"Empathy, Embodiment, and Ecology: A Phenomenological Path to Decolonial Embodiment and Reconciliation"

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Introduction

The environmental and cultural crises of the 21st century demand new ways of thinking about our relationship to the natural world and to each other. Modernity's extractive interests, which can be said to have roots in Cartesian dualism, colonialism, and industrial capitalism, have fractured the human experience of interconnection with nature and community. Phenomenology offers an alternative, presenting a framework for exploring the lived, embodied, and intersubjective dimensions of ethical and empathetic relationships. This paper draws on foundational phenomenological texts, including Edith Stein's work on empathy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied perception, Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of responsibility, and Nishida Kitarō's notion of pure experience, to propose a concept of *ecological consciousness* by looking to the Gullah communities in the Lowcountry of South Carolina as an example of resistive, yet productive, activism in this area. This consciousness, rooted in empathy and relational ontology, is both a critique of modernity and a vision for sustainable and ethical futures.

The discussion incorporates the cosmologies of the Gullah communities in South Carolina, particularly their understandings of place, space, and personhood, as a case study of lived ecological consciousness. By highlighting how the Gullah's practices challenge Cartesian dualism and affirm interdependence along with modernist conceptions of "development" and extraction of resources (human and non-human), this paper advances a decolonial ecological ontology and argues that phenomenological methods provide critical insights into fostering environmental and cultural sustainability.

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).

Empathy and the Ethical Foundation of Interconnection

Edith Stein's phenomenology of empathy offers a powerful starting point for understanding ecological consciousness. As Stein describes it, empathy is not simply the act of feeling for another; it is a way of entering into their lived experience while maintaining the

distinction between self and Other (Stein 1989, 4). This relational dynamic is foundational to moral responsibility. Empathy reveals the intersubjective nature of human existence, where one's own consciousness is constantly in dialogue with the lives of others (Stein 1989, 4). Stein states that,

> "Thus empathy is a kind of act of perceiving [*eine Art erfahrender Akte*] *sui generis*. We have set ourselves the task of expounding it in its peculiarity before tackling any other question (of whether such experience is valid or how it occurs). And we have conducted this investigation in purest generality. Empathy, which we examined and sought to describe, is the experience of foreign consciousness in general, irrespective of the kind of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced. (Stein 1989, 11).

Empathy makes the Other's experience real to us, not as an abstract concept, but as a lived reality (closely resembling Indigenous knowledge production and generational transference as seen in contemporary Gullah communities in the Lowcountry of South Carolina).

For Stein, empathy has a transformative potential that transcends the boundaries of the self. In ecological terms, this capacity to experience the Other's reality can be extended beyond human beings to include non-human entities and the environment itself. When we stand before a forest, feel the breeze on our skin, and hear the rustle of leaves, we can engage empathically with the forest as a living presence. Empathy, in this sense, becomes a practice of relationality that dissolves the rigid subject-object dualism of traditional (or Cartesian) thought. As Stein points out, empathy is the unique act through which we experience another's consciousness as real and distinct from our own, transcending mere inference or imagination (Stein 1989, 39).

Edith Stein's work on empathy helps me see morality as fundamentally relational rather than objective. For Stein, empathy is not just about understanding another's emotions; it is a direct experience of another's reality that allows us to transcend our isolated selves (Stein 1989,

51). This lived connection to the Other grounds our ethical obligations. When I experience someone else's pain as real as theirs and as something I can feel, the abstract notion of "responsibility" becomes immediate and personal. The foreignness of the Other's experience is not a barrier to understanding but the ground for ethical engagement, compelling us to act with care and attentiveness (Stein 1989, 64).

For instance, consider the experience of comforting a grieving friend. In that moment, their pain is not an abstract idea or a problem to be solved. Instead, their sadness becomes a felt reality through empathy. This emotional connection compels action, not through obligation or duty but through shared humanity. Stein's emphasis on the irreducibility of the Other's experience reminds us that ethical values arise in this relational space, not as something imposed from above but as something we co-create through connection.

