



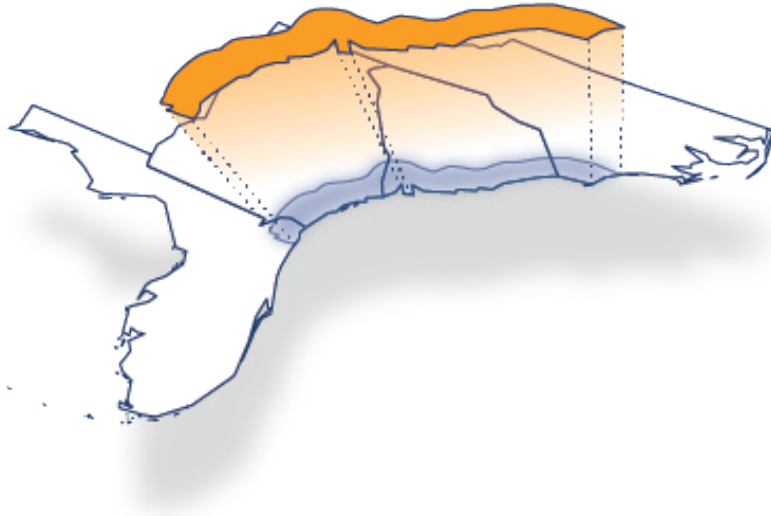
# Empowering the Gullah/Geechee Economy

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**B** | Governance Studies  
at BROOKINGS

**Makada Henry-Nickie  
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# GULLAH/GEECHEE



The Gullah/Geechee people are indigenous to communities stretching along the coast of the Carolinas, Georgia, and northeastern Florida. They are direct descendants of enslaved Africans. Their unique culture and language bear deep imprints of West African heritage. A long history of tenacious land ownership has shaped the contemporary identity of the Gullah Geechee people.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Candid conversations on structural racism have encouraged social scientists to recast issues of race, place, and inequality by adopting a new racial equity view.**



Even when policymakers pursue a racial equity view, practical research continues to overlook indigenous communities of color. Of particular concern within this lacuna are rural minority communities sitting at the intersection of racialized and isolated places. We argue that researchers should carefully attend to the experiences of rural indigenous groups such as the Gullah/Geechee, whose interests and obstacles are only partly captured in the federal rural policy framework. The Gullah/Geechee people, indigenous to the communities stretching along the coast of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Northeastern Florida, are direct descendants of enslaved Africans. Theirs is a unique culture with deep ties to West African heritage and distinctly defined by a long history of tenacious landownership.

Despite their strong sense of identity, the Gullah/Geechee community is experiencing many of the challenges facing other rural communities across the nation, including economic fragility, troubling social trends, and the impact of climate change. Compounding those struggles is the reality that these communities are often overlooked because policymakers have a very narrow picture of what “rural America” looks like, a consequence of relying on stereotypes as well as abstract quantitative data that fails to sufficiently describe the breadth of rural America’s tremendous diversity. By overlooking or discounting that diversity, policymakers disregard the unique experiences of rural minority communities like the Gullah people who sit at the intersection of racialized and isolated places. This lack of attentiveness flattens our view of these communities—resulting in their further devaluation and marginalization from broader economic and political systems.

This case study represents an earnest effort to connect the annals of history and economic experiences via a framework that mainstream economists should endeavor to emulate and enhance. The Gullah/Geechee forged an economic identity through heritage and communal land control that afforded them a distinct sense of legitimacy and autonomy. In framing this, we draw from the 14th-century Tunisian economic philosopher, Ibn Khaldun, who interpreted land as an ecological asset with societal and cultural values that creates a productive economy when combined with cooperative labor inputs. This ecological value of land shapes a rudimentary economic system of supply, demand, prices, and markets.<sup>1</sup> Khaldun’s economic theory provides an ecological lens to understand Gullah/Geechee’s communal land economy.

Throughout this case study, we highlight that Gullah land is a productive cultural asset with tangible economic value. But it is also an asset that has been hampered by generational cycles of mistreatment, failed land redistribution, and both cultural and economic devaluation. And as detailed later, this asset-rich but marginalized economy now faces multilayered threats of erasure from decades of disinvestment, predatory land development, and climate change. We argue that to preserve this community and sustain its rich cultural heritage, it is vital that federal, state, and corporate actors must construct an architecture of political agency.


This case study relies on research we conducted using a mixed-methods approach that combined ethnographic and historical analysis and detailed interviews with key community stakeholders. As part of this approach, we incorporate traditional language that is congruent with the self-understanding of the Gullah people. In terms of structure, the case study begins by sketching out a history of the Gullah people in the decades subsequent to emancipation with particular attention to their use of the land as context for their current experience. The report then details the specific cultural and economic assets that can provide economic vitality, while also exploring the fraught nature of how these assets are vulnerable to exploitation. Next, the case study explores social challenges such as tax issues, coastal gentrification, and land loss, followed by a section detailing the looming environmental challenges associated with climate change. Finally, we conclude the case study by calling for sweeping ethical rural and environmental policy changes that are urgently needed to reverse the long arc of moral policy failings and support the long-term preservation, independence, and flourishing of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

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.

