as inevitably entailing the reduction of Gullah Geechee to a product of entertainment at the expense of a critical engagement with the political history of the group (Queen Quet 2012a, 10–11, 2018b). Former Executive Director Victoria Smalls expressed a different perspective in a conversation we had during my fieldwork in 2022, confident that a balancing act may very well be possible.

I met with Smalls at the Commission's new offices in Beaufort which are located in the Arsenal, an impressive fort-like structure surrounded by high walls of the same yellowish color as the main building. The Arsenal dates back to 1798 and housed the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery that fought against Native Americans and, as part of the military, protected the institution of enslavement.[79] As I learned from Tendaji Bailey, the then assistant to Victoria Smalls, it was built by enslaved people and also served as a prison. Tendaji said that he felt that with the move of their offices to the Arsenal they are in fact doing something important as they were "re-appropriating this space for the ancestors." Upon entering the inner courtyard, I was welcomed by Smalls, who led me into her offices, apologizing for the yet sparse decoration due to their recent move. I was struck by the openness with which she answered all of my questions, not shying away at any point from critical topics and readily acknowledging areas in which the Commission still might have to improve its work. Among the first things we spoke about was tourism. Smalls said that it was an undeniable fact that the tourism industry was one of the most important industries in the Lowcountry and that she believes that it is therefore necessary to actively engage with that reality. If done right, tourism may be "a very powerful educational tool," she stated. While some people might think that printing "Gullah" on T-shirts was commercializing, she rather saw it as "an educational opportunity" since people will then ask what "Gullah" means. The decisive challenge to her was to ensure that the community is in control of the narrative and of the general conditions under which they interact with tourists, and that the people receive their fair share of the market.

Economic empowerment to Smalls was furthermore inextricably linked to finding ways of dealing with climate change. She said that at this point a significant part of the land along the coast would inevitably become uninhabitable, even if global warming can be slowed down. Sea level rise, she continued, would thus become one of the most existential threats to Gullah Geechee in the near future as numerous communities would likely have to resettle.

[79] See: https://beauforthistorymuseum.wildapricot.org/the-arsenal.

Smalls emphasized that they would have to start thinking about how the group can reproduce its culture if many of its longstanding communities were separated from their land. She disclosed that the Commission had recently been contacted by a group of Gullah Geechee descendants from Washington state whose ancestors migrated there decades ago from the Lowcountry but held on to their heritage still. Smalls said that it was experiences like these which could serve as inspiration for how Gullah Geechee people may be able to pass on their culture, even if they have to move to other parts of the United States. What this example also draws our attention to is how widely spread the diaspora of Gullah Geechee descendants actually is across the country. The GGCHC evidently serves as an important venue for these diasporic communities to re-connect. In one of the Commission's online public meetings, I met a Gullah Geechee descendant from Los Angeles whose family had migrated there early in the 20th century. It was the first time for her to connect with Gullah Geechee in the Lowcountry, although she had been aware of her heritage from her early childhood through stories from her grandmother. At the end of the meeting, she expressed deep gratitude for having been given the opportunity to learn about "her history."

In the Commission's offices, my conversation with Smalls moved onto what she understood as the central task for her tenure as Executive Director: healing and connecting the community. She said that she believed that more youth should be included in the work of Gullah Geechee institutions and in efforts to protect the culture. She was very intentional when she hired Tendaji Bailey in 2022 as her assistant, she explained, explicitly looking for a young person who could serve as a role model. Tendaji, whose family hails from St. Helena Island, where he spent most of childhood, greatly contributed to extending the Commission's work with communities, specifically with younger people, by giving workshops at public events such as the Gullah Festival as well as by traveling extensively across the Lowcountry. Smalls said that a middle ground had to be found between respect for the Elders and following their guidance, on the one hand, and sharing knowledge and responsibility with the younger generation who will naturally do things their own way, on the other.

Our final topic was the relationship between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the GGCHC. Since we had had such an open conversation, I frankly told Smalls that I was aware of certain tensions between the two entities sharing some of what I had learned from my other research participants. Smalls expressed great admiration "for the work that Queen Quet is doing for the people," even though she might not always agree with her approach. She acknowledged that there had been tensions between the Commission and the Nation in the past and said that she respected the perspectives and feelings of the individuals involved respectively, however, that these were things that had happened before her time. Her own

focus though, she explained, was on "bringing together individuals and groups who have not worked together in the past," in order to "heal wounds within the community."

On October 29, 2022, the GGCHCC celebrated the opening of its offices in Beaufort. Prominently among the speakers and presenters at the event was Queen Quet, marking the first time since she had left the Commission that the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the GGCHC collaborated publicly. While it remains to be seen how the relationship between the two entities will further evolve, especially after Small's departure, the first important steps towards a reconciliation may have been made.

Conclusion

The Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission have both come to define the Gullah Geechee Movement in profound ways. While there have always been and still are also other highly important actors, the two entities have achieved an extraordinary level of institutionalization, reach, and prominence connecting many central organizations and activists across the Lowcountry and beyond. Concepts and terminology originally developed by the Nation or the Commission deeply influenced the work and vision of several other institutions, specifically with respect to the self-identification of the group. The Nation's understanding of Gullah Geechee as an indigenous group of people forming a cohesive culture across the entire Lowcountry and even extending into other parts of the United States and the Caribbean as well as the official recognition of Gullah Geechee as a culturally distinct minority of national significance through the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act shaped the notion among descendants of belonging to one unique cultural community, greatly nurtured pride in the group's heritage, and has even begun to increasingly attract other African Americans to explore their ancestral connections with Gullah Geechee. In addition to these contributions on a discursive level, the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Corridor Commission also play a central role in supporting the legal struggles for land retention and the economic empowerment of Gullah Geechee communities, amongst others through education, lobbying for legislative changes, and the development of community tourism.

After all, the two entities' specific work on the ground and their central values are in fact quite similar, revolving around communal ways of life, self-determination, respect for the Elders and ancestors, land retention, environmentalism, spirituality, and the commemoration of histories of resistance. Where the Nation and the Corridor Commission principally differ is in their overall approaches and the scope of their demands, which will be the focus of my concluding deliberations. In the following paragraphs, I compare my findings about the

politics of the two entities, first, on a cultural, then, a political-legal, and, finally, a socio-economic level, mirroring the multidimensional understanding of justice outlined in the introduction.

As regards the cultural dimensions of the work of the Nation and the Corridor Commission there are, first, a number of parallels to be noted: Both identify systemic structures of racial oppression to be at the heart of the social edifice and, accordingly, see a need for fundamental change. Both demand recognition of Gullah Geechee culture and of its people's contributions to US American history and society and both fight against the symbolic marginalization of not only the group itself but of African descendants in the United States in general. Neither entity goes as far as suggesting to deconstruct race or ethnicity though. To the contrary, not just the politics of the two entities, but the entire movement is predicated upon an affirmation of Blackness and Africanity.

Apart from these similarities, there are also a number of differences, in particular as regards the extent to which the two entities include other parts of the population within their politics and visions. The Gullah/Geechee Nation's approach appears to be closer to what I referred to in the introduction as a defensive inward-oriented identity politics. As we have seen above, compared to the Corridor Commission but also other actors within the movement, the Nation tends to draw more rigid boundaries as to who is identified as Gullah Geechee and who is not, and it explicitly concentrates most of its efforts on the group itself, even if the effects of its work often go much further. This undoubtedly has to be read in light of the history of exploitation of and discrimination against the group by outsiders. Another part of this defensive mechanism is the Nation's tendency to use rather essentialist rhetoric in some of its official statements, which, as we have seen earlier, is also quasi required though, by the broader context of international human and indigenous rights discourses in which the entity situates its demands. This potentially detracts from the transformative potential of the Nation's identity politics, as it limits the ways in which descendants can affiliate themselves with Gullah Geechee-ness. Still, it should be emphasized that, as mentioned earlier, there is a difference between the official rhetoric used by the Nation and the actual practices of its representatives and followers. At the events I attended during my fieldwork, Queen Quet, for instance, regularly discussed the importance of building bridges between different groups of people within society. Nonetheless, the Corridor Commission clearly exhibits a more inclusive perspective on matters of culture and identity. As described above, it is highly welcoming to descendants irrespective of the stage they are at within their journey of self-discovery and also appears to be more open to non-Gullah Geechee. The rotational principle among the Commissioners certainly contributes to this more fluid understanding of Gullah Geechee-

ness, as the regular change of leadership means that people with various different lived experiences of what it can mean to be Gullah Geechee have an impact upon the politics and visions of the entity. I would still not go as far describing the Corridor Commission as pursuing an identity politics that is principally outward-oriented, since it also defines itself by focusing first and foremost upon the matters of concern of Gullah Geechee people.

On a politico-legal level the Gullah/Geechee Nation's claims for gaining special status as a national minority with certain self-administrative authorities go well beyond the scope of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, and the Corridor Commission does not seem to have any pretensions of a similar kind. Even though the Act secured funding and symbolic recognition from the federal government, it did not entail any fundamental changes to the politico-legal status of Gullah Geechee. It may therefore be understood as an instance of what Will Kymlicka refers to as "polyethnic rights," that is "group-specific measures [...] intended to help ethnic groups and religious minorities express their cultural particularity and pride without it hampering their success in the economic and political institutions of the dominant society" ([1995] 2004, 31). In distinction from the Nation's demands for the extension of rights to self-administration, "polyethnic rights are usually intended to promote integration into the larger society, not self-government" (Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 31). Indeed, the Corridor is part of the existing National Park Service system, the Commission does not possess any jurisdictional authority, and the appointment of Commissioners relies significantly on state officials. That being said, both entities' claims ultimately remain within the realm of the nation state and do not radically question it, but rather, even if in different ways, rely on the given political-legal framework. As we have seen, the Nation, too, directs it claims at the government and appears to strive not for secession but for a semi-autonomous status within the existing nation state.

Finally, also the economic dimensions of the claims made by the Gullah/Geechee Nation appear more radical than those of the Corridor Commission. This becomes perhaps most evident from the two entities' perspectives upon the tourism industry. As discussed above, the Commission principally seeks to strengthen Gullah Geechee businesses' position in the market. Its economic vision in this sense is for the group to receive its rightful share, not to change the larger political economy. "Tourism is there to stay," encapsulates this rather pragmatic acknowledgement of the status quo. This does not mean that the Commission sees no flaws in the political economic system, but much rather that from its perspective, the solution to Gullah Geechee communities' predicament appears to lie in using the existing order to their advantage. The Gullah/Geechee Nation on the other hand regards tourism as an integral part of neoliberal capitalism and thus as inevitably representing an existential

threat to the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities. In her writing, Queen Quet argues that commodification necessarily subjects Gullah Geechee culture to the narrow values of market profitability and the desires of tourists for romantic representations of "exotic Blacks" at the expense of a critical engagement with the group's history and any actual concern for the livelihoods of its people. However, the Gullah/Geechee Nation, too, organizes financial literacy workshops with the aim to strengthen entrepreneurship and encourages landowners to develop their land, showing that some of its concrete strategies are in fact similar to that of the Corridor Commission (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020e, 2021). Apart from the extent of their critique, the differences thus lie principally in the two entities' envisioned end-state outcomes: Whereas the Gullah/Geechee Nation's economic vision is inextricably tied to above discussed political-legal claims for self-government and an emphasis on "traditional" agricultural ways of life, the Corridor Commission appears to envision what might best be described as a kind of "moral capitalism" in which communal values and solidarity represent principal virtues that allow Gullah Geechee communities and descendants to freely choose their way of life while holding on to their heritage.

One of my research participants, Gloria*, an African American folklorist from Boston in her 60s, was not surprised when we spoke about how the Corridor Commission appears to be overall less radical than the Nation. She observed that, as a state-sanctioned institution that depends on public funding, its politics would necessarily tend to me more affirmative of the status quo. With respect to the Gullah/Geechee Nation, on the other hand, Gloria* said that she believes that "Queen Quet had to develop such a strong personality, otherwise she would not have survived in this political climate," referring to the deeply entrenched conservatism in the Lowcountry, particularly in South Carolina (Interview 2022). While the politics of the Nation and the Corridor Commission can certainly not be reduced to such external factors, the broader social environment undoubtedly plays a decisive role both in limiting and creating opportunities for the two entities.

Moreover, as Olaf Zenker contends in his critical engagement with Irish language revivalism, social movement actors also need to be analyzed with regards to their structural relationship to one another. Zenker suggests to "interpret [...] conflicting agencies less in their own terms of divisions and more in terms of their de facto growing association" (2012, 43). In his analysis, he observes how actors who might seemingly stand in opposition have "joined forces [...] to actually co-produce what became the fact of the local revival" (Zenker 2012, 43). The radical claims made by the Gullah/Geechee Nation may similarly be seen as an important factor in the very creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. In this sense, the Corridor may be read as a product of a later stage in the development of the

Gullah Geechee Movement defined by increasing standardization, professionalization, and, crucially, the partial accommodation of the movement's demands by the state. Political scientist Sidney Tarrow identifies the latter as a deliberate practice used by power holders to appease parts of a movement while repressing or ignoring others and therewith diffusing some of its overall momentum and threat to the status quo (2011, 267–68). A major challenge for the Gullah/Geechee Nation, given its more radical demands, is thus indeed to delineate its differences from the Corridor Commission and demonstrate the continuing relevance of its vision in order to sustain and possibly further expand its base of supporters.

With all that being said, people actually do not regard the Corridor Commission and the Nation as opposites per se. Many of the Gullah Geechee activists I interacted with have worked with both, and especially younger people seem to have a fairly fluid understanding of the relationship between the two entities. One of my interlocutors, Shane*, a fashion designer in his early-30s from North Charleston, stated that he saw the Nation as representative of the group's cultural unity and struggle for human rights and the Corridor as an expression of state sanctioned recognition and support (Interview 2022). In this sense, without ignoring the many practical challenges to such a perspective, instead of "natural" competitors, the Corridor Commission and the Nation should perhaps first and foremost be seen as expressive of different visions of a good life among Gullah Geechee which may very well co-exist.

Chapter 4: On the Cultural Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Until at least the 1980s, Gullah Geechee-ness was stigmatized as a sign of "backwardness" and "primitivity," so much so that the denominators, "Gullah" and "Geechee," signified grave insults. With the beginnings of the Gullah Geechee Movement, this eventually changed. Especially following the creation of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, Gullah Geechee achieved an unprecedented degree of recognition.[80] Against the backdrop of this development, a rising number of descendants and even other African Americans who have previously had no direct relationship with the group started to explore their ancestral connections to the Lowcountry and now increasingly affiliate themselves with Gullah Geechee heritage. This engendered a complex dynamic that involves both highly inclusive efforts among Gullah Geechee activists and organizations to transcend oppressive representations of Blackness but also certain tendencies of (unwitting) marginalization and exclusion.

The focus of this chapter are these very negotiations of Gullah Geechee identity in light of its evolution from a reason for shame to a source of pride. Despite the increased prominence of Gullah Geechee within mainstream society, the group is still subject to various forms of discrimination along the lines of race, class, and culture. Gullah Geechee occupy a highly ambivalent position: on the one hand, seen as a living proof of the richness and depth of African American culture and history but, on the other, still constructed as a relic of the past and as antithetical to "modern" US-American society. Both descendants and other African Americans therefore affiliate themselves with Gullah Geechee culture and identity in quite different and sometimes even opposing ways.

In the following, I will trace the evolution of understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness based upon conversations with descendants from different generations. The central part of this chapter will then engage with above-described dynamic entailed by the valorization of Gullah Geechee identity. I argue that Gullah Geechee people, often constructed as the "most ethnic" of all African Americans, have become a central object of what I refer to as a politics of "ethnic Blackness:" efforts of Black US-Americans to free themselves from racial stigmatization by invoking concepts of Black ethnicity. I will discuss this politics of "ethnic Blackness" from four different angles: first, the use of Gullah Geechee-ness as a means of

[80] This becomes particularly evident from the increasing prominence of Gullah Geechee within popular culture. Possibly one of the most striking examples in this regard is the influence of Julie Dash's 1990s movie, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), about a fictional Gullah Geechee community in South Carolina, on the aesthetics of Beyoncé's visual album "Lemonade" from 2016 (see Strathearn 2017, 34–35).

status distinction, second, the normalization of Gullah Geechee-ness as a part of Lowcountry African American identity, third, the significance of Gullah Geechee-ness as a restorative and connective identity, and, fourth, tendencies of Native American marginalization within Gullah Geechee identity politics.

The Evolution of Understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness

> When I was growing up in Charleston in the 1970s no one wanted to be called "Gullah" or "Geechee" … but that has changed. And it has changed so much that it might even seem to the younger generation that it had always been like that because nowadays spaces exist where Gullah Geechee is appreciated. (Sherry*, Interview 2022)

Sherry* and I were sitting in a café close to Hampton Park, Charleston, on a sunny Monday afternoon, when a young Black man walked past us wearing a T-shirt with a big bold print reading "Gullah." Coincidentally, we had just been talking about my interest in the intergenerational differences in how descendants relate to their Gullah Geechee heritage. This was when Sherry made the above cited observation about how profoundly the group's status has changed since the time when she was growing up. Sherry* is a retired accountant in her late-60s, and was born and raised in the greater Charleston area. She left the Lowcountry for her studies in the 1970s but eventually came back after having worked in Washington, D.C., for a couple of years. She told me that when she was in her teens and early 20s, that is in the 1960s and 70s, she seldomly heard anyone use the terms, "Gullah" and "Geechee," and if so, they were usually meant in a highly derogatory manner. Many of my research participants from the same generation confirmed this perception, stating that "Geechee" was such a grave insult that "if you called someone that, they would cut you up," as one of my interlocutors put it (see also Daise 2007, x).

At least until the 1980s, Gullah Geechee-ness was stigmatized as a sign of "backwardness" and "primitivity" in public understandings (see H. Frazier 2011, 19; Goodwine 1998b, 9–11). "It was what people from the countryside were called," as Sherry explained. Particularly the language, as one of the most apparent markers of the group, carried a pronounced stigma, so that having a "Gullah accent" was regarded as shameful (see Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 164). For that very reason, Sherry said, she tried to mask her identity for many years:

> And I really worked it, my manner of speech, my accent. Because I was always told that it was just not cool. That in order to be understood…that this dialect is something you ought to be ashamed of, and is something you should not use in the outside world, and that's what I was brought up with. (Sherry*, interview 2022; see also Daise 2007, 10)

Most of my research participants from this generation shared similar experiences. They often pointed out that it was particularly in school where they were systematically discouraged to speak the language (see also Goodwine 1998b, 10; Jones-Jackson 1987, 15; Walker 2024). Paradoxically, as I was told, some of their teachers propably believed that they were helping the students by teaching them "correct" English, since Gullah Geechee was perceived as such a great impediment to social mobility within mainstream society. Sherry* said that in her community "the Black middle class was big on elevation through education," an integral part of which was to speak "properly and not like that [referring to Gullah Geechee]." Two other research participants from Charleston, Martha* and Willy* both in their mid-70s, said that they still believed that "Gullah is not advantageous to Black people in modern society, neither culturally, nor economically," showing how strong of an impression the above-described experiences left upon them (Interview 2017). As several of my interlocutors stated, it was ingrained into previous generations that they had to adapt if they wanted to "make something out of themselves," especially in urban environments where pressures to conform to White hegemonic ideals were particularly strong (see Goodwine 1998b, 10–11; Queen Quet 2018a, 6).

Triss*, an actress in her mid-30s from Southport, North Carolina, said about such adaptation processes to mainstream society's ideals that "often people refer to this as assimilation," which, in her understanding though, implicitly laid blame onto earlier generations for not holding on to their heritage. Instead, she prefers to speak of "survival" since "they simply did what they had to do in order to make a living and care for their families" (Interview 2022). Such dynamics of course pertained to Black people in general. However, for Gullah Geechee, as seen with respect to the language, additional pressures came into play. This also manifested itself in intra-racial discrimination from other African Americans along the lines of class, urban-rural divides, color—revolving around the stereotype that Gullah Geechee were particularly dark-skinned—and culture (see Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 164; Goodwine 1998b, 10–11; G. T. Green 2013, 578). Grace*, a public historian in her late 40s who grew up on St. Helena Island, shared with me how every time she and her siblings went to Beaufort, they were made fun of by the local Black kids for how they spoke. She explained that Beaufort as well as other cities in the Lowcountry, such as Charleston, Savannah, or Wilmington, had long standing African American middle and upper classes who distanced themselves from whom they regarded as "poor and uneducated Black countryfolk" which often referred to Gullah Geechee people (Interview 2022).

As a consequence of this pervasive stigmatization of Gullah Geechee identity, almost all of my interlocutors from older generations did not grow up "knowing themselves as Gullah Geechee:"

> You weren't thinking about it in some conscious way, just as a fish swims in water and doesn't know that it's water. We were embraced, involved, immersed in Gullah culture, but we didn't know what Gullah was. (Dwight*, a retired scholar in his late-70s who spent most of his childhood in New York City, interview 2017)
>
> People didn't call themselves Gullah Geechee. We didn't call ourselves that, we didn't know that. We didn't know anything about Gullah culture, or Geechee culture, or West African culture and its relationships and its influences on [Gullah Geechee]. (Joshua*, an artist in his 60s from Charleston, interview 2022)
>
> I had never heard the term Gullah used in a positive way until, maybe, the 90s with *Gullah Gullah Island* airing on TV. So, we didn't identify with that until much later. (Berta*, a sweetgrass basket maker from North Carolina in her 60s, interview 2022)

Similar experiences were also related to me by people from Georgia and Florida. As evident from these citations, it is a fairly recent phenomenon that descendants explicitly regard and refer to themselves as Gullah Geechee (see also Barnes and Steen 2012, 203; Matory 2008, 951). In his analysis of the development of collective identity among the group, J. Lorand Matory asserts that Gullah Geechee had "discovered their Africanness, amplified it, and gave it a new social reality in the late twentieth century" (2008, 970). Dwight*, whom I've just cited above, stated along similar lines:

> The concepts we use today of Gullah Geechee and this idea of a unique culture are late 20th or early 21st century concepts that we are now deploying to interpret a lot of historical things that we did not interpret that way when we were there [referring to his childhood]. We are taking and re-shaping history. We are not re-shaping the facts, but we are re-shaping the interpretation. (Interview 2017)

These changes naturally reflect themselves in how younger generations relate to Gullah Geechee culture. Many of my research participants who were born in the 1980s or later, grew up being well aware of the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee." Curiously, for several of them, it had primarily been their grandparents who taught them about their family's heritage:

> [E]specially my grandpa would talk a lot about the culture. He was proud to be Gullah Geechee which was kind of rare, because people would look down on you. [A]nd you know my family land is Daniel Island, Cainhoy area. I spent a lot of time there on my family land, my grandparents' land. (Raimond*, an educator in his early-40s from West Ashley, Charleston, interview 2022)
>
> My whole life I've known myself as Gullah Geechee. I grew up on Highway 17, on a basket stand. It started with my grandfather and my grandmother. We went every day. I was in school and we would go on the side of the road and sow baskets and sell baskets, that was just our life. (Shanice*, a sweetgrass basket maker and storyteller in her late-30s from Mt. Pleasant, interview 2017)

While my interlocutors' grandparents might not have explicitly used the terms, "Gullah" and "Geechee," to describe their heritage, they shared stories of how they grew up immersed in what is now regarded as traditional Gullah Geechee culture—agricultural ways of life within small, close-knit communities.[81] This apparently contributed significantly to their grandchildren attaching positive feelings to their cultural heritage (see also Beoku-Betts 1995, 541). Apart from the context of family, almost all of my younger interlocutors named *Gullah Gullah Island* as a major influence on the development of their own identities during their childhoods. Other important early influences cited by my interlocutors were cultural festivals, food, and art, such as sweetgrass basket making. As described earlier, since the 1980s and 90s, there has been a steady increase in cultural productions, including literature, art, music, TV shows, small budget films and even larger productions, that take inspiration from Gullah Geechee history and culture and/or even explicitly engage with the group. This development has only further accelerated in the last couple of years, which also entailed the emergence of multiple younger Gullah Geechee organizations, some of whose work I will discuss further below in this chapter.

Despite this increased re-appropriation of Gullah Geechee identity, the stigmas ascribed to the group have not yet vanished (see Barnes and Steen 2012, 203–4). This becomes perhaps most apparent from the ongoing prevalence of certain stereotypes within mainstream society, a number of which I regularly encountered in the interactions with my non-Gullah Geechee research participants, especially with White US-Americans. One of my White interlocutors, a long-time resident of Charleston, told me that she had often heard about Gullah Geechee people and "their rhythmic dances and music," but never had a chance to experience any of it herself. Another of my White research participants principally connected Gullah Geechee with their "delicious food" and the "Caribbean vibe" of their language. Such views of the group's culture, even if "well-intended," are not only instances of earlier discussed trivialization of the contributions made by Gullah Geechee to US-American history and society but, moreover, exoticize descendants. We will see further below, how this places expectations onto Gullah Geechee people to perform their culture in a very narrow and static manner, especially within the tourism industry, where this further intersects with economic pressures to satisfy consumer demand, creating a number of challenges for descendants.

[81] The generation of my younger research participants' parents, on the other hand, grew up in the 1950s and 60s, a time when the Lowcountry had already been fairly well integrated into the larger capitalist political economy and when descendants increasingly sought out economic and educational opportunities in urbanized areas, or even outside of the region, where they then tended to actively hide their Gullah Geechee identity in order to avoid discrimination. As a consequence, as I was told, many from this generation "lost parts of their culture," which may explain why it was the grandparents of most of my younger interlocutors who taught them about their family's heritage.

However, not only such seemingly "positive" stereotypes about the group are still commonplace. One of my research participants, Sonya*, a cultural history interpreter in her mid-30s from Beaufort, told me about an experience she had made a couple of years ago with two White US-Americans during a tour at one of the former plantations in the Charleston metropolitan area:

> I asked them whether they had met any other Gullah Geechee people while living in Charleston. And I believe that they had both lived in Charleston for 14 years at the time. So, at this point they know that I'm Gullah. They know that Gullah Geechee people walk on two legs and we have ten fingers and we speak English and we look like any other human being. The only obvious response would be, "you don't know anyone is Gullah Geechee unless they tell you, or they have a very obvious accent," I suppose. Her response however was, "No, I have not met any other Gullah Geechee people, but my daughter teaches special ed[ucation]." That's what she said. (Interview 2017)

Evidently, the woman in the above citation intuitively connected Gullah Geechee with children having learning difficulties, thereby implying that the group's culture as a whole was somehow "impaired." One of my Black interlocutors from Savannah, Albert*, a realtor in his late-60s, stated along similar lines that to him Gullah Geechee represented a "Third World culture," thus quite explicitly conceiving it as "inferior" to "modern" US-American culture (Interview 2022). Such views may best be understood as relying on a kind of "cultural deficit model," based upon which Gullah Geechee descendants are conceived to be at a "natural" disadvantage because of their shared cultural background whose negative connotations stem from its ties to Africa (Solorzano 1997, 13; see also Lawrence III 1987, 374). This is closely linked to earlier discussed efforts within the educational system to teach Gullah Geechee students "proper" English and thereby "reduce" the imprint of their cultural heritage. Even though in recent years some schools have started to include a respectful and appreciative engagement with Gullah Geechee history and culture into their curricula, this is still rather the exception than the rule.

Triss*, whom I cited earlier, said that when she went to school in the 1990s and early 2000s, her teachers still taught them not to use Gullah Geechee, "because they said it was just wrong to speak that way" (Interview 2022). However, it is also other students' reactions which discourage the use of and the identification with Gullah Geechee. Triss* told me about former classmates of hers who were mocked in school because of their pronounced Gullah Geechee accents. She said that it was for those very reason that even among the younger generation there are still people who do not want to "fully embrace" their Gullah Geechee heritage:

> I think part of it is school and bullying, not just bullying from the students but being taught that you're speaking incorrectly, you don't sound right, you sound ignorant when you say words a certain way. But also, Gullah Geechee almost feels like it's just connected to slavery. So, people don't want to identify with that. It's so much more…but people aren't taught that, and so they don't understand. (Interview 2022)

She continued that, in her view, this close association between Gullah Geechee and bondage represents another highly problematic misconception about the culture, since "then it is not understood as something that is ongoing, as something that is connected to resistance and freedom, something that we can be proud of" (see also Daise 2007, 43; Griner 2015).

When comparing the above-described lived experiences of older to that of younger generations of Gullah Geechee descendants, we can clearly see that the status of the group has changed significantly. Once tied almost exclusively to negative connotations, the terms, "Gullah" and "Geechee," have been increasingly re-appropriated. As Sherry* states in the citation at the beginning of this section, within the past couple of decades spaces emerged that allow younger generations to develop and express a positive relationship to their cultural identity. This, however, does not mean that all the stigmas ascribed to the group have vanished. Notions of cultural "deficiency" and socio-economic deprivation are still being tied to Gullah Geechee-ness within public discourse, as evident not only from views expressed by non-Gullah Geechee, but also from the ongoing reluctance among some descendants to affiliate themselves with their heritage. This places Gullah Geechee in a subject-position that is both desired and despised—an ambivalence which, as we will see in the following, is not only central to contemporary negotiations of Gullah Geechee-ness but also speaks to larger dynamics around race, Blackness, class, and culture in the United States.

The Politics of "Ethnic Blackness"

> Anti-Blackness is very prevalent in all aspects of the US. [...]. You are taught to be anti-Black even if you don't know. That's what you are being taught, so that's when issues of Black colorism come in, and the lighter you are, the better you are. But you also didn't want to just be Black. The people who were Jamaican, that was cooler than being just Black, or if you were bi-racial, mixed with something else that wasn't just plain Black. You know, you got to feel better about yourself. (Mariah*, interview 2017)

This quote from Mariah*, one of my central research participants, tells us as much about the ongoing centrality of anti-Black racism in the United States as about its changing nature, and it also contains the key to understanding the above-described ambivalence in how descendants as well as other African Americans relate to Gullah Geechee identity, but I will return to that in a moment. While race is nothing but an "utter illusion," as Lee D. Baker writes, it has at once an undeniable "material reality, [it is both] a fiction and a "scientific"

fact" (1998, 1); it is a false belief upon which nonetheless rests "a [globally effective] nexus of material relations within which social and discursive practices perpetuate oppressive power relations between populations presumed to be essentially different" (Harrison 1995, 65). Birthed from European colonial expansion, conquest, and domination, the logic of racial oppression operates along a light–dark hierarchy, wherein Whiteness represents purity and racial superiority, whereas Blackness is constructed as a contaminating mark of inferiority (Gordon 1995, 96; Gotanda 1991, 26–27; Harrison 1995, 51). This opposition might have found its most extreme expression in the principle of binary hypodescent in the United States where every person is racially classified in relation to their proximity or distance to the two poles—White and Black—and where "any children born to parents of different races inherit the identity of the parent with the lower racial status," with Blackness signifying the lowest strata overriding all other identities (Matory 2015, 22; see also Harrison 1995, 60–61). This system of anti-Black racism, as Mariah* notes above, permeates the entire fabric of society. Critical Race Theorists and anthropologists of race have time and again demonstrated the centrality of race to the very creation and re-production of "modern" United States, emphasizing the stabilizing function of Black subordination both on a socio-economic and psychological level (D. Bell [1970] 2008, 67; Harris 1993, 1758–59; Harrison [1991] 2010, 3–4; Morrison 1993, 52; Mullings 2005, 671; Robinson [1983] 2000, 10, 199-200; St. Drake 1975, 3–4).

Anti-blackness is taught, "even if you don't know," as Mariah* says in the quote. It is deeply inscribed into US-American culture, and, indeed, operates to a large extent on an unconscious level (Lawrence III 1987, 322; Perry 2011, 5–6). Given this omnipresent representation of Blackness as lack, Lewis Gordon contends that non-Blackness becomes the principle aim of desire. As a consequence, "blackness is regarded, even by the black, as the antithesis of fulfillment in an antiblack world" (1995, 104–5). This internalization of one's own self as inferior, as the stigmatized Other, represents one of the most effective and perfidious forms of racial oppression, crippling the very foundation of one's identity (Hall 1990, 226).[82] There has been ample research and cultural critique of efforts among Black populations to free themselves from racial stigma by masking their Blackness and imitating behavior associated with Whiteness (E. F. Frazier [1955] 1997, 146–47; Harris 1993, 1712–13; hooks 2014, 40). However, as Mariah* implies with her remark on the preference of certain

[82] This insight can be traced back to W.E.B. Du Bois' work on double consciousness and the formation of racialized subjectivities ([1903] 2017, 5–6) as well as to Frantz Fanon and his theory on the workings of colonial domination through the forced internalization of the *White* gaze ([1967] 2008, 82–83).

Black identities over others, there are also alternative strategies to seek exemption from racial stigmatization.

Paul Gilroy argues that within the last decades there has been an evolution of racism from vulgar to cultural forms which engendered a new "order of racial power relations [that] has become more subtle and elusive" (1987, 40). Culture and the related concepts of cultural heritage and ethnicity are now often employed as substitutes for race, resulting in a "racism without races" in which an ahistorical notion of cultural difference represents the principle ideological device (Harrison 1995, 49; see Mbembe 2017, 7; Perry 2011, 18). At the same time, since the 1970s and 80s, the parlance of culture is increasingly being used by "new immigrants as well as established minorities to deploy ethnic strategies in their competition for political and economic advancement and in their rise above stigmatized forms of racial alterity" (Harrison 1995, 58). These broader developments in the politics of race and culture have also profoundly influenced the understanding and the use of Gullah Geechee-ness.

Mariah's* above cited statement was her response to my question what she believes motivates people to identify with Gullah Geechee, deliberating on her own experiences in high school and college. When we first met in 2017, she was in her mid-twenties and just about to finish her Master's degree in Public History. Mariah* told me that although her parents had always embraced their Gullah Geechee heritage, she herself had not identified with the culture until the beginning of her studies. Crucial to the eventual development of her own Gullah Geechee identity, she explained, was, for one, to learn about Gullah Geechee history, and, for another, a feeling of non-belonging and wanting to be more than "just Black:"

> And all of a sudden, I turned to [my father] and said, my god, if you're Gullah that means I'm Gullah, too. It had not ever connected to me before that, because I thought "you're not Gullah, if you don't speak Gullah." So, I didn't have the accent but there were people at my school who did. So, obviously they were Gullah and I was just Black. It's not a cultural identity I started to grasp and embrace until college really, with all the things that I learned taking these African American classes. (Interview 2017)

Both of the above quoted statements from Mariah* are framed by what I refer to as a *desire to become more than "just Black."* Apart from Mariah*, many other of my research participants, Gullah Geechee as well as other African Americans, have regularly referred to themselves or others as being "just Black" or "plain" Black, implying, if not even explicitly stating, that they either desired to become or already were more than "just Black." The aim of desire in this case, however, is not Whiteness but what may be referred to as "ethnic Blackness," the imagined inverse of "plain Blackness." Whereas the latter signifies to have no history and no true collective Self, "ethnic Blackness" designates the possession of a distinct and traceable

cultural heritage and ancestry, such as ascribed, amongst others, to Black Caribbeans and especially to Black Africans (see Matory 2015, 5–7; D. Wallace 2016, 41).

Curiously, looking back at her experiences in college in the mid- to late-1980s, Jessica*, a teacher in her mid-60s, recounted an experience that is very similar to Mariah's*:

> I know when I was in college, kids from Africa didn't want to be called Black, they didn't want to be identified as a Black American at all. Because when they said that they were African they were accepted more easily into the culture or society, than if you were a Black American. So, they didn't want to be called a Black American [...] because it gave a stigma to them... it's a shame... (Interview 2017)

In her analysis of the diverse processes of identity formation in Black communities Vera Green observed that "ethnic Black" identities received a growing valorization in explicit distinction from notions of "plain Blackness" during the 1960s (1970, 270). According to Matory, this development was caused by the complex interplay of the effects of desegregation, the radical affirmation of Blackness by Black Liberation Movements and Afrocentrism, the accelerated transnational migration of people, ideas, and goods, and the conservative counterrevolution against social egalitarianism (2015, 8). He argues that, as a result, the best option for many Black immigrants and natives alike to improve their social standing has become to affiliate themselves with a cultural heritage that distinguishes them from being "just Black" (2015, 2). Given that Gullah Geechee people are represented in both academic and popular discourses as one of the "most ethnic" of all African American populations, an affiliation with the group may promise exactly that (Matory 2015, 8; Cooper 2017, 11–12; Guthrie 1996, 1). This dynamic though, can manifest itself in quite different ways. As we will see in the following four sections of empirical analysis, the ethnicization of Gullah Geechee (1) may indeed be instrumentalized by Black people as a means of elevating themselves above others, but (2) may also simply become a normalized part of the self-understandings of African Americans in the Lowcountry, or (3) represent the basis for counter-hegemonic resistance, even though, also in the latter case (4) this may still, more or less unwittingly, involve the (discursive) marginalization of other groups of people.

Gullah Geechee-ness as a Means of Status Distinction

One evening during the MOJA Arts Festival in 2017, an annual festival for the celebration of African American and Afro Caribbean art and culture in Charleston, I met with two friends, Cheryl* and Hope*. We planned to visit an autobiographical play by a Gullah Geechee artist and decided to have dinner before that. While waiting for our food, our conversation turned to a MOJA event that had taken place the previous day which, as Cheryl* and Hope* said, had been attended mainly by people whom they referred to as the "Black bourgeoisie." Upon my

inquiring, they explained that "at events like these," in this case a poetry evening, the Black upper middle class of the Charleston area "suddenly remembers their African heritage and dresses up in African clothes to show off." Alyssa*, a Gullah Geechee heritage tour guide from Charleston, whom I later told about this conversation, made similar suggestions. She said that as soon as the occasion arises, especially during Black History Month, Kwanzaa, at Gullah Geechee festivals, or at other cultural events focused on Black heritage, "certain Black people," who usually do not follow any kind of African or African descended customs, suddenly become "very African" and highly eager to display their Africanity to others. My own observations at the MOJA opening reception conveyed a similar impression.

