“Decolonial Methods and Epistemologies in the Study of Gullah Geechee Ecological and Spiritual Practices”

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Introduction

The Gullah Geechee people, descendants of enslaved Africans who reside along the coastal Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, embody a profound connection to their land and cultural heritage. Their rich storytelling traditions, music, basket weaving, rice farming, and ecological stewardship are rooted in ancestral knowledge systems that have endured centuries of colonization, slavery, systemic marginalization, and socio-economic segregation. However, these vibrant practices are increasingly threatened by urban development, land dispossession, and the ongoing erosion of cultural sovereignty. Addressing these challenges necessitates a framework that recognizes and validates Gullah Geechee epistemologies while challenging previous and current colonial structures that perpetuate the at the hands of conceptions of progress based on a Western-centric capitalistic concept of progress and development of resources and the land.

Decolonial methodologies play a critical role in dismantling these entrenched colonial narratives that perpetuate the dispossession of land and erasure of cultural identities. Rooted in understanding the ongoing coloniality of power, these approaches prioritize relational and community-centered ways of knowing. They challenge the hegemony of Eurocentric paradigms that often marginalize or render invisible the epistemologies of historically oppressed communities. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue, decoloniality is not merely about addressing past injustices but actively creating pathways to autonomy and sovereignty for colonized peoples through a rendition of their unique knowledge systems and cultural practices (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 2).

This paper examines how decolonial methodologies can illuminate the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to land dispossession and cultural erasure. The Gullah Geechee people, descendants of West African enslaved individuals as well as smaller groups of Indigenous Americans from the coastal regions of the Carolinas that integrated into these communities, have preserved a distinct cultural identity and land-based epistemology through their connection to the Sea Islands along the southeastern United States. These epistemologies are deeply intertwined with ecological stewardship practices, oral traditions, and spiritual expressions that resist colonial land use and ownership definitions. For instance, their communal rice farming techniques and spiritual narratives demonstrate the inseparability of cultural identity and ecological stewardship (Campbell 2008, 25). Furthermore, their preservation of cultural memory offers a model of resistance that resonates with Cynthia Dillard's concept of "re-membering," wherein ancestral knowledge is reclaimed and made integral to present and future struggles for autonomy (Dillard 2021, 11).

This paper's central research question is: *How can decolonial methodologies illuminate the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to land dispossession and cultural erasure with the use of activism in local areas of South Carolina?* Addressing this question requires exploring how Gullah Geechee traditions embody relational and place-based knowledge systems that challenge colonial power structures. By situating the Gullah Geechee community's practices within broader decolonial frameworks, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on decolonial methodologies and their potential for advancing cultural sovereignty and ecological justice. Through this lens, the Gullah Geechee experience offers a vital case study for understanding how marginalized communities resist the persistent colonial matrix of power in pursuit of liberation and sustainability through local and authentic activism rather than more

qualitative or quantitative research methods. Even the National Park Service makes this distinction between more research and the need for activism clear in its findings in 2005 as it was preparing for the Cultural Corridor legislation that was passed by Congress:

> "Research for the sake of research is no longer acceptable; therefore, all future research within the Sea Islands should be approached with an agenda for contributing, in some way, to local communities" (National Park Service, 418).

Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Decolonial Methodologies

Decolonial methodologies are deeply rooted in critiques of the coloniality of power, a concept developed by Aníbal Quijano to describe how colonial systems of domination persist even in postcolonial societies. Quijano argues that coloniality extends beyond political control, embedding itself into cultural, economic, and epistemological structures perpetuating inequality and exclusion (Quijano 2000, 534). This framework provides a critical lens through which to analyze the historical and ongoing marginalization of the Gullah Geechee people. Their cultural sovereignty has been systematically undermined by colonial power structures that prioritize exploitative land use and disregard their epistemological contributions to ecological stewardship and cultural preservation.