In the context of the Gullah communities, empathy is woven into their cultural practices and cosmologies. The Gullah's relationship to the land and sea reflects an intimate understanding of natural cycles and interdependence. Their agricultural methods, rooted in traditional knowledge, emphasize sustainable and reciprocal relationships with the earth. This ethos parallels Stein's emphasis on empathy as a way of co-creating meaning and ethical relationships with the Other.

Embodied Perception and the Ecology of Place

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology deepens this discussion by emphasizing the role of the body as the primary site of perception and relationality. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a detached observer of the world; it is enmeshed within it, constantly perceiving and being perceived (Merleau-Ponty 1962). This embodied perspective challenges the modernist tendency

to objectify nature and instead invites us to see ourselves as participants in a dynamic, interwoven ecology.

The flesh of the world is not a collection of objects but a living fabric in which my body and the surrounding world are intertwined (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 366). Likewise, this connects to our interrelational concept of embodied empathy as a resistive force to celebrate the bracketing of ongoing community in the headwinds of socio-economic and political forces threatening Gullah communities in real-time here in the capitalistic pursuit of extractive development.

The Gullah communities embody this relational perspective in their daily practices. Walking barefoot on the land or singing while fishing are not merely cultural rituals; they are expressions of an embodied ecological consciousness that provides the framework for this present form of resistant activism. These practices exemplify what Merleau-Ponty calls the "dialogical relationship" between self and world, where perception is an active, participatory process. By engaging with the land through their bodies, the Gullah affirm their connection to the natural world as a lived reality rather than a conceptual abstraction.

This embodied engagement also holds profound ethical implications. When we perceive the natural world through our bodies, we become attuned to its fragility and vitality. A tree is no longer a resource to be extracted; it is a living presence that participates in the shared ecology of life. This shift in perception aligns with Merleau-Ponty's insistence that our ethical responsibilities arise from our embodied relationships with the world.

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 additional insight to Gullah Geechee epistemologies and phenomenological bracketing (albeit unintentional in a strictly philosophical sense), 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.

Levinas and the Infinite Responsibility to the Other

Levinas's philosophy further extends the ethical dimension of ecological consciousness by framing the encounter with the Other as the foundation of moral life. For Levinas, the face of the Other is not merely a physical presence; it is an ethical summons that calls us to respond

(Levinas 1969). This encounter disrupts our self-centered worldview and reveals the infinite complexity and vulnerability of the Other.

In ecological terms, Levinas's concept of infinite responsibility can be applied to our relationship with the environment. Standing before a river or a mountain range, we are confronted with their otherness and fragility. These encounters, like Levinas's face-to-face interactions, demand an ethical response that transcends calculation or utility. They remind us that our moral obligations extend beyond human beings to include the more-than-human world. Although dense, I believe Levinas is pointing to a similar concept here. The ethical relation disrupts the totalizing tendencies of ontology, reminding us that the Other exceeds any categories we impose upon them. This is the basis of infinite responsibility. "Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom-the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other." (Levinas, 1969, p. 42).

The Gullah's spiritual and ecological practices resonate with Levinas's ethics of responsibility. Their cosmologies view the land, sea, and ancestors as interconnected entities that must be honored and cared for. For example, the practice of leaving offerings for the spirits of the land reflects an acknowledgment of the Other's presence and a commitment to reciprocity. This ethical framework challenges the anthropocentric view of nature as a resource and instead positions it as a participant in a shared moral community. Goodwine points out that the Gullah people have always understood the land as a spiritual partner, not as a commodity. This sacred connection to the environment has guided sustainable practices for generations" (Goodwine, 1998, p. 19). and that through oral traditions, foodways, and ceremonies, the Gullah culture

sustains a profound relationship with place, embodying an ecological wisdom that Western traditions often overlook" (Goodwine, 1998, p. 26), which speaks precisely to this point.

Nishida's Pure Experience and Decolonial Ontology

Nishida Kitarō's concept of pure experience provides a metaphysical foundation for integrating these insights into a cohesive ecological ontology. For Nishida, pure experience is the immediate, pre-reflective awareness of being immersed in the world (Nishida 1958). This state of awareness dissolves the boundaries between self and Other, revealing the interconnectedness of all beings.