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The event took place at Dock Street Theatre in the historic French Quarter of downtown Charleston. Dock Street Theatre is housed in what was once called the Planters Hotel, which opened in 1809 and focused upon a clientele comprised mostly of the "planter" aristocrats, in other words the enslaver elite, and other affluent guests. The building's elaborately decorated façade, dominated by six brownstone columns and a delicate blue-green cast-iron balcony, still bears witness to this period of decadence and exploitation. There are probably only a few historic buildings in Charleston that are not in some way entangled with the history of enslavement. While no explicit mention was made of this at the reception, sometimes, as we have seen in Chapter 3 with respect to the new offices of the Corridor Commission in Beaufort, such places are purposely re-appropriated by African Americans. My sense was that in this case, however, the site was mostly chosen for its "historic charm" and elegance. Even though admission was free, the majority of the attending people were from the Black middle and upper class, many of whom I had already seen and would see again at other prestigious public events. Several of my research participants shared that in Charleston, even more so than in other cities in the Lowcountry, a very specific kind of behavior is expected, if one wants to belong to the "higher echelons of society." "If it's a bigger event and if it's supposed to be chic, then it has to be very chic, it's really got to have that…Charleston chic, it's got be historic and grand and all that to be respected," as Cheryl* explained. She said that this pertains to both Black and White Charlestonians. The choice of Dock Street Theatre as the venue for the MOJA opening reception might therefore be interpreted as having served the attending Black middle and upper classes to cultivate their bourgeois status in a rather ambiguous continuity with Charleston's history of affluence given the city's connection with enslavement.

Returning to the event itself, the program consisted of a couple of brief speeches that gave thanks to the event's sponsors, highlighted the value of MOJA for Charleston, and stressed the profound influence of African cultures upon the Americas. Afterwards an open

buffet followed, consisting of Southern, most of it Gullah Geechee, and Caribbean inspired cuisine. All of this took place in the courtyard of the theatre. While some of the attending people wore evening dresses and suits, most were dressed in clothes with African or African style prints, some wearing elaborate dresses, African inspired jewelry, or kaftans and hats, and one person even wore a pharaoh costume. There were two people at the event whom I had spoken to just a couple of days prior. The first, Martha*, was one of the two African American interlocutors in their mid-70s cited earlier, who stated that Gullah Geechee was "not advantageous to Black people in modern society, neither culturally, nor economically." While she did not wear any clothes or jewelry that were explicitly African inspired, she emphatically joined other people's conversations on how important it was to maintain "their" African heritage. One of the speeches even highlighted her contributions to that end as a former educator and member of several boards and commissions in Charleston. The second person was Jeffrey*, a Black historian from Charleston in his late-50s, whom I had already met several times at other events where he had lectured on Lowcountry African American history. Instead of his usual patterned shirts and plain trousers he wore a dashiki to the occasion. What was curious in his case is that, although I had never heard him engage seriously with Gullah Geechee in any of his presentations, if at all, he was nominated in another one of the speeches to become a member of a privately organized working group focused upon the "preservation" of Gullah Geechee heritage. After the event I tried to learn more about this said working group but was not able to find any information nor did I ever hear about the project again.

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My observations at the MOJA opening reception mirrored several of the earlier described perceptions of my research participants and may be interpreted as indeed suggesting that some of the attending African Americans fashioned themselves as "ethnic Blacks" by wearing ankhs, dashikis, and cowry shells, and by more generally affiliating themselves with an African-Diasporic Cosmopolitanism, not necessarily out of commitment but to cultivate a specific kind of Black bourgeois status. As apparent from the examples of Martha* and Jeffrey* the context of the MOJA opening reception, a public event focused on the celebration of Black cultural heritage, and, importantly, with a principal audience of middle- and upper-class African Americans, prompts a specific set of behavior and interactions. Evidently, it would not have been well regarded if Martha* had shared her private opinions on Gullah Geechee culture in that context. Jeffrey* also adapted by wearing specific clothes to the occasion. One might of course very well argue that it is common to change one's behavior depending on the situation and specifically in Jeffrey's* case the event might have simply provided him with a

space where he felt comfortable to wear a dashiki. What was crucial though in the above-described context is the specific way in which this change of behavior appeared to be part of a broader dynamic: apart from Martha* and Jeffrey* a number of other people received honorable mentions, all done in a rather ostentatious manner; and, without questioning Martha's* and Jeffrey's* commitment to social matters in general, I happened to know that their views and behavior in other contexts stood in pronounced contrast to how they represented themselves at the reception. Overall, this led to the impression that a central, if not the most important, part of the event was "to see and to be seen." Hope*, whom I cited at the beginning of this section and who used the term "Black bourgeoisie" to describe the kind of audience that attended the opening reception, said she had often made the experience that "all that people do at such events is get excited about having these titles and honorary positions."

Taking into account what I discussed in the previous section, one way to interpret my observations is that in public contexts such as the above, Black middle- and upper-classes evoke an African cultural heritage in order to distinguish themselves from other African Americans as the more cultured and "rooted" Black people. While the immediate audience for such performances are bourgeois African Americans themselves, I contend that the display of this African Diasporic class consciousness also positions itself explicitly in opposition to the racist myth that people of African descent had no history or culture and, in this sense, strives to establish itself as equal to its White European counterpart. This also pertains directly to the ways in which African Americans relate to Gullah Geechee. An affiliation with the group may gain special appeal because it is constructed as one of the "most ethnic" and "culturally rich" African descended populations in the United States. As Ian*, a political activist in his mid-40s from Charleston, said in response to my question about his thoughts on why people increasingly explore their connections to Gullah Geechee:

> For some, it certainly comes from a genuine desire to know where they're from. For others, I'm not so sure…Now that Gullah Geechee has suddenly become accepted, everyone wants to be part of it, everyone wants to be able to say they have a "distinct culture," as they call it (Interview 2017).

Curiously though, based upon conversations with many of my research participants, the status of "actually" being Gullah Geechee seems not necessarily to be perceived as desirable (see also Goodwine 1998b, 10–11). As Ian* explained further:

> They [Gullah Geechee descended people and other African Americans] don't mind wearing certain things, like everybody loves to wear their dashiki, they love to wear the sweetgrass earrings and jewelry, but as far as being identified as Gullah Geechee, they are almost ashamed of it. (Interview 2017)

In most contexts of my research, people held a specific understanding of those who "actually" were Gullah Geechee as differentiated from "modern" Gullah Geechee descendants. "Actually" being Gullah Geechee was usually identified, (1) as being a descendant of Africans and African Americans enslaved in the Lowcountry, (2) as having grown up and as living in the Lowcountry or at least as having kept a very close relationship with one's family there, (3) as having committed oneself to the continuation of Gullah Geechee culture, and (4) as possessing a deep intuitive knowledge of one's heritage, which usually includes speaking the Gullah Geechee language and/or being knowledgeable of other practices deemed traditional (see Campbell 2011, 82–83; Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 5; Jones-Jackson 1987, 22–23; National Park Service 2005, 13–14; Goodwine 1998b, 13). "Actually" being Gullah Geechee thus appears to be defined by a perceived cultural authenticity—the embodying and living of what is understood as traditional Gullah Geechee culture. On the one hand, this holds a positive connotation for traditionalists, most prominently perhaps in the case of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, playing an integral role in the entity's self-understanding and in its human and indigenous rights approach. At the same time though, such discourses of authenticity and purity tend to entail the notion that Gullah Geechee culture was somehow immutable to change and embodied an earlier stage in the cultural evolution of "modern" society (see Blakey [1991] 2010, 17; J. Jackson 1989, 127). This ties back into earlier engagement with the narrative of isolation and the symbolic ruralization of Gullah Geechee in academic as well as popular discourses and the group's romanticized construction in the tourism industry as an exotic Other (see Cooper 2017, 2–3; Hargrove 2020, 149; Ruffins 2008, 218–19; Vlach 2008, 213–15). "Actually" being Gullah Geechee is therefore also associated with the lifeways of "poor countryfolk," imagined as removed from modernity, and therefore seen as an undesirable socio-economic status (see Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 164; Goodwine 1998b, 10–11).

Finally, colorism plays a significant role in the ways in which descendants and other African Americans relate to Gullah Geechee as well. As noted by Mariah* in the citation at the beginning of the previous section, "the lighter you are, the better you are." And since Gullah Geechee are commonly seen as the "most African" of all African Americans, not only in cultural but phenotypical terms, too, the group also experiences pronounced discrimination along these lines:

> [P]hysical features typically associated with GGs – darker skin (the 'black Geechee'), tightly coiled ('nappy') hair, full lips and broad nose, characteristics of west African phenotypes, were mocked by both the larger white society but also intimately and directly by other blacks, so that GGs were rendered inferior both by a pervasive white racism external to the culture and also by a black colorism (incubated by the former)

> which privileged a 'mixed', if not exclusively European physical form (Coard, Breland, & Raskind, 2001; Martin, 1964). (Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 164)

One of my White interlocutors, Jake*, an Uber driver in his early-40s who is originally from Utah, remarked with curious fascination that "the people from the Sea Islands are really dark, not just dark brown, but blue black, you know," mis-constructing Gullah Geechee as being noticeably different from other African Americans (Interview 2022). In a similar vein, Lionel*, a retired African American journalist from Georgetown in his early-70s, shared that he was surprised when he learned that one of his acquaintances could speak Gullah Geechee because the person was "light-brown" (Interview 2022). He said that this was when he became aware of his own prejudice, having assumed that all Gullah Geechee were dark-skinned. While discrimination against the group might not be as severe anymore as described in the above citation, stereotypes about Gullah Geechee people's physical appearance, evidently, persevere.

The status of the group is thus still highly ambivalent: Characterized by certain "desirable" characteristics, such as a clearly identifiable heritage, cultural distinctiveness, and indigeneity to the Lowcountry, but also by attributes that may seem unappealing, such as an allegedly lower socio-economic status, "incompatibility" with modern society, and physical features that according to hegemonic racial ideology are regarded as "too African," Gullah Geechee culture and identity appear to serve to certain African Americans merely as a reference point. This may explain the perception of several of my research participants that some African Americans appear only willing to demonstrate a limited degree of likeness to Gullah Geechee in the parlance of cultural heritage while emphasizing their different socio-economic position in "modern" society (compare to Daise 2007, x). In this sense, the value of their affiliation with Gullah Geechee is derived from a construction of Black ethnicity that serves to de-align certain African Americans, who fashion themselves as ethnic, from the stigma of "plain Blackness." As Queen Quet shared in a conversation at the Coastal Cultures Conference in 2022, more and more African Americans appear to represent themselves as connected to Gullah Geechee heritage, seeking to reap individual benefits from the collective identity without, however, bearing any of the costs of "actually" being Gullah Geechee. While providing middle- and upper-class African Americans with a means to cultivate their bourgeois status, this strategy not only contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes about Gullah Geechee but is also complicit in the "de-culturization" of people considered as "plain Blacks"—typically working class African Americans—therewith remaining well inside the logic of the racial status quo (see Olwig 1999, 384).

The use of Gullah Geechee heritage as a means of status distinction does, certainly, not always take such forms; especially since strategic interests and commitment are not

necessarily mutually exclusive, but oftentimes overlap and over time may even change into one another (Eidson et al. 2017, 348–49). Moreover, while my own experiences in contexts such as the MOJA opening reception mostly confirmed the above-cited perceptions of my interlocutors, certain dynamics between Gullah Geechee traditionalists, on the one hand, and pragmatists (for lack of a better term), on the other, also have a significant influence on the ways in which some African Americans and descendants may be perceived as instrumentalizing the group. More specifically, Gullah Geechee traditionalists tend to criticize pragmatists for not being "truly" committed to the continuation of Gullah Geechee heritage, since they would not practice the culture in their everyday lives and, closely tied to that, water it down by not strictly following the traditions, if not by deliberately misrepresenting their heritage in order to profit off of its commodification within the tourism industry (Queen Quet 2012a, 17–18). As observed in the previous chapter, this dynamic was, at least until recently, also a defining feature of the relationship between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. Apart from that, the distinction between traditionalists and pragmatists also expresses itself along the lines of age and geography.

Gullah Geechee descendants have become an increasingly urban population over the past couple of decades, which means that there is a growing number of younger activists whose socio-economic realities differ significantly from that of previous generations. Accordingly, they develop understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness that necessarily go beyond agricultural ways of life, fluency in the Gullah Geechee language, and intimate knowledge of other cultural practices commonly deemed traditional. While younger organizations do not necessarily position themselves in opposition to the work of established entities, their perspectives are sometimes perceived as challenges. This is not to imply that there was a fundamental intergenerational conflict within the movement, nor among Gullah Geechee communities in general. Respect for the Elders still plays a crucial role for younger Gullah Geechee descendants and there has been a growing cooperation between newer organizations and established entities within recent years. Still, intergenerational tensions were cited as a major challenge to cultural reproduction by many of my interlocutors. This manifests itself, amongst others, in contestations over the normalization of Gullah Geechee-ness as a part of Lowcountry African American identity.

Gullah Geechee-ness as a Normalized Part of Lowcountry African American Identity

There appeared to be a general sentiment among many of my older research participants that younger Gullah Geechee descendants were somehow "indifferent" to the continuation of their culture and "didn't care enough." While some of them also acknowledged that there are "some younger people who do important work" most regarded passing on the culture to the next generation as "difficult." However, this appears to be experienced quite differently by the younger generation itself. As Kennedy Bennet, a Mt. Pleasant native in her 20s and descendant of basket makers, states with respect to the craft in an interview with the Washington Post:

> That narrative [of a lack of interest among the younger generation] is a little bit dangerous," Bennett said, who is a history major at Yale University. "We have an interest in basketry and we value the craftsmanship, but there are these external forces—economic, political, social—that play a role in how well the artistry is doing. (Rogers 2021)

What Bennet draws attention to are the structural constraints to the reproduction of Gullah Geechee heritage. Especially cultural practices that are tied to agricultural ways of life are difficult to maintain as they are highly time consuming and often do not provide enough income to secure one's livelihood. While sweetgrass basket making, for instance, historically an integral part of the rice plantation economy, has become a highly sought-after form of art, there is only a limited number of individuals who are actually able to make a living from the craft. One of my research participants, Ronald*, a sweetgrass basket maker in his mid-30s from Mt. Pleasant, is highly dedicated to continuing the work but has so far not been successful enough in selling his products to fully rely on basket making for a living. He therefore became a full-time employee at a gas station, which in turn limits the time he has for sowing, ultimately stalling the plans he had made for new projects in basket making. Such socio-economic concerns not only pertain to younger descendants of course but affect Gullah Geechee across all generations.

Returning to the specifics of intergenerationality, another challenge that was often cited by my younger interlocutors was the difficulty of gaining access to the knowledge necessary to continue their heritage. Arianne*, a cultural history interpreter from North Charleston in her late-20s, said that "we [younger people] really want to learn [the] Gullah Geechee [language], but many elders don't want to teach it," which she explained with earlier described stigmatization of the language (Interview 2022). This means that oftentimes younger Gullah Geechee descendants have to find out how to express themselves and explore their ancestry with their own limited resources, necessarily leading to innovations, which

sometimes is of course also pursued intentionally given their different lived experiences. This is particularly the case in urban contexts where younger people have in recent years increasingly begun to stake out new understandings of what Gullah Geechee-ness could mean in the 21st century. A recollection from my fieldwork shall allow us to delve deeper into this discussion.

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During my fieldwork in Charleston in 2022, I attended the first annual "Gullah Gala Music and Fashion Show." It took place on April 16 at the Trident Technical College, a community college in North Charleston. The event description asked to "dress your best" and I decided to wear plain black pants and a dashiki that I got from Nigeria when I last visited my father. When I arrived at the venue, it was already quite crowded. The audience was all Black, mostly in their 20s and 30s, and probably numbered around 200 people. Some were dressed in African inspired clothes, too, but most wore evening dresses or a suit and tie. In front of the venue there was a red carpet where people could pose and take photos of themselves. Upon entering the building, one first got into the lobby where the reception was located as well as a number of vendors. Three offered cosmetic products, one sold jewelry, another displayed hats and accessories for men, and the remaining two were specialized on clothes. Only the two latter were explicitly marketed as Gullah Geechee. One of them was from Mt. Pleasant and sold T-Shirts imprinted with the word "Gullah" and the outline of the state of one's choice, and the other, Gullah T's N' Tings, a very popular Hilton Head based business which I will come back to in Chapter 5, sold different kinds of clothes most of which also had "Gullah" printed on them. The main event took place in the auditorium right behind the lobby and centered around a fashion show and live music. The host, a young Black woman, emphasized that the event was about the celebration of Black fashion and design, which she described as an expression of "our culture." After a brief introduction, the fashion show commenced showcasing the work of different young Black designers. In between the walks, live music was played, mostly contemporary RnB. Some of the clothing designs had bold colors and clear lines, some were more experimental with elaborate details and expressive geometrical shapes, and yet others took inspiration from African clothing in color as well as form. Following these walks, there was a contest for the best dressed people from the audience, categorized in men and women. People applauded most vigorously for people dressed in Afro-clothes and from among the women a person wearing an African-inspired dress made first place. After that the official part of the event was over and people started to socialize.

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Curiously, apart from the name of the event and the prints on the T-Shirts sold at some vendors' stalls, there was no explicit reference to Gullah Geechee.[83] When I spoke with a couple of the attending people, they shared that they were proud of their heritage even though they admitted that they don't regard themselves as particularly knowledgeable about Gullah Geechee traditions. Upon my question what Gullah Geechee means to them, several people answered that it was simply part of their lives, or as one person put it: "Geechee is just who we are, we're binyahs." This statement, as simple as it may seem, in fact very much encapsulates the significance of Gullah Geechee-ness to many younger descendants. For its full meaning to become clear the terms "Geechee" and "binyah" will need further explanation.

While historically the ethnonyms, "Gullah" and "Geechee," were differentiated by regional use, the former specific to South Carolina and North Carolina, and the latter to Georgia and Florida, this began to change in the last couple of decades. Geechee is now increasingly being used as a self-descriptor by urban and younger Gullah Geechee populations, whereas Gullah refers to rural and more "traditional" members of the group. As Arianne*, earlier cited cultural history interpreter from North Charleston in her late-20s, shared with me:

> Geechee makes me think of people from North Charleston and the way they speak. It is like younger people stuff, whereas on the islands, and the more rural you go, the more you hear the old-school accent and the language. (Interview 2022)

Trisha*, an author in her early-40s from Johns Island, similarly explained that to her Gullah always represented something more traditional, "it is connected to the food, the language, and the baskets, for example" (Interview 2022). "Geechee," on the other hand, she said, "is about urban contexts and more embraced by younger people, which was already the case when I was going to college." The terms "binyah" and "cumyah" in turn refer to yet another dimension of Gullah Geechee identity—the former describing Gullah Geechee descendants who grew up in the Lowcountry and the latter referring to any people who moved there at a later point in life, including descendants as well as non-Gullah Geechee, though, some people I have interacted with applied even more specific categories for these different groups. As Belinda*, earlier cited retired primary school teacher in her mid-60s who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, explained:

[83] At first glance, one might see certain parallels between the Gullah Gala and the MOJA opening reception. However, whereas in the case of the former Gullah Geechee heritage and culture were never explicitly brought up, the exact opposite took place at the latter event, epitomizing the very difference between the dynamics of normalization versus status distinction. Apart from that the demography of the audience was markedly different. The Gullah Gala was attended exclusively by younger people, whereas the vast majority of the audience at the MOJA opening reception was in their 50s and older.

> You're a binyah, if you are from here, and a cumyah, if you are originally from somewhere else, but you could also be a cumyah-binyah, a person who is from the Lowcountry but then moved away and eventually came back. (Interview 2022)

The categories cumyah and binyah in this sense mark one's relationship to territory but may also indicate one's familiarity with the culture. The above citation from the Gullah Gala, "Geechee is just who we are, we're binyahs," thus encapsulates the specific lived experiences of young urban descendants to whom Gullah Geechee appears to have become part of their localized African American identity. This relationship then is less defined by an intimate knowledge of cultural practices and the "actual" being of Gullah Geechee nor by any explicit political project, but may rather be understood along the lines of what sociologist Herbert Gans describes as symbolic ethnicity: "a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior" (1979, 9). This does not lessen young urban Gullah Geechees' commitment or that of other descendants who affiliate themselves similarly with the culture. Instead, it should rather be seen as indicative of above discussed socio-economic conditions that influence how Gullah Geechee-ness can be lived and expressed in contemporary society. I would, in fact, expand Gans' concept of symbolic ethnicity in this regard since, as mentioned earlier, it appears that for younger descendants the issue is not only about connecting themselves with established traditions but also to find new ways of incorporating Gullah Geechee culture into their everyday lives. Clothing, for instance, historically one of the most important markers of group belonging, plays a crucial role in this regard, as we have seen above.

During my fieldwork in 2022, I lived in North Charleston for one month and frequently saw young Black people wear outfits from Gullah T's N' Tings or from SweetGrass Clothing Company, a Charleston based business which also sells clothes imprinted with the words "Gullah" and "Geechee." Clearly, the T-Shirts, sweaters, pants and accessories from these businesses are considered fashionable, and while some of my research participants regard an affiliation with Gullah Geechee in such a manner as rather superficial, it does signal how much more highly regarded Gullah Geechee has become. Taking seriously the connection which young urban descendants seek with their heritage, I argue that the above-described developments among younger generations may be read as an instance of the politics of "ethnic Blackness" that is defined by the normalization of an "ethnic Black" identity. We may, in this sense, be witnessing the beginnings of how Gullah Geechee-ness is becoming an integral, self-affirmative part of Lowcountry African American-ness.

Intergenerational Conflicts over the Boundaries of Gullah Geechee-ness

As indicated earlier, the negotiations over what it means to be Gullah Geechee in the 21st century can sometimes become a point of contention between different generations of descendants. Most recently, this manifested itself in a conflict between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and a younger organization called Geechee Experience. Geechee Experience was founded by Akua Page and Christ Cato, both of whom are North Charleston natives, in 2018. At first, the duo was mostly active on Youtube but has since established a presence on other social media as well and even created its own website.[84] The work of Geechee Experience began with the production of videos explaining the differences between Gullah and Geechee terminology, which the group distinguishes along earlier-described lines of geography and generation. Page and Cato refer to Gullah as the linguistic ancestor of Geechee, which in turn they understand as a modern variant of the former, spoken mostly in urban areas and exhibiting greater similarities with English. The self-described aim of the group, according to their Youtube channel, is "Puttin On Fa Da Culcha," which translates to "Preserving the Culture" (see also Schiferl 2021) On their Facebook page, they similarly define their efforts as "preserving Gullah Geechee culture through digital storytelling," emphasizing their focus upon social media.[85] In a conversation with Lurie Daniel Favors, host of The Lurie Daniel Favors Show, Akua Page elaborates further on why she and Cato founded the group:

> That [to combat prejudice] is actually why we created it [Geechee Experience], because even in our own community the post traumatic slave syndrome is deep within the culture. Not a lot of parents or people who are Gullah are even passing it on to the next generation, that's literally how a culture dies [...]. As we got older and decided educating ourselves that is when we we're like, "we really need to change the narrative amongst ourselves." We can't convince somebody else to see us as human if we don't even see our humanity in our own culture, especially our language. I actually come from the public school system, as a student and a teacher, and I see how they put a lot of these children in special ed[ucation] classes and on speech therapy. (Lurie Daniel Favors 2021)

Much of what Page says ties back into what was discussed earlier with respect to both past and ongoing marginalization of Gullah Geechee culture. From its very beginnings, Geechee Experience focused on raising awareness about the group's history and culture, combating prejudice, and, therewith aiding younger descendants in exploring their heritage and developing pride in their ancestry. In the past couple of years, the group has become highly popular not only among younger people—virtually all of my younger interlocutors across the

[84] See: https://www.youtube.com/@GeecheeX?app=desktop, https://www.instagram.com/geecheeexperience/?hl=de, and https://geechee-s-school-d600.thinkific.com/collections.
[85] See: https://www.facebook.com/GeecheeX/.

Lowcountry followed them on social media—but even some of my older research participants expressed respect for their work as well. Given this success, Geechee Experience has greatly expanded their work which now also includes online courses on Gullah Geechee history and culture, private consultations with Page and Cato, and the sale of books and merchandise, such as clothes with prints of Geechee proverbs and quotes from their Youtube videos.[86] Geechee Experience has even inspired other young activists to do similar kind of work as was shared with me by my interlocutors and as becomes evident from direct references to the group in other people's social media content.[87]

Not everyone, though, approves of the work of younger organizations such as Geechee Experience, specifically of their focus on social media. Queen Quet, Chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, voiced concerns at several of the events that I attended about the accuracy of information that is being shared about Gullah Geechee on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube. Whether or not she included Geechee Experience in that critique is not clear of course, but she appeared to have a rather critical view of younger activists in general. As she stated in one of her online events, "Zooming in on Sustainability, Gullah/Geechee Resistance and Spirituality," on October 22, 2020:

> You [referring to younger activists] should not think that you are the first doing this. Do not think that taking a selfie and putting it up on social media will win the struggle. Don't act as if you are developing a new fight. You are continuing what our ancestors did. They cut through the woods with machetes, they rode boats…today we have machines. […] Sustainability means going all the way back, learning from previous generations, learning form the ancestors, and appreciating the wisdom of your Elders. (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020d; see also Queen Quet 2022a)

The major points of critique raised within this statement appear to be that younger activists, in Queen Quet's view, disregarded the long history of the liberation struggles that they are part of by representing themselves as pioneers but actually lacked the patience to engage in the long term organizing necessary to effect lasting changes. The earlier mentioned conflict that took place specifically between the Gullah/Geechee Nation and Geechee Experience revolved around these very issues, sparked off by the latter's creation of its own flag.

In 2021, as described on their website, Geechee Experience created a "Gullah Geechee Diaspora Flag" after a yearlong community project in collaboration with a Nigerian artist that involved "community feedback from the Gullah Geechee Diaspora."[88] According to several of my research participants, the Nation quite vocally criticized Geechee Experience in

[86] See: https://geechee-s-school-d600.thinkific.com/collections, https://geechee-experience.creator-spring.com/?_ga=GA1.2.1298287594.1609196458, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsEQiQTR30A.
[87] See: e.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkXi1DjOhXI.
[88] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KZgM9Q8b18.

reaction to this online. At the Gullah/Geechee Nation Black History Month Celebration in Charleston that I attended in 2022, Queen Quet at one point emphasized that "there is only one flag, not two or three" and that "all other things you see are just banners," which is of course in line with earlier described sole claim to authority over Gullah Geechee-ness by the Nation. One of my research participants, Melissa*, a political activist and organizer in her late-20s from Charleston who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, said that while she admires the work of Geechee Experience, she does not understand why they had to create a second flag, since "it just leads to confusion and division" (Interview 2022). She also felt that it was disrespectful to Queen Quet as the "rightful queen," given how much she had done for her people. Most of my other interlocutors were rather reluctant to discuss the conflict, as they felt that it cast a bad light onto the entire community.

It appears that the Nation perceived Geechee Experience as challenging its authority by offering what it understood as a competing way of identifying with the culture. Page and Cato themselves, however, rather seem to have felt that the Gullah/Geechee Nation's understanding of Gullah Geechee-ness had simply not included their own and other people's lived experiences as young urban descendants: In one of their videos Page and Cato emphasize how the flag speaks to the fact that many descendants live in the Diaspora and have not grown up on the Sea Islands or not even in the Lowcountry but still want to connect with their ancestry.[89] In addition to her work with Geechee Experience, Akua Page also offers tours on Gullah Geechee history and culture in North Charleston via Airbnb. I participated in one of them during my fieldwork in 2022 and had the chance to ask her directly about the conflict with the Nation.

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Page said that it had always seemed to her that the Nation's perspective was that "you have to speak the language and you have to be from the Sea Islands" and only then you were accepted as "actually" being Gullah Geechee. Because of that, she added, she had not regarded herself as a descendant for many years. However, "most Gullah Geechee nowadays grow up in urbanized areas and not on farms. And they go to corner stores to get their food, they don't grow it themselves." With the creation of Geechee Experience and specifically with the flag, they wanted to open up a space for those descendants as well, Page explained. She said that "sometimes the Elders want the younger generation to do things exactly as they did but we also have to do things our own way." This did not mean that Geechee Experience was unwilling to work with the older generation though, Page emphasized. For instance, she said,

[89] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KZgM9Q8b18.

only a couple of years ago the group had cooperated with Elder Carlie Town, Minister of Information of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, for a video on the importance of oral history documentation. To record the knowledge of the Elders represented one of the central tasks of her generation, she explained.

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Upon closer inspection, Geechee Experience's work stands in continuity with much of what other entities have done before, specifically the Nation. As discussed earlier, the Gullah/Geechee Nation was among the first entities to draw attention to urban Gullah Geechee communities and to expand understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness. Perhaps fittingly then, several of my younger research participants said they did actually not see much of conflict, and shared that they have both the flag of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the one created by Geechee Experience at home, which to them simply stood for different perspectives on the culture.

What we are witnessing, as I contend, are the beginnings of a generational change. Shifts in the demographic makeup of Gullah Geechee communities ultimately affect the movement at large which, as we have seen above, has stimulated a series of developments among younger Gullah Geechee descendants in particular. On the one hand, the increasing recognition of Gullah Geechee as an "ethnic Black" population has contributed to a normalization of the identity for younger and urban descendants as an integral part of their African American-ness without necessarily entailing political activism. On the other, there are now also younger organizations like Geechee Experience that explicitly seek to continue the counter-hegemonic struggles of previous generations and, at the same time, try to carve out new spaces for their own lived experiences. While the earlier cited distinction between traditionalists and pragmatists makes visible certain important internal dividing lines in the movement, the very concepts of tradition, modernity, commitment, and authenticity are evidently among what is at stake within contestations over the meanings of Gullah Geechee-ness. Where the boundaries are drawn that determine whether and, if so, how one is regarded as Gullah Geechee-descended has great influence upon the transformative potential of the group's collective identity, both for descendants as well as for non-Gullah Geechee, as we will see in the following.

Gullah Geechee-ness as a Means of Healing, Connection, and Counter-Hegemonic Resistance

Towards the end of my stay in Charleston in 2017, I attended an annual history program called *Inalienable Rights*. The program was organized by the *Slave Dwelling Project*, an

organization focused on creating awareness about the crucial role of African Americans in US-American history and society, primarily through overnight stays in former dwellings of enslaved people across the United States but also through the organization of other educational and cultural events. Its goal is to contribute to "a more truthful and inclusive narrative of the history of the [U.S. American] nation that honors the contributions of all our people."[90] The program *Inalienable Rights* was created in 2016 and is conducted by Black historians directly affiliated with the *Slave Dwelling Project* as well as by independent African American researchers and cultural history interpreters. *Inalienable Rights* seeks to provide a space for dialogue between White and Black US-Americans about the history of enslavement as well as about its continuities with contemporary forms of racial oppression in the United States. The event took place at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, the site of a former plantation, situated northwest of the Charleston peninsula. It featured two presentations on the Trade with Enslaved People, two storytellings and a presentation on Gullah Geechee history and culture. The latter, as I briefly discussed in the introduction to this thesis, was held by Jasmine*, a Gullah Geechee cultural history interpreter in her mid-twenties from Beaufort, who became one of my central interlocutors.

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Jasmine's* presentation was the third event of the day and like all of the other performances took place next to the former cabins of the enslaved beneath a wooden pavilion. She began her presentation with a Ghanaian song to pay respect to the ancestors, explaining that it was a way of honoring those who had come before her and made possible that she stands in front of us. She was dressed in a blue top, sweetgrass earrings, a green and purple colored headwrap, and a brown skirt. Jasmine* asked whether there were any Gullah Geechee in the audience, to which no one raised their hands—about half of the attending people were African American. "Some of you will definitely be Gullah Geechee, without even knowing it," she said. She explained that about forty percent of all African Americans can trace their ancestry back to Charleston and that some people in the audience therefore certainly had "roots in the Lowcountry." Jasmine* then spoke about how Gullah Geechee culture was once misconceived as a sign of "primitivity" and "ignorance." She said that the exact opposite was true and that the creation of a new language and culture under the most oppressive conditions spoke to the immense ingenuity and perseverance of the African ancestors. Finally, Jasmine* emphasized that Gullah Geechee was not just a remnant of the past though, but a living, breathing culture, which was vibrant and changing.

[90] See: https://slavedwellingproject.org/about-us/.

After her presentation, I got a chance to talk to Jasmine* in private, where she further elaborated on several of the points she had made:

> Gullah Geechee [...] is more than just a relic, or more than just a costume, more than just, you know, something to make people laugh. [...] I have heard some person say we weren't preserving the culture, we are facilitating the continuation. And I really like this phrasing. I interviewed an activist and he was saying he didn't like the term preserve, because you preserve fruits, you put them in a jar, you put them on a shelf. This is not what it means to be Gullah now and what a more modern interpretation looks like. I am beyond grateful that I had this opportunity [to talk with aforementioned activist], because without it I never would have done this particular form of interpretation. I interpret third person, it's not like I'm on a plantation. I don't do it from that perspective. [I]t allows people to understand it in a way that they wouldn't otherwise. You know, what it means beyond that, what it means to understand history beyond this idea of the past.

Jasmine* furthermore explained that tourists often assumed that the clothes she wears for her performances were historic. However, she said that they were inspired by Afrofuturism and represented an interpretation of a "timeless Gullah Geechee woman." Neither her top, nor her earrings, nor her headwrap would have been worn similarly, she said, if at all, by enslaved Gullah Geechee women, nor would they have been made from the same materials at that time.

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As becomes evident both from her presentation and the conversation we had afterwards, to Jasmine* Gullah Geechee is neither unchanging, nor just a performance, but a culture which is lived and which matters in the present. She therefore rejects the term "preservation" and is primarily concerned with exploring the contemporary meaning(s) of Gullah Geechee-ness. Still, she understands this meaning to be rooted in history. History though, to Jasmine*, does not merely represent "this idea of the past" but gains significance first and foremost in how it is lived and embodied in the present as culture and identity. In her Afrofuturistic rendering of a timeless Gullah Geechee woman both the continuity of cultural identity as well as the creation of a new and autonomous Self thus find expression. I argue that this particular dimension of Jasmine's* cultural history interpretation may be read as a subversion of the rigid binary of "tradition" vs "modernity" and its harmful effects upon indigenous and culturally distinct populations, creating a space for more fluid notions of Gullah Geechee-ness (see J. E. Jackson and Ramírez 2009, 537; Povinelli 2002, 6).

To fully apprehend the counter-hegemonic potential of Jasmine's* work, it is imperative to examine more closely its immediate context, Magnolia Plantation. Given that millions of tourists visit former plantations, year in and year out, these sites are particularly potent places of remembrance (Small 2013, 405). Former plantations are the very centers of the reproduction of romanticized narratives of the Antebellum South and of the symbolic

marginalization of African descended people within the tourism and heritage industry (Alderman 2013, 377). Sites such as Magnolia therefore exert enormous influence on people's understandings of past and present racial relations in the United States (Alderman, D. L. Butler, and Hanna 2016, 2): The deliberate omission, and sometimes even worse, nostalgic idealization of the period of enslavement perpetuates racist views of Black people as culturally inferior and un-deserving of an equal status in US-American society. At the same time, as scholars observe, "Southern plantations are especially powerful tourist sites where the exclusion of slavery heritage is [...] also potentially contested" (Alderman, D. L. Butler, and Hanna 2016, 3). And indeed, within the past couple of years, the sites of former plantations have begun to increasingly include a critical engagement with the history of enslavement and with the experiences of the enslaved Africans (Alderman, D. L. Butler, and Hanna 2016, 3). However, this does not necessarily mean that such perspectives then occupy a central role within the programs of these sites.

As implied by its name, the narrative presented at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens focuses primarily on the flower gardens, wildlife, and the affluent lifestyle of the White "planter" aristocracy. The site offers a guided tour on the experiences and the living conditions of the enslaved and later free people at Magnolia, but it is only one among four. The three other tours are, first, the "Plantation House Tour," secondly, a so-called "Nature Train," focused on the wildlife and gardens of Magnolia, and, thirdly, the "Nature Boat," which takes visitors through the flooded former rice fields. One could thus easily visit Magnolia without ever seriously engaging with the struggles of the enslaved people. Moreover, like many other former plantations, Magnolia reminds of an amusement park. The official brochure of the site is headlined with a quote from Charles Kuralt, a White journalist, calling Magnolia "My Greatest Charleston Pleasure" (Magnolia Plantation and Gardens 2017); and many visitors of Magnolia would probably agree with this statement, as might be inferred from the predominantly positive reviews of the site on TripAdvisor that praise the site as a perfect choice for a family weekend retreat, a honeymoon, or a wedding (TripAdvisor 2024).

By explicitly defying such hegemonic representations of the past and its continuities, Jasmine* transforms Gullah Geechee culture from a marginal phenomenon into a central piece of US-American history and society—a living and indisputable proof against the alleged cultural and racial inferiority of African descended people. Importantly, Jasmine* regards the group's history, culture, and identity to be not only of significance to descendants but to African Americans at-large:

> It was really remarkable for me when I started to understand all of what Gullah Geechee is and meant. So, I was like, this is important, this is significant, and it has most certainly influenced all African American culture, even though, again, we are just taught that it's this separate, little, funny thing that happened over there.