Sylvia Wynter's critique of Western epistemologies further illuminates the marginalization of Gullah Geechee ways of knowing compared to the broader colonialist agendas of South Carolina's power, political, and socio-economic frameworks. Wynter asserts that Western modernity's claim to universal knowledge has historically delegitimized alternative epistemologies, framing them as primitive or inferior (Wynter 2003, 267). This epistemic violence is evident in the exclusion of the Gullah Geechee community from decision-making processes regarding land use and environmental policy. For instance, despite their profound

connection to the land and its resources, Gullah Geechee voices were largely absent from discussions leading to the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act, which aimed to preserve their cultural heritage but often operated within colonial frameworks (Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012, 15). These methodologies challenge the colonial monopoly on knowledge and foreground the community's inherent sovereignty and role as stewards of the land and its cultural memory.

Relational Knowledge and Place-Based Methodologies

The Gullah Geechee community's cultural practices provide a profound example of relational epistemology, connecting human activity to the ecological rhythms of land and water. These practices challenge colonial frameworks by centering relationships, interdependence, and reciprocity. For the Gullah Geechee people, land and water are not mere resources but imbued with memory, spirituality, and responsibility (Boley and Gaither 2015, 5). This orientation is evident in their rice farming, fishing, and storytelling traditions, which weave a tapestry of cultural and ecological knowledge. Emory Campbell, a leading Gullah Geechee scholar, explains that rice farming techniques adapted from African agricultural systems symbolize the community's resilience and ingenuity. These techniques were vital for survival and served as acts of cultural preservation and defiance against the plantation economy's erasure of African heritage (Campbell 2008, 28). Similarly, Judith Carney highlights how the Gullah Geechee people's mastery of rice cultivation transformed the South Carolina Lowcountry, creating a distinct cultural and ecological landscape shaped by African diasporic traditions (Carney 2001, 112). Additionally, Keith Basso asserts that;

> "But there is more to making place-worlds than living local history in a localized kind of way. In addition, place-making is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of

> fashioning novel versions of "what happened here." For every developed place-world manifests itself as a possible state of affairs, and whenever these constructions are accepted by other people as credible and convincingor plausible and provocative, or arresting and intriguingthey enrich the common stock on which everyone can draw to muse on past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them anew. Building and sharing place-worlds, in other words, is not only a means of reviving former times but also of revising them, a means of exploring not merely how things might have been but also how, just possibly, they might have been different from what others have supposed." (Basso 1996, 24).

In examining these practices, it becomes clear that Gullah Geechee knowledge systems resist colonial narratives by asserting a land-based sovereignty that transcends legal definitions according to traditional local ordinances in Beaufort and Charleston counties of South Carolina. Their relationship with the land is not one of ownership but *stewardship*, informed by a cosmology that sees land, water, and community as inseparable. This epistemology directly challenges the "traditional" notion of land as a commodity to be exploited. For example, the practice of controlled burning, historically dismissed or outlawed by colonial and modern authorities, reflects a sophisticated understanding of ecological management passed along through the centuries via Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Using fire as a tool, the Gullah Geechee people cultivated landscapes that supported biodiversity and sustainable agriculture, echoing Indigenous approaches to land care in other parts of the world.

Ecological Reciprocity and Cultural Identity

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* provides an additional lens for understanding the reciprocal relationship between ecological stewardship and cultural identity. Kimmerer introduces the concept of the "gift economy," where the natural world is understood as a generous giver, and humans are responsible for maintaining balance through acts of gratitude and care (Kimmerer 2013, 25). This perspective adds insight to Gullah Geechee epistemologies, which view land and water as entities deserving of respect and stewardship.

Practices such as fishing in tidal creeks or planting indigo for dyeing are imbued with reciprocity, acknowledging the land's gifts while ensuring its sustainability for future generations rather than extractive tools used to dominate an area to provide the most commercial or economic benefit regardless of other concerns.

Kimmerer's notion of the "grammar of animacy" further illuminates the linguistic and cultural frameworks that foreground relationships over domination (Kimmerer 2013, 56). For the Gullah Geechee people, the language of storytelling, whether through oral histories, spirituals, or folktales, serves as a medium for transmitting ecological and cultural knowledge. These stories often feature lessons about respect for nature, such as the importance of tidal rhythms in fishing or the dangers of overharvesting. By embedding ecological wisdom within narrative traditions, the Gullah Geechee people maintain a dynamic relationship with their environment that resists the extractive logic of colonial modernity.