In the context of ecological consciousness, Nishida's pure experience offers a way of reimagining our relationship with nature as one of participation rather than domination. By suspending the dualistic frameworks that separate humans from the environment, we can begin to experience the world as a dynamic, interdependent whole. This perspective aligns with the Gullah's cosmologies, which emphasize the interconnection of place, space, and personhood. Pure experience, for Nishida, is like a state in which there is no distinction between subject and object; it is a direct and unmediated encounter with reality as it is (Nishida, 1958, p. 6).

A decolonial ecological ontology emerges from integrating Nishida's philosophy with Gullah practices. Decolonial thought challenges the extractive logic of capitalistic Western modernities and affirms the value of Indigenous and African diasporic knowledge systems. By grounding ecological consciousness in pure experience, we can cultivate a relational ontology that honors marginalized communities' wisdom and resists nature's commodification.

Toward a Relational Ethics for Sustainable Futures

The phenomenological insights of Stein, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Nishida converge in a vision of ecological consciousness that is relational, embodied, and ethical. This consciousness challenges the Cartesian dualisms that have fueled environmental degradation and cultural erasure. Instead, it affirms a holistic understanding of being that integrates empathy, embodiment, and responsibility. As Abram points out, to touch the coarse skin of a tree is to begin to sense, however dimly, the tree's own awareness and its own tactile reality, which brushes back against my fingers as I reach toward it. Such reciprocity lies at the heart of more-than-human ethics (Abram 1996, 64).

The Gullah communities exemplify this relational ethics through their practices and cosmologies. Their lived ecological consciousness offers a model for addressing the intertwined environmental and cultural sustainability crises. By honoring the interdependence of all beings, Gullah communities demonstrate how phenomenological principles can be translated into practical, ethical action.

The Gullah Geechee community's cultural practices provide a profound example of relational epistemology in the context of an embodied consciousness that transcends the usual human / non-human distinctions, 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).

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.

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].

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).

Conclusion

In conclusion, ecological consciousness is not merely an abstract ideal; it is a lived practice that emerges from our relationships with the Other, both human and non-human. By integrating phenomenological insights with decolonial perspectives, we can cultivate a relational ethics that fosters sustainability, resilience, and care. This vision invites us to reimagine our

[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).

place in the world not as isolated individuals but as participants in a dynamic, interconnected ecology.

A key phenomenological tool in this process is the task of bracketing or suspending preconceived notions and biases to engage with the world as it presents itself. For the Gullah communities, this is reflected in their cosmological relationship with place, space, and personhood, which resists the extractive logic of colonialist modernity. The Gullah experience of the land and sea as sentient and conscious understands these spiritual presences as embodying a form of bracketing that prioritizes relationality over dominance and recognizes the intrinsic value of the natural world. In this way, their practices reflect a decolonial consciousness that moves beyond Cartesian dualism to embrace a holistic, intersubjective ontology.

By combining Stein's insights on empathy, Merleau-Ponty's focus on embodiment, and Levinas's ethical demands of the Other, we arrive at a vision of moral value that is relational, embodied, and grounded in lived experience. Ethical values are not static principles we apply to life; they emerge dynamically in our interactions with others, our ecologies (internal and external), and ourselves. For the Gullah, the phenomenological act of bracketing opens the possibility of engaging with nature as a co-creator of meaning rather than a resource to be extracted.

In the face of ecological polycrisis, this relational approach to morality offers a powerful alternative to the extractive logic of colonialist modernity, which is obsessed with value extraction and defined roles based on capitalistic structures. When we cultivate empathy for the Earth, embody our interconnection with it, and respond to its infinite demands and offerings, we begin to live an ethical life rooted in care and reciprocity through intentional consciousness. By bracketing our assumptions and embracing the relational wisdom embedded in decolonial and

phenomenological traditions, we create the space for more sustainable, just, and meaningful ways of being in the world.

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