As Jasmine* stated in her presentation at Magnolia, approximately forty percent of all African Americans can trace their ancestry back to the enslaved people who arrived off the peninsula of Charleston (National Park Service 2005, 19). This has far-reaching implications for the scope of Gullah Geechee cultural heritage. Many African Americans cannot trace their exact ancestry due to the fragmentary documentation of the origins of the enslaved Africans. Against this backdrop, Gullah Geechee cultural heritage may offer a unique way of reclaiming one's African ancestry since the very concept of Gullah Geechee-ness is based upon heterogenous origins in various African and even Native American cultures (see Joyner 1984, 207). Marquetta Goodwine, Queen Quet of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, writes in reference to the Gullah Geechee residents of St. Helena Island, South Carolina: "The branches of the family tree of the native Gullah/Geechee include Bajan, Sierra Leonean, Senegalese, Madagascaran, Cusabo, Yamassee [sic], Cherokee, Creek, and many others." ([1995] 2009, 10). In this sense, Gullah Geechee-ness exhibits a form of "pidgin potential," a concept used by Jaqueline Knörr, to describe the property of certain "creole" identities to offer connectivity to people across ethnic boundaries (2010, 746–47). In the specific case of Gullah Geechee, we might speak of a connectivity across the boundaries of different regional and social identities. As Belinda*, earlier cited retired teacher who identifies as a citizen of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, told me:

> When Black people hear about it [Gullah Geechee culture] and when they realize what it means and what it is, then they realize, "I am a Gullah Geechee child." […] You could come from…be Black from Utah and come here for the first time and then go, "Oh, my gosh, I'm a Gullah Geechee child." Because you can trace your ancestral roots all the way back to Charleston. It becomes a learning period for a lot of people that becomes very prideful. (Interview 2022)

Many of my Gullah Geechee research participants shared such inclusive views, some understanding Gullah Geechee identity as connecting all African Diasporic cultures in the Atlantic with one another. Belinda* even said that I, as an Afro German with Igbo ancestry, could be considered part of the larger Gullah Geechee family. While this latter view can certainly not be generalized, it still demonstrates how the boundaries of who is considered Gullah Geechee and who is not have shifted greatly and continue to be re-negotiated.

Perspectives such as the above were also reflected in the accounts of several of my African American research participants who visited the Lowcountry to learn about Gullah Geechee history and culture. At the Music and Movement Festival on St. Helena Island in

2017, I met a Black woman from New York who told me that she felt as if something had been "revealed" to her, that something "inside [her] spirit" had been deeply touched by the history she had learned. Her words and those of other people were often very similar to how African American scholar Judith Lynn Strathearn describes her own feelings when visiting the Lowcountry for the first time:

> On our first day at the Penn Center [a cultural and educational center on St. Helena Island, S.C.], I walked down a path that led to a dock on the water, and sitting there alone, I felt something I can only describe as a connection that brought a sense of serenity I had never felt before. At age thirty-four, I felt like I had come home. While I do not know if my ancestors came from the Sea Islands or West Africa, sitting on that dock made me realize that I have a shared past with the Gullah; it's just something I feel. (2017, 2)

Evidently, traveling to the Lowcountry and learning about Gullah Geechee may become a spiritual journey for African Americans, the essence of which, as I argue, lies in experiencing oneself as more than "just Black" through the healing and restoration of a collective African Diasporic Self. In opposition to earlier described efforts to seek exemption from racial stigmatization through the de-alignment of one's position from "plain Blackness," the use of Gullah Geechee cultural heritage as a means of healing, connection, and counter-hegemonic resistance may fundamentally challenge the very logic underlying the differentiation between "plain Blacks" and "ethnic Blacks" and re-align Blackness at-large with the possession of memorable and worthful histories and cultures. This connective potential within the Gullah Geechee Movement may be seen as exemplary of what I described earlier as outward-oriented identity politics that allows for the building of bridges between groups of people while still maintaining notions of difference.

Curiously, though perhaps not surprisingly, such highly inclusive views tended to be expressed rather by individuals and less so by larger Gullah Geechee entities. Some observations in this regard about the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and the Gullah/Geechee Nation will help to further illuminate the matter. In two of the online public meetings organized by the Corridor Commission that I attended an extension of the Corridor was suggested. In the first case, a person explicitly argued that also other Southern states, such as Mississippi, had Gullah Geechee communities and should therefore be included in the Corridor. In the other, a group from Washington had applied for logistical aid, stimulating a discussion about the boundaries of the Gullah Geechee Diaspora. No definite position was taken by the Commissioners with regards to extending the Corridor but the logistical and political-legal difficulties this would entail are quite evident. If the Corridor were to be ever further extended, the question would necessarily arise how exactly

Gullah Geechee could then still be understood as a culturally distinct population native to the Lowcountry, potentially unsettling the very definition of the Corridor.

The Gullah/Geechee Nation faces similar matters given its human and indigenous rights approach, based upon which the entity likewise asserts that Gullah Geechee represent a clearly definable population. Moreover, at the Coastal Cultures Conference in 2022, discussed in the previous chapter, Queen Quet criticized how some Gullah Geechee had fought for the group's matters of concern for decades, willingly bearing the burden of stigmatization, while others had only recently begun to embrace Gullah Geechee identity, as the benefits had come to outweigh the costs of affiliating oneself with the group. Another related issue that I will discuss more extensively in the following chapter is that of so-called Gullah Geechee "frauds"—African Americans who are perceived as only pretending to be Gullah Geechee in order to profit off the popularity of the group, particularly within the tourism industry, which often entails mis-representations of the group's history in an effort to satisfy the demands of visitors (Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 165–66; Hargrove 2007, 44; Queen Quet 2006a, 213, 2012a, 17–18). It is likely for these very reasons that the Gullah/Geechee Nation is rather apprehensive towards too readily extending notions of Gullah Geechee-ness.

At some point, it appears, boundaries between Gullah Geechee and others will eventually be drawn by any actors within the movement. This is, however, not to be interpreted as a narrowing of sociality per se since the identification of differences does not automatically translate into opposition or conflict. Identities necessarily have boundaries. The decisive question is where and how exactly they are drawn and how interaction across these boundaries is structured. Still, there are ways in which identity politics may indeed unwittingly marginalize other groups of people even if the respective actors principally pursue a counter hegemonic politics, as will be investigated in the following section.

The Narrative of the Gullah War and Multidirectional Memory

During my first stay in the Lowcountry in 2017, I saw a Black person in Charleston wearing a T-Shirt that said "Gullah War." I had never heard of the term before and asked several of my research participants for its meaning, however, they were not familiar with it either. Upon doing some internet research, I realized that it actually seemed to be quite an established term within certain discourses focused on the subversion of White hegemonic historiography. More specifically, it appeared that the concept was especially popular among younger people, as evident from the numerous TikTok and Youtube videos as well as podcasts and even songs

about the Gullah War produced by that demographic.[91] Many of these texts cite as their original source an essay, "The Gullah War: 1739-1858," written by Y.N. Kly, the late director of the IHRAAM and former professor of political science and international law, which was published in a volume edited by Queen Quet in 1998 (Kly 1998).[92,93] Within that essay, Kly states that the concept had originally been coined by Muriel Miller Branch, a Black writer, historian, and storyteller, in her 1995 publication, *The Water Brough Us*, that is broadly focused upon Gullah Geechee history and culture (1998, 44–45, Endnote 1). Branch uses the term, Gullah War, only once in the entire book to describe the prevalence of "uprisings among Sea Island slaves [...] during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (1995, 20). Curiously, she states that it had been "modern historians" who first "dubbed" said uprisings "The Gullah War" (1995, 20). Branch does, unfortunately, not provide any reference for that claim, nor have I been able to identify any such historiographies myself. This leaves us to assume that either she herself did indeed coin the term or that the concept had perhaps circulated in discourses among historians that remained unpublished. Be it as it may, the most impactful interpretation of the concept of the Gullah War is undoubtedly that of Kly. He greatly expanded upon the narrative and placed it at the very center of his argument in above-cited essay. The decisive difference between Kly's and Branch's understanding of the term, as he notes himself, lies, for one, in his discussion not only of armed struggles in South Carolina but also in Spanish Florida and, for another, in his assertion that all of these instances of resistance were in fact connected:

> To regard these wars [the different battles constituting the Gullah War] as simply regional struggles is to vastly understate their impact; this insurgency challenged the very institution of enslavement. [...] Within the span of two short decades, with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation after a Civil War in which African Americans once again rose en masse to fight for their freedom, the entire system crumbled. (1998, 43, see also 45, Endnote 2)

While he stops short of explicitly stating so, Kly clearly suggests that the Gullah War directly impacted the eventual abolition of enslavement (1998, 44). In another passage he writes that its historical importance was on par with "the revolutionary war of 1776 and the conflicts of 1812; the purchase of Florida [...]; the purchase of Louisiana territory [...]; and the Civil

[91] See: https://www.tiktok.com/@sunnmcheaux/video/7059793839028014383, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/jIFo1a3giWM, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUOf7Z0b6KE&rco=1, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG-mXP86tfA, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2rfrjjmHhY, https://open.spotify.com/track/3PQHj8UwgHzbjOomZghu7L, https://open.spotify.com/track/6FfED9lSeT45p6otsQTYd3.

[92] The essay was re-published in 2006 as a chapter in *The Invisible War. The African American Anti-Slavery Resistance from the Stono Rebellion through the Seminole Wars* edited by Kly himself (2006b, 50–100).

[93] The essay cites Diana Kly as having assisted Y.N. Kly in the writing process.

War" (1998, 21). This very significance, he asserts, led the US government to deliberately suppress information about the war at the time so as to prevent "widespread knowledge of a largely successful [...] Gullah insurgency" which might have potentially incited further rebellion (1998, 19). He goes on to argue that White hegemonic historiography not only misrepresented the armed struggles of Africans and African Americans during the 18th and 19th century as discrete and uncoordinated uprisings but also concealed the major events of the war.

The Gullah War, according to Kly, began with the Stono Rebellion of 1739, included numerous lesser known and smaller battles and the failed Denmark Vesey Insurrection of 1822, as well as, crucially, the series of conflicts commonly known as the Seminole Wars, which may very well be said to lie at the heart of Kly's argument (1998, 19, 21). In Kly's understanding, the Seminole Wars did not only conclude the Gullah War but also represent the culmination of the "Gullah insurgency." As discussed in Chapter 2, the Seminole Wars were a series of armed struggles in the early 19th century that took place in northern Florida between an alliance of Native American Seminole and African descended people who had escaped enslavement, on the one side, and the United States Army, on the other. In mainstream historiography these conflicts are principally seen as Native Americans wars, as suggested by their name. Kly however asserts that,

> the anti-enslavement revolts and later military campaigns of the Gullah "exiles" of Florida [...] were originally suppressed or omitted from print, and consequently usually ignored by succeeding generations of historians and scholars, who mistakenly represented a significant part of this conflict as yet another Indian war. (1998, 21)

The Seminole Wars, to Kly, are in this sense a construct of White hegemonic ideology that merely serves to distract from the "true" nature of the conflicts—the concerted opposition to enslavement led by Africans and African Americans (1998, 22). These armed struggles therewith achieve a particular significance for his concept of the Gullah War since they represent a culmination of all the previous battles. Apart from the Stono Rebellion, which took place in South Carolina but continued southward, Kly principally focuses on conflicts in Spanish Florida, even establishing a connection between the Denmark Vesey Insurrection and resistance further South (1998, 35–37). Finally, given that the Seminole Wars resulted in the formal emancipation of hundreds of formerly enslaved people, they are understood by Kly to show the relative success of the Gullah War.

The evidence for Kly's claims about the Seminole Wars in fact consist only of a few historical sources. For the most part he relies upon interpretations of the conflicts by 20th century scholars of Black Seminole history (e.g. Katz [1986] 2012; Mulroy [1993] 2003;

Porter 1996). As described in Chapter 2, Black Seminole were the descendants of formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans who had fled successfully to Spanish Florida and lived with the Native American Seminole. While there was some intermarriage, it appears that the two populations for the most part formed separate communities (Hancock 1980, 319). Due to their geographical proximity and close socio-economic ties though, Black Seminole adopted a number of cultural practices from the Seminole (Opala [1987] 2009, 21). According to anthropologist Joseph Opala, it was the scholar Kenneth Wiggins Porter who first engaged seriously with this history (1981, 11). Porter began writing on the topic in 1932, but his most comprehensive work was published posthumously in 1996. It was not until the 1980s and 90s that a broader engagement in academia with Black Seminole took place, most of which was focused upon the groups' history, culture, and linguistics. All of these studies emphasize the decisive role played by the formerly enslaved in their relationship with the Seminole, specifically during the Seminole Wars. From among these authors, Opala was likely the first to explicitly interpret Black Seminole resistance as a large-scale opposition to the institution of enslavement:

> The Seminole blacks are not but another example of Negro resistance to slavery in the antebellum South—they are the principal example. Nowhere else in what is not the United States did the necessary geographical and political factors converge to produce marronage on a grand scale. Nowhere else did maroon communities persist for generations and challenge whole armies. Nowhere else was there forged a formidable alliance of Indians and Negroes. And nowhere else did blacks ally themselves with European powers and attempt to hold the frontier against further American expansion. (Opala 1981, 12)

The cultural connections between Black Seminole and Gullah Geechee people were in turn pioneered by linguist Ian Hancock who identified the language spoken among the Texan descendants of Black Seminole as closely related to Gullah Geechee (1980). Building upon Hancock's work, Opala later referred to Black Seminole as a "small offshoot of the Gullah who escaped rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia," thus conceiving the group as part of the larger Gullah Geechee Diaspora (Opala [1987] 2009, 21). While Kly evidently drew greatly from this earlier research, he explicitly criticized the concept of "black Indians" as yet another way "[t]o distort and conceal the true nature of this war [the Gullah war]" by channeling "those efforts of enslaved Africans which were successful into efforts of new identities viewed as separate from the collective as a whole" (1998, 21). Instead, he refers to all African descended people in the Lowcountry as Gullah:

> For the period of the 18th and early 19th century, we can use the term 'Gullah' to represent the whole of the imported African population in the regions of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida (1998, 20).

Kly's central innovations thus lie, for one, in the connection of various struggles of enslaved and freed people to escape to Spanish Florida and, once there, defend their liberty, as well as, for another, in the re-interpretation of the Seminole Wars as a series of conflicts led by Gullah Geechee against the institution of enslavement. As mentioned earlier, most contemporary understandings of the Gullah War mirror Kly's perspective by identifying the war as having lasted for about a century, beginning with the Stono Rebellion in 1739 and including numerous other battles, and by placing a particular focus upon the Seminole Wars as a concealed Black struggle, possibly the largest of its kind in the United States, against the institution of enslavement. Some Gullah Geechee activists, though, have made slight modifications to Kly's concept as I learned when I encountered the narrative again during my second stay in the Lowcountry.

As briefly mentioned earlier in my discussion of the work of Geechee Experience, Akua Page, one of the group's founders, offers tours about Gullah Geechee history and culture via Airbnb, and I had the chance to attend one of them in February 2022. The tours take place in Riverfront Park, North Charleston, and focus specifically on traditions of resistance among Gullah Geechee. Curiously, one of the central topics in that regard was the narrative of the Gullah War. For the most part Page's interpretation of the term followed Kly's argument, however, she asserted that the war was in fact still ongoing, extending the concept from armed struggles against enslavement to also include the ensuing resistance to racial oppression after Emancipation. This perspective, as I found out afterwards, can actually be traced back to the writings of Queen Quet. In her foreword to "The Invisible War," a volume edited by Y.N. Kly, which he dedicated entirely to the narrative of the Gullah War, Queen Quet asserts:

> As Gullah/Geechees continue to fight for their human right to self-determination, many are now recognizing that "The Gullah War" has not actually ended. Citizens of the Gullah/Geechee Nation are still fighting for their land and water rights and to continue their unique cultural heritage endemic to America. (2006b, xvii)

Not surprisingly, given her close collaboration with Kly, Queen Quet frequently references the Gullah War in her writing and even mentioned the concept in her speech before the United Nations in Geneva in 1999 (Hargrove 2000, 170; Queen Quet 2006a, 129, 2018a, 10, 2021). It may therefore be assumed that the Gullah/Geechee Nation played a major role in the popularization of the term particularly as regards its connection with contemporary struggles.

All of the above-described interpretations of the Gullah War make use of the concept as a counter hegemonic tool that makes visible not only the Radical Black Tradition of

organized struggle against enslavement but in more recent interpretations also unveils the continuities of racial oppression and the ongoing resistance thereto. Importantly, the narrative of the Gullah War thus understands emancipation not as a benevolent gift from White abolitionists but as the consequence of the tireless efforts of African descended people—a perspective that may be seen as supporting the Nation's and other institution's argument for Gullah Geechee people's centuries long commitment to the protection of their rights to self-determination. The notion also appears to greatly empower descendants, which is specifically evident in its appeal to younger activist, nurturing pride in Gullah Geechee ancestry by reversing the image of passive enslaved people into that of resistance fighters.

While the concept of the Gullah War thus undoubtedly possesses significant subversive potential, there are also a number of problematic dimensions within the narrative that become apparent upon closer inspection. More specifically, I argue that in their efforts to subvert White hegemonic historiography advocates of the concept of the Gullah War, even if unintentionally, tend to marginalize Native American history. This pertains both to the ways in which the relationship between the formerly enslaved Africans and the Native American Seminole in Spanish Florida is represented and, tied to that, how the Seminole Wars are re-interpreted and re-framed in general. What we can observe is an almost complete reversal of how the roles of the African descended people and Seminole had been constructed previously. Whereas earlier historiographies viewed the formerly enslaved as mere subordinates to the Seminole, scholars on Black Seminole history began to represent the latter as dependent upon the former. As Joseph Opala writes:

> In time, the two groups [Black Seminole and Native American Seminole] came to view themselves as parts of the same loosely organized tribe, in which blacks held important positions of leadership. […] But the Gullahs were physically more suited for the tropical climate and possessed an indispensable knowledge of tropical agriculture; and, without their assistance, the Indians would not have been able to cope effectively with the Florida environment. ([1987] 2009, 21)

In a similar vein, Kenneth Porter contends that, at least until the later stages of the Second Seminole War, it had been the Black Seminole who were the central force behind the struggles (1996, 12, 107; see also Katz [1986] 2012, 52). He argues that the conflict with the US government had been more existential to the formerly enslaved people since, "[a]lthough the tribespeople [Native American Seminole] faced losing their homes to the land-hungry American settlers […] blacks were confronted by a far more serious menace [the forced return into enslavement]" (1996, 4). Porter goes on to assert that the influence of Black Seminole "had certainly been the primary factor in the fierce Seminole resistance to removal" (1996, 97). These unsubstantiated claims trivialize the gravity of the situation for the

Seminole to whom, it may safely be assumed, their liberty was just as valuable as to the formerly enslaved. It is not only in his interpretation of the motivations of the Black Seminole and the Native American Seminole however, that Porter's work should be read with a certain caveat, but also as regards the historical sources of his above claim that African descended people had played the decisive role within the wars.

Porter's case principally relies on the notes of U.S. Army General Sidney Thomas Jesup who assumed command of the Florida campaign in 1836 (1996, 66). Jesup famously wrote about the conflict that, "[t]his…is a negro, not an Indian war," possibly the singular most cited statement brought forth in support of, first, the central role of Black Seminole within the war and, later, the concept of the Gullah War (cited in Porter 1996, 67; e.g. Kly 1998, 29). However, not only is there, to my knowledge, no other historical source that makes similar claims about the wars, raising questions about the representativity of Jesup's perspective, but his notes should also be treated with caution because they represent the biased views of a government agent in service of a system of White supremacy. Advocates of the narrative of the Gullah War furthermore tend to take Jesup's statement to refer to all three wars, although he only commanded the U.S. army for two years from 1836-38 during the Second Seminole War. And while there is indeed strong evidence, first, for the central role played by formerly enslaved people as leaders during that second war, secondly, for their numerical majority as fighters, and, thirdly, for an explicit focus placed on the liberation of plantations, this does not justify the assertion that African descended people had been the "masterminds" behind the wars.

Another problematic dimension within the narrative of the Gullah War are claims made about the identity of the Native American Seminole. Kly asserts that the Seminole "had no collective identity or history—[…] simply did not exist as "Seminoles"—prior to the conflicts taking place" (2006a, 22). Some contemporary interpretations of the Gullah War even go as far as implying that the term, "Seminole," had actually referred to the formerly enslaved Africans and not to Native Americans and was therefore just another instance of White hegemonic historiography obscuring the history of Black resistance struggles.[94] While the Seminole did indeed not exist as a collective before contact with the Europeans, the formation of the group out of different smaller tribes coming from Florida as well as other Native Americans who had been displaced to the region took place from the early to the mid-18th century, that is, well before the beginning of the Seminole Wars (Wasserman 2010, 109–

[94] See: https://lastapostle.me/2016/03/03/the-overlooked-reason-slavery-ended/.

10; see also Hancock 1980, 319). Moreover, Kly's point may very well be made about Gullah Geechee themselves.

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is estimated that the Gullah Geechee language first stabilized over the course of the 18th century, indicating that a similar timeline may be assumed for Gullah Geechee culture at large. In light of this and the fact that people were constantly being imported from Africa to the Lowcountry through the 18th century, it appears rather questionable to apply the term Gullah Geechee indiscriminately to all African descended people in the region, as Kly proposes. Opala convincingly demonstrates that Black communities in Florida in the 18th and 19th century were in fact highly heterogenous, which also pertains to their relations to the Spanish colonial government as well as to the Seminole (1981, 41–43). And even today the descendants of Black Seminole identify as a separate group of people despite the historical and cultural ties that exist between them and Gullah Geechee (Ian Hancock, interview 2022). Charlene*, a Seminole Negro Indian Scout descendant from Bracketville, Texas, shared that she mostly identifies as a Black person, however, that "it really depends on the context" how she positions herself exactly:

> If I talk to someone who knows about Black Seminole history, I will identify as Black Seminole, if that person knows about the military history of Black Seminole, I will identify as a descendent of the Seminole Negro Indian Scouts. (Interview 2022)

To simply refer to Black Seminole as Gullah Geechee would evidently then not only be historically inaccurate but also impose an identity onto their descendants which they do not necessarily affiliate themselves with.

Ultimately, all of the above points are inscribed into the very term, "Gullah War," itself, which in its determination to unearth one history of resistance threatens to render another invisible. This of course also ties back into my analysis in the previous chapter of how the concept of Gullah Geechee as a quasi-indigenous group of people exhibits tendencies of symbolic Native American displacement. In the narrative of the Gullah War this perhaps finds one of its most explicit manifestations, as Gullah Geechee quite literally replace Native Americans in their historic role as defenders of their ancestral homeland against an expansionist U.S. army. The symbolic marginalization of Native Americans is not a phenomenon specific to contestations over Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity though, but is tied inextricably to broader social discourses on race. Due to the tendency of reducing racial relations in the United States to the Black and White binary, the symbolic erasure of Native Americans has time and again been perpetuated by efforts that actually seek to subvert White hegemonic historiography (see Deloria 1988, 168). A recent example for this is the 1619 project, which, at least in its original online series of essays, and despite its

excellence in other regards, represents the enslaved Africans and their descendants as the foremost fighters for liberation and democracy in US history while omitting the struggles of Native Americans.[95]

My critique is by no means to suggest that I believe the concept of the Gullah War should be refuted entirely. Advocates of the narrative indeed make a number of very important points. Undoubtedly, the role of African descended people in the Seminole Wars has been greatly underestimated, if not deliberately omitted. There is also, clearly, a connection between the Stono Rebellion, other efforts to escape South, and the armed conflicts in Spanish Florida. And, finally, all of these struggles, including the Second Seminole War, should indeed be interpreted as concerted acts of resistance against the institution of enslavement. The root of the problem with the narrative of the Gullah War, is tied to what Michael Rothberg refers to as "competitive memory," the general perception of collective memory as a "zero-sum struggle over scarce resources" wherein it is assumed that a "straight line runs from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others" (2009, 3, 4-5). Rothberg proposes instead to engage in projects of multi-directional memory, which assume the opposite, that memory and identity are relational, fluid, and thus potentially open ended (2009, 3).

The concept of the Gullah War, I contend, thus presents not only a challenge but also an opportunity. An argument in support of the central elements of the narrative need not be made at the expense of Native Americans; their role in the Seminole Wars can and should be considered to have been equally important to that of African descended people. The Seminole undoubtedly fought just as much for the protection of their livelihoods and liberty against a US-American government that had killed countless of their ancestors and was determined on removing them from Florida with all means necessary. Importantly, a multi-directional perspective would allow not only to make visible both Native American and African American histories of resistance but also the close historical ties between the two groups in Spanish Florida and, possibly, even create spaces for discourses about contemporary relations.

Some beginnings of such an approach do in fact already exist among Gullah Geechee activists. In her tour, Akua Page frequently stressed the importance of Native American history to the Lowcountry. In the beginning, she emphasized that the land that we were standing upon had first been inhabited by indigenous people whom she explicitly included in her libation to the ancestors. Moreover, she shared that she was in the process of reaching

[95] See: https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-1619-project-and-the-demands-of-public-history.

out to Native American tribes in South Carolina in hope of cooperating on educational projects. In much of her writing Queen Quet, too, emphasizes the contributions of Native Americans as well as the historical connections between them and Gullah Geechee people (e.g. Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 22, [1997] 2009, 34, [1998] 2015, 97). An important next step for a multi-directional commemoration of the role of both Native Americans and African descended people in the series of conflicts in Spanish Florida would be to speak of, for example, "The Seminole-African Wars" instead of only Seminole or Gullah Wars. This kind of commemoration evidently cannot be determined by an academic study but should ideally be negotiated between Seminole, Black Seminole, and Gullah Geechee people themselves. A process which, in the words of Rothberg, may ultimately have "the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" (2009, 4–5).

Conclusion

Understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness have changed significantly over the past couple of decades. Chris*, a social media activist in his late 30s from North Charleston, said that people who are growing up now embrace the identity to a far greater extent than even just a few years ago. At the same time though, he added, "actually" being Gullah Geechee is still seen by many as an obstacle within mainstream society. In his view, "a real change will have occurred only when someone speaking like me, a bilingual person, could become mayor of Charleston or at least be a member of City Council. And we're still far from that" (Interview 2022). Still, Gullah Geechee have undeniably achieved an unprecedented degree of recognition, with an increasing number of not only descendants but even other African Americans seeking to affiliate themselves with the identity. Based around the notion of Gullah Geechee as the "most ethnic" of all African American populations, the group has become an object of what I referred to as a politics of "ethnic Blackness"—efforts of Black US-Americans to free themselves from racial stigmatization by invoking concepts of Black ethnicity. I have engaged with this dynamic from four different angles, first, the use of Gullah Geechee-ness as a means of status distinction, secondly, the normalization of Gullah Geechee-ness as a part of Lowcountry African American identity, particularly among younger generations and urban descendants, thirdly, the significance of Gullah Geechee-ness as a means of healing, connection and counter-hegemonic resistance, and, fourthly, tendencies of Native American marginalization within Gullah Geechee identity politics. All of these dimensions of the politics of "ethnic Blackness" revolve around a differentiation between "ethnic Black" identities, which are imagined as historically rooted and culturally rich, and "plain Black

identities," which describe the inverse of the former. However, the ways in which this distinction is being acted upon differs significantly.

In my engagement with the use of Gullah Geechee in contexts such as the MOJA opening reception, we have seen that some middle- and upper-class African Americans appear to affiliate themselves with the group not necessarily out of commitment but in order to distinguish themselves from other African Americans as the more "rooted" and cultured Black people. Since "actually" being Gullah Geechee is still perceived by many as an undesirable socio-economic status and therefore, as Chris stated above, as an impediment to social mobility, a connection to the group is only established through a parlance of cultural heritage. The value of this specific form of Black cultural capital is derived from a construction of Black ethnicity that serves to de-align certain African Americans, who represent themselves as "ethnic," from the stigma of "plain Blackness" by following a reasoning of racially classed othering. This strategy does not function by resistance to dominant racial narratives, but, based upon complicity in the de-culturization of "plain Blacks," remains well inside the logic of racial stigmatization. The use of Gullah Geechee as a means of status distinction does, certainly, not always take such forms. Especially, since strategic interests and commitment are not necessarily mutually exclusive but oftentimes overlap and over time may even change into one another. Moreover, as I pointed out above, there also exists a certain tension between Gullah Geechee descendants who regard themselves as traditionalists, such as the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and descendants whose relationship to their heritage may be described as more defined by pragmatic day to day considerations. It is therefore also very well possible that some of the people classified by my research participants as belonging to the "Black Bourgeoisie" simply affiliate themselves with Gullah Geechee heritage rather on an occasional basis and not in their everyday lives, which does not mean that Gullah Geechee automatically becomes a mere instrument to them. Nonetheless, I argue that we should always be mindful of elements of socio-economic inequality within contestations and negotiations over Gullah Geechee heritage and identity.

Tensions revolving around notions of commitment and pragmatism also play a significant role within intergenerational matters among Gullah Geechee communities. It appears that to some younger descendants Gullah Geechee ancestry has become a normalized part of their identity as African Americans within the Lowcountry, without necessarily having achieved a pronounced political significance (compare to Zenker 2012, 35). As evident from my participant observation at the Gullah Gala, Gullah Geechee-ness may in this sense first and foremost become a sort of framework in which young urban descendants locate their experiences. Some more outspokenly political Gullah Geechee activists criticize this, in their

perception, "superficial connection" with the culture. To a certain extent this may be seen as tying back into the earlier discussion of negative connotations that are still being ascribed to "actually" being Gullah Geechee. As Anthony*, an activist and educator in his mid-40s, shared in response to my telling him about the Gullah Gala: "I don't know if you've ever heard of the saying, 'everybody wants to be Black but nobody wants to be Black.' See, it's the same with Gullah Geechee. Everybody wants to be Gullah Geechee but nobody wants to be Gullah Geechee" (Interview 2022). He elaborated that it might have become cool to wear T-shirts that say "Gullah," but really embracing the culture and working for its continuation was not necessarily what "some people would do."

However, while there certainly exists a reluctance among some descendants to "fully embrace their heritage," differences in the extent to which they are politically active or "actually" practice the culture in their everyday lives do not per se speak to a lack of commitment. As I discussed above, due to socio-economic factors it has become a challenge for many Gullah Geechee, particularly in urban areas, to live traditionally, which would, strictly speaking, involve following agricultural ways of life. Given how different the lived experiences of younger descendants actually are from the common ruralized image of the group, they now seek to extend understandings of what it means to be Gullah Geechee in the 21st century. Many therefore tend to affiliate with the term "Geechee" instead of "Gullah" in order to connote their urban upbringing and accordingly different culture. While for some, this may simply be an expression of "who they are" and does not necessarily entail political activism, we have seen that there are in fact also decidedly political younger organizations, such as Geechee Experience, who give voice to the experiences of urban descendants and combat mis-representations of Gullah Geechee history and culture. To a certain extent one might argue, just as with regards to the establishment of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, that these developments among younger descendants might be read as a partial realization of the demands of idealists such as the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Indeed, while there are certain tensions over authority between the Nation and younger organizations, specifically Geechee Experience, the former was among the first to create awareness about urban Gullah Geechee populations and to extend understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness.

With all the differences within the movement along the lines of age, geography, class, and ideology, the major Gullah Geechee entities and activists share an understanding of Gullah Geechee identity as having a restorative, connective, and counter-hegemonic potential. As we have seen in Jasmine's* approach to public history, Gullah Geechee heritage may in this sense serve to subvert harmful mis-representations about African American

history and nurture pride in being of African descent. Much of the work of Gullah Geechee activists consists of challenging White hegemonic historiography by making visible the contributions of their African ancestors not just as manual laborers on plantations but as experts in agricultural technologies and by emphasizing the ancestor's resilience in holding on to their cultural traditions in the face of the most inhuman conditions. Oftentimes these kinds of efforts take place within the context of plantation museums or other historic sites tied to the history of enslavement that significantly contribute to the perpetuation of romanticized images of the Antebellum South. This presents specific challenges to activists but also the opportunity to create a radical corrective right at the heart of where public knowledge about the history of racial oppression is (re-)produced. As Jasmine* stressed with her Afro-futuristic rendering of a Gullah Geechee woman, this work does not only, or even principally, pertain to the past but serves to inspire visions of a better future.

Another major focus of such counter-hegemonic efforts lies in language politics and combatting stereotypes about Gullah Geechee speakers. Activists assert that the language is yet another proof for the richness of the group's heritage and that descendants should regard themselves as bilingual, proficient both in English and Gullah Geechee. The earlier described manner in which Queen Quet opens all of her presentations and performances in Gullah Geechee has to be read against this backdrop as well. She radically claims a space in which Gullah Geechee does not have to be masked, as had been the case so often in the past but can be expressed freely both in speech and other practices. As a consequence of the above-described efforts, we have seen that learning about Gullah Geechee has become a liberating journey not only for descendants but also for other African Americans. The counter-hegemonic visions of Gullah Geechee activists subvert the very logic which underlies the differentiation between "ethnic Blacks" and "plain Blacks" by understanding all African descendants as connected with memorable and worthful histories and cultures, regardless of their specific positions. As such, Gullah Geechee heritage potentially provides a basis for the transcendence of oppressive images of Blackness at large and may even serve as a common ground for Black people across the boundaries of different regional and social identities. In that regard, the Lowcountry has come to represent a sort of "motherland within," in distinction from Africa as the "motherland without," where a reconnection to one's African ancestry can be mediated, promising healing of the generational trauma of displacement and disconnection. While the use of Gullah Geechee as a means of counter hegemonic resistance thus principally stands at odds with dominant racial ideology, some of its elements, serving first and foremost to empower African descendants, can still have harmful effects on others.

In my analysis of the concept of the Gullah War, which has gained increasing presence in the past couple of years, we have seen tendencies of Native American marginalization. The narrative makes visible the continued and organized opposition against the institution of enslavement by Africans, discursively connecting struggles with one another that had hitherto been regarded as discrete. At the same time tough, as I have argued, advocates of the narrative, in their determination to subvert White hegemonic ideology and emphasize the histories of resistance of African descended people, even if unwittingly, contribute to the reproduction of other structural disparities, namely the omission of a Native American history of resistance. Ultimately, I believe that the concept of the Gullah War holds the potential to tell of the struggles both of the Native American Seminole and the African descended people as well as of their collaboration. Some beginnings of such an approach exist already, as we have seen in the work of Queen Quet and Akua Page. To further realize the potential for multi-directional memory, the very term itself for the series of conflicts should be critically assessed by activists, and cooperation with descendants of Native American Seminole and Black Seminole should be pursued. What the case of the Gullah War shows is that as much as politics of memory and identity may not per se represent zero-sum games, "the past is not a free resource," as anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig reminds us (1999, 370). If we therefore do not identify the intersectional relations of power that determine constructions of cultural heritage and its meta-narratives, we may unwittingly contribute to veiling what makes heritage a source of empowerment and pride for some, but a burden for others (Olwig 1999, 384–85). This is not only true for the case of the Gullah War but also pertains to other dimensions of Gullah Geechee identity politics, particularly with respect to intersections of class and culture.

Joseph*, one of my African American research participants, a janitor in his late-60s from Charleston, feared that the claims for recognition of Gullah Geechee people could lead to the neglect of the matters of concern of "ordinary" working-class Black people who are not able to evoke a distinct cultural identity for themselves (Interview 2022). He was therefore highly critical of the Gullah Geechee Movement. Being a native of the Lowcountry, Joseph* would, ironically, be identified as Gullah Geechee himself by many activists. He was very clear though, that he did not care to connect himself to Gullah Geechee in any way. Lester*, an African American tour guide in his 50s from Savannah, was similarly critical of the movement, saying that it would "distract from the actual concerns of the people" (Interview 2017). While these views raise highly important questions, I also contend that they do not speak against the affirmation of Gullah Geechee heritage and identity per se. Especially the point made by Lester* is expressive of earlier discussed reduction of Gullah Geechee to

cultural matters and ignores the pronounced socio-economic dimensions of the movement. Moreover, the counter-hegemonic visions of many Gullah Geechee activists carry great potential not only for the group itself but also for other African Americans, as we have seen earlier. Gullah Geechee people are "inextricably tied to the American race-class drama" (Cooper 2017, 213), their history, heritage, and culture represent a living and indisputable proof against the alleged cultural and racial inferiority of African descended people. What the above critique, particularly from Joseph*, should indeed draw our attention to though, are the complex intersections between notions of deservingness, class, culture, and identity. In an ideal world, government spending and private and corporate donations would allow for the support of all social justice projects. In reality though, *pace* Rothberg, available resources and political will are limited and cultural trends strongly influence how these are focused. It does therefore indeed represent an important question how the Gullah Geechee Movement's framing of their demands for justice affects "ordinary" Black US-Americans.

Chapter 5: On the Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Political organization among Gullah Geechee, as pointed out repeatedly in the previous chapters, tends to be reduced within public as well as academic discourses to efforts of cultural revitalization. However, from its very beginnings the movement has been inextricably tied to resistance against land loss, spatial displacement, over-development, and, more generally speaking, the neo-liberalization of the political economy in the Lowcountry. In my effort to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Gullah Geechee Movement, I will now shift my attention to these often-neglected socio-economic dimensions.

The chapter is structured into three parts: In the first section I will engage with the economic situation of both rural and urban Gullah Geechee communities and examine the major forces underlying processes of land loss, spatial displacement, overdevelopment, gentrification, and the precaritization of labor relations within the Lowcountry. A particular focus will be placed upon how majoritarian identity politics informs dynamics of socio-economic marginalization, as evident from cases of state sanctioned-discrimination against Black and Gullah Geechee communities. In the second part, I will engage with concrete efforts of resistance against the above-described processes. I will, for one, concentrate on the work of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, based in Charleston, South Carolina, an institution that provides legal aid to descendants in their struggles for land retention, and, for another, discuss three different community led projects, in Beaufort, Hilton Head Island, and Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, that oppose dynamics of gentrification and displacement by making specific policy suggestions to their local governments. The third and final section places a focus on the tourism industry both as a possible means of economic empowerment but also as one of the major threats to the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities. More specifically, I will discuss tensions between what was perceived by several of my interlocutors as "merely symbolic" versus "actual" socio-economic change as well as the various possible consequences of the commodification of culture and, closely tied to that, debates about authenticity.