Lessons for Decolonial Praxis and Activism

The Gullah Geechee community's relational epistemologies offer vital lessons for decolonial praxis. By centering relationality, they model an approach to knowledge production that prioritizes connection, accountability, and reciprocity. This starkly contrasts with Western academic traditions, which often treat knowledge as an object to be extracted and commodified. Instead, Gullah Geechee practices exemplify Kimmerer's "grammar of animacy," where the natural world is recognized as a co-creator of knowledge rather than a passive resource (Kimmerer 2013, 56).

Furthermore, the parallels with other Indigenous and even settler-colonial traditional ecological knowledge systems underscore relational epistemologies' universality as tools for

decolonial research and practical activism. Both traditions highlight the importance of grounding methodologies in local contexts while remaining open to intercultural dialogue. Drawing on ancestral wisdom and ecological stewardship, these practices challenge the colonial matrix of power and offer alternative frameworks for imagining sustainable futures.

Challenging Western-Eurocentric Paradigms

The struggle of the Gullah Geechee community against land dispossession and cultural erasure exemplifies the broader project of challenging Eurocentric paradigms in knowledge production and ecological governance. We must interrogate how colonial frameworks devalue Southern epistemologies as expressed in the following thinkers, intersect race and gender in oppressive ways, and suppress ecological resistance movements that center on relationality and reciprocity.

Epistemologies of the South

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' *The End of the Cognitive Empire* provides a crucial lens for understanding the marginalization of Southern epistemologies and their potential to disrupt Eurocentric knowledge systems. Santos argues that "epistemologies of the South" are marginalized not because they lack sophistication but because they challenge the universalizing claims of Western modernity (Santos 2018, 108). The Gullah Geechee community's land-based practices, which combine ecological stewardship with cultural sovereignty, exemplify these epistemologies. Their practices are often dismissed as "folk knowledge" by urban planners and developers, perpetuating the colonial notion that Western objective science is the sole arbiter of truth. For example, the controlled burns historically employed by the Gullah Geechee to manage forested areas are undervalued despite their proven ecological benefits. Instead, colonial

frameworks impose Western land management practices that disrupt the delicate balance maintained by Gullah Geechee knowledge systems (Campbell 2008, 53).

The marginalization of Gullah Geechee epistemologies is further evident in the context of urban development and gentrification. The rapid transformation of South Carolina's Sea Islands into luxury resorts and gated communities threatens not only the physical displacement of the Gullah Geechee people but also the erasure of their cultural landscape. Santos reminds us that "intercultural translation is always inter-political translation," highlighting the need for dialogues that respect and integrate Southern epistemologies into policy-making processes (Santos 2018, 112). The absence of such dialogues exacerbates the devaluation of Gullah Geechee knowledge systems and perpetuates the colonial matrix of power.

The Intersection of Land and Race

María Lugones' concept of the coloniality of gender provides another critical framework for analyzing the Gullah Geechee community's struggle. Lugones argues that colonialism imposed racialized and gendered hierarchies that continue to shape social and ecological relationships (Lugones 2010, 745). The Gullah Geechee's activism in the media, activism through art and music, and activism in local politics for land sovereignty are deeply intertwined with these hierarchies. For instance, the patriarchal structures imposed by colonial systems often excluded Black women from decision-making processes related to land ownership, perpetuating their marginalization. However, Gullah Geechee women have historically played a central role in preserving cultural practices and advocating for land rights, embodying a resistance that disrupts

both racial and gendered hierarchies (Ghahramani, McArdle, Fatorić 2020, 9)[1]. As Carolyn Merchant asserts,

> "Now, ecology and the women's movement have begun to challenge the values on which that opinion is based. By critically reexamining history from these perspectives, we may begin to discover values associated with the premodern world that may be worthy of transformation and reintegration into today's and tomorrow's society." (Merchant 1980, xxii).

The intersection of race and gender is also evident in the cultural narratives surrounding the Gullah Geechee people. Often romanticized as "noble savages" or exoticized for their unique traditions, their lived experiences of oppression and resilience are frequently overlooked. This erasure serves to dehumanize the Gullah Geechee and justify their exclusion from land-use decisions. Lugones' critique of the coloniality of gender underscores the importance of dismantling these intersecting oppressions to support decolonial praxis that centers relationality and equity (Lugones 2010, 751).

