

Center For Process Studies *Is It Too Late?: Toward an Ecological Civilization*

Sam Harrelson

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**Relational Roots and Ecological Futures: Bridging Whitehead, Cobb, and Gullah Wisdom
Toward a Decolonized Ecological Civilization**

Good morning and thank you for welcoming me. I bring greetings from the salt-marsh islands of South Carolina, where the smell of pluff mud rises at dawn and cicadas hum like hidden generators. One humid July day on St. Helena Island thirty years ago as a young man in college, I stood inside a praise house that predates the Civil War. Candles flickered, feet stamped pine flooring, and neighbors began a ring shout, a spiraling dance in which every heel strike carries memory forward. Earlier that day, an elder had said, “The land is dancing through us.” That single sentence captures today’s thesis: **reality is relationship, and when we honor that fact in practice, we meet ecological crisis with hope.**

Today, I will braid three strands around that insight:

- **Alfred North Whitehead** gives us a metaphysical grammar of becoming.
- **John Cobb** offers a social charter he calls ecological civilization.
- **Gullah wisdom** supplies a living vernacular that grounds theory in the grit of place.

My roadmap has five short movements.

Movement 1: Whitehead's Relational Metaphysics

Whitehead starts from the conviction that reality is not made of inert things but of events in relationship. An actual occasion is a pulse of experience that *prehends*, that is, feels, the universe and then perishes into data for the next moment. Because prehension is universal, value shimmers even in granite and photons, not only in neurons. Ecology follows naturally: humans are not spectators of nature but participants inside the same creative advance that moves rivers, herons, and human economies.

Our climate crisis is first a crisis of perception, rooted in the myth that humans are autonomous subjects gazing at an objective world. Whitehead subverts that myth by insisting that the subject and object are poles inside every occasion. The forest looks back, the river answers, the atmosphere remembers.

Picture a loggerhead turtle emerging on Hunting Island tonight. Her sense of moonlight is a local concrescence of cosmic facts—lunar gravity, Gulf Stream temperature, ancestral memory, even my admiration right now. Whitehead's ontology warns that wounding any strand reverberates across the whole.

Movement 2: Cobb's Ecological Civilization

John Cobb asks what would happen if a society tried to *live* as though relationality were real. He calls the outcome **ecological civilization**—a culture whose basic metric of success is the health of Earth. Cobb critiques three idols of industrial modernity: unlimited growth, anthropocentrism, and colonial extraction. In their place he sketches seven transitions: energy, agriculture, population, economics, community, theology, and education. Each transition is daunting, yet

glimpses already exist in river-keeper alliances, indigenous fire councils, and eco-village economies.

Cobb admits his proposal can hover like a blueprint unless communities already practicing relational life-ways carry it. One such community is the Gullah.

Movement 3: Gullah Spiritual Ecology

Who are the Gullah? Descendants of West and Central Africans enslaved on the Sea Islands of the southeastern United States, they forged a creole language and culture centered on thick relationality.

Roots in Rice & Resistance

Beginning in the late-1600s Low-Country planters deliberately purchased captives from Sierra Leone, Senegambia, and Angola because they knew how to grow the “white gold” of Carolina rice. By 1708 Africans already out-numbered Europeans in the colony, and on the Sea Islands that Black majority often reached 90 percent. The lethal summer mix of malaria and yellow fever drove planters inland, leaving enslaved communities semi-autonomous for months at a time; isolation became an incubator of cultural memory.

Language as Living Cosmology

Today’s lilting Gullah/Geechee Creole still carries Mende syntax and Kikongo vocabulary. To greet someone with Tenki tenki is to rehearse Whitehead’s principle that creativity is polyphonic; multiple lineages sing one sentence. Scholars call this a creole; elders call it

“Gu Mother Tongue,” the voice in which waterways, ancestors, and children all understand one another.

Praise-Houses & Ring Shouts

Because plantation owners banned large gatherings, Sea-Island families built tiny praise-houses where worship bled into community governance. Inside, the ring-shout’s counter-clockwise spiral reenacts the sun’s daily arc and tidal pull. Each dancer “catches” the Holy Spirit, then hands the rhythm on—an embodied tutorial in process relationality.

Freedom & the Penn School

The first major emancipation of the Civil War occurred not in Appomattox but at Port Royal (1861), when U.S. forces seized Beaufort County and freed 10 000 enslaved people. Quaker missionaries founded Penn School on St. Helena Island in 1862 to educate the newly liberated; it later hosted Martin Luther King Jr. strategy retreats, making it a hinge between Gullah endurance and national civil-rights imagination.

Land as Covenant—Heirs’ Property

After Emancipation many families bought or were granted acreage, holding it in common as heirs’ property. Consensus-based governance honors kinship yet complicates modern finance; today rising taxes, partition-sales, and resort development threaten to fracture these commons. Elders insist, “If the land goes, the language goes.” Their struggle illustrates Cobb’s warning that ecological civilization fails unless it also de-colonizes property law.

Why This Matters for Process Thought

The Gullah story is not a picturesque sidebar; it is a living laboratory where Whiteheadian metaphysics already breathes. From rice-field hydrology timed to lunar cycles, to communal deliberation that privileges persuasion over coercion, Sea-Island praxis shows how a cosmology of relationship can survive enslavement, war, and gentrification—and still sing. Our task is to listen, learn, and ally.

Three brief windows:

1. **Ritual.** The ring shout is more than worship; it is ecological pedagogy.

Counter-clockwise motion mimics the sun's path, call-and-response echoes tidal rhythm, and the rule against crossing feet teaches that progress is communal and circular. In process terms, the shout is *communal concrescence*: many voices braided into one pulse of novelty.