Past and Present Processes of Land Loss and Displacement

Gullah Geechee people are among the economically most vulnerable populations in the Lowcountry. While there is no data available that speaks specifically to the socio-economic situation of the group, valuable insights can be deduced from general demographics of coastal North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. According to recent surveys, the median income of Black or African Americans is 20-30 percent lower and the poverty rate

among this population about 1,5 to 2 times higher than the respective states' average.[96] Other variables, such as homeownership or college degree, likewise reveal systemic racial disparities that place Black people at the very bottom of most statistics.[97] For the most part of the 20th century and remaining so to this day, specifically land loss and displacement have been among the greatest challenges to Gullah Geechee descendants. Since many other problems converge in these phenomena, they will be at the center of my discussion in this section, where I will both engage with the history of socio-economic marginalization in the Lowcountry as well as with its current manifestations.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the ancestors of Gullah Geechee were among the first formerly enslaved people to purchase land after Emancipation, and despite numerous setbacks, such as the revocation of Special Field Order 15 and the restitution of land to Confederate elites, a higher percentage of Black people were able to hold onto their property in the Lowcountry than anywhere else in the United States (see K. L. Brown 2004, 80; Queen Quet [1997] 2009, 62). The central role ascribed by many descendants to land, particularly among the older generation, derives from this long history of ownership. Fred Lincoln, chairman of the Cainhoy Volunteer Fire Department, South Carolina, describes this special relationship in a conversation with journalist and former South Carolina GGCHC Commissioner Herb Frazier as follows:

> The old-timers say that this is the first property we owned, and that was the factor that made you free [...]. Land separated a free man from a slave. Because these are the first properties former slaves owned there is an emotional attachment to the land. (2011, 250–51)

Tied to this emotional value is the understanding among Gullah Geechee of land ownership as a defining characteristic of the group's heritage and a prerequisite for the reproduction of its culture (Beoku-Betts 1995, 541; Cooper 2017, 180–81; H. Frazier 2011, 215; Goodwine 1998a, 174; Hargrove 2020, 152; Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 3; Hurley and Halfacre 2011, 383; Queen Quet 2012a, 27, 2012d, 302). In a recent interview, Queen Quet emphasizes that the group's relationship to its maritime environment was the basis of numerous cultural practices, specifically with respect to agriculture and communal settlement patterns, and that the loss of this connection would therefore pose an existential threat to the group:

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[96] See: https://statisticalatlas.com/state/North-Carolina/Household-Income, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/South-Carolina/Household-Income, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Georgia/Household-Income, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Florida/Household-Income.

[97] See: https://statisticalatlas.com/state/North-Carolina/Overview, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/South-Carolina/Overview, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Georgia/Overview, https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Florida/Overview.

> You cannot have Gullah/Geechee culture without the land and without the water. We are inextricably tied to this coast. You can't move us anywhere else, you cannot sustain the same culture somewhere else. We need this environment. (Queen Quet cited in Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 6)

The processes that now endanger this very relationship can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century and the burgeoning agricultural and mining industries as well as the rise of private interest in the acquisition of land in the Lowcountry. At the time, these developments were still fairly regionally bounded and a significant amount of Gullah Geechee communities were able to hold on to their autonomous lifestyle. It was during the post-WWII era that the described changes accelerated, intersected with other developments, and began to affect the Lowcountry as a whole: tourism experienced a massive expansion in the area and incentivized further privatization, increasing industrialization squeezed more and more Gullah Geechee farmers and fishers out of the market who were then pushed into the growing low wage service sector, and the out-migration of younger descendants in search of better educational and professional opportunities led to profound demographic changes in many communities. The cumulative effect of these developments greatly compromised the ability of descendants to retain their property and eventually caused the loss of land among and the displacement of many communities. A dynamic that particularly fueled these processes and continues to be among the greatest threats to Gullah Geechee land ownership is the aggressive exploitation of the specific property relations among Gullah Geechee that are known as "heir's property" through real estate companies (see Smith 1991, 294).

Heirs' property describes a form of ownership where a group of heirs are "tenants in common" and where, depending on the heirs' respective position in the family tree, all of them own a certain percentage of the property (Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, 4). This particular legal relationship commonly results from the absence of a written will and/or the improper transfer of the deed following the property owner's death (Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, 4). Heirs' property occurs predominantly in African American communities in the South, but the phenomenon exists across the entire United States, also affecting communities in Appalachia, Latinx communities in the Southwest, and Indigenous communities in reservations.[98,99] The development of heirs' property is linked to socio-economic disparities and lack of access to legal advice but also to distrust in governmental institutions, given the affected people's past and ongoing experiences of state-sanctioned

[98] See: https://farmlandaccess.org/heirs-property/.

[99] It is estimated that 80 percent of land was lost by Black farmers between 1910 and 1970 due to various practices of systemic racial discrimination, centrally among these was the exploitation of the legal loopholes around heirs' property (see Castro and Willingham, April 03, 2019; Hargrove 2005, 126).

oppression. However, heirs' property may also be read as a cultural phenomenon and not only as a problem, as I will discuss further below.

Land was historically passed down by oral and not written agreement in Gullah Geechee communities (see Hargrove 2005, 123–24). While one individual might have been designated to be primarily responsible for the property, ownership of land was for a long time understood as communal among the group and revolved centrally around its use (Botwick 2018, 199). Given the mentioned out-migration of Gullah Geechee descendants during the early to mid-20th century, the legal owners of heirs' property dispersed widely and, in many cases, were not even aware of formally holding any shares. Those who had stayed in the Lowcountry and continued living and working on the land were usually seen to have assumed ownership, in many cases without, however, having obtained a deed, which meant that the land became heir's property unbeknownst to its owners (Hargrove 2005, 123–24). Land owned as heirs' property presents a series of challenges, preventing owners from obtaining loans and mortgages due to the absence of a clear title, which puts the property at risk of being forced into a partition sale in court, since any person holding an heir's interest can petition that the land be divided (Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, 5). In the 1960s, real estate companies began to take advantage of this discrepancy between arrangements among Gullah Geechee communities and US property law by tracking down heirs to buy their interests and force a partition—an ethically questionable practice that continues to this day.

The consequences of a forced partition are, either, (1) a partition by kind, if the land can be effectively divided into parts that equal all the respective heirs' shares, (2) a partition by allotment, allowing one or more heirs to acquire the shares of other heirs, or (3) a partition sale, if the other two options are deemed non-applicable by the court (Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, 7). The latter often results in auction sales in which the owners are usually outbid by developers and lose their land entirely. Among the greatest challenges for affected families to clearing heirs' property titles and preventing the above consequences are not only the costs of hiring a lawyer but also the difficulty of finding agreement among the heirs about how to deal with the land, as to some selling might actually appear like a good choice given the economic precarity within communities.

While the exploitation of the legal loopholes around heir's property remains a major threat to communities, Gullah Geechee organizations and allies to the group have successfully developed different solutions to aid descendants in their struggles to combat this dynamic. At the same time, the intersectionality of the different processes of socio-economic marginalization that affect the group vastly complicates any efforts of sustainably protecting

land ownership among Gullah Geechee. The described challenges arising from heir's property are a case in point, as they are inextricably tied to another major driver of land loss and displacement—gentrification.

Attracted by mild winters and the scenic maritime environment White middle- and upper-class US-Americans, especially from Northern states, increasingly moved into the Lowcountry during the second half of the 20th century (National Park Service 2005, 49). At around the same time and directly tied to that development, resort tourism and gated communities were established on the Sea Islands and historic preservation and urban renewal became central to urban planning in coastal cities. These processes were further accelerated by infrastructural projects, more specifically, the expansion of Interstate 95 in the mid-1970s (the central north-south highway on the East coast), which greatly facilitated travel, especially to formerly remote areas along the coast, and drew ever more permanent residents as well as tourists to the region (National Park Service 2005, 84–85).

Gated Communities and Resort Tourism on the Sea Islands

The creation of Sea Pines Planation, later renamed to Sea Pines Resorts, which was opened by entrepreneur Charles Frasier on Hilton Head Island in 1957, is commonly regarded as the prime example of the development of gated communities on the Sea Islands and their impact onto the livelihoods of local populations (Hargrove 2005, 63–64; National Park Service 2005, 83). Within just 18 years the percentage of Gullah Geechee among the total population of Hilton Head Island decreased from 90 to 15 percent—today the number of descendants is estimated at a mere 8 percent of the total population (Graves Sellars 2019; Hargrove 2005, 63–64). Many other Gullah Geechee communities along the coast, even if not all to the same extent, were subject to similar experiences (Goodwine 1998a, 167–70; National Park Service 2005, 86–88). As Fath Davis-Ruffins contends, the establishment of Sea Pines Plantation ushered in a profound transformation of coastal communities:

> Marsh and beachfronts are now enclosed by gated properties cutting off access to familiar fishing ground and to grasses used for making baskets. [...] Displaced African Americans have moved to less valuable real estate in the center of the island or have moved off the island entirely. (2008, 229)

This ongoing privatization, as observed by Davis-Ruffins, prevents Gullah Geechee not only from accessing economic resources, but also from visiting sacred burial grounds as well as other culturally relevant sites, such as praise houses (see also Hurley and Halfacre 2011, 391; National Park Service 2005, 83, 85).

One of the most devastating consequences of this sprawling real estate development on the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities is the steady rise in property prices, which

in turn means that low-income owners of now highly desirable waterfront homes struggle to pay their taxes as these are bound to property values (see National Park Service 2005, 84). This dynamic then intersects with the described challenges arising from heirs' property, leaving many Gullah Geechee descendants with no choice but to sell their land and move, which has profound effects on their ways of life given the earlier discussed connection between land ownership and culture among the group (see Smith 1991, 294). The establishment of gated communities and resorts thus changed the very structure of the political economy in coastal areas. Once principally defined by autonomous Black communities and subsistence farming, the Sea Islands and surrounding areas transformed into a service-based economy in which White "newcomers" occupy the upper ranks of the socio-economic ladder (Hargrove 2005, 43–44, 2020, 142). The authors of the GGCHC Management Plan identify these changes as having engendered a status quo that may perhaps most fittingly be referred to as a kind of neo-plantation economy:

> The late 20th century brought a new twist to the term "plantation" within the Corridor in the form of resorts, subdivisions, golf courses and golf communities, and recreation facilities. At these seemingly modern plantations, Gullah Geechee people served primarily as a menial labor force. (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 54)

Queen Quet, one of the most outspoken critics of these developments, similarly contends that the growth of this low wage service sector first and foremost contributes to the reproduction of socio-economic inequalities and traps descendants in relations of dependency ([1998] 2015, 183, 2006a, 20, 63-64, 2012a, 17). These processes of course not only impact Gullah Geechee but all populations with lower income and wealth. Many White locals therefore share critical perspectives about gated communities and dynamics of privatization, which, in light of the predominance of people migrating into the Lowcountry from the North, is expressed not only along the lines of class but geography as well (see Hargrove 2005, 85; National Park Service 2005, 84). Similar dynamics can also be noted with respect to the influence of gentrification on political relations. As Al*, a politician in his late 60s from North Carolina, told me:

> One would think the main problem here are Dixiecrats, but it's the snowbirds. You have all these people moving in from the North, especially retirees, and that changes the balance of power tremendously. In many places they now represent the majority which means they get to pull the strings. (Interview 2022)

He explained that the main issue was that many of these "newcomers" tended to hold conservative political views and neither understood nor cared about the local history. An observation that was shared by many of my interlocutors (see also Hargrove 2005, 85).

Melissa Hargrove, who conducted interviews with inhabitants of gated communities, similarly describes how they seemed to have vastly different worldviews than her Gullah Geechee research participants (2005, 103–4; see also Brabec and Richardson 2007, 160). This expressed itself amongst others in the latter's perception of the charity efforts of gated community residents as both patronizing and misguided. As one of Hargrove's interlocutors commented on the creation of a cancer center:

> We didn't ask for a cancer center. We don't get cancer. It wasn't until all these places moved in here that we ever got sick anyway. Now we eat foods with preservatives, have microwave ovens, and can't get to the healing plants because they're all gated off. That hospital is for them, not us. (2005, 92)

Evidently, the two groups' respective understandings of development and wellbeing diverge significantly. Whereas to the residents of gated communities amenities, such as golf courts and other recreational facilities, supermarkets and malls, paved roads and other infrastructure easing access to the coast, and of course the very enclosed properties themselves appear to be indicative of an improved quality of life, these very "improvements" are experienced as detrimental by Gullah Geechee communities on multiple levels (see Hargrove 2005, 104).[100] This manifests itself most tangibly perhaps in the effects of gentrification and over-development on the environment.

The so-called reclaiming of marshland and the clearing of forests significantly weakens the natural protection offered by the maritime ecology against flooding and hurricanes. This has increased coastal communities' exposure to natural disasters, which especially affects populations without the financial means to insure their property and make necessary renovations to their homes. Moreover, growing pollution through higher population density harms marine wildlife, therewith slowly undermining the livelihoods of local fishers (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 60). Sea level rise and heat waves caused by climate change only further add to this predicament. Given that the majority of Gullah Geechee communities are located directly on the coast, environmental matters are among the most pressing concerns of descendants. Gullah Geechee activists and organizations have in fact been warning about the threat posed by environmental damages to coastal communities for decades. However, local governments have until recently prioritized the above-described understandings of a good life among their affluent constituents. While there are some signs that authorities are finally beginning to take the concerns of Black and Gullah Geechee

[100] There are of course also people among the residents of gated communities who are well aware of these problems and have critical views of the very institutions they live in (Hargrove 2005, 111–12). However, they appear to be in the clear minority, since the choice to live within a gated community often becomes untenable to such critical voices (Hargrove 2005, 112).

communities more seriously, their actions might be too little too late, especially with regards to climate change and gentrification, as irreparable damage has already been done both to the environment and to communities.

Urban Renewal and Historic Preservation in the Coastal Cities

Most of the above-described challenges also exist in urban environments of the Lowcountry, even though the underlying dynamics differ slightly. While gated communities and resort tourism were the central drivers of gentrification on the Sea Islands, the intersections of historic preservation, heritage tourism, and urban renewal had similar consequences in the port cities, of which Charleston is commonly seen as a paradigmatic example (Hargrove 2020, 148; see also Bures and Cain 2008, 2). Starting in the 1950s and 60s Charleston's historic preservation movement gained increasing traction, and, tied to the burgeoning heritage tourism industry, more and more of the city's historic districts were renovated to re-create a romanticized vision of the Antebellum South:

> Marks of wear and tear had to be patched and painted, to protect structures and to cash in on the city's "reputation for aristocratic appearance." Preservation had come to mean restoration, and visitors disturbed by the transience of things admired Historic Charleston for standing fast against the onslaught of relative values and inevitable decay. (T. Rosengarten 1992, 45)

The socio-economic consequences of this were similar to the above-described effects of resort tourism and gating on the Sea Islands and its surrounding rural areas. Restoration increased property values, which in turn led to a rise in taxes (Hargrove 2005, 159). This then intersected with the challenges arising from heirs' property and aggressive real estate development, heavily burdening lower income families, especially African American and Gullah Geechee communities (Bures and Cain 2008, 5; Hargrove 2009, 97). The Black population was thus slowly pushed ever further outside of the center of Charleston, relocating north of the peninsula and to the East Side. Many of my older research participants reminisced how once numerous Black businesses lined the central streets of downtown Charleston, almost all of which are long gone now (see also Hargrove 2005, 151–52). Hargrove writes that it is estimated that the Black population of Charleston decreased by about 88 percent between 1920 and 1990 (2009, 98). Most of my interlocutors regarded this displacement as deliberate, since not only the private sector but also the city's administration was a central driver behind this process.

In the 1950s, a combination of projects of urban renewal, many of which forced Black residents to relocate, and public housing, likewise aimed at African Americans, led to an increase of racial segregation in the city of Charleston (Bures and Cain 2008, 5; Hargrove

2009, 97) . A prominent example that was often cited by my research participants was the "Crosstown Expressway" built in 1968, which was later, cynically it may seem, renamed "Septima P. Clarke Parkway," after the famous Charlestonian Civil Rights leader.[101] The expressway, a multi-lane fast traffic road connecting Highway 17 and Interstate 26, bisected the historically Black neighborhood and led to the demolition of approximately 150 homes and businesses.[102] Another infamous case is the fate of the African American Ansonborough community. In 1968, construction of the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium led to the first removals of Black residents in the neighborhood, after which gentrification "priced out" many more, as it was put by one of my interlocutors (see also Hargrove 2009, 97). Then, in 1992, the Anson Borough Homes, a public housing complex principally occupied by African Americans, was demolished, following a report that found the area to be contaminated by coal tar residues (Hargrove 2005, 166–67). Despite protests and a controversial public debate, revolving around the actual health hazard posed by the pollution, the residents eventually had to relocate. Hargrove cites a tenant stating in an interview with the Post and Courier at the time that he believed the actual reason for their removal was that "the city don't want people going to the number one tourist attraction [referring to plans for the construction of the South Carolina Aquarium, which was eventually built in 2000] to drive by poor, black faces at the entrance" (2005, 167). The neighborhood is now indeed principally known for its well-preserved historic architecture, entertainment, and restaurants, with nothing left to remind of its historic Black community.

While Charleston was described by many of my research participants as the most extreme case of such processes the situation of African American and Gullah Geechee communities in other cities is not fundamentally different. A case in point is the city of Savannah, Georgia, which is often marketed as having kept gentrification at bay, compared to Charleston.[103] My recollections of a walking tour that I attended during my time in Savannah in 2022, led by Dr. Jamal Touré, a historian, lecturer, artist, and professor at Savannah State University, will allows us to delve deeper into the topic.

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The walking tour started at the Haitian monument which commemorates the island's Black soldiers who fought in the US-American War of Independence and is located on Franklin

[101] See: https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/septima_clark/virtual-tour/expressway-and-park.
[102] See: https://coastalconservationleague.org/projects/the-crosstown-redesign/.
[103] Jacksonville, Florida, for instance, has a similar history of urban renewal and displacement of Gullah Geechee and African American communities, even though historic preservation and tourism have been of lesser relevance there compared to Savannah and Charleston (see E. Davis, February 15, 2022, July 30, 2024).

Square, one of the many picturesque public parks of downtown Savannah. Touré then led us past First African Baptist Church and to Yamacraw Village, a predominantly Black neighborhood characterized by its public housing projects. One of our first stops there was Yamacraw Square, a much smaller public park than the one we had been to just minutes earlier, consisting of a few benches, a fountain with sculptures of three Black kids playing, and what I only later learned was a wall commemorating Savannah's African American and Native American history. Touré told us that he had been involved in the creation of the park. Before, there had not even been grass, he said, the city apparently feeling that the Black community did not need a proper square like the ones in downtown Savannah. Plans for the park had already been conceived in 1992, but it took 14 years for the project to be completed, as some parts of Savannah's population "took issue with the idea," as Touré put it (see also Monroe 2016). Above mentioned commemorative wall originally consisted of 16 plaques, most of which have been missing for years. The rest of them are damaged to the extent that recognition of their purpose becomes almost impossible. Touré said that to him this vandalism stands in continuity with past acts of domestic terrorism and state sanctioned assaults against the integrity of the local Black community. He explained that Yamacraw Village had once been a thriving Black neighborhood, referred to as the "Harlem of the South," and home to one of the oldest urban Gullah Geechee communities in Georgia, with beautiful two-story wooden houses, businesses, and entertainment. "Bothered" by the prominence of this Black community, Touré said, the city and federal government began to fundamentally alter the neighborhood in the 1940s. The historic buildings were torn down and replaced with public housing, which led to the forced removal of at least 3,000 people (see also Nicholson 2023). Touré referred to these processes in Yamacraw Village as the "manipulation of spatial memory:"

> People nowadays could never imagine that things have once been like that, so when the Elders say they grew up in Yamacraw, younger people immediately think of the projects, but that's not how it was. All of this purposely contributes to lessening the image that Black people have of themselves.

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Touré's critique in his walking tour ties back into the discussion in Chapter 4, of how racial oppression greatly relies upon the internalization of one's own self as inferior by the racially othered population. In the case of Yamacraw Village, we see how this does not only take place on the level of discourse but is inscribed, as Touré explained, into physical space, by literally erasing traces of the past that would challenge White hegemonic ideology. These interlocking processes of physical and symbolic marginalization can also be identified in the earlier example of the Ansonborough community, revealing how both the city of Charleston's and

Savannah's urban planning was, and some would contend still is, fundamentally informed by racially motivated practices of systemic displacement. In fact, there was a general sentiment among many of my research participants that not only these two cities but most local governments across the Lowcountry prioritize "appearance" and "profits" over truth and the wellbeing of their Black residents, a matter I will discuss further in the following sections.

Intersections of Socio-Economics, Culture, and Law

Quite evidently, none of the above discussed socio-economic dynamics affect Gullah Geechee only by chance. The group has been and continues to be subject to marginalization precisely because of its identity. While other low-income populations have of course also been affected by several of the described processes regardless of their racial positioning, the interplay of racism, cultural discrimination, and economic deprivation have placed Gullah Geechee at a particularly stark systemic disadvantage. This heightened vulnerability became apparent most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, the socio-economic fallout of which eventually forced numerous Gullah Geechee businesses to close and had many descendants lose their jobs. Chris*, a social media activist in his late-30s from North Charleston whom I have already cited in the previous chapter, pointed out that the pandemic not only had profound economic but also cultural consequences, as small businesses, especially restaurants, are not only employers, but also "cultural touchpoints:"

> This is where people get together, where they meet. And these places often have a long history in the community and do a lot to hold it together. This is what makes them so important. But since we are talking about small businesses and sometimes even tiny businesses, they are not as resistant to the ups and downs of the economy. Especially not in such an extreme situation [referring to the pandemic]. (Interview 2022)

The pandemic exacerbated these pre-existing precarities in the Lowcountry and made ever more visible the fundamental chasms within society. In the case of Gullah Geechee, this revealed yet again the complex intersections between race, class, and matters revolving around the group's cultural heritage. The above-described challenges tied to heir's property represent another instructive example of this and additionally involve political-legal dimensions.

From the dominant legal perspective heirs' property principally represents a problem: unresolved property relations that arise due to the failure of heirs to clear their title—an alleged failure on the part of heirs that is seen as responsible for putting them into an exploitable legal situation in the first place. This view is based upon the persistent misconception that US (property) law was inherently neutral and could be fairly applied to

each and every individual citizen without any qualifications (see D. Bell 1995, 901; Crenshaw 2017, 2309–10). This neither takes into account the specific cultural history of Gullah Geechee as a distinct group of people, nor the inextricable link between race and the concept of property rights, which, as I argue, is both necessary to gain an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of heir's property and its relation to US property law (see Harris 1993, 1714). As described above, the ownership of land within Gullah Geechee communities was traditionally regarded as communal, which, as historiographers have demonstrated, can be traced back to the group's African ancestry (Brabec and Richardson 2007, 158). Heirs' property in this sense may be regarded as part of Gullah Geechee's cultural heritage that survived the Middle Passage and was passed down over the centuries within the Lowcountry. As the authors of the Hilton Head Island R/UDAT study assert:

> Heirs [sic] property is a sign of ancient culture, not a genuine title problem. It should be protected and preserved for its value in representing a special element of the past, if it can be sufficiently clarified and saved from unwarranted expense and delay in fitting it into the modern use of land titles (Regional and Urban Design Team of the American Institute of Architects 1995, 13).

The current legal situation then should not be read as the result of descendants' "ignorance" of property law or their "failure" to adhere to it. Instead, it must be understood as resulting from the contact between different cultural understandings of property relations under conditions of extreme inequality. The institution of enslavement forcefully placed the ancestors of Gullah Geechee in a new and hostile social environment in which they were wholly excluded from the realm of property law. In fact, as Cheryl Harris argues, this "*interaction* between conceptions of race and property [within the United States] played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination" from the very beginning (1993, 1715–16). This involved both the denial of property rights as well as the legal definition of enslaved people themselves as property (Harris 1993, 1718–19; see also Mbembe 2003, 26). Post-Emancipation, the formerly enslaved applied the communal logics to land ownership that had been passed down within their own communities, and for decades this did not represent a conflict. It only became one as land in the Lowcountry transformed into a desirable commodity and real estate developers aggressively sought for means to acquire property.

US property law, with some minor modifications, principally as regards its interpretation, does in fact allow sufficient leeway for judges to accommodate heirs' property. This has been demonstrated by an initiative lead by the American Bar Association's Section of Real Property, Trust and Estate Law together with the Uniform Law Commission (ULC),

both voluntary organizations of lawyers, which drafted the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act (UPHPA) in 2010, in an effort to improve the legal basis for resolving heirs' property cases. The act introduces three major changes to the partition law regulating heirs' property:

> 1. Whenever possible a partition by kind should be the preferrable option over a sale of the property. Whereas in the past judges principally based their decisions on how to partition heir's property upon economic factors the UPHPA requires them to take into consideration the cultural and the emotional value of the land as well.
>
> 2. If one person holding an heirs' interest petitioned for a partition sale the other heirs must be given the opportunity to buy that person's shares at a price that is equivalent to the value of the petitioner's fractional interest before a partition sale is considered, therewith strengthening the option of partition by allotment if a partition by kind is not feasible.
>
> 3. In the case of a partition sale, the property is to be set at a price equivalent to the fair market value, as opposed to the hitherto predominance of auctions which usually led to sales below the market price. (The American Bar Association 2016)

The UPHPA was enacted in a number of states across the US, including Georgia, in 2014, South Carolina, in 2015, and Florida, in 2020. As of the writing of this thesis, the act is under debate in the North Carolina legislature.[104] While the UPHPA may not be able to resolve the underlying reasons for the socio-economic marginalization of communities, it does provide a strong basis for the successful protection of heirs' property owners' land in the event of a legal case. Importantly, it furthermore shows that it is possible to do justice both to the dominant legal structure and to understandings of property relations among descendants. It was principally the hitherto narrow application of White hegemonic readings of property relations coupled with cultural biases towards Gullah Geechee that produced the discussed negative consequences for the owners of heirs' property. To sustainably resolve this conflict, as suggested by the UPHPA, it is necessary to recognize it not only as a legal and socio-economic but also a cultural matter.

As we have seen, the socio-economic situation of Gullah Geechee communities is defined by the complex entanglement of various dimensions that go beyond simple matters of class, making it highly challenging for activists to effect lasting changes. Still, the Gullah Geechee Movement has produced numerous approaches over the past couple of decades to empower communities. In the following, I will focus on several such efforts that were either led by communities themselves or pursued in collaboration with allies to the group.

[104] See: https://www.uniformlaws.org/committees/community-home?CommunityKey=50724584-e808-4255-bc5d-8ea4e588371d.

Resistance among Gullah Geechee Communities and Their Allies Against Dynamics of Socio-Economic Marginalization

From its very beginnings the Gullah Geechee Movement was defined by its resistance not only against cultural oppression but also against the above-described dynamics of socio-economic marginalization. As pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, land loss and displacement are among the most existential threats to the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities. Accordingly, to this day at least part of the efforts of most Gullah Geechee institutions focuses upon combating these particular dynamics. In addition to the work of entities such as the Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, there are also a number of allied organizations which support communities in their struggles for land retention. In the following I will, first, focus on one of these allies that is likely the most important organization in the field of heirs' property rights—the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation (CHPP). The CHPP is based in Charleston, South Carolina, and, as implied by its name, provides legal aid to owners of heirs' property. While the CHPP principally works with families in South Carolina, it also collaborates with institutions and communities across the Lowcountry, prominently the Corridor Commission. During my time in Charleston in 2022, I had the opportunity to speak with Jeff Winget, the organization's director of communications, who shared some of the CHPP's history and explained its current work and approach.

The CHPP was founded in Charleston in 2005 as a non-profit organization with the aim of supporting families in clearing their heirs' property titles. What sets the organization apart from others, Winget said, was that it has always had its own team of lawyers allowing it to work a higher number of cases and to do so with more flexibility. Before, he continued, organizations would depend on the goodwill of external lawyers, which potentially limited their work. While the CHPP provided a much-needed service, there still always remained the question of how people would be able to hold on to their land in the long term, after their titles had been cleared. Taking inspiration from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program from 2012, Winget said, the organization decided to add a focus on forestry to their work. He explained that most properties in South Carolina have a considerable number of trees and, with the help of the USDA's forestry program, property owners could "make the land work for them," either by selling their timber and/or by producing and selling carbon credits through planting trees. The overall approach of the CHPP has thus come to rest upon three central pillars: First, the organization provides educational services in the form of workshops and free consulting to inform people about (a) the risks of owning heirs' property and (b) the

opportunities they have to clear their titles and to prevent more land from becoming heirs' property in the first place (Prevention). Secondly, the CHPP provides legal aid to families looking to clear the titles to their land (Resolution). Access to the organization's services is gained by writing an application detailing the family's situation. The legal services clients receive are then free of charge. Thirdly, the CHPP encourages property owners, once their titles have been cleared, to utilize the land to ensure that it can actually be maintained (Land Utilization).[105] Winget emphasized that sustainability is essential to the organization, both with respect to the environmental effects of the business models they support and to the clients' intentions with their property. Only families are aided who genuinely want to hold on to their land, he said. In that sense, the ultimate aim of the organization is to help build generational wealth and therewith combat structures of socio-economic inequality.

The specific approach of the CHPP to land retention is followed by most Gullah Geechee entities as well. The Gullah/Geechee Nation and the Corridor Commission, for example, both recommend that owners of heirs' property, after clearing their title, utilize the land in order to help them pay their taxes and build a solid financial base (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020b; Gullah/Geechee Nation 2020c, 2020e). One of my interlocutors, Will*, a gardener in his late 60s from Charleston, was rather critical of this strategy though, since, as he stated, "it buys into this whole idea that land was a commodity and that just adds to the system [of neoliberal capitalism]" (Interview 2022). It may, indeed, be argued, that a focus on increasing the profitability of land affirms the dominant socio-economic structure, furthering the very system that pushed Gullah Geechee communities into precarity in the first place. At the same time, given the historically accumulated disparities between racialized groups in the United States, building generational wealth among Black landowners undeniably also entails a transformative dimension as it strives to bridge racial inequalities. In any case, like another one of my research participants, Denise*, a small business owner from Savannah in her late 30s, stated:

> There is this pressure to make land pay for itself because taxes are tied to the value of your property. That means if you don't make money with your property, or have some other kind of steady income, or just a lot of money, you won't be able to hold on to your land, because in a region like this [the Lowcountry], and I don't know if you're aware of this, but this is one of the fastest growing regions in the country, so the value of your land is going to increase and that means your taxes are going to increase as well. (Interview 2022)

[105] See also the official website of the CHPP: https://www.heirsproperty.org/protect-your-land/, https://www.heirsproperty.org/put-your-land-to-work/, and https://www.heirsproperty.org/client-stories/.

To address this predicament Gullah Geechee entities and their allies also put a significant focus upon transforming the legal and socio-economic dimensions that are underlying the loss of land. The main avenue pursued in this regard is to lobby for zoning law changes that determine the kind of development allowed within specific geographic units. In the following, I will engage with three efforts of this kind where detailed solutions and policy recommendations to their local governments were (co-)developed by Gullah Geechee communities.

Community Projects in Beaufort, Hilton Head Island, and Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina

One of the first and most successful interventions into zoning law regulations by a Gullah Geechee community was made in Beaufort County in the late 1990s. In response to the earlier-described processes of over-development and gating on the Sea Islands, Queen Quet, then as head of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, and other community leaders from St. Helena Island worked together with the Beaufort County Planning Commission to determine measures to protect the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities (Queen Quet [1995] 2009, 60–61; see also National Park Service 2005, 96). In 1997, based upon this collaboration, Beaufort County officials drafted the Beaufort Comprehensive Plan, a multi-year agenda for the guided development of the County, which recommended the creation of a Cultural Protection Overlay District (CPOD) as well as the addition of exceptions to the zoning ordinance that facilitate the maintenance of family compounds (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 166–167, 599-600; see also Henry-Nickie and Seo 2022, 35). These suggested policies were then adopted by the Beaufort City Council in 1999 as part of the Beaufort County Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance (BCZDSO) (National Park Service 2005, F31).

Notably, the decision-making process for the creation of the COPD was fundamentally predicated upon the recognition of the distinctiveness of Gullah Geechee culture and its value to US-American history and society, representing one of the earliest state sanctioned acknowledgements of that kind as well as yet another example of the close intertwinement of the cultural, socio-economic, and legal sphere:

> The traditional cultural landscape and its physical setting on St. Helena Island is a treasure of national significance. As one of Beaufort County's last substantially rural Sea Islands and the center of its most notable concentration of Gullah culture, the island requires an additional level of development standards to protect this important resource. (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 166)

The argument underlying the creation of the COPD centrally revolved around the understanding of gated communities as "antithetical to the cultural heritage of St. Helena Island," citing detrimental effects of socio-economic development upon cultural systems as

necessitating political-legal action (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 167). What the zoning law changes achieved specifically was to prevent the building of new gated communities, limit traffic and the construction of roads or other infrastructure that would alter the "rural character" of the community, and protect public access to culturally relevant sites and resources (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 167). In addition to the COPD the new zoning ordinance also provided the legal basis for supporting the maintenance of family compounds. Traditional settlement patterns among rural Gullah Geechee communities are defined by the cohabitation of extended family in a multi-generational compound which, however, is at odds with most zoning laws by exceeding the permitted maximum number of residential structures within a given space (Brabec and Richardson 2007, 163). The changes to the zoning ordinance adopted by the Beaufort County Council addressed this issue by allowing such higher density housing through the subdivision or leasing of land by family members (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 163-164, 599; see also Brabec and Richardson 2007, 164). Finally, in explicit recognition of the socio-economic challenges faced by Gullah Geechee communities, the BCZDSO also reduced the minimum size of lots to preserve the affordability of housing (Land Ethics, Inc. 1997, 176, 582).

The adoption of the above-described policies was a major success for the Gullah Geechee community of St. Helena and may be seen as the central reason why the island and its surrounding areas have been spared from any larger development projects. Commitment to these policies was reaffirmed in the most recent Beaufort Comprehensive Plan from 2021 (Beaufort County 2021, 36–37). Still, there have been multiple efforts over the years by real estate developers to lobby for amendments to the zoning ordinance and it was largely due to the organizing and protest of the community that none of these have been successful (Gullah/Geechee Nation 2022c, 2023b; Litterst 2023). St. Helena may not be the only community which has fought for the creation of laws and policies designed to specifically protect the livelihoods of Gullah Geechee descendants, but corporate and political interests have greatly slowed down, if not wholly thwarted similar efforts elsewhere. In recent years, though, there have been a number of breakthroughs, two of which I want to engage with in more detail.

The first case is Hilton Head Island which, as described earlier, has experienced one of the highest degrees of gentrification among the Sea Islands. In 2017, the town of Hilton Head created a Gullah-Geechee Land and Cultural Preservation Task Force.[106] Comprised of nine individuals, including three members of the Hilton Head Island Planning Commission,

[106] See: https://www.hiltonheadislandsc.gov/news/news.cfm?NewsID=2990 and https://hiltonheadislandsc.gov/boards/gullah/.

three Gullah Geechee community members, and three representatives from local Gullah Geechee institutions, the group is tasked to

> identify and assist in the preservation of the Gullah-Geechee culture for the purpose of detecting and resolving issues specific to its community, including, without limitation, heirs' property, taxes and land use, economic and sustainability issues for an improved quality of life, and through on-going educational programs, workshops and seminars. (The Walker Collaborative, Clarion Associates, and Victoria Smalls 2019, i)

To address these matters, the task force worked together with town staff as well as outside experts and engaged in a series of community meetings. This collaborative effort resulted in the 2019 Gullah Geechee Culture Preservation Project Report making a broad range of policy recommendations (The Walker Collaborative, Clarion Associates, and Victoria Smalls 2019). Two years later, in 2021, the Hilton Head Town Council adopted the Family Compound and Family Subdivision Ordinance suggested by the report, which functions similar to the changes made to the zoning ordinance in St. Helena Island, and, furthermore, created the Gullah Geechee Historic Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation in 2022 to further guide the process of finding and implementing solutions to the local community's challenges.[107] Whereas these measures undoubtedly represent a decided improvement and may signal that the Town of Hilton Head has begun to take seriously the concerns of descendants, it should be emphasized that the current process is the result of decades of organizing, suggestions, and critique from the local Gullah Geechee community and its allies.

Already in 1995, Hiton Head community leaders worked together with specialists from the Regional and Urban Design Committee of the American Institute of Architects to pen a report on the situation of the local Gullah Geechee community and detail the changes necessary to protect its integrity and empower its residents (Regional and Urban Design Team of the American Institute of Architects 1995, 1–2). The document proposes a series of policy changes: the creation of an heirs' property non-profit corporation that assists families in clearing titles and that develops a long-term perspective for their land, the improvement of infrastructure, importantly, water and sewer access, a credit for taxes paid by the community for services they have never received, road and other physical improvements, changes to the zoning ordinance to allow for higher density housing, cultural and historic preservation programs, tax deductions through alternative property value assessments, the development of an environmental protection plan, housing affordability programs, measures

[107] See: https://hiltonheadislandsc.gov/gullah/overlay/ and https://hiltonheadislandsc.gov/gullahgeecheecdc/.

to support small businesses, a deliberate effort to create employment for Gullah Geechee in the local administrative apparatus, the extension of public transportation, and, finally, the improvement of educational and recreational opportunities (Regional and Urban Design Team of the American Institute of Architects 1995, 13–53). Most of these recommendations also appeared in the 2019 report indicating how little progress had been made in the intermittent period. Nonetheless, although only a fraction of these measures has been implemented so far, the creation of above-mentioned institutions indeed gives reason to hope that a serious and ongoing engagement with the matters of concern of the local Gullah Geechee community might finally take place.

The second case, notable for the collaboration of several different Gullah Geechee communities and the local government, is that of the Settlement Community Task Force in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina.[108] Mt. Pleasant, once a collection of rural settlements, has experienced rapid growth since the 1980s and 90s and now represents one of the largest suburban towns in South Carolina, separated from Charleston only by the Cooper River. While the town is well known for its multiple-generations-old families of basket makers it is also home to several other Gullah Geechee communities that date back to the Postbellum Period. After Emancipation the formerly enslaved people founded a number of autonomous settlements in the area. While they all equally relied on agriculture for subsistence, each also developed a focus upon certain crafts, such as brickmaking, iron work, or basket making, which led to a small network of trade among these communities and with the city of Charleston (see National Park Service 2005, 88–90). These specific traditions also played a crucial role for the development of the settlements' respective local identities (Settlement Community Task Force 2021, 1–2). Currently, there are 11 settlement communities which have been able to maintain their geographical and cultural integrity (Settlement Community Task Force 2021, 3). The term itself, "settlement community," is in fact a fairly new creation. Curiously, none of my interlocutors were able to say when and by whom it was first used. Clarissa*, an accountant in her early-40s from Mt. Pleasant, said that to her the major function of the term was to allow communities to make visible their unique histories and, at the same time, collectively voice their concerns to the Town of Mt. Pleasant (Interview 2022).