Ecological Resistance and Activism

The ecological resistance of the Gullah Geechee people can be further contextualized through a comparative analysis of the Karuk people's opposition to dam projects on the Klamath River. Kari Marie Norgaard's *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People* illustrates how the Karuk people's resistance is rooted in a relational epistemology that views rivers and salmon as kin rather than resources to be exploited (Norgaard 2019, 45). Similarly, the Gullah Geechee

[1] This is particularly an incredibly important area of research that this project will seek to study in the coming years with more ethnographic focus. As the authors here highlight: "Strengthening gender equality, particularly the adaptive capacity of Gullah Geechee's women, can help to enhance their community resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change hazards. This systematic review revealed that while a small portion of the publications (n = 11, 17%) studied both female and male community members, a few publications (n = 2, 3%) focused only on female participants. Hence, future studies should focus on fostering gender equality in research, as well as on improving social and economic infrastructure that would support building resilience of Gullah Geechee women and their intangible heritage and associated livelihoods (e.g., sustainable tourism practices) against climate change risks." (p. 11).

people's opposition to coastal development and industrial agriculture reflects a worldview prioritizing ecological health and cultural survival over economic profit.

Both communities demonstrate how ecological resistance is a form of decolonial praxis. For the Gullah Geechee, fighting coastal erosion, industrial shrimping, and the privatization of sea islands is not just about preserving land but also about maintaining the cultural and spiritual connections that define their identity. These struggles reveal the limitations of Western environmental frameworks, which often prioritize conservation as an abstract goal while ignoring the lived realities of Indigenous and diasporic communities.

The comparative analysis also highlights the shared challenges communities face in resisting ecological degradation. The Karuk and Gullah Geechee peoples contend with the imposition of colonial land-use policies that ignore their relational epistemologies. Norgaard emphasizes that decolonial methodologies must prioritize the voices of those most affected by environmental injustices, challenging the extractive practices of Western academia and policy-making (Norgaard 2019, 72). This perspective aligns with Gullah Geechee's advocacy for participatory land-use planning incorporating their traditional ecological knowledge.

Reimagining Sovereignty

Ultimately, challenging Eurocentric paradigms requires reimagining sovereignty as relational rather than territorial. The Gullah Geechee's resistance to development is not simply a demand for legal recognition but an assertion of their right to exist as a community defined by reciprocal relationships with land and water. By centering decolonial methodologies, we can move beyond the binary of Western conservation and development to envision frameworks that honor the interconnectedness of cultural and ecological systems.

Applications of Decolonial Methodologies to Gullah Geechee Activism

Decolonial methodologies provide an invaluable framework for understanding and addressing the ongoing struggles of the Gullah Geechee community for land sovereignty and cultural preservation. This section examines specific applications of these methodologies through the lenses of land education, intercultural translation, and relational ethics. By grounding these concepts in the lived experiences and epistemologies of the Gullah Geechee people, we can explore how decolonial praxis offers pathways for advocacy, sustainability, and justice.

Land Education and Gullah Geechee Advocacy

Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy's "land pedagogy" concept emphasizes the importance of reconnecting communities to the land as a form of resistance against colonial dispossession (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2015, 19). For the Gullah Geechee people, land is not merely a physical territory but a repository of cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and spiritual connection. The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, established by the U.S. Congress in 2006, is a powerful example of community-led advocacy that embodies the principles of land pedagogy. This federally recognized corridor spans the coastal regions of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, preserving sites of historical and cultural significance while fostering education and tourism rooted in the Gullah Geechee way of life.

The Heritage Corridor exemplifies a decolonial approach to land education by centering on the narratives and epistemologies of the Gullah Geechee people. Its programs and initiatives, such as oral history projects and sustainable farming workshops, seek to reconnect younger generations with traditional practices like rice cultivation and fishing. These practices are not merely economic activities but integral to the Gullah Geechee's cultural identity and survival. By

framing land education as a tool for empowerment, the Heritage Corridor counters colonial narratives that depict the Gullah Geechee as relics of the past, emphasizing their agency and adaptability in the face of modern challenges.