2. **Land tenure.** After Emancipation, families claimed marshy margins as *heirs' property* held in common. Deeds list hundreds of names, and decisions must be unanimous.

Developers bristle, but elders reply, “We don't own the land... the land owns us.” That sentence could appear in *Process and Reality*.

3. **Foodways.** Traditional rice cultivation relies on tidal gates called trunks. Farmers read moon, wind, and river as partners. Sea-level rise now drowns many fields, yet some adapt by reviving brackish-friendly strains first planted three centuries ago—adaptation as ancestral dialogue.

These practices are ecological liturgies. The Gullah never studied Whitehead; they *live* him.

Movement 4: Convergences and Creative Tensions

Theme	Process Insight	Gullah Praxis
Ontology	Universal prehension shares value everywhere	Ancestors inhabit live oaks, marshes remember songs
Epistemology	Knowledge emerges through participation	Basket weavers judge sweetgrass by feel, not metric
Ethics	Care grows from shared becoming	Communal fields put kinship above profit

Tensions persist. Process philosophy can lapse into abstraction that erases colonial histories.

Place-based cultures risk being romanticized or commodified. A two-way conversation is needed: philosophers translate abstraction into solidarity; local communities harness conceptual tools to defend their lands.

1. Cosmology / Ontology – “All is Event”

Whitehead’s doctrine of *actual occasions* says every entity, quartz crystal, cicada, committee vote, is a pulsation of felt relations. In Gullah thoughts, the same claim surfaces in the proverb “**Pluff mud tell um story**”: the estuarine soil itself remembers the travail of rice planters and the jubilation of Emancipation. Both voices insist that matter is never mute; it is historical and responsive.

Creative tension: Process scholars risk flattening colonial trauma into a generic “web of life.”

Gullah elders press us to honor which relations have been wounded and who still carries that pain.

2. Epistemology – Knowing *with*, not *about*

For Whitehead, *prehension* is knowledge by sympathetic feeling; we grasp the world by “taking it into ourselves.” Gullah basket-makers demonstrate this when they pull a sweetgrass bundle through their teeth to judge moisture. Metrics tell moisture content, but teeth feel *story*—the storm surge that shaped that grass.

Creative tension: Universities valorize written scholarship; Gullah pedagogy privileges tactile apprenticeship. Bridging the two means designing curricula where “publish or perish” is supplemented by “touch or forget.”

3. Ethics – Value Emerges in the Between

Cobb argues that ecological civilization adopts *mutual flourishing* as its cardinal virtue.

Heirs’-property governance enacts that virtue by requiring consensus among dozens of cousins before land is sold. The long deliberations honor relationship over quick liquidity.

Creative tension: Consensus can paralyze urgent adaptation when sea-level rise encroaches.

Process thought contributes a pragmatic principle of *creative advance*, sometimes novelty must break stalemate, but always through persuasion, never coercion.

4. Economics of the Gift vs. the Market

Whitehead’s emphasis on *intrinsic value* challenges GDP’s fixation on market price. Gullah community fish fries circulate mullet and okra outside the cash nexus, mirroring what Cobb names “a moral economy of sufficiency.”

Creative tension: Coastal tourism markets now brand that very fish fry as “heritage cuisine,” re-commodifying the gift. A process lens can help detect when creativity tips into exploitation by asking: **Does this novelty broaden the circle of participation—or narrow it?**

5. Theology / Spiritual Praxis

Process theology pictures God as the “poet of the world,” luring each moment toward beauty. In ring-shout practice, the Divine is *felt* as a rhythmic lure: the drummer modulates tempo until a new melodic phrase, a “fresh possibility,” breaks through fatigue. That is concrescence made audible.

Creative tension: Some praise-house leaders worry that academic theologians abstract the Spirit into metaphysics. The invitation is reciprocal translation: scholars attend the shout; shouters see their art named as world-making.

6. Politics and Power

Both frameworks demand structural change. Cobb lists “transition in governance” toward local empowerment; Gullah leaders fight zoning boards to keep industrial shrimpers out of sacred creeks. Whitehead supplies the moral leverage: no polity may externalize costs because every cost *returns* through the web of prehension.

Creative tension: Process rhetoric of interdependence can be co-opted by corporate “green talk.” Gullah activists remind us that solidarity is measured by **who gets rainfall runoff in their yard** after a resort golf course is built.

Why linger here? Because the most revolutionary alliances fail when they ignore friction points. By naming both resonances *and* risks, we model the very relational honesty our ecological future requires.

Movement 5: Implications for a Decolonized Ecological Future

1. **Policy.** Reform partition-sale law to protect heirs' property, a living model of commons-based stewardship.
2. **Climate Action.** Sea-Island wetlands are carbon sinks; defending Gullah land serves planetary mitigation.
3. **Education.** Seminaries influenced by process thought can invite praise-house elders as co-teachers. Theory meets practice.
4. **Liturgy and Activism.** Imagine climate marches ending in a ring shout that trains bodies for democratic rhythm, or policy briefings beginning with libation naming both ancestors and endangered species as co-participants.

Public-theology note: Shoutin prayer, an improvisational sermon over drum and clap, shares agency among preacher and congregation, an enacted lesson in Cobb's non-coercive divine lure.

Conclusion

Return with me to that praise house. The elder's whisper, "The land is dancing through us," contains Whitehead's creativity, Cobb's ecological charter, and Gullah relational praxis. **Is it too late?** It is growing late, yet the circle is still turning. If we honor relational roots, we can nourish ecological futures. Let us keep the dance moving.

Thank you.