As elsewhere, gentrification led to a massive increase in real estate prices in Mt. Pleasant over the past couple of decades, forcing many descendants to sell their land and relocate. Natalie*, a basket maker from Mt. Pleasant in her late 50s, reminisced how, before the transformation of the area, "the majority of our family lived close by, children still made

[108] See: https://www.tompsc.com/1182/Settlement-Communities.

their own toys and played on the streets, which were really just dirt roads back then." "Today," she continued, "most of the younger generation would never be able to move back here. It's just become too expensive. My son lives in North Charleston and my daughter just moved to Goose Creek [further north]. I'm just glad I have my grandma's house" (Interview 2022). A major factor that contributed to these processes of displacement on a regional level was the damage caused by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, a category 5 hurricane. Peggy*, a retiree in her late 70s from Mt. Pleasant, explained to me that "many people were just not able to repair their houses after Hugo. Then developers came in and offered them money and they sold their property, often below the actual value. And now they can't move back" (Interview 2022).

As discussed above, Gullah Geechee communities are particularly vulnerable to such environmental disasters due to the intersections between their historical location close to the water and systemic economic disparities. Just as on Hilton Head Island, the challenges faced by Gullah Geechee in Mt. Pleasant have been known to the local administration for many years. However, as one of my interlocutors working for the Town of Mt. Pleasant shared, the unwillingness of the government to take decisive action and the resulting distrust on the part of the local population thwarted past efforts to address the existing problems. Natalie* shared her frustration in that regard, stating that "there have been numerous cases where development was proposed and we voiced our concerns and opposition, and the town still approved of it, and now we have to bear the consequences" (Interview 2022).

Following years of pressure from the communities and its allies, the Mount Pleasant Town Council created the Settlement Community Task Force in 2020 with the purpose of identifying possible solutions to the above-described concerns. The group is composed of fifteen community members with at least one representative for each of the 11 settlement communities (Settlement Community Task Force 2021, 1). In December 2021, the task force published a report on the situation of the settlement communities, including recommendations for action created in collaboration with Town staff, the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, and the Mount Pleasant Waterworks (Settlement Community Task Force 2021). The central matters of concern identified are categorized under the themes of "infrastructure," "economic disparity," "cultural integrity," and "property ownership" (Settlement Community Task Force 2021, 4). A set of recommendations is made on each of these fields, proposing measures very similar to the ones suggested in the Beaufort Comprehensive Plan and the Hilton Head Island reports, involving changes to the zoning ordinance that would prevent any development considered detrimental to the integrity of the respective community (Settlement Community Task Force 2021, 6–18).

Thus far, one of the major achievements of the settlement communities' efforts has been the designation of Phillips Community, located in northern Mt. Pleasant, as a Charleston County historic district in August 2021 (Slade 2021). The county recognition took place against the backdrop of a longstanding debate on the widening of Highway 41, which would have necessitated the relocation of numerous businesses and homes in the community. Eventually a compromise was reached to minimize the impacts of the road extension on both the residents and the environment (S. Baldwin 2021; Editorial Staff, The Post and Courier 2021; Rivers James and Descherer 2023). The historic designation of Phillips requires that any future development must now be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission which can reject any plan that is deemed as negatively impacting the character of the community. As of the writing of this thesis, other settlement communities are in the process of determining whether to also work towards a designation as historic districts.

While the creation of the task force and the county recognition of Philipps Community represent important achievements, the settlement communities still face numerous challenges. I had the opportunity to speak with several members of the Settlement Community Task Force and each emphasized how ongoing economic inequality continues to threaten the integrity of their communities in multiple ways. As one representative, Faith*, said:

> It is all about economics. The problem is that there has never been a sufficient economic base for the Black population. [...] Even now, when people have the opportunity to go to college or find employment elsewhere, they usually do not come back because there are no prospects here. (Interview 2022)

And even if younger people wanted to move back, she added, the steady rise in housing costs often makes this impossible. The older generation is therefore deeply worried about how Gullah Geechee heritage may still be held onto in their communities given these profound demographic changes.

Economic disparities also closely tie into matters revolving around infrastructure. One of the major points of contention for the settlement communities is the lack of adequate drainage systems and sewer services. As the settlement communities are not incorporated into Mt. Pleasant, they do not have access to any of its public services. And while annexation by the town is not desired by most, great frustration exists over the history of tax exploitation. A member of the task force explained that Black communities have historically paid for public infrastructure that they were then never allowed to use because of racial segregation. Given these experiences of state-sanctioned discrimination, communities feel that they should now at least have access to basic public services. A closely related matter is

that unincorporated communities do not have any political representation in the town either. Since the settlement communities are immediately affected by many of the decisions made by the local government, this appears rather problematic, to say the least, to many of its residents.

All of these matters are further complicated by the fact that settlement communities are affected by the legislations of two different levels of local government, Charleston County, on the one hand, and the Town of Mt. Pleasant, on the other. Earlier cited research participant working for the Town of Mt. Pleasant shared with me that there was a certain lack of communication between these two entities. Developers take advantage of this situation by acquiring property in settlement communities and then approaching the County and town separately to receive approval for development, trying to pit the two administrations against one another. An important part of efforts to protect settlement communities, the person emphasized, is therefore to improve collaboration between the town and the County governments. However, challenges also exist within the settlement communities themselves. One member of the task force said that information flow represented a particular problem, since knowledge pertaining to such crucial issues as taxing or property law was not disseminated effectively. This, the person continued, was also a matter of intergenerationality, as the older generation often struggled with using the internet and new media, relying on younger people's support, a circumstance complicated by the mentioned demographic shifts.

What becomes apparent from the above discussed cases of resistance against economic marginalization and displacement is not only that all of the described Gullah Geechee communities face similar problems, but, perhaps more importantly, that there is not a lack of possible strategies in order to counteract these processes. As demonstrated, suggestions on how to address the challenges brought about by gentrification and over-development have been made for decades. And, while I have only engaged in more detail with community projects in South Carolina, the same can be observed in the other three states of the Lowcountry (see National Park Service 2005, F32-33).[109] The major issue then, quite evidently, lies in a lack of political will on the part of local governments to implement the recommendations made by Gullah Geechee activists, institutions, and their allies on how to best provide relief to communities. This is not only a problem specific to the situation of Gullah Geechee but, as Critical Race Theorists argue, represents an integral part of racial relations in the United States. In his seminal work *Race, Racism, and American Law*, Derrick Bell contends that one of the greatest obstacles to racial progress lies not necessarily in a lack

[109] See also, for instance: https://www.benesch.com/plan-to-preserve-and-enhance-american-beach-recognized-by-nefrc/.

of willingness among decisions makers to improve the situation of the oppressed but rather in the reluctance to give up any privileges enjoyed by the White majority population, specifically the upper classes (D. Bell [1970] 2008, 1; see also Harris 1993, 1768).[110] Any progress made, thus, commonly takes place when the interests and goals of elites happen to coincide with the advancement of racial equality, as Bell argues in his interest convergence hypothesis:

> [...] blacks are more likely to obtain relief for even acknowledged racial injustice when that relief also serves, directly or indirectly, to further ends that policymakers perceive are in the best interests of the country. ([1970] 2008, 24)

Any such relief, as Bell continues, then commonly tends to be instrumentalized by decision makers as "proof that society is indeed just," regardless of how insubstantial the changes have actually been, only to provide an excuse for authorities to carry on as before ([1970] 2008, 24).

Returning to the specific case of the Gullah Geechee movement, a caveat must therefore be added to the seemingly promising recent developments, such as in Hilton Head and Mt. Pleasant. While at first glance local governments have seemingly begun to care about the concerns of descendants, it is still unclear how genuine their commitment is and whether any substantive changes beyond the appointment of committees and task forces is actually going to occur. Ultimately, as implied by several of my research participants, it may be necessary for larger transformations to take place that affect the very structure of the political economy in order to sustainably protect the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities. And this would, indeed, require a genuine willingness among the socio-economic and political elites to give up their long-held privileges.

I will now turn my attention to the field of tourism both as one of the dynamics underlying the described processes of marginalization but also as a possible means of empowerment for Gullah Geechee communities. Amongst others, I will explore the intersections between racism and tourism as well as tensions between what was perceived by several of my interlocutors as merely "symbolic" versus "real" change.

Cultural Heritage Tourism and Its Ambivalent Effects on Gullah Geechee Communities

Tourism is among the largest industries in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida alike contributing to a significant portion of the respective states' GDPs, with much

[110] The observation that the needs of marginalized groups of people are subordinated to the interests and goals of a dominant population can be made of course with respect to any form of oppression, be it along the lines of race, culture, class, gender, or other categories.

activity concentrated along the coast of the Lowcountry.[111] This is most pronounced probably in South Carolina, where tourism in the greater Charleston area alone accounted for $12.8 billion of the industry's overall economic impact of $29 billion in 2022 (which in turn made up roughly 12.8 percent of the total GDP of South Carolina, greatly stimulating other industries such as real estate and finance as well).[112] While data on tourism for the individual states of the Lowcountry and its cities and towns has been gathered for decades, statistics on the specific area constituted by the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor has until recently not been available. In 2019, the GGCHC Commission partnered with Mandala Research, a private research institution specialized on tourism, to determine the economic potential of the industry within the Corridor. The final report estimates the amount that leisure travelers might potentially spend at $34 billion per year, quantifying the perception shared by many of my research participants that "tourism has become the lifeblood of the area" (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020a, 42). A fact that to some descendants represents one of the central causes for Gullah Geechee communities' present struggles, while others see it as part of the solution.

The Tourism Industry—Between Ideological Apparatus and Facilitator of Change

As discussed above, tourism in the Lowcountry was from its very beginnings, and continues to be, intimately linked with dynamics of both symbolic and spatial marginalization. The majority of the visitors I interacted with, however, seemed mostly ignorant about the costs of the idealized images that fuel the tourism industry. Countless tourists are still drawn to the area by romanticized narratives about the "historic Antebellum charm" of port cities like Charleston or Savannah. This stands in stark contrast to the lived experiences shared with me by my Gullah Geechee interlocutors. Monica*, an educator in her mid-30s from Charleston, said the following:

> I was in a restaurant on King Street, and there was a picture of, like an aerial view, of the front of the market—that's downtown, Meeting Street area. And it just looked so magical, and it looked so mystical, it really looked like something out of *Polar Express*. And I was, like, "this is how White people see Charleston." You know, the stories that they get and the things that they come here expecting to see is this very magic, pristine, starry, quaint thing. It was never that, it was never that for me… and so,

[111] See: https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2024/08/13/north-carolina-breaks-tourism-spending-record-2023, https://www.scprt.com/articles/industry-announces-record-breaking-growth-and-gov-mcmaster-presents-annual-awards-at-sc-tourism-conference#:~:text=All%20told%2C%20the%20estimated%20economic,for%202022%20was%20%2429%20billion, https://gov.georgia.gov/press-releases/2024-01-30/gov-kemp-department-economic-development-celebrate-2024-official-state, https://www.flgov.com/2024/01/12/travelers-to-florida-continue-to-outpace-the-nation/#:~:text=For%20every%20dollar%20spent%20by,per%20day%20to%20Florida's%20economy.

[112] See: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1065201/south-carolina-real-gdp-by-industry/ and https://www.live5news.com/2023/05/30/charleston-area-sees-record-breaking-year-tourism-2022/.

> certainly, being Black at a majority White institution [referring to her studies at the College of Charleston] shaped how I saw Charleston. But even after I graduated and as I saw things like the response to Emanuel, the massacre at Emanuel, or when Walter Scott was murdered…We are politely segregated. So, people are not going to talk about it, unless they have to talk about it. And if they have to talk about it, you got to be ready for tears, because so much of Charleston has been built on a lie and denial. (Interview 2017)

The police shooting of Walter Scott in North Charleston in 2015 and the mass murder at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church by a White supremacist only a few months later, which Monica refers to above, profoundly shook the city of Charleston. Commonly seen as a liberal island in conservative South Carolina and nurturing an image of itself as polite, hospitable, and pleasant, the city became a center of attention amid a series of nationwide protests against racial violence, following the shooting of Michael Brown by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014. After the attack on Emanuel, the city organized a "Walk of Unity" across Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge to demonstrate the local population's united stance against racism, which was celebrated in news media as expressing the "love and peace" that were "truly" at the heart of Charleston (e.g. Leon 2017). However, the walk and its surrounding discourse were seen as highly problematic by Monica* and many of my other Gullah Geechee and Black research participants. To Monica*, the Walk of Unity was principally motivated by political and economic reasons and served to veil the deep fractures within the city:

> I think people fail to realize that the reason anything happened quickly in the way it did was because all eyes were on Charleston. Charleston makes money, it's a number one tourist destination. It is not like police in North Charleston actually cared about Black people and that's why the police officer who killed Walter Scott was arrested. It's because everybody was looking at Charleston. But there was this great big response of like, "oh it's so nice the way y'all handled that, and y'all weren't like Ferguson, you weren't this, you weren't that, y'all were really classy." And even some of the people here—like after the massacre there was a bridge walk, a "Walk of Unity." And when I tell you people felt good about that! Like the way a bunch of White people from a certain age group think that everybody marched with Dr. King. That's how it sounded. It sounded like it was the White people marched with Dr. King and there were no Black people, because everybody claimed they marched with Dr. King. But the way they feel about walking across that bridge, like that really changed something, and they got to feel really proud about it, to the point where—"we didn't handle it like they did, we didn't loot and we didn't terrorize," and, really, what it felt like was, "look at our n******, look how our n****** handle this." Because that's all it was, it wasn't like we felt good about the massacre. It wasn't like it's okay here, like we all wanted to go and sing Kumbaya. But that's what it was made to look like… (Interview 2017)

Years later, in 2022, the public reaction to Emanuel was still a frequent topic in the conversations about race and Charleston that I had with my Gullah Geechee and Black interlocutors. Most of them similarly expressed their frustration and anger at the ways in

which the city tried to "hide everything that is not pleasant," although everyone knew, as one of my interlocutors put it, "that there is this elephant in the room called racism." As discussed in Chapter 4, racial inequality remains one of the defining realities of US-American society. This is not to imply that no progress had been made in the past decades but that over the course of hundreds of years racism has been deeply inscribed into the very institutional foundations of the United States (see Mullings 2005, 679–80; Perry 2011, 21; Yosso 2005, 73). The tourism industry in the Lowcountry is an instructive case in point.

As Monica* implies in the above citations, the function of tourism in the negotiation of racial relations in Charleston is to serve, for one, as an integral part of the ideological apparatus within the political economy of the city by reproducing an idealized image of the White nation, and, for another, as a major source of economic revenue that perpetuates the status quo and profoundly influences political decision-making processes, commonly at the expense of Black and Gullah Geechee communities. Cindy*, a basket maker from Mt. Pleasant, felt that the extent of this was such that "the city is not for the people anymore, the city is for the tourists" (Interview 2022). While Charleston is commonly cited as the prime example for this kind of development, similar observations can be made about other parts of the Lowcountry as well. As Dr. David Pleasant, a scholar, musician, and political activist from Savannah, points out:

> Savannah, just as most of the South, is very much running on Confederacy narratives. It's highly problematic, if not outright sick. The city presents itself as this welcoming tourist destination and there are people who dress up in Confederate military uniforms and wave Confederate flags every year at the St. Patrick's Day Parade in plain view. And there is no adequate response from the people. (Interview 2022)

To the contrary, he continued, tourists would flock to historic sites of former plantations and urban enslavement to admire the historic architecture and "romantic" atmosphere, while remaining wholly ignorant, if they so choose, about the stories beneath the surface. He argued that even the few existing representations of Black history commonly took place under terms set by White hegemonic ideology revolving around plantation life, servitude, and suffering, instead of resistance and liberation, so as not to "unsettle the illusion." While he acknowledged that there have been changes in recent years, he regards much of the symbolic recognition of Black history from local governments and public institutions as mere lip service:

> You may have all these markers being erected in various places commemorating Black history and Gullah Geechee history and you may have institutions vowing to "tell the whole story." But when you take a look at what is really happening, you'll see that Black people are still being priced out and pushed to the peripheries. All that these

> markers really do is ease White people's conscience. What they really are is gravestones, that's what they are. (Interview 2022)

This tension between "mere" symbolic recognition and "actual" change ran through many of the conversations I had with my research participants about the socio-economic-situation of Black and Gullah Geechee communities, specifically with respect to the role of tourism. One of the most recent points of contention in this regard was the construction of the International African American Museum in Charleston. Plans for the museum were first made in the early 2000s under former mayor Joseph P. Riley. However, the project never really got underway, struggling to secure funds and apparently lacking a clear direction. According to one of my interlocutors who had been part of meetings about the museum from the very beginning, the mass murder at Emanuel Church in 2015 played a major role in revitalizing the IAAM:

> The project was basically dead. But after Emanuel, people across the nation looked to Charleston and wanted to do something, and particularly White people thought they could absolve themselves by donating for a project like this. (Interview 2022)

Still, it would take several more years until the project was realized. The ground-breaking ceremony for the museum took place in 2019 at Gadsden's Wharf, the location of one of Charleston's historic ports of entry for the enslaved Africans after their forced quarantine on one of the islands off the coast.[113] Construction costs are estimated at over $100 million, financed through a mix of local and state government funding as well as private donations (Waters 2017; Roberts 2023). The museum finally opened in June 2023 to mostly positive reactions. News media reported of visitors praising the exhibitions, specifically the museum's effort at creating a holistic perspective on the African American experience, engaging with local, national as well as international dimensions (see Glenn 2023; McBride 2023). Several of my research participants shared that they, too, had a positive impression of the museum, being particularly pleased that the IAAM dedicates an entire exhibition to Gullah Geechee.[114] To some, however, certain problems that they had seen with the museum from the beginning still remained.

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[113] See: https://www.preservationsociety.org/locations/gadsdens-wharf/.

[114] The IAAM currently has a total of 9 permanent exhibitions: "African Roots/Routes," focused on the cultural histories of different populations in West and West Central Africa; "American Journeys," engaging with US American history through an African Diasporic lens; "Atlantic Worlds," revolving around the Black Atlantic and connections between Africa, the Americas, and Europe; "Carolina Gold/Memories of the Enslaved," concerned with the history of plantation economy in South Carolina and the experiences and contributions of the enslaved Africans; "Creative Journeys," a series of artistic reflections upon the themes of the museum; "Gullah Geechee," concentrated on Gullah Geechee history as well as on current matters of concern to descendants; "South Carolina Connections," recounting the life stories of prominent African Americans from South Carolina; and two video installations engaging with various aspects of African Diasporic experiences. Furthermore, the museum also contains the Center for Family Research that supports visitors in tracing their ancestry. See: https://iaamuseum.org/the-museum/.

One major critique pertains to the overall focus of the IAAM. Dr. Millicent Brown, a historian, museum consultant, and member of the group, Citizens Want Excellence at IAAM, is cited stating in an interview that the museum did not sufficiently engage with racial oppression:

> Where did white supremacy take hold and allow enslavement to continue? You know, give us credit for the rice, the okra and all the good stuff, and the good food. But those are not transformative issues. To what extent did the churches, the politics, the medical communities and the educational communities, to what extent did they continue this falsehood about Black inferiority? (Glenn 2023)

One of my research participants, who was involved in the creation of the museum and with whom I discussed this issue, responded that they understood the point, however, that in the case of the IAAM including such perspectives would have exceeded the possible thematic scope of the institution. The person further explained that in their understanding the museum was supposed to speak to an audience that is as broad as possible, "meet them where they currently are, and then guide them a little bit further" (Interview 2022). What undoubtedly also has to be taken into account in this discussion is the earlier mentioned overall political climate in the state of South Carolina. Especially in light of the aggressive campaign waged by conservatives against Critical Race Theory a more "political" focus of the museum would certainly have found less support (see Reid Rayford 2023; Reynolds 2024). Still, Brown's position resonates with Dr. David Pleasant's earlier critique of a general lack of radical anti-racist and liberationist perspectives in public discourses on the nation's history.

The other main critique raised by my interlocutors touches an even more fundamental aspect: the actual benefit of the IAAM to the local Black population. The museum is located in Ansonborough, the earlier discussed historic Black neighborhood that became heavily gentrified after the displacement of that community (see Glenn 2023). The area around the wharf is characterized by luxury apartments and office buildings and serves as the location of the South Carolina Aquarium. Brown is cited on this issue, too, in above mentioned interview, commenting:

> I remember at some of the public meetings where people spoke up and said, 'Shouldn't our museum be put in a community where it can economically benefit the development of the Black community?' Brown said. 'Isn't that how you repay us for our unpaid labor? And so, to position it in a place where, as some people say, you're trying to Disneyland it, you're trying to make it a spot that is conducive for tourism.' (Glenn 2023)

City officials apparently argued that the IAAM would contribute to a general increase in tourism, the benefits of which would "trickle down" to Black businesses as well, as I was told by earlier cited interlocutor who had attended several of the public meetings about the

museum. The person was highly skeptical of that view though, noting that "there are virtually no Black businesses in the vicinity of the museum." They rather feared that the museum might draw away visitors from other historic sites and neighborhoods and further concentrate tourism in downtown Charleston, which "is entirely dominated by White businesses anyway." The actual purpose of the museum, as the person asserted, was to be the legacy of Joseph P. Riley.

Riley served as mayor of Charleston for over 40 years (1975-2016) and had a profound impact upon the city's development. His reputation is rather mixed though, particularly among the Black population. While some of my research participants praised him for his role in "polishing" the image of Charleston and building a strong economy, others see him as responsible for having let loose gentrification and point out that despite his public image as a champion of racial justice, "his actual politics were not beneficial, to say the least, to the Black population," as one of my interlocutors stated. Critics see the museum as just another case in point—a prestige project that is promoted as serving "the Black community" without actually engendering any "real change." Peggy*, earlier cited retiree from Mt. Pleasant, expressed her frustration about this "hypocrisy" as follows:

> Black people are still struggling to meet their basic needs and the city's response is that? The museum will have absolutely no economic value to the Black population. So, if they really cared about us, they should have taken all that money and they should have spent it on things that actually matter to the community. (Interview 2022).

My earlier cited interlocutor, who was involved in the creation of the museum, said that while they did not think the situation was ideal either, they still believed that the IAAM can make invaluable contributions:

> The museum was long overdue. Charleston became one of the richest cities in the South because of the trade with enslaved people. And this laid the foundation of what the city is today. So, there are still many important conversations to be had. And we envision the IAAM to play a central role in that process, but also in complicating understandings of Blackness and making visible connections within the African Diaspora that are commonly neglected. It will be a dynamic place and it will further the shift that is taking place in how history is being told. (Interview 2022)

There is indeed a change occurring in how museums and historic sites engage with the history of enslavement and racial relations. Currently, one of the leading institutions in this regard within the Charleston area is McLeod Plantation on James Island.[115] McLeod is part of the Charleston County Park System and the first historic site of a former plantation in the area led by a Black woman and Gullah Geechee descendant, Toby Smith. Smith became McLeod's

[115] See: https://www.ccprc.com/1447/McLeod-Plantation-Historic-Site.

Cultural History Interpretation Coordinator in 2021 and has since further expanded the focus of the site on the lives of the enslaved people which was already introduced under her predecessor Shawn Halifax. McLeod is unique in its intersectional and holistic approach engaging with Gullah Geechee history and culture, the experiences of women and children, and with Native American history and the collaboration between indigenous people and the enslaved. In the last couple of years, many other sites across the Lowcountry have been making efforts, too, at changing their narratives. Admittedly, most are still very slow in moving away from the flower gardens, wildlife, and romanticized tales of the White planter aristocracy towards a critical engagement with history. Magnolia Plantation, for instance, as I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, finally added a tour on the history of enslavement to its program several years ago. However, it remains only one among many other options that visitors can book, so that it is in fact still possible to tour the site without ever seriously engaging with the history of enslavement at all.

As argued earlier, narratives of the past have a profound impact upon the ways in which we understand the present and are able to envision the future. It is in this sense that tourism, specifically heritage tourism, plays an integral role in the reproduction of ideology. Following the same logic, it may also be seen as an opportunity though, for historically marginalized communities to intervene in hegemonic discourse and challenge accepted notions of what was, is, and may be (see Appadurai 2013, 288–89). Jasmine's* Afrofuturistic approach to cultural history interpretation, discussed in the previous chapter, is a powerful case in point. "There is," to use the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "nothing 'mere' about symbols" (Coates 2017). A story, in the broadest sense of the term, an idea, or more proactively speaking, our imaginations and aspirations, can have tremendous material consequences (see Appadurai 2013, 187–90). The "Myth of the Negro Past," for instance, served as a bedrock for the dehumanization and exploitation of people of African descent for centuries, and its rebuttal was essential for the advancement of racial justice (Herskovits [1941] 1990). In order to transform a system of oppression it is therefore not only necessary to challenge its socio-economic order but also its dominant ideology (see Althusser 1971, 146–49). The IAAM may in that sense indeed be seen as an invaluable addition to the memoryscape of the Lowcountry. Through its focus on the varied lived experiences in the African Diaspora and its nuanced approach to Blackness, it may very well stimulate critical discourse on race and therewith, eventually, also contribute to a change of material relations.

With all that being said, above critique of the museum still draws our attention to important questions of representation that profoundly impact the relationship between the symbolic and socio-economic sphere: What was the political framework for the decision-

making processes about the museum? Whose voices were included and whose were not? In other words, who made decisions about the IAAM for whom, in what context, and to what end? Evidently, neither the focus of the museum, nor its architectural design, its location, etc. were determined via democratic means. One might object that this is simply not how "such processes" work. And, indeed, while the creation of institutions like the IAAM may be led with more or less transparency and community involvement, in the end, it is not "the people" who make the final decisions, but a board of directors, which in the case of the museum consists of prominent individuals from the spheres of economy, law, politics, education, and culture. From the perspective of the above cited critics of the museum, this seems to be exactly what constitutes the problem: public money is being spent under the discretion of a small group of people who were not democratically elected to do so, in a way that does not seem to meet the needs of the population whom the efforts are allegedly dedicated to.

The matter is in fact not just specifically about the IAAM but more generally pertains to how decisions about the distribution of public resources are being reached in a democratic state that has historically neglected if not outright ignored the concerns of its Black citizens. Similar matters have been at stake in earlier discussed instances of collective resistance to economic marginalization as well. In the example of Mt. Pleasant, we have seen that communities subject to the negative effects of over-development are excluded from the decision-making about these very processes due to the structure of the political-legal system itself. To sustainably improve the situation of the settlement communities, it would therefore not only be necessary to effect socio-economic changes but also to transform how people are able to participate in the political sphere. In the case of the IAAM it yet remains to be seen how the museum will actually affect its social environment. Despite the valid criticism, the institution still holds a certain transformative potential with regards to subverting representations of US-American history. The broader question though, that I have yet to address more thoroughly remains whether, and if so, to what extent, tourism entails any significant socio-economic benefits for Black and specifically Gullah Geechee communities.

The Commodification of Gullah Geechee Culture—Between Exploitation and Empowerment

The earlier cited market study report from Mandala Research shows that there has been an increased demand from visitors to the Lowcountry not only for critical engagements with Black history but also for other ways to experience Black and particularly Gullah Geechee heritage (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2020a). Gullah Geechee has in this sense become a form of cultural capital within the tourism industry which has opened up a wide range of new professional opportunities. There is a growing number of tour

guides, storytellers, cultural history interpreters, artists, entertainers, chefs, and other kinds of cultural experts building their identity and business around Gullah Geechee-ness. Even within the period between my first stay in the Lowcountry in 2017 and my second fieldwork in 2022, I noticed a significant increase in the number of businesses explicitly identifying as Gullah Geechee across the Lowcountry. This is the case especially in cities like Charleston, Beaufort, and Savannah, and, slowly, in Jacksonville and Wilmington, too, where Gullah Geechee galleries, boutiques, restaurants, and pop-up stores are becoming more and more of a common sight. But also on the Sea Islands, such as Sapelo Island, St. Helena, or Hilton Head, local communities have renovated and preserved historic sites, established tour companies, and museums as part of a community based and sustainable tourism. Yet again, there remain a number of challenges.

In several of the public meetings of the GGCHC Tourism Alliance it was pointed out that, despite the just described growth in Gullah Geechee centered economic enterprises, there was an ongoing reluctance among some descendants to explicitly identify their businesses as Gullah Geechee given the ambivalent status of the group. In the South Carolina Tourism Alliance meeting in April 2022 one of the participants shared that they recently went to a Black owned restaurant in the Beaufort area. They said that they had immediately known that what they were eating was Gullah Geechee food. However, the restaurant did not market its cuisine as such. Other participants weighed in and shared similar stories. The discussion soon revolved around how making Gullah Geechee businesses more visible represented one of the major obstacles to realizing the economic potential of tourism for communities. In this regard, one participant from Charleston stated:

> Gullah Geechee is what gives Charleston and all the other areas a certain unique character that I think was always there but that was not talked about openly or in a beneficial way. But now it has become a really great marketing tool that we can use to show how people do things in a unique way. The problem is that we still got a lot of people who don't want to call themselves Gullah, or who simply don't know [about their heritage]. (South Carolina Tourism Alliance Meeting 2022)

A similar challenge was noted with respect to historic sites. Especially in the Florida and North Carolina Tourism Alliance meetings participants emphasized that there was still a lack of information on which places are actually connected with Gullah Geechee history and on how to differentiate them from other African American related sites. Currently, there are a number of developments in these two states, where historic sites are being marked as Gullah Geechee for the first time, such as in the case of Reaves Chapel in Navassa, North Carolina, or where new sites dedicated to the group are being created, such as Freedom Park in

Jacksonville, Florida, honoring the history of the local Cosmo community.[116] This challenge of naming may be seen as an example of the shifting understandings of Gullah Geechee-ness discussed in Chapter 4 and, importantly, illustrates the potential material consequences of these symbolic negotiations. Stakeholders and representatives of tourism marketing agencies participating in the Tourism Alliance meetings expressed their commitment to explicitly support Gullah Geechee centered tourism, which shows yet gain the increasing incentive to mark one's business as such. Several of my interlocutors, however, identified a problem with the distribution of benefits from the commodification of Gullah Geechee culture, particularly within the tourism industry.

Francis*, an author in his late-60s from Charleston, said upon my question to what extent Gullah Geechee people have profited from the growing valorization of their heritage and identity: "There are some, but not the majority, because people are capitalizing on our culture. So, you're fighting that kind of thing" (Interview 2017). He explained that there were more and more African Americans within the cultural heritage tourism industry who "only claim to be Gullah Geechee descendants" without any actual connection to the culture (see also Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 165–66; Hargrove 2007, 44–45). This was also observed by John*, a retired scholar and activist in his 70s:

> Many people who are pretending to be and sometimes even are Gullah Geechee appear at festivals and other places and tell stories in what they consider the Gullah language and they make a living off of promoting stereotypes. (Interview 2017)

Several other of my research participants shared similar experiences, saying that especially the Gullah Geechee language was being instrumentalized by some Black tour guides to impress unknowing tourists. As Monica*, earlier cited educator from Charleston, said to me:

> Some of the tour guides just use the language as a punchline. And some of them don't even speak Gullah. They make it sound like Gullah, but it's not the actual language, it's nonsense. But most people don't realize. (Interview 2017)

She continued to explain that tour guides caricatured aspects of Gullah Geechee culture to satisfy tourists' desires for alterity and sensation. I have experienced such a "fraud," as these tours are often referred to, myself in Charleston during my fieldwork in 2017 (see Boley and Johnson Gaither 2016, 171).

[116] See: https://coastallandtrust.org/lands/reaves-chapel/ and https://www.timucuanparks.org/new-park-highlights-jacksonvilles-gullah-geechee-history/.

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The tour was called *Gullah Gullah Tours* at the time, has since been renamed to *Gullah Geechee Tours*, but is still being operated by the same person, Godfrey KHill.[117] On his website KHill claims to be the "only Native Charleston Gullah historian, researcher, and curator," an assertion which quite explicitly delegitimizes any other cultural experts in the city.[118] He began his tour on a similar note, stating the following:

> I'm not all about just making people happy, I don't just do the story telling. I got real truth. Everybody talks about Gullah, about Gullah tours, about Gullah information, "we're doing Gullah events." Always ask the question, what does Gullah mean? When it comes to this culture, play no games, if somebody tells you that they know about this culture—just ask the question, what does it mean? So, I'm going to answer that question in a very specific place, and in a very specific environment. So, you're going to feel and see it all, and I'm going to give you the proof of everything I said. (*Gullah Geechee Tours* 2017)

Curiously, KHill makes explicit reference to discourses on the instrumentalization and exploitation of Gullah Geechee in the tourism industry, differentiating his own work as one of truth and not "just storytelling." Over the course of his tour, he frequently reasserted the authenticity of his identity, amongst others, by claiming kinship with Philipp Simmons, a famous Charlestonian Gullah Geechee blacksmith, as well as with a family of sweetgrass basket makers from Mt. Pleasant. I inquired into both claims after the tour and learned that neither was true.

Most of the information he presented us with as well as the sites we visited were, in fact, the same that other tour guides focus upon. What differed was that KHill more so than others created an atmosphere that made participants feel that they were witnesses to something unique. His use of dramatic pauses, suggestive questions, and his expressive body language endowed much of what he said with a certain enigmatic gravity. The "facts" he shared about supernatural occurrences only further added to this air of mystique. In one such case, he showed us a video of a woman who, as he claimed, was a "Boo Hag," a creature from a well-known Gullah Geechee folktale. Before he showed us his "proof," he had already established what a Boo Hag looked like and how she behaved, which then of course perfectly fit to what he had recorded. The video showed him following a woman at night, calling her a "hag," and telling her to stop. When he caught up with her, he turned her around, in reaction to which she screamed and ran away, which, as he claimed, was "evidence" that she was in fact not human and had feared his knowledge about "her true identity."

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[117] See also the official website and YouTube channel of *Gullah Geechee Tours*: https://gullahgeecheetours.com/ and https://www.youtube.com/@gullahgeecheetours357.
[118] https://gullahgeecheetours.com/look-yah/.

Eventually then, KHill shared with us the "true meaning" of Gullah Geechee, which was indeed fundamentally different from any other interpretation of Gullah Geechee history and culture I had encountered in Charleston or anywhere else. He began his argument by claiming that "Gullah" was actually a Hebrew word and meant redemption, "revealing" the connection between Gullah Geechee history and Israelites, "which they never wanted us to know." This, as he continued, represented the key to understanding the "true ancestry" of African Americans:

> Hebrews and Africans are totally different people. You would never see an African growing hair on his face like you got there [pointing at the face of a male person in his tour]. Never seen one. One in every million, perhaps, but Hebrews they grow hair. Africans don't have to shave. We got to shave. And we never walked around without clothes, we always had clothes on. We were never the naked people [showing photos of half-naked Africans in crooked postures on the flat screen in his van]. We are the hairy-faced people. But when we think of Israel, we do not think of us. They never sold Africans on the auction block. I hate to be called African. Africans enslaved my people. They know we're different people. The Africans did not sell Africans, they sold Hebrews. We were hiding from the Romans, the Greeks, but they found us, and when they found us, they bought us… So, I'm an African American… African American? I'm not African, and I'm not American. I just want to know my real name![119,120] (*Gullah Geechee Tours* 2017)

Rhetorically, KHill's tour was styled as a critique of White hegemonic historiography seemingly empowering African Americans. However, his final "revelation" about Gullah Geechee not only distorts historical facts but also contributes to the reproduction of racist stereotypes about African people. Disconcertingly, some of the other people on the tour seemed to enjoy his performance, as apparent from their positive reactions. There was frequent applause and specifically his assertions about the "true meaning" of Gullah Geechee drew many gasps of wonder and appreciation. As one person told him afterwards, "it has been a beautiful experience, bless you." Or another, "we must tell more people about your tour."[121]

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I discussed the tour with some of my interlocutors, who saw it as exemplary for the potential underside of tourism, harming communities both by spreading mis-information and by drawing away customers from businesses that are regarded as authentic. An issue highlighted

[119] See also: https://gullahgeecheetours.com/gullah-geechee-tours/from-negroes-back-to-hebrews-to-gullah-geechee/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm5mVAC1JLA.

[120] KHill's argument in fact largely mirrors the ideology of Black Israelism, an African American religion dating back to the 18th century which is based on the belief that African American people were descendants of ancient Israelites (see Shreve, May 07, 2018, see; Eligon, January 23, 2019). While I have found another website that links Gullah Geechee with Black Israelite ideology, I have not encountered this narrative in any other context of my fieldwork (See: https://medium.com/@dfortson702/1900s-black-slaves-confirmed-as-israelites-f2605a0a09f2). Still, this case shows yet again how Gullah Geechee history, culture, and identity may be used by African Americans as central objects within their pursuit of belonging.

[121] See also this brief video of one of KHill's tours: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm5mVAC1JLA.

by Francis*, above cited author from Charleston, was the fact that there was "no regulation of what tour guides can or cannot say. To get their certificate they have to pass an exam. But what really matters in the end is what they think the tourists want to hear" (Interview 2017). As I described above, KHill's performance was highly captivating and what he shared undoubtedly makes for a unique experience, which in most cases appears to be exactly what visitors are looking for. Jasmine*, the cultural history interpreter cited in the previous chapter, said that mis-representations of Gullah Geechee within tourism present a particular kind of challenge to descendants working in the industry themselves. She shared that many of the people who attend her performances and presentations had "false understandings of what the culture actually is, because they were given non-authentic information elsewhere" (Interview 2017). To combat this can be an uphill battle, she said, since tourists might simply be disappointed that their expectations of what they thought how Gullah Geechee should look like and how they should speak were not satisfied. This then puts pressure upon descendants to conform to these stereotypes in order to be able to compete with other businesses.