However, the Heritage Corridor also raises questions about the limits of federal recognition within a colonial framework. While it provides resources and visibility, it does not grant the Gullah Geechee full sovereignty over their land or protect them from the pressures of gentrification and development. Tuck et al. remind us that land pedagogy must go beyond symbolic gestures to address the structural inequalities perpetuating land dispossession (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2015, 31). In this context, Gullah Geechee's advocacy efforts highlight the need for policies prioritizing community-led decision-making and protecting ancestral lands from exploitation.

Intercultural Translation and Gullah Geechee Knowledge Systems

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of intercultural translation offers a valuable framework for understanding how the Gullah Geechee integrate diverse epistemologies into their cultural and ecological practices. Santos defines intercultural translation as a process of dialogue and negotiation between different knowledge systems that respect their autonomy while fostering mutual understanding (Santos 2018, 112). For the Gullah Geechee, this process is evident in blending African, Indigenous, and European influences in their traditions, from their language (Gullah Creole) to their agricultural techniques.

One striking example of intercultural translation is the Gullah Geechee's adaptation of African rice-growing techniques to the marshy landscapes of the Southeastern United States. Drawing on knowledge systems developed in West Africa, enslaved Gullah ancestors

transformed these coastal regions into some of the most productive rice fields in the Americas. This agricultural ingenuity exemplifies how they combined ancestral wisdom with an acute understanding of their unfamiliar environment, creating a sustainable system supporting economic and cultural resilience (Carney 2001, 95).

Today, the Gullah Geechee continue to engage in intercultural translation as they navigate the challenges of climate change and urbanization. For instance, their traditional practices of controlled burns and oyster reef restoration align with contemporary ecological principles, offering models for sustainable resource management. These practices demonstrate the value of integrating Indigenous and community-based knowledge systems into broader environmental policies. Santos emphasizes that such integration requires dismantling the epistemological hierarchies that privilege Western science over other ways of knowing (Santos 2018, 135). In the case of the Gullah Geechee, this means recognizing their ecological practices not as "alternatives" but as vital contributions to global sustainability efforts.

Relational Ethics in Research with Gullah Geechee Communities

Dwayne Donald's concept of Métissage emphasizes the importance of ethical relationality in research, mainly when working with communities whose histories and knowledge systems have been marginalized by colonial frameworks (Donald 2009, 6). Métissage, derived from the French word for "mixing," refers to the weaving together of diverse perspectives and experiences to create a more inclusive understanding of the world. This approach aligns with the relational ethics central to decolonial methodologies, which prioritize reciprocity, accountability, and respect for the autonomy of research participants.

When engaging with the Gullah Geechee community, researchers must navigate the complexities of relational ethics with care and humility. Historically, academic research has often treated the Gullah Geechee as objects of study rather than partners in knowledge production, perpetuating a colonial dynamic of extraction and exploitation. Donald's Métissage calls for a different approach that views research as a collaborative process that benefits both the researcher and the community (Donald 2009, 10). This requires building relationships based on trust, listening to community voices, and ensuring that the research outcomes align with the community's goals and values.

One way to embody relational ethics in research with the Gullah Geechee is through participatory action research (PAR). This methodology actively involves community members in all stages of the research process, from defining the research question to analyzing the results. For example, a PAR project on coastal resilience might collaborate with Gullah Geechee fishermen and farmers to document their traditional practices and incorporate their insights into climate adaptation strategies. Such an approach validates the community's knowledge and empowers them to shape the policies that affect their lives.

Relational ethics also extends to how researchers represent the Gullah Geechee in their work. As Cynthia Dillard argues in *The Spirit of Our Work*, researchers have a responsibility to honor their subjects' cultural and spiritual dimensions, avoiding reductive or sensationalist portrayals (Dillard 2021, 67). For the Gullah Geechee, this means acknowledging the centrality of spirituality in their relationship with the land, as expressed through rituals, songs, and storytelling. By incorporating these elements into their research, scholars can offer a more nuanced and respectful portrayal of Gullah Geechee culture.

Decolonial Praxis as a Path Forward

The applications of decolonial methodologies to Gullah Geechee studies illustrate the transformative potential of these approaches for both research and advocacy. By centering land education, intercultural translation, and relational ethics, we can challenge the colonial narratives that have historically marginalized the Gullah Geechee and support their ongoing struggles for sovereignty and sustainability. These methodologies illuminate the richness of Gullah Geechee's knowledge systems and offer lessons for broader efforts to decolonize academia and society.

Ultimately, the Gullah Geechee's resilience and creativity in the face of systemic oppression underscore the importance of viewing decoloniality as a collective and relational practice. As researchers, policymakers, and allies, we must strive to co-create knowledge that honors past wisdom while envisioning a more just and inclusive future. By doing so, we can contribute to the broader decoloniality project, transforming how we conduct research and relate to one another and the world.

The Role of Researchers in Decolonial Praxis

Decolonial praxis necessitates a fundamental shift in how researchers approach communities that colonial systems have historically marginalized. The Gullah Geechee people, whose cultural practices and ancestral lands are inextricably linked, provide a case study for understanding researchers' ethical and epistemological responsibilities in decolonial work. This section examines two central aspects of this role: critical self-reflection and ethical reciprocity, grounding these discussions in the works of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Cynthia Dillard.

Critical Self-Reflection and Positionality

Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes the importance of positionality in decolonial research, urging researchers to critically examine their roles, biases, and assumptions (Smith 2012, 137). In the Gullah Geechee community context, positionality requires acknowledging the historical and ongoing power dynamics that have shaped their struggles for land and cultural sovereignty. For researchers from outside the community, this involves recognizing the privilege inherent in academic and institutional contexts and how these privileges can perpetuate colonial hierarchies.

Critical self-reflection extends beyond individual awareness to include the broader structures within which research is conducted. Smith highlights that decolonial research must actively resist the extractive tendencies of academic knowledge production, which often prioritizes publication and recognition over community benefit (Smith 2012, 146). Researchers working with the Gullah Geechee must ask themselves difficult questions: Who benefits from this research? Whose voices are being amplified or silenced? How can the research process contribute to the community's goals and needs rather than simply documenting their experiences?

In practice, critical self-reflection may involve revisiting research methods and rethinking the framing of research questions. For example, rather than approaching the Gullah Geechee as subjects to be studied, researchers can position themselves as collaborators, co-creating knowledge that centers the community's perspectives and priorities. This approach aligns with the decolonial commitment to relationality and underscores the researcher's accountability to the community they engage with.

As Ghahramani, McArdle, and Fatorić state,

> "Educating the public on perceived historical wrongs to minority or marginalized groups is a challenging task, requiring insight and sensitivity to historical contexts, as well as to the ongoing struggles of minority and/or marginalized populations." (Ghahramani, McArdle, and Fatorić 2020, 2).

Ethical Reciprocity and "Re-Membering"

Cynthia Dillard's concept of "re-membering" provides a framework for ethical reciprocity in research, emphasizing the need to honor ancestral knowledge and cultural resilience (Dillard 2021, 34). For the Gullah Geechee, whose traditions are deeply rooted in both African and Indigenous worldviews, "re-membering" involves reconnecting with their heritage's spiritual, ecological, and social dimensions. Researchers can support this process by creating spaces for the community to share their stories, practices, and insights on their terms.

Ethical reciprocity also requires moving beyond the transactional nature of traditional research. Dillard argues that researchers are morally obligated to give back to the communities they engage with through tangible resources, advocacy, or the amplification of their voices in broader policy discussions (Dillard 2021, 58). For the Gullah Geechee, this might involve supporting initiatives like the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor or collaborating on projects that address the threats posed by climate change and gentrification.

An example of ethical reciprocity in action is using participatory research methods, such as community workshops or oral history projects. These methods validate the knowledge of the Gullah Geechee and empower them to take an active role in shaping the research outcomes. Dillard's framework highlights the importance of building trust and establishing long-term relationships with the community, ensuring the research process is as meaningful as its results (Dillard 2021, 73).

Reimagining the Role of Researchers

The role of researchers in decolonial praxis is not simply to document or analyze but to engage in a transformative process that challenges colonial epistemologies and amplifies marginalized voices. Smith notes that this requires reimagining research as a relational and participatory practice that prioritizes the community's needs and aspirations over academic conventions (Smith 2012, 219). In the case of the Gullah Geechee, researchers must be willing to unlearn colonial assumptions about knowledge and authority, embracing a more collaborative and inclusive approach to inquiry.