What appears to be one of the central points of contention with respect to these challenges arising from so-called frauds is the relationship between notions of authenticity and Gullah Geechee heritage. I have already discussed understandings of what is commonly seen as "actually" constituting traditional Gullah Geechee culture in Chapters 3 and 4, specifically as regards the perceived quasi-indigeneity of the group and how the rather static understandings of culture and identity inscribed into international law impact the ways in which Gullah Geechee entities position themselves. What I have not really engaged with yet is the very differentiation between what may be called, on the one hand, authentic and, on the other, inauthentic manifestations and representations of Gullah Geechee cultural heritage—a distinction which can have far reaching consequences both in the context of commodification and the political-legal realm.

Most contemporary scholars, particularly in the field of heritage studies, understand cultural authenticity as a construct. From this perspective, it represents, just as any other social phenomenon, something that is produced and not given. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts with regards to the notion of an authentic heritage:

> Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. Despite a discourse of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, recreation, recuperation, revitalization, and regeneration, heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past. (1995, 369–70)

And indeed, there are numerous empirical cases where seemingly age-old cultural heritage turns out to be a fairly recent innovation (see J. L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 2009, 2–5).

Authenticity, as is therefore argued within heritage studies, is a relational category and principally determined by social negotiation and not by objective facts. Ning Wang, for instance, contends that what is often at stake particularly within the tourism industry is actually a "symbolic authenticity," "where toured objects or others are experienced as authentic not because they are originals or reality, but because they are perceived as the signs or symbols of authenticity (Culler 1981)" (1999, 356). This illuminates not only the production of the authenticity of a cultural artefact or a practice but also that of the visitor experience. As we have seen in the case of *Gullah Geechee Tours*, what appeared to have been decisive for the audience was that they experienced KHill's presentation as authentic and that they found their own preconceived notions of Gullah Geechee culture to be satisfied. Is that to say though, that there is no actual difference between the authentic and inauthentic, apart from perspective and social consensus?

As invaluable as social-constructionist approaches to authenticity are, I contend that there is something that may potentially get lost along the way, if we solely concentrate upon the production, experience, and relationality of authenticity. In the worst case such a singular focus may convey the impression that cultural heritage represented nothing but an empty signifier that can be filled with meaning almost arbitrarily. Instead, I want to make the argument that heritage can indeed have a substance, a relatively stable basis that is derived from the historicity of the respective phenomenon and that impacts the negotiation of an object's or practice's authenticity.[122] The Gullah Geechee language, for instance, has been shown to exhibit unmistakable continuities with different African languages in vocabulary, grammar, and whole proverbs (National Park Service 2005, D25; Mufwene and Gilman 1987, 134). While the language has of course evolved over the centuries and will continue to do so, and while a definition of what represents "standard Gullah Geechee" is clearly a matter of negotiation, a line can still be drawn between actual, and in this sense, authentic variations of the language that exhibit certain historical continuities, and inauthentic versions that are nothing but exoticized forms of English. A similar argument can be made about other practices and knowledge that are part of the cultural heritage of the group as well, for example, as regards sweetgrass basket making which relies upon very specific techniques that have been passed down for centuries from the group's African ancestors and that differ from methods used to make baskets in other parts of the world.

The above is not to imply that a critical engagement with the social conditions that determine whether something is regarded as authentic or not was superfluous, to the

[122] This does of course not contradict the fact that there are also recent cultural innovations to which these factors may not apply.

contrary. I rather propose that a social-constructionist approach to authenticity should be complemented by a materialist perspective that equally takes into account historical continuities and the consequent existence of relatively stable socio-material structures that underlie cultural phenomena. Importantly, such a position needs to be clearly differentiated from essentialism, which, by definition, assumes a fixed and immutable core and thus creates immovable boundaries. The perspective that I suggest, on the other hand, conceives similarity and coherence as grounded in historical processes, which naturally involve changes, disjunctures, and (re-)connections.

To grasp what this entails for concrete empirical analysis, we shall consider again the example of *Gullah Geechee Tours*. One possible way of looking at that case would be to sidestep the question of whether KHill's representation of Gullah Geechee was actually authentic and focus principally on how that proclaimed authenticity was produced during the tour, how it was experienced by the participants, and how it was debated among the community. While all of these dimensions are crucial to understanding the situation, the overall approach to the matter would, in my view, still be lacking not only on an analytical level, since we would simply ignore the factual historical inaccuracy of the claims made by KHill, but also on a politico-ethical one, as a relativist social constructionism would not allow us to take a firm theoretically grounded position with respect to the described negative impacts so-called frauds have upon other Gullah Geechee businesses. By taking into account historical continuities, we would instead be able to argue and problematize that there are, indeed, businesses or more generally speaking actors within the tourism industry that (re-) produce what may be called inauthentic and potentially harmful representations of Gullah Geechee cultural heritage. This argument is also relevant for the earlier described challenge of naming faced by the Tourism Alliance, as non-Gullah Geechee businesses are evidently being incentivized by the increased value ascribed to Gullah Geechee-ness to appropriate the identity. Here, too, it appears important to have the conceptual tools that allow the drawing of boundaries without, however, reverting back to some form of essentialism. The danger of course still remains that notions of historical continuity are instrumentalized and that boundaries are drawn too rigidly. I certainly do not want to pretend that taking into account the historicity of phenomena would simply solve the challenges that are tied to contestations over what counts as Gullah Geechee and what does not. This still remains a matter of social contestation and, importantly, relations of power. However, I believe that it makes for a better analysis and firmer political positioning if we include in our examination the socio-material dimensions of culture and its associated phenomena.

The final point I want to discuss in this section, still closely tied to the concept of (in-) authenticity, pertains to the relationship between money and culture. Several of my interlocutors who were critical about tourism argued that the spread of inauthentic representations of Gullah Geechee culture was only the "natural consequence" of commodification, since entertainment value would always trump truth in the tourism industry. Connected to that was also the perception that Gullah Geechee heritage was being watered down, since "people now care more about the money than the culture," as one of my research participants said. While there is clearly a monetary incentive structure within tourism that significantly contributes to mis-representations of Gullah Geechee culture, there also exists a general tendency within popular as well as academic discourse to view money and culture as intrinsically antithetical to one another. As Jessica Cattelino notes:

> In both American popular culture and classic Western social theory, money and capitalism are often identified with an essentialized modernity, and as such are understood to erode or dissolve cultural and individual distinctiveness. (2008, 12)

In her analysis of the Seminole gaming industry and shifting cultural values among the group Cattelino argues that money is in fact not necessarily "corrosive of culture or abstracting of difference, but [may also function] as a force through which culture (itself an abstraction) is evaluated, produced, disciplined, and channeled" (2008, 78). I contend that similar observations can be made about the relationship between the reproduction of Gullah Geechee culture and its commodification, specifically within the tourism industry. As much as tourism is undeniably an integral part of dynamics that threaten the socio-economic integrity of Gullah Geechee, it has also contributed to the reproduction of certain cultural practices. The best example of this is likely the tradition of sweetgrass basket making.

Historically a tool within the rice plantation economy the knowledge of how to sow sweetgrass baskets was once spread across the Lowcountry. With the abolition of enslavement and the decline of rice production though, sweetgrass baskets lost their economic function and gradually began to disappear. As discussed in Chapter 2, whereas efforts to preserve the tradition at Penn Center in the early 20th century failed, Mt. Pleasant basket makers were able to hold on to the craft because it had roused the interest of travelers visiting Charleston and thus became an important means of revenue (see D. Rosengarten 2018, 102–3). It might very well be argued that tourism provided the necessary economic base for basket makers to continue their craft. Without a market, basket making would have been restricted to spare time outside of wage labor which, undoubtedly, would have hampered, if not outright prevented its flourishing over the course of the 20th century. Similarly, the reproduction of

other cultural practices, such as the Ring Shout, Gullah Geechee music, or cuisine benefitted from the emergence of Gullah Geechee centered tourism.

The relationship between money and culture further reveals its complexity in cases where businesses are seemingly first and foremost economic enterprises. A case in point is Gullah T's N' Tings on Hilton Head Island. Gullah T's N' Tings was created in 2020 by Hilton Head Island native Sonya Jovan Grant as an Etsy store, offering t-shirts as well as other clothes, bags, and various accessories. The business has since then moved to its own website and Grant now also sells her products at events such as the Gullah Gala, where I first learned about the company.[123] Typical of Grant's designs are bold prints of the word "Gullah" in capital letters on solid-colored clothes. While to some of my interlocutors such products merely show how "the culture is being turned in to a brand," as one person put it, others view them as acts of reclaiming Gullah Geechee heritage. As discussed in the previous chapter, specifically to younger descendants Gullah Geechee themed clothing has in fact become an important marker of identity. Gullah T's N' Tings indeed explicitly speaks to a younger audience, searching for "new, fresh and appealing ways to redefine the culture for the younger generations," but, at the same time, also emphasizes its desire to "close the generational gap in the culture" by "intriguing the elders of the Gullah community."[124] The homepage of Gullah T's N' Tings features a video which metaphorically speaks to this matter as well.[125] It first shows a beach in black and white. There's a cut and a Black woman in a long, flowing white dress can be seen walking towards the beach. Another cut, and the image is in color, showing the same Black woman in denim shorts and a white Gullah T's N' Tings button up shirt. The images continue to move back and forth between these figurative past and present re-incarnations of a Gullah Geechee woman indicating difference but also continuity in the designs of Gullah T's N' Tings. On the subpage "History & Legacy" Grant elaborates that she envisions her business to contribute to the passing on of the "legacy" of her ancestors:

> I feel as though God has called me to continue the legacy started by my grandparents and the generations before them, in keeping our culture rich and admirable. Telling the stories of the elders and educating the world through my designs.[126]

As the case of Gullah T's N' Tings implies, the commodification of Gullah Geechee culture does not necessarily empty it of meaning but may also be intentionally used as a vehicle to educate and engender pride in the group's heritage. Despite the undeniable weight of market

[123] See: https://gullahtsntings.com.
[124] See: https://gullahtsntings.com/pages/history-and-legacy and https://gullahtsntings.com/pages/about.
[125] See: https://gullahtsntings.com/.
[126] https://gullahtsntings.com/pages/history-and-legacy.

forces, the decision making of descendants and non-Gullah Geechee does not follow one set script. To the contrary, the ways in which individuals navigate the relations between capitalism and cultural reproduction are highly complex and may range from deliberate exploitation and disinterested instrumentalization to the committed use of economic strategies for the purpose of cultural reproduction.

Conclusion

Despite the many achievements made in the past couple of decades, Gullah Geechee people still face numerous socio-economic challenges that seriously threaten the integrity of their communities. As we have seen, dynamics of displacement began to take root already in the late 19th and early 20th century and greatly accelerated after World War II. The 1960s and 70s saw the establishment of gated communities and resort tourism on the Sea Islands and the expansion of historic preservation, heritage tourism, and urban renewal in the port cities, ushering in major transformations in the region. Rural communities which historically relied on subsistence farming became part of industries built around low wage service labor that trapped descendants in new relations of economic dependency. This lack of perspectives contributed to an increased outmigration of younger descendants who left for urban centers in the Lowcountry or beyond in search of better professional and educational opportunities. At the same time, the in-migration of middle- and upper-class White US-Americans, attracted to the Lowcountry by its sunny beaches, historic architecture, and mild winters, led to an exponential rise in real estate prices. The ensuing increase of property taxes intersected with the problems surrounding heirs' property, putting ever more pressure upon Gullah Geechee landowners and, eventually, compelling many to sell their land. In addition to that, overdevelopment weakened the natural protection provided by wetlands against natural disasters exacerbating coastal communities' exposure to hurricanes and flooding.

Resistance against these dynamics has been a defining part of the Gullah Geechee Movement from its very beginnings (see Smith 1991, 294–95). As I have demonstrated, activists and their allies developed a range of different strategies to combat socio-economic marginalization. One of the central means of opposing land loss revolves around solving the challenges arising from heirs' property. Among the most prominent allies to Gullah Geechee descendants in this regard is undoubtedly the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation (CHPP). The CHPP's three-tiered strategy of prevention, resolution (clearing of titles), and land utilization has profoundly shaped how most Gullah Geechee communities and institutions approach land retention today. While dealing with heirs' property challenges is often one of the most immediate needs of owners and, in the long term, may provide the basis

for a sustainable preservation of land, successful cases are still threatened by gentrification and overdevelopment. Gullah Geechee communities therefore place a significant focus upon effecting changes in local zoning ordinances, in order to legally prevent development that may be detrimental to their integrity. Possibly the greatest success of that kind has been accomplished in Beaufort County with the establishment of the Cultural Protection Overlay on St. Helena Island in 1999. Recently, progress has also been made in other places such as Hilton Head Island or Mt. Pleasant with the establishment of task forces explicitly focused upon the concerns of Gullah Geechee communities. While there is thus reason to hope that local governments are beginning to take seriously the needs of descendants, authorities have in fact long been aware of the problems they are now vowing to address. As we have seen in the case of Hilton Head Island, activists and their allies have not only voiced their concerns for decades but also collaborated with outside experts to document their situation and recommend concrete policy changes. There has, evidently then, never been a lack of possible solutions but of political will. Instead of working on behalf of its Black and Gullah Geechee communities, local governments have been deeply complicit in above-described dynamics of marginalization by prioritizing development and profit over the wellbeing of these populations.

Apart from these legal interventions, I have also discussed the highly ambivalent role of tourism in Gullah Geechee communities' struggles for empowerment. Some of the more radically anti-capitalist entities, such as the Gullah/Geechee Nation, regard the industry as inextricably tied to the very mechanisms that threaten the group; other institutions, such as the GGCHC Commission, while well aware of its potential dangers, believe an involvement in tourism can not only allow descendants to gain control over narratives of their history and culture but also provide an important source of revenue. And indeed, as we have seen, tourism may provide various economic prospects for descendants. There is a growing number of Gullah Geechee chefs, entertainers, tour guides, artists, and other cultural experts across the entire Lowcountry. This transformation of Gullah Geechee-ness into a form of cultural capital also entails risks and challenges though. According to many of my interlocutors, some descendants as well as other African Americans have begun to instrumentalize Gullah Geechee culture to profit from its status within the tourism industry, at worst misrepresenting the group's history and heritage to satisfy the expectations of tourists. The case of *Gullah Geechee Tours* may not only be seen as an extreme example of this dynamic but also ties back into the discussion of the politics of "ethnic Blackness" in the previous chapter. Godfrey KHill's claims about connections between Gullah Geechee and Hebrews and his attempt to de-align Black US-Americans from Africanity may be read as an effort to escape

the racial stigma ascribed to Blackness. His argument, however, ultimately contributes to the reproduction of established racial stereotypes by its distortion of African American and Gullah Geechee history, and reveals itself as a manifestation of an aggressive inward-oriented identity politics. While such "frauds" indeed represent a serious problem, the main competition for Gullah Geechee entrepreneurs within tourism still comes from White owned businesses, which hold a much larger share of the market, have access to far greater resources, and thus profoundly impact what kinds of products and services tourists have come to expect. In addition to that, we have seen that despite the increased valorization of Gullah Geechee culture, there is still an ongoing reluctance among some descendants to explicitly identify their businesses as such, yet again indicating the interconnections between politics of identity and socio-economics. In this sense, the efforts of institutions such as the GGHCC Tourism Alliance to encourage Gullah Geechee centered tourism have, curiously, become an integral part of re-ethnicization processes.

Another central issue with respect to tourism highlighted by my interlocutors was the tension between symbolic and socio-economic change. Especially in light of the described negative experiences with local governments official acts of symbolic recognition can feel empty, if not even cynical to descendants: as Gullah Geechee are being systematically displaced, their culture now appears to serve as a marketing tool for authorities. While I have made the case that cultural politics are never "merely" symbolic, the debates surrounding the International African American Museum (IAAM) in Charleston have shown the complexity of intersections between symbolic/cultural and socio-economic dimensions as well as the significant impact of authority and representation, that is the political-legal framing, upon this relationship. The decisive question is not whether cultural politics entail any material consequences, but rather what kind of material consequences they produce and whose interests they serve. Likewise, the connection between money and culture cannot be reduced to one fixed script. Without minimizing the negative impacts of tourism upon Gullah Geechee culture, we have seen that the market created by the industry also provided a crucial economic basis for the reproduction of certain cultural practices, most prominently, sweetgrass basket making. Moreover, analogous to what I have argued in the previous chapter with respect to identity, actors relate to the commodification of Gullah Geechee culture in multiple ways, ranging from exploitation, on one end, to the use of their business for the purpose of education and empowerment, such as in the case of Gullah Ts' N' Tings, on the other.

Tourism may indeed benefit Gullah Geechee communities. However, it does not represent a universal remedy, which also its advocates are well aware of. As some of my interlocutors pointed out, not every Gullah Geechee can or would even want to become an

entrepreneur. While some descendants have been able to profit from the commodification of the group's culture, others, particularly those with fewer economic means to begin with and/or less expertise in the specific cultural practices that are currently in demand, have not. Moreover, the tourism industry remains an integral part of neoliberal capitalism. As much as descendants may appropriate the economic techniques of the industry for the benefit of the collective, tourism does not fundamentally question the status quo, to the contrary. The point to be made is that the socio-economic challenges faced by Gullah Geechee communities as well as the disparities within the group are symptomatic of broader structures of inequality within the United States. While it is, undoubtedly, possible to achieve meaningful change on a local level, such as through a combination of the discussed legal interventions and community tourism, broader transformations will ultimately be necessary to sustainably protect the integrity of Gullah Geechee communities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

> Progressive social movements [...] transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. We must remember that the conditions and the very existence of social movements enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way. It is that imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call "poetry" or "poetic knowledge." (Kelley 2002, 9)

I set out, at the beginning of this thesis, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Gullah Geechee Movement with a focus both on its internal differentiation and its embeddedness in broader social dynamics. To that end, I first discussed the historical conditions of the emergence of the movement and its development until the present day (Chapter 2), which laid the foundation for the three empirical chapters that were loosely organized along the lines of the politico-legal (Chapter 3), cultural (Chapter 4), and socio-economic (Chapter 5) dimensions of the movement. As I have argued throughout the thesis, while analytically distinct, in reality these different levels are ultimately inseparable from one another.

This concluding chapter has the aim of connecting the common threads that ran through this thesis and of discussing what lessons may be drawn from my findings about the Gullah Geechee Movement for broader questions revolving around the role of identity politics in the achievement of justice. I want to stress that it is not my intention to evaluate the Gullah Geechee Movement as to how "successful" it has been in realizing its goals—a standard against which we measure social movements far too often—instead, I will be concerned with "the merits and powers [as well as with the potential pitfalls] of the visions themselves," in other words, with the "poetic knowledge" that is produced within the movement (Kelley 2002, ix).

Affirmative versus Transformative Politics

The central visions that animate the Gullah Geechee Movement revolve around land retention, communal ways of life, cultural empowerment, spirituality, respect for the Elders and ancestors, the commemoration of histories of resistance, the achievement of greater political representation, and equitable access to economic resources. While these concerns are shared by most Gullah Geechee activists and institutions, there are significant differences between their overall approaches and the scope of their demands. One of the main distinctions I discussed in this respect was that between self-described traditionalists, on the one hand, and pragmatists, on the other. While I believe that in the context of empirical analysis it made sense to retain such emic concepts, a discussion of the broader implications of Gullah Geechee

movement politics may benefit from another and more abstract set of categories that makes visible the structural relations between the means and imagined outcomes of different approaches to achieving social justice. For that purpose, I will draw again from the work of Nancy Fraser, more specifically from her differentiation between affirmative and transformative politics (see 1998, 82–86; N. Fraser 2013, 200–202).

Fraser describes such politics as affirmative that are "aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" (1998, 82). "Affirmative" in this sense refers to the more or less deliberate reproduction of the existing infrastructure, as the aim is not to fundamentally alter the status quo but to reform it (e.g. redistribution through social welfare programs, recognition through the appropriation of racial categories, or representation through the extension of voting rights). Transformative politics on the other hand describe remedies "aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework" (e.g. redistribution through the abolition of private property, recognition through the deconstruction of race, or representation through the decentralization of political decision making processes) (1998, 82).[127] A central difference between affirmative and transformative strategies thus lies in the latter's focus on the generative nature of structures as opposed to the former's prioritization of outcomes within the boundaries of a given system. This is not to say that consequences do not matter to transformative approaches, but rather that outcomes are understood as inextricably linked to processes and structural forces, including the very means used to bring about change. In other words, the ends can never possibly justify the means from a transformative perspective: given the causal link between the two, non-ideal means would, in this sense, inevitably lead to the re-production of non-ideal social relations, or as Audre Lorde famously stated "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (2017b, 91). In turn, affirmative approaches do not necessarily disregard structural forces; they may simply not identify the basis of the system itself as the source of injustice but its specific arrangement. When the existing order is perceived as producing net benefits, the logical solution may appear to reform and not to transform.

Importantly, Fraser acknowledges that politics do not just neatly belong to either the affirmative or transformative kind but operate along a spectrum often involving elements of both (see 1998, 86). Further pursuing that train of thought, the practices of a political actor may thus very well be classified as transformative on one level but as affirmative on another. That is, while an actor's class politics may be transformative, e.g. by seeking to fundamentally

[127] This of course presumes a liberal democratic and capitalist society as the status quo. In a socialist state the creation of private property, for instance, would represent a transformative change.

alter the relationship between capital and labor, their identity politics and their political-legal framing may be affirmative, e.g. by retaining the hierarchy inscribed into the existing cultural value system, whether deliberately so or not, and by remaining, for instance, within the existing framework of the nation state. I want to stress though, that I do not regard the categories "affirmative" and "transformative" to impart a positive or negative connotation per se, which is to say that in my own understanding they principally serve analytical and not normative purposes. Following that reasoning, it would, logically, also have to be classified as transformative to abolish democracy in the United States and instead establish an authoritarian regime, as this would fundamentally alter the existing political-legal order of society.

Finally, Fraser also identifies so-called "non-reformist reforms"—affirmative politics that may, intentionally or not, eventually lead to social transformation (2003, 78–82). She cites unconditional basic income as one possible example, as it does not alter property relations nor introduce workplace democracy, but, as she argues, may ultimately have a fundamental effect on the relation between capital and labor, since workers would gain greater bargaining power (2003, 78–79). The categories "affirmative" and "transformative" thus refer to the specific ways in which politics relate to the existing structures within a given society, allowing us to better comprehend how social actors envision change both with respect to the pursued means and the imagined outcomes.

In the following, I will engage in a discussion of the central findings from my empirical chapters by applying the distinction between affirmative and transformative politics to the three dimensions—cultural, political-legal, and socio-economic—along which I analyzed the Gullah Geechee Movement.

Situating the Gullah Geechee Movement's Visions of Justice

One of the major achievements of the Gullah Geechee Movement has, undoubtedly, been the transformation of Gullah Geechee-ness from a reason for shame to a source of pride. Once seen as grave insults, the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee" are now increasingly embraced not only by descendants themselves but even other African Americans in search of their ancestral roots. Despite the magnitude of this change and even though I have just used the term "transformation," I still argue that the overall identity politics of the movement may be classified as affirmative. The empowerment of descendants relies first and foremost on the strengthening of pride in their Africanity and Blackness, as opposed to a deconstruction of these categories, as a transformative approach would suggest. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, this can be traced back to the historical context of the Black Liberation Struggles of the 1960s

and 70s that fundamentally shaped the work of early Gullah Geechee activists and institutions. Still very much rooted in this tradition, the Gullah Geechee Movement seeks to re-appropriate the definitional authority over what it means to be Gullah Geechee, Black, and African American, without a complete subversion of the concepts of race and ethnicity. Nonetheless, it appears necessary to make a distinction between different kinds of affirmative identity politics within the movement. For as we have seen, particularly in the discussion of what I referred to as the politics of "ethnic Blackness" in Chapter 4, the valorization of Gullah Geechee-ness has a number of different and sometimes even opposing effects.

Whereas the instrumentalization of Gullah Geechee identity as a means of status distinction may, in the worst case, have the consequence of contributing to a reproduction of the established racial hierarchy, the concept of Gullah Geechee-ness as a restorative and counter-hegemonic heritage, on the other hand, unsettles this very order by emphasizing the universal worth of Blackness and African descent. In other words, both strategies may be categorized as affirmative, however, the former is based upon the acceptance of what is given, while the latter pushes against the boundaries of the existing cultural system. Classifying the identity politics of the Gullah Geechee Movement as affirmative is, moreover, not to imply that activists do not critically reflect upon the meta-levels of racial terminology. Jasmine*, the cultural history interpreter whose work I discussed extensively in Chapter 4, and I had a conversation about this very topic, in which she shared her perspective on the concept of race, specifically as regards the Black and White binary:

> I know that it [race] is a construct, in the sense that at the nitty gritty it doesn't matter. We are more the same than we are different, physically, like our actual make up of ourselves as human beings, but in experience as well. However, I am really proud of my Blackness, it is not something that I would be willing to give up, because somebody decided that Black and White didn't matter anymore. (Interview 2017)

Evidently, Jasmine* is fully aware of the constructed nature of racial categories but this does not change the fact that her identity as a Black person has great emotional as well as political significance to her. Over the course of our conversation, we realized that our feelings were in fact quite similar in this regard. For me, too, identifying as Afro-German and as a Black man represents an integral part of my self, imagined as it may be. It is by far not the only lens through which I see myself but it still plays a central role in how I locate my lived experiences; a perspective shared by most of my Black and Gullah Geechee interlocutors. Stuart Hall contends that it was due to the historical experience of "deracination" and oppression that a search for "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves'" plays such a pivotal role for identity struggles

within the African Diaspora (1990, 223). It may be argued more generally that affirmative identity politics, with its aim to re-appropriate a "collective self," represents a common, perhaps even necessary phenomenon in the context of historically marginalized groups of people. This ties back into the argument I made in the introduction to this thesis about how identity politics practiced by groups of people who have been and/or (still) are the object of cultural oppression are often inward-oriented—and, thus, by definition affirmative—because they have a principally defensive impetus, reacting to the past or ongoing imposition of denigrating ascriptions.

Importantly, just as an affirmative identity politics does not stand in the way of critical reflection about the very structures which it is embedded in and which, indeed, it always runs the risk of perpetuating, so does the identification of difference not per se stand in the way of a politics of commonality. As mentioned above by Jasmine*, she has an acute understanding of how "we are more the same than different, physically [as well as] in experience." That is, only because an important part of her identity is grounded in a differentiation of the population along the lines of race and culture, Jasmine* does not automatically lose a sense of what she shares with people who do not have the exact same social position as she does. Of course, we have seen that the movement as a whole is highly heterogeneous and there are, admittedly, also activists with little interest in any collaboration beyond their own identity group, but I have very rarely encountered such views. To the contrary, many of the Gullah Geechee activists I interacted with stated that they saw it as an important part of their work to build bridges between different groups of people, regardless of their cultural, religious, or political backgrounds. Moreover, as much as the connection between Gullah Geechee and Africanity defines the movement, most of my interlocutors regarded their specific place within the Diaspora as US-Americans at least as equally significant to the constitution of their collective self.

Coming back to the broader argument, I would even go further than stating that the identification of difference does not contradict a sense of commonality and assert that the former may actually be regarded as a necessary precondition for the latter, especially in contexts of past and ongoing injustice committed by one identity group against another. Achille Mbembe aptly observes in this regard:

> Often, the desire for difference emerges precisely where people experience intense exclusion. In these conditions the proclamation of difference is an inverted expression of the desire for recognition and inclusion. [...] And the desire for difference is not necessarily the opposite of the project of the *in- common*. In fact, for those who have been subjected to colonial domination, or for those whose share of humanity was

> stolen at a given moment in history, the recovery of that share often happens in part through the proclamation of difference. (2017, 183)

In other words, it is the "cuts and scars" left by histories of oppression that engendered certain desires for difference in the first place (2017, 183). An integral part of re-creating social cohesion and a sense of commonality may therefore, indeed, lie in the self-empowerment of marginalized groups of people through the appropriation of the very categories of difference that have once been and often still are used to justify their oppression. Crucially, this process of recognition does not only have the potential of mobilizing the oppressed but even those belonging to the group of collective beneficiaries. A case in point is the involvement of White middle- and upper-class US-Americans in the Gullah Geechee Movement. Many of the White allies I spoke with shared that learning about Gullah Geechee history and heritage made them, for one, see the past and ongoing injustice done not only to descendants but also to other African Americans and, for another, comprehend the privileges they themselves enjoy due to their own social position. It was in this sense a recognition of difference that stimulated them to fight for a common cause.

With all that being said, it has to be acknowledged as well that affirmative identity politics can, indeed, have harmful effects, even if unwittingly so. As evident from my discussion of the narrative of the Gullah Wars, even discourses that have a counter-hegemonic impulse may entail the marginalization of other vulnerable populations, in that specific case, Native Americans. The broader challenge that reveals itself here is how different histories of marginalization can be recognized within a social environment that tends to frame cultural and identity politics as zero-sum games. This becomes ever more apparent when we investigate how affirmative identity politics intersects with political-legal and socio-economic dynamics.

We have seen that human and indigenous rights discourses have had a profound impact upon the ways in which Gullah Geechee entities, specifically the Gullah/Geechee Nation, formulate their political legal claims. As much as this has made the group's demands more intelligible to state representatives and transnational actors, it has also led activists and community leaders to adapt their rhetoric to the rather static understandings of culture and identity inherent to international legal codes. In this sense, the political-legal status quo fosters affirmative approaches to identity, which in turn contributes to the perpetuation of the former. It is for that very reason that transformative identity politics commonly faces an uphill battle with regards to gaining recognition, funding, or any other kind of support from national as well as international institutions. Differently put, it might be argued that an affirmative identity politics is already inscribed into the established political legal order. This

does not mean though, that identity politics are being overdetermined by such broader structures. We have seen that, for example, the Gullah/Geechee Nation, which at times tends to use rather essentialist rhetoric within their official statements, practices a much more fluid understanding of Gullah Geechee-ness in its actual day to day business (compare to Bernstein 2002, 87–88). Affirmative identity politics thus does not automatically or necessarily ignore the internal complexity of the respective identity groups, nor does it sideline the larger society in which it is situated. Nonetheless, as I discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, mentioned essentialist rhetoric can have the effect of precluding certain ways of imagining oneself as part of the collective, such as in the case of younger descendants who, especially in urban contexts, are therefore trying to stake out new ways of being Gullah Geechee in the 21st century.

Taking a step back and looking at the how the Gullah Geechee Movement politico-legally frames its struggles in general, we can observe that it very much operates affirmatively within a "Keynesian-Westphalian frame" of justice, i.e. within the politico-legal framework of the nation state (N. Fraser 2013, 189–90). This may be most evident in the case of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, a state sanctioned and state funded institution. However, even the Gullah/Geechee Nation, which makes demands for semi-autonomy, directs its claims for justice at the communal, state, and/or federal government, just as virtually any other actor within the movement—the constructs of semi-autonomy and recognition as a national minority, of course, fundamentally hinge upon the existence of a nation state (see Bens 2020, 182). Yet again, we should distinguish between different levels of affirmativeness. Whereas the Corridor Commission's work does not fundamentally question the existing political-legal order, the Nation's demands for self-determination envision a profound change: the sharing of politico-legal authorities between the state and Gullah Geechee communities. This has to be read in light of a widespread lack of political will among decision makers to implement the changes necessary to protect the integrity of communities, as discussed in Chapter 5. Presently, descendants do not have many options to influence politics apart from lobbying, given the scarce representation of the group. Special rights and/or laws that would provide protection for Gullah Geechee communities against over-development are therefore often seen as one of the most effective solutions. This very matter, of course, commonly framed as the alleged "special treatment" of minorities, represents one of the central points of contention within debates around identity politics.

There is, in fact, a wealth of literature on (liberal) multiculturalism that makes convincing cases for the provision of specific protection, or more generally speaking, collective rights, for culturally distinct groups of people within liberal democracies. While I will not be able to delve deeply into this discussion, I want to at least briefly summarize the

main points made in favor of multicultural accommodation. The central argument brought forth by proponents of liberal multiculturalism is that an individual's liberty can only be guaranteed when its membership within a collective (religious, cultural or otherwise) is protected as well (see Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 52). This view rests upon the position that an individual's personal autonomy cannot be separated from its embeddedness within larger social formations. Liberal democracies, as multiculturalists contend, therefore have a duty of protecting collectives. The other major point made in support of collective rights is that such measures can effectively contribute to decreasing inequality, for instance, by protecting vulnerable groups of people from the harmful effects, unintended or not, of actions by the majority (see Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 31). The question remains of course which groups in particular are deserving of such rights. Liberal multiculturalists identify a number of specific circumstances that, following liberal principles, may warrant a special legal status for groups of people. Amongst others, (1) when historical treaties were made (and broken) between the nation state or its legal predecessor and a group of people, which, for example, represents the legal justification for the federal accommodation of Native Americans in the United States; (2) in the case of national minorities, that is groups which are culturally and linguistically distinct from the majority population and which were assimilated into the nation state during the very process of its creation, usually against their own volition; (3) when historical injustice was committed by the nation state against a group of people, collective rights may be regarded as justified as a processual means of compensation; (4) for the sake of cultural diversity in itself, which ties back to the principal argument made in favor of the creation of collective rights, stressing the importance of the connections between individuals and collectives (see Kymlicka [1995] 2004, 109, 116, 121).

Returning to the specific case of Gullah Geechee, we have seen, particularly in Chapter 3, that the arguments made in favor of a special protection of the group are predicated upon claims of its cultural distinctiveness and quasi-indigenous status. The challenge that presents itself on a politico-legal level, inextricably tied to the debate about indigeneity and specifically as regards the demands for self-determination of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, is that the group's ancestors have not lived on the North American continent before its colonization, nor have there ever been any historical treaties made between the United States and Gullah Geechee. The situation of the group is therefore decidedly different from that of Native Americans. Undoubtedly though, a strong case can be made for the value of protecting the integrity of Gullah Geechee culture and heritage given their important contributions to US-American history and society, which, as we have seen, is exactly the line of argument that the authors of the special resource study by the National Park Service pursued, and which then

successfully laid the grounds for the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. In addition to that, the group may also be understood as qualifying for the status of a national minority, given that, for one, the forceful deportation and enslavement of the African ancestors of Gullah Geechee formed an inherent part of the nation building process of the United States and, for another, descendants have been able to hold on to their cultural and linguistic heritage. To a certain extent though, a very similar argument could be made about African Americans in general, especially when we take into account that at present most Gullah Geechee descendants do not follow what may be regarded as the group's "traditional" ways of life anymore. This then might be taken to suggest that only a select group among Gullah Geechee should be eligible for special rights, upon which follows the question of how exactly that should be determined, revealing the complexity of such matters even though we have only scratched the surface of the deliberations necessary for such decision making. The point to be made is that the affirmative politics inscribed into the political legal order further complicate the identity matters I discussed above, specifically concerning the drawing of boundaries, as the very definition of what constitutes a culturally distinct group of people evidently has very tangible consequences. This leads me to the closely related discussion of the intersections between class, cultural identity, and notions of deservingness.

As discussed in Chapter 4, some of my African American research participants were skeptical about the Gullah Geechee Movement because of fears that descendant's claims to justice based upon their cultural distinctiveness might sideline the needs of working-class Black people who cannot mobilize any such identity for themselves. While the Gullah Geechee Movement's politics does not represent the concerns of descendants and that of other African Americans as competing whatsoever—to the contrary, all of the activists I interacted with saw their own work as inextricably tied to broader Black struggles—one may indeed ask, how notions of deservingness are influenced, even if unwittingly, by cultural politics. In theory, as I have argued before, identity politics does not have to be a zero-sum game. The recognition of the concerns of Gullah Geechee people should not stand in any opposition to a simultaneous recognition of the concerns of other African Americans. And as we have seen, an engagement with Gullah Geechee history and culture may in fact even lead to a greater appreciation of and/or pride in Black history and culture in general.

However, my empirical analysis has also shown that the valorization of "ethnic Black" identities may, in the worst case, contribute to a reproduction of the established racial hierarchy and the concomitant deculturization of "plain Blacks." There is then always also a negative potential inherent to a politics that rests upon an emphasis of cultural distinctiveness, insofar as anyone who is not able to conform to this norm may be seen as

lacking and undeserving. This has to be read in light of a public discourse that still very much represents poverty among African Americans as a "cultural problem," mis-constructing the economic precarity and deprivation that a significant part of the Black population is still subject to as the result of their own doing—a view which has a direct effect upon policy making (see Kelley 1997, 8). Bearing the aforesaid in mind, contrast the alleged "culture of poverty" of the Black urban poor with the image of the "richness" of Gullah Geechee people's centuries-old cultural heritage, take into account the limitedness of public as well as private funding, and identity politics may end up becoming a zero-sum game after all. Politics of culture and identity can in this sense focus the attention of decision makers as well as sponsors onto certain groups of people—be it out of "genuine" concern or for the mere purpose of polishing their image through acts of charity and/or supporting a "just cause"—at the expense of others.

As much as I believe that the above raised points should be taken seriously, a discussion of how marginalized groups of people may represent competition to one another runs the risk of becoming a red herring. For it is precisely these kinds of arguments that various political actors instrumentalize time and again in order to sow discord among the oppressed and prevent the creation of broader coalitions. The real issue is not that culturally distinct groups of people, or more broadly speaking historically marginalized groups of people, are "taking away" the resources that are "actually" needed by "the" working class. As we have seen in Chapter 5, as much as Gullah Geechee descendants' struggles to retain their land, resist dynamics of gentrification, and find meaningful and adequately remunerated employment are specific to the unique position of the group, they are, at the same time, highly representative of the struggles led by a majority of the US-population. Brian*, a White handyman in his mid-50s who grew up on James Island, South Carolina, said to me, after sharing that he did not have health insurance and would rather die than go to the emergency room, if he ever got into a serious accident, because he wouldn't be able to afford it:

> The people who are not wealthy, they lead shitty lives. They try to make the best of it, but they ain't never gonna make it… they just try to make the best of it… this is the American way, this is the fucking American dream. (Interview 2022)

The point to be made is that the underlying cause of the above-described socio-economic challenges are broader structures of exploitation and deprivation that are deeply inscribed into the political economy of the United States. What Brian* alluded to more specifically in the above quotation is the relationship between labor and capital and the resulting disparities in income and wealth. As he added later on in our conversation, "there are people who work

16 or 17 hours and they still struggle, while others don't even know how to spend all their money" (Interview 2022).