This reimagining also involves recognizing the interconnectedness of land, culture, and spirituality in Gullah Geechee epistemologies. Researchers must approach these relationships humbly, understanding that their role is not to "give voice" to the community but to listen, learn, and support it. By centering the Gullah Geechee's narratives and priorities, researchers can contribute to a broader project of decoloniality that seeks not only to understand the past but also to build a more just and equitable future.

However, research and community engagement in these communities of South Carolina must not be extractive or exploitative in approaches, goals or aims. As Amanda Baugh points out in her seminal work regarding such unintentional (and intentional) aspirations;

> "Her goal was for the African American community to "go green" and become knowledgeable about environmental issues and practices. Even though most of the African Americans she worked with already were middle class, she wanted them to engage in classed behaviors such as organic gardening and shopping at farmers' markets that would signify that status to others." (Baugh 2017, 102).

Ultimately, researchers' roles in decolonial praxis are both a privilege and a responsibility. They must be committed to self-reflection, reciprocity, and relationality and

willing to challenge the structures and assumptions of the academic world. For those working with the Gullah Geechee, this means honoring their resilience and creativity while advocating for the systemic changes needed to protect their land, culture, and way of life.

Future Directions: Pluriversality and Gullah Geechee Futures

The Gullah Geechee community's ongoing struggle to maintain cultural sovereignty and resist land exploitation exemplifies a broader decolonial effort to envision alternative futures. This section draws on the works of Arturo Escobar and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson to frame these efforts within the concepts of pluriversality and cultural resurgence, providing a pathway for ecological and cultural sustainability.

Pluriversal Futures and Land Sovereignty

Arturo Escobar's concept of pluriversality offers a powerful lens for understanding the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to homogenizing forces of globalization and colonial capitalism. Escobar defines pluriversality as "a world where many worlds fit," emphasizing the coexistence of diverse ways of knowing, being, and relating (Escobar 2018, 121). The Gullah Geechee's land-based epistemologies rooted in practices such as communal farming, storytelling, and spiritual traditions challenge the Eurocentric paradigms prioritizing land commodification and resource extraction. Accordingly, Basso asserts that "societies must survive, but social life is more than just surviving. And cultural meanings are epiphenomenal only for those who choose to make them so." (Basso, 1996, 67).

In resisting urban development and gentrification on the Sea Islands, the Gullah Geechee assert their right to a pluriversal future that values cultural and ecological relationships over

profit. For example, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor serves as a tangible manifestation of pluriversality, preserving cultural practices while advocating for sustainable land use (Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2012). Escobar's framework invites researchers to support these efforts by amplifying Gullah Geechee's voices and advocating for policies that protect their cultural and environmental sovereignty.

Cultural Resurgence as a Model for Sustainability

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concept of resurgence further illuminates how the Gullah Geechee can serve as an ecological and cultural sustainability model. As Simpson articulates, resurgence involves reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems and practices to restore relationships with the land and community (Simpson 2017, 34). For the Gullah Geechee, this involves preserving traditional practices and adapting them to contemporary challenges, such as climate change and sea-level rise.

One example of resurgence in action is the Gullah Geechee's use of traditional ecological knowledge to address environmental challenges. Practices like controlled burning, rotational farming, and sustainable fishing reflect a deep understanding of local ecosystems and their rhythms. These practices align with Simpson's vision of resurgence and demonstrate how cultural traditions can inform innovative solutions to ecological crises while reinforcing communal bonds.

Implications for Decolonial Methodologies

Integrating pluriversality and resurgence into Gullah Geechee's advocacy highlights the transformative potential of decolonial methodologies. These frameworks encourage researchers to move beyond extractive knowledge production toward approaches prioritizing relationality,

reciprocity, and community empowerment. By centering Gullah Geechee's epistemologies and practices, researchers can contribute to creating pluriversal futures that honor the diversity of human and ecological relationships and enables an activist stance armed with knowledge generated not by socio-economic concerns rooted in capitalistic colonialist structures, but with wisdom and "enlightenment" from authentic relational praxis with the land, ecosystems, spirituality, and justice.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how decolonial methodologies can illuminate and support the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to cultural erasure and land dispossession. By examining the historical and conceptual foundations of decolonial methods, the relational knowledge systems of the Gullah Geechee, and the ethical responsibilities of researchers, this study underscores the transformative potential of decolonial praxis to challenge systemic inequities and create alternative futures. The process of engaging with these frameworks has been deeply instructive, not only in advancing my understanding of the Gullah Geechee community but also in refining my perspective as a researcher committed to decolonial work.