Due to these structural forces, the efforts of Gullah Geechee activists and institutions have certain limitations in how sustainably they can protect the integrity of communities. While the movement undoubtedly achieved certain significant changes on the local and regional level, through a combination of legal interventions, lobbying, and community led economic ventures, fundamental challenges remain. In this regard, it also varies yet again, to what extent activists and institutions strive for profound change or reform. My empirical analysis suggests that the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, for instance, envisions a kind of moral capitalism in which the group would receive its equitable share of the market and descendants are able to freely pursue their visions of a good life—a clearly affirmative approach. The Gullah/Geechee Nation, inextricably tied to its vision of self-determination through nationhood and its anti-capitalist critique, on the other hand, appears to strive for more radical and transformative changes, in the form of tightly knit and self-sufficient communities where the group would be able to make decisions for itself widely independent from the actions of mainstream society. Apart from these two major positions, I have of course encountered many other views in between as well. Whatever the specific approach though, the majority of the Gullah Geechee activists and institutions I interacted with identified the socio-economic challenges they are faced with as part of a larger struggle that can only be won if they strike alliances with other marginalized groups of people.

The Gullah Geechee Movement, evidently, represents a highly heterogeneous struggle that cannot be reduced to a single type of politics. While the overall tendency of the movement may be identified as affirmative in all of the three analyzed dimensions of justice, there are significant variations in the specific levels of affirmativeness. The demands and visions of some parts of the movement largely stay within the framework of the given system, others, in turn, push against these very limits. Most importantly, we have seen that the Gullah Geechee Movement is far from a marginal and self-referential phenomenon, but touches upon fundamental dimensions of the intersections between race, class, culture, and justice in the United States. What began as a regionally bounded struggle among a group of people who were once "one of the most looked-down-upon of African American populations" (Matory 2015, 8), has evolved into a transregional and highly intersectional struggle that involves not only Gullah Geechee descendants but also inspires other African Americans and even White allies to political action.

Epilogue

It has been the principal aim of this thesis to illuminate the ways in which the Gullah Geechee Movement imagines and tries to build a new and better future. I have demonstrated that the struggles of descendants take place on multiple interconnected levels that each, even if to differing extents, involve contestations over Gullah Geechee identity. While some critics demand an "end" to identity politics, I have tried to show that there is not, and never has been, any politics, and this emphatically includes self-described universalist and majoritarian politics, that is free from concerns about identity. What differs is the extent to which such concerns are being addressed explicitly, how the respective politics is oriented—inwardly or outwardly—and how it relates to the structural foundations of a given society, affirmatively or transformatively. Most importantly, as I have argued throughout this thesis, opposed to much of mainstream discourse, matters of identity, though principally rooted in the cultural system, also pertain immediately to the socio-economic sphere and the political legal framework, and vice versa. For that very reason, our awareness of what makes us different, or more accurately, our awareness of how we have been positioned differently in and through history, while simultaneously remaining cognizant, too, of what it is that we share, represents a necessary foundation for the realization of a common struggle for justice.

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Deutsche Kurzzusammenfassung der Dissertationsschrift

The Gullah Geechee Movement–Black Identity Politics and Intersectional Struggles for Justice in Contemporary United States

Abstract

Im Mittelpunkt dieser Dissertation stehen die intersektionalen Kämpfe um Gerechtigkeit innerhalb einer kulturell distinkten afroamerikanischen Bevölkerungsgruppe namens Gullah Geechee. Gullah Geechee sind Nachkommen versklavter Afrikaner*innen und Afroamerikaner*innen, die Wissen und Praktiken ihrer Vorfahren in einem höherem Maße haben reproduzieren können als die meisten anderen afroamerikanischen Populationen. Das demografische Zentrum der Gruppe liegt im Südosten der Vereinigten Staaten, einer Region, die gemeinhin als Lowcountry bezeichnet wird und die Küstenstreifen und Inseln des südlichen North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia und Nordflorida umfasst. Gullah Geechee wurden bis Ende des 20. Jh. von der Mehrheitsgesellschaft entlang der Differenzkategorien *race*, Kultur und Klasse als „verarmte“ und „rückständige“ Landbevölkerung stigmatisiert. In den letzten Jahren ist es jedoch zu einer zunehmenden politische Selbstorganisation innerhalb der Gruppe gekommen. Infolgedessen haben sich Gullah Geechee Kultur und Identität von einem Grund zur Scham zu einer Quelle des Stolzes entwickelt, nicht nur für Gullah Geechee selbst, sondern auch für andere Afroamerikaner*innen. Es ist eines der zentralen Argumente dieser Arbeit, dass diese Entwicklungen als Zeichen der Entstehung und Konsolidierung einer sozialen Bewegung zu lesen sind. Im Gegensatz zu anderen akademischen Studien argumentiere ich, dass die Gullah Geechee Bewegung nicht nur als Beispiel kultureller Revitalisierung zu erachten ist, sondern einen Fall multidimensionalen Widerstands gegen kulturelle, sozioökonomische und politisch-rechtliche Dynamiken der Marginalisierung darstellt. Das Hauptziel dieser Arbeit ist es, ein umfassendes Verständnis dieses intersektionalen Kampfes zu entwickeln und einen Beitrag zu aktuellen Debatten über die Rolle von Identitätspolitik zur Erreichung sozialer Gerechtigkeit zu leisten. Zu diesem Zweck werde ich die interne Differenzierung der Gullah Geechee Bewegung, ihre zentralen Akteur*innen, Visionen, Ziele und Politik sowie ihre Einbettung in breitere gesellschaftliche Dynamiken untersuchen.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Das erste Kapitel, die Einleitung, stellt den Lesenden, einerseits, den spezifischen empirischen Fokus meiner Analyse, die Gullah Geechee Bewegung, vor und führt, andererseits, in den größeren gesamtgesellschaftlichen wie akademischen Kontext ein, in dem das Thema der

Dissertation situiert ist. Der Begriff, „Gullah Geechee", bezeichnet eine kulturell distinkte Afro-Amerikanische Bevölkerungsgruppe, deren historischer, wie auch gegenwärtiger demographischer Mittelpunkt im Südosten der Vereinigten Staaten, dem sogenannten Lowcountry, liegt.[128] Schätzungen der Bevölkerungszahlen von Gullah Geechee reichen von 200.000 bis 1.000.000 Menschen. Demographische Bestimmungen sind aus verschiedenen Gründen kaum genauer zu treffen, vor allem, da Gullah Geechee nicht in deutlich abgegrenzten Gemeinschaften, sondern zum größten Teil räumlich und sozial integriert in der Mehrheitsgesellschaft leben und sich die Frage danach, wer sich als Teil der Gruppe versteht und verstanden wird, im deutlichen Wandel befindet.[129]

Gullah Geechee gelten als eine der, wenn nicht gar als die, meist beforschte Afro-Amerikanische Population in den USA. Nichtsdestotrotz wurde die Gruppe für lange Zeit im öffentlichen Diskurs als relativ marginal konstruiert. Bis in die 1980er Jahre diente das Ethnonym „Gullah Geechee" vorranging als Fremdbezeichnung mit deutlich negativer Konnotation. Als „afrikanischste aller afroamerikanischen Populationen" wurden Gullah Geechee dabei zu einer „eigentümlichen" und „primitiven" Landbevölkerung verandert und die Gullah Geechee Sprache, welche aus verschiedenen afrikanischen Sprachen und Varietäten des Englischen entstand, als „schlechtes Englisch" abgetan. Mit Ende des 20. Jh. begann sich der Status der Gruppe langsam, aber stetig zum Positiven zu verändern - ein Prozess der sich Anfang der 2000er Jahre deutlich beschleunigte und dazu geführt hat, dass heute nicht nur Gullah Geechee selbst, sondern auch andere Afro-Amerikaner*innen eine Verbindung mit Gullah Geechee Geschichte, Kultur und Identität aktiv suchen und die Gruppe einen prominenten Platz im Bewusstsein der breiten Gesellschaft erlangt hat. Dies wird unter anderem an der Vielzahl von Referenzen zu Gullah Geechee auf sozialen Medien, wie Facebook, YouTube oder TikTok, deutlich, als auch an pop-kulturellen Bezügen, wie beispielsweise der ästhetischen Orientierung des visuellen Albums, „Lemonade" (2016), der Popkünstlerin und Sängerin Beyoncé an dem Independent-Film, „Daughters of the Dust" (1991) über eine fiktive Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaft an der Küste South Carolinas.

In der Forschung zu Gullah Geechee, die vorwiegend durch die Disziplinen der Linguistik, Geschichtswissenschaften und Folkloristik geprägt ist, wurden diese rezenten Entwicklung bisher kaum beleuchtet. Die wenigen Studien, die hierzu existieren, rahmen den

[128] Das Lowcountry umfasst die Küstenregionen des südlichen North Carolinas, South Carolinas, Georgias, und Nordfloridas. Der Name ist auf die geographischen Gegebenheiten der Region zurückzuführen, die sich durch von einer Vielzahl von Flüssen durchzogenes Marschland sowie hunderte dem Festland vorgelagerte Inseln auszeichnet.

[129] Die meisten Schätzungen schließen lediglich die Gullah Geechee Population innerhalb des Lowcountry ein und erfassen beispielsweise nicht die signifikante Gullah Geechee Diaspora in urbanen Räumen im Norden der USA.

Wandel von Gullah Geechee Identität als Symbol der Scham zu einer Quelle des Stolzes in erster Linie als kulturelle Revitalisierung oder Renaissance. Dabei findet, wie ich argumentiere, eine Reproduktion gewisser eindimensionaler Repräsentationen der Gruppe statt, die öffentliche und akademische Diskurse seit Beginn der Gullah Geechee Forschung im frühen 20. Jh. prägen und durch einen kulturellen Reduktionismus gekennzeichnet sind. Die in den letzten vier Jahrzehnten stattgefundene Institutionalisierung und Selbstermächtigung unter Gullah Geechee droht dabei als selbst-referentielle Bestrebungen nach kultureller Anerkennung verkannt zu werden. Dem entgegen lautet eines der zentralen Argumente meiner Arbeit, dass es sich bei den beschriebenen Entwicklungen um die Formierung und Etablierung einer sozialen Bewegung handelt, die sich durch eine hohe Intersektionalität sowohl ihrer Forderungen nach Gerechtigkeit als auch ihres politischen Handelns auszeichnet. Daran anknüpfend argumentiere ich auf übergeordneter Ebene, dass die Reduzierung der Gullah Geechee Bewegung auf ein rein kulturelles Phänomen repräsentativ ist für breitere gegenwärtige Debatten um Identitätspolitik und soziale Gerechtigkeit.

Mit den Präsidentschaftswahlen im Jahr 2016 kam es zu einer drastischen Zäsur des liberalen Projektes in den USA. Die innenpolitische Situation ist seitdem geprägt von sozio-ökonomischer Unsicherheit, gesellschaftlicher Polarisierung sowie der grundsätzlichen Infragestellung liberaler Ideale und Institutionen. Auf der Suche nach Erklärungen und möglichen Lösungen für diese Krise des Liberalismus zeichnen sich aktuelle akademische wie auch öffentliche Debatten vor allem durch Auseinandersetzungen um das Verhältnis von Identitätspolitik, auf der einen, und Klassenpolitik, auf der anderen Seite, aus. Identitätspolitik, die einst das Versprechen einer gesamtgesellschaftlichen Integration von Diversität bot, wird nun vermehrt auch von linksliberalen Politiker*innen, Journalist*innen und Wissenschaftler*innen in den Generalverdacht gezogen eine zentrale Ursache für die Fragmentierung von Gesellschaft zu sein. Als Hauptkritikpunkt wird zumeist geführt, dass Identitätspolitik zu einem übermäßigen Fokus auf die Interessen und Anerkennung von Minderheiten geführt habe, auf Kosten der Belange der Mehrheitsgesellschaft, insbesondere hinsichtlich einer gerechten Verteilungspolitik. Während diese Perspektive zwar gewisse bedeutsame Aspekte der gegenwärtigen politischen Situation sichtbar macht, bedient sie sich auch eines sehr engen Begriffs des Verhältnisses von Identitätspolitik zu Fragen der Umverteilung.

Ich argumentiere, erstens, dass Identitätspolitik in dieser Logik fälschlicherweise ausschließlich sogenannten Minderheiten zugeschrieben wird, obwohl bspw. hegemoniale Rassenideologien und -politik ohne Frage zu den wirkungsvollsten Manifestationen des

Phänomens gehören und, zweitens, dass identitätspolitische Bewegungen zwar tatsächlich zu einer Verengung der Verständnisse von Solidarität und Gerechtigkeit führen können, die Freiheitskämpfe historisch marginalisierter Gruppen häufig jedoch das genaue Gegenteil erreicht haben. Bei kritischer Betrachtung ist hierbei festzustellen, dass eine scharfe Trennung zwischen Kämpfen um Anerkennung und Umverteilung häufig kaum möglich erscheint. Ich stelle vor diesem Hintergrund die These auf, dass emanzipatorische und intersektionale Identitätspolitik eine bedeutende, wenn nicht gar notwendige Rolle für die Ausweitung liberaler Prinzipien von Gleichberechtigung und Freiheit spielt. Meine Diskussion dieser Fragen baut auf Nancy Frasers multidimensionaler Sozialtheorie auf und macht ein Argument für die notwendige Verbindung von Identitäts-, Klassenpolitik und politisch-rechtlicher Rahmung für die Erreichung sozialer Gerechtigkeit. Ich schlage weiterhin eine Typologie vor, die eine Differenzierung zwischen unterschiedlichen Formen von Identitätspolitik erlaubt, von selbst-referentiellen Unterfangen historisch marginalisierter Gruppen über hegemoniale identitäre Projekte bis hin zu emanzipatorisch-intersektionalen Bewegungen, welche das Anerkennen von Differenz als Grundlage für die Schaffung von nachhaltigen Verbindungen und Solidarität begreifen.

Die Gullah Geechee Bewegung stellt eine derart wertvolle Fallstudie hinsichtlich der beschriebenen theoretischen und gesellschaftspolitischen Diskussionen dar, insofern sie, wie oben angemerkt, auf den ersten Blick vermeintlich wie ein zuvorderst identitätspolitisches Unterfangen erscheinen mag; Gullah Geechee Aktivist*innen und Institutionen entwickeln jedoch Visionen von Gerechtigkeit, die weit über bloße Fragen um Anerkennung hinausgehen, was sich unter anderem an der untrennbaren Verflechtung von kultureller Identität und Landbesitz zeigt. Schließlich berühren öffentliche wie akademische Diskurse um Gullah Geechee Identität, angesichts der Konstruktion des Kulturerbes der Gruppe als Archetyp afro-amerikanischer Kultur, grundsätzliche Fragen um die Beziehungen zwischen *race*, Klasse und Gerechtigkeit in den Vereinigten Staaten.

Das Ziel meiner Dissertation ist es, einerseits, zu der noch in ihren Anfängen befindlichen kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit gegenwärtigen politischen Entwicklungen unter Gullah Geechee beizutragen, und, davon ausgehend, Impulse zu breiteren Debatten um die Rolle von Identitätspolitik in der Erreichung sozialer Gerechtigkeit zu liefern.

Das der Dissertation zu Grunde liegende empirische Material wurde primär im Rahmen zweier Feldforschungen im Lowcountry, im Jahr 2017 für zwei Monate als Teil meiner Masterforschung, und im Jahr 2022, für 9 Monate, produziert. Ich bediente mich dabei vorrangig der Methode der teilnehmenden Beobachtung (im Zuge dieser nahm ich an einer Vielzahl von kulturellen Veranstaltungen, Treffen verschiedener Organisationen und

Protesten teil) sowie verschiedener Formen des Interviews, offen bis semi-narrativ (während der ersten Feldforschung im Jahr 2017 führte ich 11 Interviews, 2022 führe ich 48 Interviews und weitere 116 informelle forschungsrelevante Gespräche). Schließlich habe ich auch Diskursanalysen verschiedener Dokumente, auf die ich vor allem online Zugriff gewonnen habe, vorgenommen. Die in diesem Text als Forschungsteilnehmende bezeichneten Personen sind, soweit nicht weiter angezeigt, Gullah Geechee.

Chapter 2: On the History of Gullah Geechee People and the Emergence of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Das zweite Kapitel befasst sich, erstens, mit der historiographischen Forschung zu Gullah Geechee, bietet, zweitens, einen chronologischen Überblick zur Geschichte der Gruppe, beginnend mit der Periode der Versklavung bis hin zur Mitte des 20. Jh. und setzt sich, drittens, daran anschließend mit den Entstehungsbedingungen der Gullah Geechee Bewegung auseinander. Das Kapitel schafft damit den historischen Kontext für die empirischen Analysekapitel der Dissertation zu gegenwärtigen Dynamiken der Bewegung.

Eines der zentralen Anliegen innerhalb der Forschung zu Gullah Geechee für den Großteil des 20. Jh. war es ein Verständnis von den Ursprüngen der Kultur der Gruppe zu entwickeln. Dies leitete sich von der Beobachtung ab, dass Gullah Geechee in einem weitaus größeren Maße als andere afro-amerikanischen Populationen Wissen und Praktiken Ihrer afrikanischen Vorfahren haben reproduzieren können. In den letzten Jahrzehnten sind folgende vier Faktoren als zentrale Bedingungen für die Entstehung und Reproduktion von Gullah Geechee Kultur in der Forschung etabliert worden: 1.) der Bedarf eines ausgesprochen hohen Arbeitsvolumen auf den Reisplantagen des Lowcountry, was untrennbar mit einer hohen Nachfrage für versklavte Afrikaner*innen einherging und so zu einer demographischen Mehrheit dieser führte, 2.) die Abwesenheit der Weißen Plantagenbesitzenden für den Großteil des Jahres aufgrund tropischer Krankheiten und Hitze, 3.) der kontinuierliche (illegale) Import von Versklavten direkt aus Afrika bis zu Beginn des US-Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieges 4.) und die relative ökologische Ähnlichkeit des Lowcountry mit den Regionen aus denen die Versklavten deportiert wurden, was vermutlich die Adaption kultureller Praktiken erleichterte. Das am meisten zitierte Erklärungsprinzip, das dabei häufig als einige der obigen Punkte zusammenfassend begriffen wird, sowohl in akademischen wie auch populären Diskursen, ist jedoch das Motiv der Isolation. Demnach wird die Möglichkeit der Entstehung und Reproduktion von Gullah Geechee Kultur in Abhängigkeit von einem relativen Mangel an Kontakt zwischen der Gruppe mit der Mehrheitsgesellschaft betrachtet. Erst vor einigen Jahren wurde dieses

Narrativ von dem Anthropologen J. Lorand Maroy einer grundlegenden Kritik unterzogen. Matory liefert umfassende historische Belege für die durchgehende Einbettung von Gullah Geechee in größere soziale Entwicklungen und Ereignisse. Neben der Tatsache, dass sich das Narrativ der Isolation historisch nicht halten lässt, ist es auch hinsichtlich seiner diskursiven Wirkung zu kritisieren. Die Annahme, dass Gullah Geechee bis in das 20. Jh. isoliert von der Mehrheitsgesellschaft gelebt hätten, relegiert die Gruppe in eine periphere Position innerhalb US-Amerikanischer Geschichte und Gesellschaft und trägt entscheidend zur Reduktion von Gullah Geechee auf ihre vermeintlich „exotische" Kultur und deren Unterhaltungswert bei.

Meine Auseinandersetzung mit Gullah Geechee Geschichte setzt vor dem obigen Hintergrund an und ist bestrebt zum Schreiben einer dezidiert politischen Geschichte der Gruppe beizutragen – ein Unterfangen, das von Gullah Geechee Akademiker*innen selbst wegbereitet wurde. Das zweite Unterkapitel demonstriert, aufbauend auf der Arbeit verschiedener Historiker*innen, wie Gullah Geechee über die Geschichte hinweg eng in gesamtgesellschaftliche Dynamiken involviert waren: von Widerständen gegen die Institution der Versklavung, über politische Organisation und Führung während der sogenannten Periode der Reconstruction, die eine nie da gewesene rechtliche Selbstbestimmung ehemals Versklavter bedeutete, die Befreiungskämpfe in der darauffolgenden Zeit der rassistischen Segregation, bis hin zur Mitte des 20.Jh. und der Civil Rights Bewegung. Diese lange Tradition des Widerstands, wie ich argumentiere, sollte schließlich eine bedeutende Grundlage für die Entstehung der Gullah Geechee Bewegung darstellen.

Bisher hat lediglich eine Handvoll anderer Autor*innen die rezente Zunahme politischer Organisation und Institutionalisierung unter Gullah Geechee als die Formierung einer sozialen Bewegung begriffen. Der einzige umfassendere Text stammt aus dem Jahr 1991, baut auf oben beschriebenen Fehlannahmen zur angeblichen Isolation von Gullah Geechee auf und kommt damit zum, wie ich herausstelle, falschen Schluss, dass die Bewegung relativ unabhängig von größeren gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen entstanden sei. Ich demonstriere im Gegenteil, unter anderem auf Basis von Aussagen einiger meiner älteren Forschungsteilnehmenden, dass Erfahrungen, die Gullah Geechee Aktivist*innen als Teil der Civil Rights Kämpfe sammelten, zentral zur Entstehung der Gullah Geechee Bewegung beitrugen. Die Bewegung erwuchs in diesem Sinne nicht aus einem Vakuum, sondern baute auf sowohl unmittelbar vorhergehenden als auch historischen Traditionen des Widerstands auf. Neben diesen politischen Entwicklungen waren auch wissenschaftliche Arbeiten, spezifisch der Black Studies und des Black Feminism, von großer Bedeutung, insofern Studien, die erstmals die Relevanz afro-amerikanischer Kultur und Geschichte betonten,

entscheidend die positive Umdeutung von Gullah Geechee Identität beeinflussten. Schließlich haben auch Dynamiken sozio-ökonomischer Marginalisierung in den 1970er Jahren, in Form des Anstiegs von Immobilienpreisen und daran gebunden von Grundsteuern sowie der Prekarisierung von Arbeitsbedingungen, die Institutionalisierung organisierten Widerstands unter Gullah Geechee stimuliert.

Der eigentliche Beginn der Gullah Geechee Bewegung lässt sich in den 1980er Jahren mit der Entstehung von Kulturfestivals identifizieren, die erstmals die Bezeichnung „Gullah Geechee" öffentlich mit positiver Konnotation nutzten. Während der primäre Fokus dieser Veranstaltungen auf Kunst und Kultur gelegen haben mag, zeichnen sich die Festivals bis heute dadurch aus, dass auch stets Workshops Teil ihres Programmes sind, die sich explizit mit sozio-ökonomischen Belangen befassen. Parallel zu diesen Festivals bildeten sich Initiativen und Organisationen unter Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften, die sich dezidiert für den Schutz von Landeigentum und der sozio-ökonomischer Bestärkung der Gruppe einsetzten. Durch die 1990er Jahre hindurch nahmen diese Entwicklungen des koordinierten und anhaltenden kollektiven Widerstands weiter zu und kulminierten schließlich in den 2000ern in der Schaffung der beiden bis heute größten Gullah Geechee Institutionen: der Gullah/Geechee Nation und des Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor.

Ich diskutiere abschließend, dass während Gullah Geechee ein nie da gewesenes Maß an Institutionalisierung und Anerkennung erreicht haben, die Gruppe jedoch nach wie vor von verschieden Dynamiken sozio-ökonomischer, politisch-rechtlicher und kultureller Marginalisierung betroffen ist. Weiterhin stellen sich eine Vielzahl von Fragen unter anderem danach, wer den Anspruch erheben kann, die ausgesprochen heterogene Gruppe politisch zu repräsentieren, was es bedeutet Gullah Geechee zu sein im 21. Jh. und wie mit der zunehmenden Kommodifizierung des Kulturerbes der Gruppe umgegangen werden sollte. Das zentrale Anliegen der drei empirischen Analysekapitel besteht darin ein Verständnis ebendieser und weiterer Anliegen, der Visionen und konkreten Projekte, die die Bewegung auszeichnen, ihrer zentralen Akteur*innen und schließlich ihrer Einbettung in größere soziale Prozesse zu entwickeln.

Chapter 3: On the Political-Legal Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Dies ist das erste der drei empirischen Analysekapitel meiner Arbeit, die sich mit gegenwärtigen Dynamiken der Gullah Geechee Bewegung befassen und dabei jeweils einer der Dimensionen von Gerechtigkeit gewidmet sind, die ich aufbauend auf Nancy Frasers Sozialtheorie in der Einleitung differenziert habe – politisch-rechtlich, kulturell und sozio-ökonomisch. Gleichzeitig stellt auch in allen drei Kapiteln die Auseinandersetzung mit den

Intersektionen zwischen den genannten Sphären einen integralen Bestandteil meiner Betrachtungen dar.

Kapitel 3 konzentriert sich auf die interne Differenzierung der Gullah Geechee Bewegung auf organisatorischer und politisch-rechtlicher Ebene. Meine Analyse wird sich in erster Linie auf die Gullah/Geechee Nation (GGN) und die Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission (GGCHCC) konzentrieren. Trotz der zentralen Rolle, die beide Institutionen für Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften spielen, gibt es kaum Studien, die sich tiefergehend mit den Visionen und konkreten Projekten der GGN und der GGCHCC auseinandersetzen. Diese Lücke ist das Kapitel bestrebt zu schließen. Meine Diskussion der GGN und der GGCHCC beruht auf Analysen von offiziellen Dokumenten und öffentlicher Kommunikation, teilnehmender Beobachtung verschiedener Veranstaltungen beider Institutionen und Interviews sowie Gesprächen, darunter auch mit Repräsentant*innen der GGN und der GGCHCC.

Die GGN wurde im Jahr 2000 mit der Ernennung von Marquetta Goodwine zu Queen Quet und Chieftess geschaffen. Während die Institution sich selbst als „Nation innerhalb einer Nation“ begreift, wurde sie bis dato nicht als solche von der US-Amerikanischen Regierung anerkannt, noch besitzt sie in irgendeiner anderen Weise politische Autoritäten gemäß US-Amerikanischen Rechts. Die Forderungen der GGN nach Selbstverwaltungsrechten folgt weitestgehend der Logik von Diskursen internationaler Menschenrechte und der Rechte indigener Gruppe. Die Institution betont in ihrem Selbstbild nicht nur die kulturelle Distinktheit von Gullah Geechee, sondern begreift die Gruppe als quasi-indigen und angesichts dessen mit legitimen Ansprüchen auf Minderheitenrechte ausgestattet. Die GGN stützt dieses Argument damit, dass Gullah Geechee Kultur als solche in den Vereinigten Staaten entstand und die Gruppe seit dem 17.Jh. kontinuierlich im Lowcountry lebt.

Autorität innerhalb der GGN ist offiziell geteilt zwischen Queen Quet, die exekutive und repräsentative Funktion in ihrer Position vereint, der Assembly of Representatives, die die Legislativkraft darstellt, eine gewählte Körperschaft von Repräsentant*innen aus dem gesamten Lowcountry, und dem Council of Elders, der Judikative, die sowohl über die Kontinuität der Traditionen von Gullah Geechee als auch die Integrität der Verfassung der GGN wacht. Es finden sich darüber hinaus keine weiteren Informationen zu den inneren Strukturen der GGN. So sind weder die Namen der Repräsentant*inen oder der Elders noch die Verfassung öffentlich zugänglich. Grundsätzlich stellt sich der Forschungszugang zur GGN als herausfordernd dar, was mit negativen Erfahrungen der Gruppe von Ausbeutung durch Wissenschaftler*innen zusammenhängt. Insbesondere die GGN ist aufgrund dessen recht zurückhaltend, was Forschungsanfragen anbelangt und erwartet das Erweisen

aufrichtigen Interesses an gleichberechtigter Kooperation über einen längeren Zeitraum. Während es mir möglich war an mehreren öffentlichen und semi-öffentlichen Veranstaltungen der GGN teilzunehmen und auch mehrfach mit Queen Quet persönlich zu sprechen, blieben meine Einblicke in die oben kurz beschrieben organisatorischen Strukturen trotzdem beschränkt.

Bestimmend für die Vision der GGN ist oben genannte Forderung nach Selbstverwaltungsrechten und Semi-Autonomie. Die Institution gehört innerhalb der Gullah Geechee Bewegung zu den deutlichsten Kritiker*innen des neoliberalen status quo und seiner Verflechtungen mit institutionalisiertem Rassismus in den Vereinigten Staaten. Die GGN, allen voran Queen Quet, zählt dabei zu Pionieren in der Produktion kritischer politischer Geschichte zu Gullah Geechee und des radikalen Empowerments der Gruppe. Weiterhin zählt die GGN zu den ersten Institutionen, die traditionelle Verständnisse von Gullah Geechee erweiterte, erstens, von ländlichen auch auf städtische Räume und, zweitens, über das Lowcountry hinaus auf die Gullah Geechee Diaspora in Städten im Norden der Vereinigten Staaten, Teilen Texas und Oklahomas und selbst der Karibik. Die GGN hat damit in vielerlei Hinsicht gegenwärtige Selbstbilder von Gullah Geechee und, allgemeiner, die Politik der Bewegung entscheidend mitgeprägt. Während die Institution eine entsprechend große Gefolgschaft besitzt, ist sie jedoch nicht frei von Kritik. Einige meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden brachten auch große Skepsis gegenüber der GGN, konkret Queen Quet zum Ausdruck. So wurde mir vermehrt mitgeteilt, dass an der Wahl des Staatsoberhaupts, die am Anfang der Gründung der GGN stand, nur ein relativ geringer Teil der Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften teilgenommen hätte. Manche meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden zweifelten gar an, dass es überhaupt eine Wahl gab. Während sich verifizieren ließ, dass die Wahl tatsächlich stattfand, zeugen diese und andere Gerüchte über die GGN, wie ich argumentiere, vor allem von erwähnter relativer Intransparenz sowie von gewissen Spannungen über Autoritätsansprüche innerhalb der Gruppe. Eine Vielzahl meiner Gesprächspartner*innen hob negativ hervor, dass die GGN einen nahezu absoluten Anspruch auf sowohl die Definitionshoheit über als auch auf die Repräsentation von Gullah Geechee erhebt. Tatsächlich behauptet die GGN sowohl in ihrem offiziellen Selbstverständnis als auch auf öffentlichen Veranstaltungen die einzig authentische und legitime Institution zu sein, die explizit für alle Gullah Geechee sprechen könne. Dieser Anspruch, der gerade von Queen Quet deutlich getragen wird, erschien letztlich der zentrale Grund zu sein für die Ablehnung der Institution von einigen meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden. Nichtsdestotrotz ist festzuhalten, dass die GGN eine enorm bedeutende Rolle in der Stärkung von GG Gemeinschaften einnimmt, durch politische Lobbyarbeit, Vermittlung von Beratung zu

Landrechten und ökonomischer Selbstbestimmung, und, wie bereits erwähnt, durch kulturelles Empowerment.

Die Vorstellung von Gullah Geechee als quasi-indigene Gruppe mag im Fall der GGN am ausgeprägtesten sein, spielt jedoch letztlich für die Gullah Geechee Bewegung im Ganzen eine zentrale Rolle. Ich vertiefe diese Diskussion daher im Übergang zur Analyse der Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission weiter und beobachte Parallelen zwischen der Konstruktion von Gullah Geechee als indigen und der Kultur- und Identitätspolitik postkolonialer karibischer Staaten. Ich argumentiere, dass im Kontext der Versklavung tatsächlich davon gesprochen werden kann, dass sich neue Kulturen unter den Nachkommen deportierter Afrikaner*innen entwickelten, die als den jeweiligen Regionen indigen zu betrachten sind. Gleichzeitig lässt sich jedoch auch feststellen, dass sowohl im Fall karibischer Nationen wie auch der Gullah Geechee Bewegung gewisse Tendenzen einer diskursiven Marginalisierung von Native Americans und Native Caribbeans stattfinden, insofern innerhalb anti-hegemonialer Widerstandsnarrative schwarze Bevölkerungen als „neue Indigene" konstruiert werden. Hierbei lässt sich die tatsächliche Gefahr beobachten, dass Identitätspolitik als Nullsummenspiel wirken kann. Ich greife dieses Thema der potentiellen Marginalisierung von Native Americans in der subversiven Erinnerungspolitik der Gullah Geechee Bewegung im vierten Kapitel erneut auf.

Der Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (GGCHC) wurde im Jahr 2006 als sogenannte National Heritage Area geschaffen, die erste ihrer Art, die einer „lebendigen Kultur" gewidmet ist, und die Küstenregionen North Carolinas, South Carolinas, Georgias, und Nordfloridas umfasst. Die Grundlage für den Gesetzesbeschluss zur Schaffung des Korridors war eine fünf-jähriges Forschungsprojekt des National Park Service (NPS), der vom US-Kongress beauftragt wurde die „nationale Bedeutung" von Gullah Geechee Geschichte und Kultur zu bestimmten. Die Studie stellt wahrscheinlich das umfassendste Forschungsprojekt dar, das je zu Gullah Geechee unternommen wurde. Eine Vielzahl von Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften im gesamten Lowcountry wurde durch Einzel- und Gruppeninterviews involviert und der Öffentlichkeit wurde in Form einer Serie von Informationsveranstaltungen die Möglichkeit gegeben sich einzubringen und ihre Fragen und Anliegen direkt an die Forschenden und den NPS zu stellen. Vor dem Hintergrund dieses offenen Prozesses waren die Erwartungen an den GGCHC von Beginn an ausgesprochen hoch. Damit verbunden waren auch einige Fehlannahmen über die Funktionen und Möglichkeiten des Korridors. Unter Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften bestand anfangs der Glaube, dass der Korridor befähigt sei Finanzmittel direkt auszuschütten und Betroffene in

Landrechtsfragen zu unterstützen. Tatsächlich besitzt der GGCHC jedoch keinerlei solcher Autoritäten.

Die in der Gesetzgebung definierte Funktion des GGCHC ist es zur Dokumentation, Interpretation und Erhaltung von Gullah Geechee Kultur beizutragen und Möglichkeiten zu identifizieren, um Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften sozio-ökonomisch zu stärken. Die Förderung des Korridors erfolgt durch Mittel der US-Amerikanischen Regierung, die jedoch eine Finanzierung in gleichen Teilen durch den Privatsektor vorschreibt, und ausschließlich Kosten für die Infrastruktur, das Personal und Veranstaltungen deckt. Die Koordination des Korridors obliegt der Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, in welche Repräsentant*innen aller vier Bundesstaaten des Lowcountry auf zwei Weisen berufen werden können: a) durch Ernennung der Innenministerien der jeweiligen Bundesstaaten b) durch Nominierung von Privatpersonen. Die Commissioners alternieren üblicherweise nach drei bis vier Jahren und arbeiten ehrenamtlich – ausschließlich die Direktor*in der Commission und zwei Assistenzen sind festangestellte Mitarbeitende. Im Unterschied zur GGN sind die Strukturen des GGCHCC ausgesprochen transparent: die Commission organisiert vierteljährliche öffentliche Veranstaltungen innerhalb derer sowohl über die laufenden Projekte im Korridor als auch über die Finanzplanungen informiert wird. Weiterhin erhalten Teilnehmende die Möglichkeit Anliegen direkt an die Repräsentant*innen zu richten.

Angesichts obig genannter unerfüllter Erwartungen an die Commission, haben einige meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden, insbesondere während meiner ersten Feldforschung im Jahr 2017, Frustrationen und Zweifel hinsichtlich der Wirksamkeit des Korridors zum Ausdruck gebracht. Die Commission war lange Zeit, wie ich vom damaligen Direktor erfuhr, vor allem damit befasst Sponsoren aus dem Privatsektor zu gewinnen sowie regelmäßige Kommunikationswege mit Gemeinschaften und effektive interne Arbeitsstrukturen zu schaffen. Diese Prozesse waren durch das ausgesprochen geringbesetzte Personal deutlich erschwert. Die Diskrepanz zwischen Hoffnungen und tatsächlichen Möglichkeiten des Korridors führte bei mehreren meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden zum Gefühl, dass der Korridor vor allem ein symbolischer Akt gewesen sei und die Commission weit entfernt von den Lebensrealitäten der Gemeinschaften. Dieser Eindruck erschien sich zwar nicht gänzlich, doch signifikant geändert zu haben, als ich 2022 meine zweite Feldforschung unternahm. Der Commission war es zwischenzeitlich gelungen sich zu etablieren und neben der GGN eine zentrale Rolle einzunehmen hinsichtlich der Verbindung von Gemeinschaften im gesamten Lowcountry, der Organisation regelmäßiger Bildungsveranstaltungen, als auch der

Herstellung von Kontakten zwischen Gullah Geechee und Expert*innen in den Bereichen der Landrechtsberatung und des Tourismus.

Im Schluss des Kapitels nehme ich einen Vergleich der Visionen und der Politik der GGN und der GGCHCC vor. Ich argumentiere, dass die Institutionen als repräsentativ für zwei zentrale Ansätze innerhalb der Bewegung betrachtet werden können: einerseits, steht die GGN, gemäß ihres Selbstbildes, im Erbe afrozentrischer Bewegungen für idealistische und traditionalistische Strömungen, die bestrebt sind die Gruppe zu ermächtigen politisch autonom von der Mehrheitsgesellschaft in subsistenzwirtschaftlichen Gemeinschaften zu leben; andererseits, steht die GGCHCC für pragmatischere Strömungen, welche sich als in der Mehrheitsgesellschaft integriert begreifen, größere Offenheit besitzen für die Nutzung von marktwirtschaftlichen Dynamiken, wie der Kommodifizierung von Gullah Geechee Kultur im Tourismus, und darin keinen Widerspruch hinsichtlich der freien Gestaltung ihrer kulturelle Identität sehen. Vor dem Hintergrund dieser teils recht unterschiedlichen Ansätze, existierten in der Vergangenheit ausgeprägte Spannungen zwischen der GGN und der GGCHCC. Unterstützende der Institutionen sind jedoch nicht deutlich entlang einer Linie getrennt, sondern vielzählige Aktivist*innen und Organisationen arbeiten schon jahrelang mit sowohl der GGN und der GGCHCC zusammen. Weiterhin gab es in den letzten Jahren bedeutende Annäherungen zwischen den beiden Institutionen, die sich wohl am deutlichsten darin zeigten, dass im Februar 2023 zur Eröffnung des neuen administrativen Zentrums des GGCHC auch die GGN in dem Programm zur Feier des Ereignisses zentral eingebunden war.

In gewisser Weise mag die GGCHCC, im Vergleich zur GGN, als exemplarisch für die späteren Phasen einer sozialen Bewegung betrachtet werden, in denen der Staat begonnen hat bestimmten Forderungen nachzukommen, durchaus mit dem Kalkül die ursprünglichen, weitreichenderen Visionen von Aktivist*innen zu entschärfen. Die gegenwärtige Situation zeigt in jedem Fall, wie hocheffektiv die Gullah Geechee Bewegung es in den letzten Jahrzehnten vermocht hat staatliche Anerkennung und Unterstützung zu gewinnen. Was sich zukünftig jedoch zu erweisen haben wird, ist in welchem Maße, angesichts der sich wandelnden Position der Bewegung als Ganzer, Akteur*innen und Institutionen, wie die GGN, weiterhin für radikalere Forderungen mobilisieren werden können.

Chapter 4: On the Cultural Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Kapitel 4 befasst sich mit Verhandlungen von und Auseinandersetzungen um Gullah Geechee Kultur und Identität und den damit verbundenen Bemühungen innerhalb der Bewegung Dynamiken symbolischer Marginalisierung entgegenzuwirken. Ich konzentriere mich dabei

zuerst auf die zunehmende positive Konnotation von Gullah Geechee Identität in den letzten Jahrzenten auf Basis von Interviews mit Forschungsteilnehmenden unterschiedlicher Generationen.

Für den Großteil des 20. Jh. war Gullah Geechee Identität mit den Stigmata von "Rückständigkeit" und "Primitivität" belegt. Die Begriffe "Gullah" und "Geechee" galten dabei als schwere Beleidigungen bis in die 1980er Jahre hinein.[130] Dies begann sich erst allmählich mit Beginn der Gullah Geechee Bewegung zu ändern. Auch wenn nach wie vor, gerade für manche ältere Gullah Geechee, eine gewisse symbolische Last mit der Identität verbunden ist, hat sie sich insgesamt sehr deutlich zum Positiven gekehrt. Neben Diskursen in sozialen Medien und der Popkultur zeigt sich dies am augenscheinlichsten daran, dass eine zunehmende Zahl von Gullah Geechee selbst und auch anderen Afro-Amerikaner*innen, die vormals keinen direkten Bezug zur Gruppe hatten, aktiv eine Verbindung mit der Kultur und Identität der Gruppe suchen.

Ich argumentiere, dass diese Aufwertung der Identität der Gruppe eine hoch komplexe und ambivalente Dynamik hervorgebracht hat, innerhalb derer Gullah Geechee, als, wie oben angemerkt, „afrikanischste aller Afro-Amerikaner*innen", zu einem zentralen Objekt einer, wie ich sie bezeichne, *politics of „Ethnic Blackness"*, geworden sind. Mit dem Konzept der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* begreife ich Bemühungen von Schwarzen US-Amerikaner*innen sich von rassistischer Stigmatisierung zu befreien, indem sie die Kategorie ethnischer Identität für sich aktivieren. Ethnische schwarze Identitäten werden dabei als solche Identitäten begriffen, die über einen „reichhaltigen" kulturellen Hintergrund verfügen, im Unterschied zu *„plain Black identities"*, die durch das Gegenteil, also eine imaginierte Wurzel- und Geschichtslosigkeit markiert sind.[131] Diese Dynamik kann unterschiedliche Formen annehmen, die von einer Instrumentalisierung von ethnischen Schwarzen Identitäten auf Kosten von *„plain Black identities"* bis hin zu einer anti-hegemonialen Aufwertung Schwarzer Identitäten im Allgemeinen reichen können. Ich setzte mich in der Folge konkret mit vier verschiedenen Ausprägungen der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* auseinander: 1. der Instrumentalisierung von Gullah Geechee Identität zu Zwecken der Statusdistinktion, 2. der Normalisierung von Gullah Geechee-sein als Teil afro-amerikanischer Identität im Lowcountry, 3. der Nutzung von Gullah Geechee Identität als

[130] Die Nutzung des Ethnonyms, "Gullah Geechee" hat sich erst in den 1990er Jahren etabliert. Historisch wurden die Begriffe „Gullah" und „Geechee" als regionalspezifische Varianten für die Bezeichnung der Gruppe getrennt verwendet – „Gullah" in North und South Carolina, „Geechee" wiederum primär in Georgia und Florida.

[131] Die Begriffe "ethnic Black" und „plain Black" stellen emische Konzepte dar, das heißt sie wurden in dieser Form explizit von einigen meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden genutzt.

Mittel des Widerstands und der transethnischen Verbindung und 4. Tendenzen symbolischer Marginalisierung von Native Americans im Zuge anti-hegemonialer Geschichtskritik.

Meine Diskussion der Instrumentalisierung von Gullah Geechee als Statussymbol beruht auf Interviews sowie teilnehmender Beobachtung insbesondere einer Veranstaltung im Rahmen des MOJA Festivals in Charleston, South Carolina, welches afro-amerikanischer, in erster Linie Gullah Geechee, und afro-karibischer Kunst und Kultur gewidmet ist. Während des Festivals berichteten einige meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden von einer sogenannten *„Black Bourgeoisie"*, die zu bestimmten Anlässen ostentativ Bezug zu ihrem afrikanischen Kulturerbe herstelle. Meine eigenen Beobachtungen auf der MOJA Eröffnungsveranstaltung, auf der sich vorwiegend Afro-Amerikaner*innen der Mittel- und Oberklasse einfanden, legten ähnliches nahe. So ich einige der Gäste bereits persönlich kannte, war es mir möglich zu differenzieren zwischen persönlichen Haltungen und öffentlichem Auftreten. Während eine grundsätzliche Diskrepanz solcher Art natürlich als völlig normal zu erachten ist, standen die öffentlichen Äußerungen von zwei mir bekannten Personen spezifisch zu Gullah Geechee in eklatantem Widerspruch zu den mit mir privat geteilten Positionen: beide teilten indifferente bis hin zu abfällige Meinungen über die Kultur der Gruppe in persönlichen Gesprächen – konkret beschrieb eine der beiden Personen Gullah Geechee als „dritte Welt Kultur", die in ihren Augen keinerlei Funktion in moderner Gesellschaft erfülle – stimmten jedoch auf der Veranstaltung emphatisch in Gespräche zur Bedeutsamkeit des Erhalts afrikanischen Kulturerbes ein.

Vor obigem Hintergrund sowie aufbauend auf bestehenden Studien zur Kultivierung Schwarzer Bürgerlichkeit und Bemühungen unter Afro-Amerikaner*innen sich kulturell mit hegemonialen Idealen der Weißen Mehrheitsbevölkerung gleichzustellen, argumentiere ich, dass Gullah Geechee Kultur und Identität in bestimmten öffentlichen Kontexten zu bedeutenden Bestandteilen der Pflege eines kosmopoliten, afro-diasporischen Selbst geworden zu sein erscheinen. Dabei geschieht eine stillschweigende Differenzierung zwischen, auf der einen Seite, dem „eigentlichen" Gullah Geechee-sein, das nach wie eine unerstrebenswerte sozio-ökonomische Position darstellt, und, auf der anderen, einer ausschließlich symbolischen Verbindung mit der Gruppe als Gullah Geechee-Nachkomme. Diese spezifische Form der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* stellt eine relative Nähe zu Gullah Geechee Kultur und Identität somit in erster Linie zum Zweck der Abgrenzung von anderen Schwarzen US-Amerikaner*innen her, die als weniger kultiviert und wurzellos konstruiert werden („plain Blacks"), wobei letztlich eine Reproduktion der Logiken bestehender rassistischer Hierarchien stattfindet. Es ist zu betonen, dass natürlich keine starre Linie gezogen werden kann zwischen der Instrumentalisierung von und der genuinen Hingabe zu

kulturellen Identitäten. Wie andere Studien zeigen, ist der Übergang häufig fluide und Positionen sind grundsätzlich wandelbar. In diesem Sinne kann es sich ohne Frage bei manchen der von meinen Forschungsteilnehmenden als *„Black Bourgeoisie"* klassifizierten Personen um Fälle handeln, in denen die Identifizierung mit Gullah Geechee schlicht situativ stattfindet und weniger von alltäglicher Bedeutung ist, was nicht mit einer bloßen Instrumentalisierung der Kultur und Identität gleichzusetzen wäre. Nichtsdestotrotz ist festzuhalten, dass Dimensionen sozio-ökonomischer Ungleichheit innerhalb von Verhandlungen von und Auseinandersetzungen um Gullah Geechee Kultur und Identität eine bedeutende Rolle erlangt haben.

An diese Analyse anschließend befasse ich mich mit der Normalisierung von Gullah Geechee-sein als Teil afro-amerikanischer Identität im Lowcountry. Ich konzentriere mich schwerpunktmäßig auf die Lebensrealitäten jüngerer Gullah Geechee, die heute zumeist in urbanen Räumen aufwachsen und ein Verhältnis zu Gullah Geechee Identität entwickeln, das von traditionellen Bildern der Gruppe als ländliche Bevölkerung abweicht. Erneut beruhen meine Ausführungen auf sowohl Interviews als auch teilnehmender Beobachtung. Ein besonderes Augenmerk lege ich dabei auf die Gruppe, Geechee Experience, die von zwei Gullah Geechee Aktivist*innen aus North Charleston gegründet wurde. Die Arbeit von Geechee Experience dreht sich zentral um Sprachpolitik und die positive Bestärkung junger Gullah Geechee in der Selbstfindung ihrer Identität. Die Gruppe begann mit dem Erstellen von Youtube Videos zu sprachlichen Unterschieden zwischen „Gullah" und „Geechee". Geechee Experience versteht die beiden Begriffe dabei leicht abweichend von ihrer üblichen Bedeutung als regionalspezifische Ethnonyme: „Gullah" bezeichnet in diesem Verständnis sowohl die eigentliche Sprache als auch Personen, die traditionelle Vorstellungen der Kultur verkörpern, was neben dem Beherrschen der Sprache, Kenntnis anderer Praktiken, wie des Flechtens von sweetgrass baskets, einen ländlichen Hintergrund und häufig auch ein höheres Alter umfasst. „Geechee" hingegen beschreibt hierbei einen Dialekt des Englischen, der hinsichtlich von Aussprache und Vokabular stark geprägt ist von Gullah, und darauf aufbauend Personen, die wiederum moderne Vorstellungen von der Kultur verkörpern, was sich primär auf junge Menschen in urbanen Räumen bezieht, die viele der als traditionell erachteten kulturellen Praktiken nicht beherrschen.

Auf einer Veranstaltung in North Charleston, der Gullah Gala, einem Modefestival, habe ich Manifestationen dieses Selbstverständnisses junger Gullah Geechee ebenfalls beobachten können. Interessanterweise wurde Gullah Geechee Kultur kaum explizit als solche erwähnt, im deutlichen Unterschied zur obig diskutierten MOJA-Festival Eröffnungsveranstaltung. Die einzigen direkten Bezüge, die sich beobachten ließen, waren

zwei lokale Gullah Geechee Bekleidungsunternehmen, die T-Shirts, Hoodies, und Accessoires mit Gullah-Prints in verschiedenen Ausführungen verkauften. Ich sprach mehrere Teilnehmende direkt auf diese Beobachtung an, woraufhin die Personen mir mitteilten, dass sie sich „einfach als Geechee verstünden" und die Veranstaltung eine Feier dessen darstelle. Einer meiner zentralen Forschungsteilnehmenden, ein Gullah Geechee Aktivist, äußerte sich vor diesem Hintergrund kritisch der Gullah Gala gegenüber, so sie in seinen Augen unpolitisch sei und lediglich oberflächlichen Bezug zum kulturellen Erbe der Gruppe suche. Was sich hier ausdrückt, wie ich argumentiere, sind, auf der einen Seite, oben erwähnte Spannungen zwischen Idealist*innen und Pragmatiker*innen innerhalb der Bewegung, darüber hinaus jedoch auch, das Maß in dem sich die Rolle von Gullah Geechee für jüngere Generationen gewandelt hat. Während Gullah Geechee Identität vor einigen Jahrzehnten noch vor allem negativ behaftet war, schließlich explizit politisch angeeignet wurde, stellt sie nun, wie es erscheint, auch einen potentiell völlig normalen und in diesem Sinne unpolitischen Bestandteil der Lebensrealitäten junger Afro-Amerikaner*innen dar. Die *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* nimmt hierbei die Form einer allgemeinen Ethnisierung afroamerikanischer Identität im Lowcountry an. Die Herausforderung, die sich dabei stellt und die zu Konflikten innerhalb der Bewegung führt, ist die Aushandlung der Grenzverschiebung des Gullah Geechee-seins.

Konkret entzündeten sich hieran in den vergangenen Jahren Spannungen zwischen der GGN und Geechee Experience: Queen Quet kritisierte letztere auf Sozialen Medien dafür Gullah Geechee Kultur zu „verwässern". In einem persönlichen Gespräch mit Queen Quet führte sie weiter aus, dass eine relative Minderheit die Kämpfe für die Verbesserung des Status der Gruppe geführt habe und nun, da die Kosten den unmittelbaren Nutzen nicht mehr überschritten, jedoch mehr und mehr Menschen einen Bezug zu Gullah Geechee behaupteten, obwohl sie keine wirkliche Verbindung zur Kultur besäßen. Angesichts der zentralen Rolle des Status kultureller Distinktheit nicht nur für die Forderungen der GGN sondern auch des GGCHC und einer Vielzahl anderer Institutionen stellt ein mögliches Aufweichen der Grenzen zwischen Gullah Geechee und anderen Afro-Amerikaner*innen eine tatsächliche Herausforderung dar. Gleichzeitig, wie wiederum Akua Page ausdrückte, eines der Gründungsmitglieder von Geechee Experience, suchen junge Gullah Geechee in urbanen Räumen schlicht nach Möglichkeiten sich mit ihrem Kulturerbe zu verbinden, was jedoch von traditionellen Verständnissen der Gruppe nicht geboten würde. Hierin manifestiert sich letztlich die einengende Wirkung der hegemonialen Identitätspolitik internationaler Rechtscodes, die relativ starre Bilder von kultureller Distinktheit konstruiert und historisch marginalisierten Gruppen auferlegt. Dies wirkt sich schließlich negativ auf die Flexibilität

letzterer aus, die reale Wandelbarkeit von Kulturen und Identitäten im Verhältnis zu staatlichen Bedingungen der kulturellen Anerkennung zu navigieren.

Trotz all der diskutierten Differenzen innerhalb der Bewegung teilen nahezu alle Gullah Geechee Institutionen ein grundsätzliches Verständnis der Identität als Mittel des anti-hegemonialen Widerstands. Ich befasse mich in dieser Diskussion erneut mit der Arbeit der GGN und der GGCHCC sowie mit der Performanz einer Gullah Geechee Aktivistin im Kontext eines erinnerungspolitischen Projektes auf einer ehemaligen Plantage. Gullah Geechee Geschichte und Kultur wird in all diesen Fällen als lebendiger Beweis gegen den Mythos der vermeintlichen Geschichts- und Kulturlosigkeit von Afro-Amerikaner*innen begriffen. So bildet es einen festen Bestandteil der meisten Gullah Geechee Bildungs- und Kulturveranstaltungen die Resilienz der afrikanischen Vorfahren der Gruppe hervorzuheben, die darin gesehen wird, dass diese trotz unmenschlichster Bedingungen dazu in der Lage waren eine neue Kultur zu schaffen, welche in verschiedentlicher Hinsicht bedeutende Einflüsse auf die Mehrheitsgesellschaft genommen hat, sei es in künstlerischer, kulinarischer oder auch landwirtschaftlicher Hinsicht. Hinzu definiert sich die Bewegung durch die Interpretation von Gullah Geechee Geschichte und Kultur als untrennbar verbunden mit politischem Widerstand, dessen Kontinuitäten bis in die heutige Zeit und in Verbindung mit Kämpfen wie bspw. gegen Polizeigewalt gesehen werden. In Gesprächen mit Gullah Geechee als auch anderen Afro-Amerikaner*innen zeigte sich, dass die Auseinandersetzung mit diesen Narrativen des Widerstands und des kulturellen Reichtums eine enorme ermächtigende Wirkung haben kann. Das Lowcountry erscheint hierbei zu einer Art Mittelpunkt afro-amerikanischen Kulturerbes zu werden, das Afro-Amerikaner*innen eine Möglichkeit bietet sich mit ihren imaginierten kulturellen Ursprüngen zu verbinden. Erneut zeigt hier die Vorstellung von Gullah Geechee als „afrikanischste aller afro-amerikanischen Populationen" ausgesprochene Wirkkraft. Ich argumentiere, aufbauend auf Arbeiten aus den Creole Studies, dass Gullah Geechee in diesem Sinne eine Art trans-ethnisches Potential entwickelt zu haben erscheint, dass es verspricht Afro-Amerikaner*innen über soziale, regionale und ethnische Grenzen hinweg miteinander zu verbinden. Die *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* äußert sich in diesem Fall genau entgegengesetzt zu der Instrumentalisierung von Gullah Geechee als Mittel der Statusdistinktion, insofern die Aktivierung von Gullah Geechee Identität für anti-hegemonialen Widerstand etablierte rassistische Hierarchien untergräbt und letztlich afro-amerikanische Kultur als Ganze als wertvoll und reichhaltig begreift.

Ich befasse mich schließlich mit einer vierten Manifestation der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"*, die trotz ihrer grundsätzlich subversiven Bemühungen Tendenzen der Marginalisierung von Native Americans aufweist. Hierbei nehme ich eine Diskursanalyse des

Narrativs der „Gullah Wars“ vor, ergänzt durch Interviews und Gespräche. Der Begriff „Gullah Wars“ bezeichnet kriegerische Auseinandersetzungen hauptsächlich zu Beginn bis Mitte des 19. Jh., die in der dominanten Geschichtsschreibung gemeinhin als „Seminole Wars“ bezeichnet werden. Die Seminole oder Gullah Wars waren eine Reihe von Kämpfen in Nordflorida zwischen, auf der einen Seite, den Native American Seminole und den sogenannten Black Seminole (Afrikaner*innen und ihrer Nachkommen, die der Versklavung aus South Carolina und Georgia entflohen waren) und der US-Armee, auf der anderen Seite. Das Ergebnis der Kriege war die Deportation der Native American Seminole und der Black Seminole nach Oklahoma als Teil der sogenannten Trail of Tears, der systematischen Verdrängung von Native Americans aus dem Südosten der Vereinigten Staaten. Das Narrativ der Gullah Wars, welches in den letzten Jahren innerhalb von Teilen der Bewegung stark popularisiert wurde, insbesondere unter jüngeren Menschen, begreift diese Kämpfe explizit nicht als Teil der Konflikte zwischen Native Americans und den Vereinigten Staaten, sondern als organisierten Widerstand gegen die Institution der Versklavung, eine Tatsache die, so das Argument, durch hegemoniale Geschichtsschreibung verdrängt worden sei.

Zentrale Anregung für dieses Narrativ waren Studien zu den Black Seminole, deren Nachkommen tatsächlich deutliche kulturelle Verbindungen zu Gullah Geechee aufweisen, insbesondere in linguistischer Hinsicht. Einige Arbeiten zu Black Seminole Geschichte argumentierten weiterhin, dass die Bedeutung der Black Seminole innerhalb der Seminole Wars weit unterschätzt worden sei und sie eine zentrale Rolle in den Kriegen besessen hätten. Das Narrativ der Gullah Wars baut hierauf auf, mit der entscheidenden Modifikation, dass Black Seminole als Gullah Geechee begriffen und die Kriege auf Konflikte im 18 Jh. ausgeweitet werden. Während tatsächlich historische Belege existieren, die nahelegen, dass zumindest der sogenannte zweite Seminole oder Gullah War explizit gegen die Institution der Versklavung gerichtet war und, dass dabei die Rolle ehemals Versklavter deutlich unterschätzt wurde, lässt sich die Behauptung von Verfechtern des Narratives der Gullah Wars nicht stützen, dass Black Seminole, bzw. Gullah Geechee die eigentlichen „Köpfe“ hinter den Kriegen gewesen seien. Im Bestreben hegemoniale Geschichtsschreibung zu unterlaufen, droht das Narrativ damit die Rolle der Native American Seminole und der Black Seminole umzukehren und die Kämpfe ersterer unsichtbar zu machen. Dies drückt sich wohl am deutlichsten in der Umbenennung der Seminole Wars in Gullah Wars aus. Weiterhin ist die Umdeutung der Black Seminole als Gullah Geechee höchst problematisch, so eine solche Identifikation weder historisch nachweisbar ist, noch sich die Nachkommen der Black Seminole als Gullah Geechee begreifen. Der Fall des Narratives der Gullah Wars knüpft letztlich eng an die Diskussion in Kapitel 3 zu den potentiellen negativen Wirkungen der

Indigenisierung von Gullah Geechee auf Native Americans an. Diese Manifestation der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* muss, wie ich argumentiere, jedoch nicht zwingend in einem Nullsummenspiel enden. Das Narrativ der Gullah Wars bietet das Potential multi-direktionalen Erinnerns, insofern sowohl historische Widerstände von Native Americans als auch von Afro-Amerikaner*innen sowie deren Kollaboration sichtbar gemacht werden könnten. Ein notwendiger erster Schritt, um diese Wirkung tatsächlich zu erzielen, wäre, bspw. die Nutzung eines Begriffs, der beide Gruppen sichtbar macht, wie Seminole-African Wars, was letztlich jedoch nicht in einem akademischen Diskurs, sondern in Interaktion zwischen den Nachkommen der beiden Gruppen verhandelt werden müsste.

Ich schließe das Kapitel mit einer Diskussion der ausgesprochenen Komplexität von Identitätspolitik unter Rückbezug auf die beschriebene Vielfalt und teils Gegensätzlichkeit der Projekte für die Gullah Geechee Identität aktiviert wird.

Chapter 5: On the Socio-Economic Dimensions of the Gullah Geechee Movement

Kapitel 5 konzentriert sich auf die sozio-ökonomische Situation von Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften und Bemühungen innerhalb der Bewegung Gentrifizierung, Landverlust und der Prekarisierung von Arbeitsverhältnissen entgegenzutreten. Ich beginne mit einer Diskussion demographischer Daten und Statistiken zur politischen Ökonomie des Lowcountry. Während in dieser Hinsicht keine spezifischen Informationen zu Gullah Geechee existieren, lassen sich Trends von der allgemeinen Situation von Afro-Amerikaner*innen ableiten. Afro-Amerikaner*innen machen etwa 30 Prozent der Gesamtbevölkerung des Lowcountry aus, sind jedoch deutlich unterrepräsentiert in verschiedensten entscheidungstragenden gesellschaftlichen Bereichen. Es existieren ausgeprägte Disparitäten zwischen Schwarzen und Weißen Haushalten hinsichtlich von Vermögen, Einkommen, Bildung, oder auch des Zugangs zu Gesundheitsversorgung. In dieser systemischen Benachteiligung von Afro-Amerikaner*innen lassen sich, wie eine Vielzahl von Forschungen aufzeigen, deutliche Kontinuitäten mit vergangenen Formen rassistischer Unterdrückung erkennen. Die treibenden Kräfte in der Wirtschaft des Lowcountry sind die Schifffahrtsindustrie, mit den größten Häfen in Savannah, Georgia, und Charleston, South Carolina, die Schwerindustrie, der Dienstleistungssektor und der Tourismus. Schließlich ist zu betonen, dass das Lowcountry vorwiegend konservativ, das heißt republikanisch, regiert wird, mit entsprechend wirtschaftsliberalen bis hin zu libertären Gesetzgebungen, die vor allem den Eigentümer*innen von Kapital Freiräume schaffen und im Gegenzug geringen Schutz für Arbeitnehmer*innen, Mieter*innen etc. bieten.

Für Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften gehören Landverlust, räumliche Verdrängung und die Prekarisierung von Arbeitsbedingungen zu den dringlichsten Anliegen in sozio-ökonomischer Hinsicht. Der Anfang dieser Prozesse ist bis in das frühe 20. Jh. zurückzuverfolgen und der beginnenden Industrialisierung des Lowcountry sowie des Anstiegs privaten Interesses an Land in der Region. Nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg verschärften sich diese Dynamiken: es kam zu einer zunehmenden Verdrängung von Gullah Geechee Fischern und Farmern durch Großunternehmen, der Dienstleistungssektor weitete sich deutlich aus, insbesondere in Zusammenhang mit dem Wachstum von Tourismus hin zu einem der bedeutendsten Industriezweige der Region, was Gullah Geechee in geringfügige Arbeitsbeschäftigungen relegierte, und die steigende Immigration von Weißen US-Amerikaner*innen der Mittel- und Oberklasse verknappte Land und führte zu einer Erhöhung sowohl der Immobilienpreise und damit verbunden auch der Grundsteuern.

Unter Gullah Geechee lag im Vergleich zu anderen afro-amerikanischen Populationen historisch ein relativ hohes Maß an Landbesitz vor, dies änderte sich jedoch durch die beschriebenen Entwicklungen rapide. Dabei wurde der Gruppe unter anderem auch eine kulturelle Konvention zum Verhängnis: Landbesitz wurde in Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften, in Anschluss an Besitzverhältnisse ihrer afrikanischen Vorfahren, als kollektiv verstanden. In Kombination mit Erfahrungen der systemischen Benachteiligung im US-amerikanischen Rechtssystem wurden bis weit in das 20. Jh. nur selten Testamente verfasst, noch überhaupt Besitzurkunden in Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften gepflegt. Während innerhalb der Gruppe bestimmte einzelne Personen mündlich für die Verwaltung familiären Lands Verantwortung erhielten, wurden nach geltendem Landrecht bei Nichtexistenz von Testamenten automatisch Ansprüche gleichmäßig auf alle Nachkommen der ursprünglichen Besitzer*innen übertragen. In der Folge war es Teilerb*innen möglich eine Aufteilung des Landes zu fordern oder, falls dies von Gerichten als nicht gleichwertig durchführbar bewertet wurde, einen Verkauf zu erzwingen. Diese Situation wird von Immobilienunternehmen seit den 1960er und 1970er Jahren gezielt ausgenutzt, indem sie Erb*innen identifizieren, deren Anteile abkaufen und einen Zwangsverkauf des jeweiligen Grundstücks zu erwirken versuchen. Die Intersektion dieser aggressiven Kauftaktiken mit oben beschriebenen Prekarisierungsdynamiken hat zu massiven Landverlusten unter Gullah Geechee geführt und stellt bis heute eine der zentralen Herausforderungen für die Gruppe dar.

Angesichts der Dringlichkeit des Umgangs mit Landrechten gehört die Klärung von Besitzverhältnissen zu den zentralen Maßnahmen in der sozio-ökonomischen (Selbst-)Ermächtigung von Gullah Geechee. Ich befasse mich in dieser Hinsicht konkret mit der

Arbeit des Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, einer Institution, die kostenfreie rechtliche Beratung für Gullah Geechee anbietet und zudem Grundbesitzer*innen encouragiert ihr Land wirtschaftlich zu nutzen, durch bspw. die nachhaltige Produktion von Bäumen für die Holzindustrie, um eine langfristige Sicherung zu gewährleisten. Darüber hinaus befasse ich mich mit drei Grassroots-Initiativen von Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften, die zu unterschiedlichen Zeitpunkten in den letzten vier Jahrzehnten in enger Zusammenarbeit mit externen Berater*innen Policy Paper erstellt haben. Diese richteten umfassende und detaillierte Empfehlungen an ihre kommunalen Verwaltungen für politisch-rechtliche Schritte, nicht nur, um ihre eigene Integrität zu schützen, sondern die jeweiligen Regionen im Allgemeinen gegen Überbebauung und Gentrifizierungsdynamiken, die auch andere lokale Populationen negativ betreffen, zu stärken. Die ersten solcher Vorstöße fanden bereits in den 1980er Jahren statt, jedoch sind kommunale Verwaltungen bisher kaum darauf eingegangen. In den letzten Jahren wurden schließlich erstmals an einigen Orten verschiedene dieser Empfehlungen aufgenommen, wie die Schaffung von Zonen, in denen Neubebauung nur stark eingeschränkt stattfinden darf. Während einige meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden sich angesichts dieser Entwicklungen hoffnungsvoll gaben, befürchteten andere, dass es sich hierbei nur um kleine Zugeständnisse handeln könnte, jedoch kein grundlegender Wandel stattfinden würde.

Das Spannungsfeld von „lediglich" symbolischer Veränderung versus „tatsächlichen" Wandels zog sich insbesondere auch durch das Feld des Tourismus. Wie angemerkt, stellt die Tourismusindustrie einen der zentralen Wirtschaftszweige des Lowcountry dar und wird in der Bewegung ausgesprochen ambivalent betrachtet. Während manche Aktivist*innen und Institutionen eine Möglichkeit der sozio-ökonomischen Bestärkung im Tourismus sehen, durch eine selbstbestimmte Kommodifizierung von Gullah Geechee Kultur, sehen andere in dem Feld vor allem Problemursachen, so der Tourismus zentral zu Gentrifizierungsdynamiken im Lowcountry beigetragen hat. In ländlichen Küstenregionen hat sich dies vor allem in Form von Resort-Tourismus manifestiert, während in Küstenstädten, wie Charleston oder Savannah, vor allem Renovierungsprojekte als Teil des sogenannten „urban renewal" und der „historic preservation" zur Verdrängung ganzer Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften führten. Hierbei spielten die jeweiligen kommunalen Verwaltungen beziehungsweise Stadtverwaltungen eine aktive Rolle, insofern derartige Projekte gezielt von Stadtplanern zur Deplatzierung Schwarzer Populationen genutzt wurden. Dies wurde zumeist von einer Rhetorik begleitet, die Tourismus und die allgemeine „Aufwertung" von Stadtteilen als der gesamten Bevölkerung dienlich behauptete. Viele meiner Forschungsteilnehmenden waren aufgrund derartiger Erfahrungen zutiefst skeptisch

gegenüber jeglicher Versprechen politischer Repräsentant*innen. Augenscheinlich positive Veränderungen, wie ein verstärktes Gedenken Schwarzer Geschichte durch Informationstafeln in verschiedenen Orten, wurden häufig als oberflächliche und rein symbolische Akte begriffen, ohne tatsächliche Konsequenz für die Lebensrealitäten von Afro-Amerikaner*innen und Gullah Geechee.

Gleichzeitig hat die Tourismusindustrie jedoch auch einen Markt geschaffen, in dem Gullah Geechee Köche, Tourguides, Musiker*innen, Künstler*innen und viele andere auf Basis ihres kulturellen Erbes selbständig Ihren Lebensunterhalt bestreiten können. In einigen Fällen hat in diesem Zusammenhang der Tourismus gar eine Basis geschaffen für die Reproduktion kultureller Praktiken. Das prominenteste Beispiel in dieser Hinsicht ist das Flechten von sweetgrass baskets - Körben, die noch heute gemäß der von ihren afrikanischen Vorfahren tradierten Techniken von bestimmten Gullah Geechee Familien gefertigt werden. Sweetgrass baskets spielten historisch eine zentrale Rolle in der Reisplantagenwirtschaft, wurden nach Ende der Versklavung ökonomisch jedoch zunehmend irrelevant. Aufgrund dessen verschwand das Wissen um ihre Herstellung nach und nach in verschiedenen Regionen des Lowcountry gänzlich. In der Stadt Mt. Pleasant, neben wenigen anderen Orten, haben einige Familien das Wissen um das Flechten von sweetgrass baskets erhalten können, so zu Beginn des 20. Jh. Reisende auf ihrem Weg von Norden nach Süden auf die Körbe aufmerksam geworden waren und sich schließlich ein Markt für diese entwickelte. Sweetgrass baskets wurden somit in den 1920er und 1930er Jahren eine bedeutende Einnahmequelle in Mt. Pleasant, vor allem für Gullah Geechee Frauen, was gleichzeitig die materielle Grundlage darstellte, die kulturelle Praxis überhaupt zu reproduzieren. Die Körbe sind heute zu einer Kunstform geworden und stellen zudem ein ausgesprochen beliebtes Souvenir dar. Am Fall der sweetgrass baskets zeigen sich jedoch auch Grenzen der positiven Effekte der Tourismusindustrie für Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften. Nur wenige Familien können sich ausschließlich von der Herstellung der Körbe ihren Lebensunterhalt finanzieren – ähnlich verhält es sich auch mit anderen Tätigkeiten im Tourismus.

Die beschriebenen Kommodifizierungsdynamiken wecken in Teilen der Bewegung auch Sorge vor einer Verwässerung von Gullah Geechee Kultur. Dabei erscheint ein grundlegender Widerspruch zwischen Monetarisierung und genuiner kultureller Hingabe wahrgenommen zu werden. Tatsächlich ist es in den letzten Jahren zur Vermehrung sogenannter Gullah Geechee „frauds“ gekommen. Es handelt sich hierbei um Afro-Amerikaner*innen, die von sich behaupten Gullah Geechee zu sein, jedoch keine tatsächliche persönliche Verbindung zur Gruppe besitzen und in einigen Fällen die Kultur bewusst exotisieren, um die Bedürfnisse von Tourist*innen zu befriedigen. Ich selbst habe einen

solchen Fall beobachten können. Es handelte sich dabei um einen Schwarzen Tourguide, der verwandtschaftliche Beziehungen zu einigen bekannten Gullah Geechee Persönlichkeiten Charlestons behauptete, von der sich jedoch keine verifizieren ließ, und dessen Führung zu Gullah Geechee Geschichte und Kultur letztlich auf verschwörungsmythischen Erzählungen basierte und grob verandernde bis hin zu rassistische Behauptungen über die Ursprünge der Gruppe produzierte. Hierin lässt sich schließlich ebenfalls eine Form der *politics of „ethnic Blackness"* identifizieren, die sich Gullah Geechee Identität gezielt zu ökonomischen Zwecken bedient und ganz fassbar macht, wie Identitätspolitik, im Sinne der Verhandlung von Gruppenzugehörigkeiten, unmittelbare materielle Konsequenzen haben kann. Es existieren jedoch auch Kleinunternehmen, wie die in Kapitel 4 bereits genannten Bekleidungsgeschäfte, die ihre Arbeit als Möglichkeit betrachten Aufklärungsarbeit zu und Stolz für Gullah Geechee Kultur zu schaffen. Ich argumentiere daher schließlich, dass eine dichotome Gegenüberstellung von Geld und Kultur der Komplexität von Kommodifierungsdynamiken nicht gerecht wird und sich Akteur*innen nicht automatisch gemäß fester Skripts verhalten, sondern Navigationsspielräume bestehen hinsichtlich der Weisen zu welchen Zwecken die Monetarisierung kultureller Praktiken genutzt wird.

Die GGCHCC beispielsweise besitzt hinsichtlich von Tourismus einen eher pragmatischen Ansatz und betrachtet den Sektor als ein zentrales Mittel in ihrer Strategie der sozio-ökonomischen Stärkung von Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften. Die damalige Direktorin der Commission teilte mir mit, dass während sie sich der Risiken der Tourismusindustrie vollends bewusst sei, sich die gegeben Realitäten nicht einfach ändern ließen, und sich vor allem die Frage stelle, ob Gullah Geechee Gemeinschaften eine aktive Rolle einnehmen wollten in den ohnehin stattfindenden Prozessen. Die GGN hingegen vertritt eine grundsätzlich kritische Position dem Tourismus gegenüber. Queen Quet sieht in den Kommodifizierungsdynamiken vor allem die Gefahr der neoliberalen Trivialisierung und Verdinglichung von Gullah Geechee Geschichte und Kultur zu bloßen Unterhaltungswerten. Nichtsdestotrotz ist die GGN letztlich auch in die Tourismusindustrie involviert, wenn auch lediglich in Form eines community tourism, der in kleinem Rahmen und unter möglichst großer Kontrolle der jeweiligen Gemeinschaft stattfindet.

Abschließend identifiziere ich die verschiedenen sozio-ökonomischen Herausforderungen, denen Gullah Geechee ausgesetzt sind, bei all ihren Spezifika als Symptome größerer Marginalisierungsdynamiken der politischen Ökonomie der Vereinigten Staaten. Während lokale und regionale Initiativen und Projekte bedeutende Fortschritte erwirkt haben, erfordern viele der diskutierten Probleme größere Transformationsprozesse für die Erreichung nachhaltiger Veränderungen.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In der „Conclusion“ fasse ich die vorherigen Kapitel kurz zusammen, mit einem Fokus auf die Verbindungen zwischen den zentralen Argumenten, die ich jeweils verfolgt habe. In Rückbezug auf die Einleitung der Dissertation verdeutliche ich, wie meine Analyse der Gullah Geechee Bewegung aufgezeigt hat, dass die gängige Kritik an Identitätspolitik in vielerlei Hinsicht als reduktionistisch zu erachten ist: während bestimmte Formen von Identitätspolitik zwar tatsächlich fragmentierende Wirkung haben und sozio-ökonomische Anliegen vernachlässigen können, macht dies lediglich einen möglichen Teil des Phänomens aus. Am Beispiel der Gullah Geechee Bewegung habe ich aufgezeigt, wie identitätspolitische Praktiken auch das genaue Gegenteil bewirken und verbindende Funktion haben – wie ersichtlich in der Mobilisierung anderer Afro-Amerikaner*innen und auch Weißer Allies durch die Bewegung – als auch, vor dem Hintergrund der komplexen Lebensrealitäten der involvierten Akteur*innen, untrennbar mit sozio-ökonomischen und politisch-rechtlichen Anliegen verbunden sein können. Aus diesem Grund, so argumentiere ich abschließend, ist ein Bewusstsein für das, was uns unterscheidet, oder genauer gesagt, ein Bewusstsein dafür, wie wir unterschiedlich positioniert sind, ohne aus den Augen zu verlieren was uns wiederum grundsätzlich eint, eine notwendige Grundlage für die Verwirklichung eines intersektionalen Kampfes für Gerechtigkeit