The research question put forth at the beginning of this paper; *how can decolonial methodologies illuminate the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to land dispossession and cultural erasure through activism?* has guided this inquiry into the interplay between place-based epistemologies, relational ethics, and broader power structures. Drawing from scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I have gained a deeper appreciation of how marginalized communities navigate the colonial matrix of power while maintaining cultural resilience. Concepts like Escobar's pluriversality, Simpson's

resurgence, and Santos' intercultural translation have been invaluable in framing the Gullah Geechee's practices as not merely resistance but as acts of creation and transformation, contributing to the possibility of pluriversal futures (Escobar 2018; Simpson 2017; Santos 2018).

One of the key insights from this semester has been the recognition that decolonial methodologies are not merely academic exercises but deeply relational practices. However, methodologies rooted in relationality can challenge Western epistemological hierarchies and offer new ways of understanding the interconnectedness of people, land, and knowledge. The Gullah Geechee community's land-based practices, such as rice farming, fishing, storytelling, and even musical traditions, similarly emphasize the importance of relationality and reciprocity, revealing how ecological stewardship and cultural identity are intertwined (Campbell 2008; Carney 2001).

Furthermore, the ethical responsibilities of researchers have emerged as a central theme in this work. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's concept of positionality and Cynthia Dillard's framework of "re-membering" have emphasized the importance of self-reflection and reciprocity in engaging with communities (Smith 2012; Dillard 2021). These frameworks have challenged me to consider my positionality as a researcher and how my work can contribute to the broader goals of cultural preservation and ecological justice. As Dwayne Donald's Métissage approach suggests, ethical relationality involves engaging with communities and creating spaces for mutual learning and transformation (Donald 2009).

The intersection of decolonial methodologies and Gullah Geechee studies has also underscored the need for interdisciplinary approaches. By integrating insights from sociology, Indigenous studies, and environmental justice, this paper has sought to highlight the complexity

and richness of Gullah Geechee knowledge systems. The works of Kari Marie Norgaard and Sylvia Wynter have been particularly instructive in demonstrating how ecological and racial justice are deeply interconnected, offering valuable frameworks for addressing the systemic inequities that the Gullah Geechee face (Norgaard 2019; Wynter 2003).

The concept of pluriversality offers a powerful vision for the future. As Escobar argues, pluriversal worlds challenge the dominance of Western modernity by creating spaces for diverse ways of knowing and being (Escobar 2018). The Gullah Geechee community's efforts to preserve their cultural practices and advocate for sustainable land use are a testament to the possibilities of such worlds. By centering their voices and practices, researchers can contribute to creating futures that honor the diversity and interconnectedness of human and ecological relationships.

The emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, and self-reflection has deepened my understanding of decolonial methods and challenged me to think critically about my own research practices. The conversations we have had in class, as well as the readings and assignments, have illuminated the transformative potential of decolonial praxis to create more just and sustainable worlds. This work has reaffirmed my commitment to engaging in research that is not only rigorous but also ethical and relational, contributing to the broader goals of decolonization and social justice.

In conclusion, this paper has sought to demonstrate how these methodologies can illuminate and support the Gullah Geechee community's resistance to cultural erasure and land dispossession by ongoing dialogue and activism. By integrating insights from decolonial scholars and applying them to the specific context of the Gullah Geechee, this work contributes to a

broader understanding of how marginalized communities navigate and challenge the colonial matrix of power. As researchers, our task is to support these efforts through relational engagement, ethical reciprocity, and a commitment to unlearning colonial assumptions. In doing so, we can contribute to the emergence of pluriversal futures that honor the richness and diversity of human and ecological relationships.

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