Queen Quet  
Chieftess  
Gullah/Geechee Nation





A woman with dark skin and long braids stands in a sun-dappled forest. She wears a yellow tank top, a long, colorful patterned skirt, a white headband with beads, and multiple gold bracelets and necklaces. To her left is a wooden sign with three vertical panels. The first panel is yellow with the word 'WEBB' in blue letters. The second panel is green with the word 'GULLAH' in yellow letters. The third panel is blue with the word 'GEECHEE' in yellow letters. The background is a dense forest of tall trees with green foliage. The ground is covered with dry leaves and some white plastic trash.

Queen Quet, Chieftess of the  
Gullah/Geechee Nation in the  
Gullah/Geechee Ga'dun" on  
historic St. Helena Island, SC.

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# BRIEF HISTORY OF GULLAH/GEECHEE

**The *Sankofa* principle in Ghana dictates that appreciating the significance of Gullah heritage and the case to politically empower its representatives requires a critical reexamination of sanitized versions of history.**



*Ef hunnuh ain kno whey hunnuh dey frum, hunnuh ain gwine kno whey hunnuh gwine.*

*“If you do not know where you are from, you won’t know where you are going.”<sup>5</sup>*

In keeping with this principle, our case study begins by establishing a historical timeline as a foundation.

Going beyond the timeline, it is important to understand the myriad of injustices regarding land use that also provide context for this community as well as many other communities nationwide. In her book “Repair: Redeeming the Promise of Abolition,” scholar Katherine Franke exposes the fictive civil war humanists who cruelly manipulated freed men’s aspirations for *freed-dom*, land ownership, and self-determination as



**My great great grandparents purchased land during the Civil War. We don't have all the land Adam and Betsy bought. They purchased 59 acres of land, we only have 20 acres today. Storms, hurricanes, and rising taxes created hardships for them. A major hardship was embezzlement within the Freedmen's Bank. My family lost all their money and could not pay workers or the cotton gin. They lost all 59 acres and got it back several times, and finally only retained 20 acres. Some of these issues still plague our Gullah/Geechee communities.**

**Victoria Smalls  
Executive Director  
Gullah/Geechee Cultural  
Heritage Corridor**

cheap mechanisms to tend cotton-laden fields. Such subjugation was meant to finance the pressing costs of war and to test the hypothesis that free Black labor was cheaper and more productive when unchained.<sup>2</sup> Even this summation is too simple to depict Sea Island Black people's complicated journey to eventual land ownership that was shaped by the economics of war and a genuine social experiment to restore humanness to enslaved people. The Black Sea Islanders we recognize today as Gullah/Geechee survived a series of land redistribution experiments. Some aspects of this campaign were extraordinarily exploitative: intentions to substitute cotton-bonded indentured labor for free slave labor dominated the largely failed exercise. Other elements, supported by complicated humanists like the New England "Gideonite Band" missionaries, orchestrated the Port Royal Experiment and a paid labor system that enabled freed men and women to form cooperatives to purchase plots of land at auctions sanctioned by President Lincoln.

The Sea Islands land redistribution is a byzantine anthropological chapter beyond the scope of this case study. Yet, we appreciate the significance of land auctions as an attempt at reparations, as Franke argues, which secured land ownership for a small group of freed men and women who worked for generations to create a formal economic system to support their healing and identity creation as freed people with autonomy. For example, according to the 1870 decennial census, the population on St. Helena Island was 90% Black and 13% (8,459 acres) of the island's land was registered to Black owners. In our contemporary framework, this minimal land ownership meant 70% of Black people were homeowners with a weak form of wealth to anchor a subsistence economy.<sup>3</sup> Gullah land ownership survived President Johnson's and Congress's racist land restoration crusades that stripped land and valuable cotton harvests from Black people who had been deceived into believing their pooled savings would secure them dignity,

independence, and freedom. Since the 1861 auctions, Black people along the Sea Island's coastline acquired millions of acres of land but have been subjected to egregious practices that have substantially reduced their valuable waterfront land holdings.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the Gullah/Geechee embody a profound sense of patriotism combined with a fierce instinct to protect their land that is shaped by this dark and painful history. But while not shying away from this sordid history, it's important to highlight that this context is also about Gullah/Geechee's resiliency and ability to innovate. For example, Gullah land ownership purchased through cooperatives and family resource pools parallel community-based savings models to create an annealed identity and an economy. Like the emancipated Caribbean peoples, land governance and spatial isolation allowed the Gullah/Geechee to author their economic destiny undergirded by permanent homesteads and solidarity. All the intangible markers of a nation emerged from this healing: distinct cultural norms, a unique language, and community-regulated institutions of governance based on shared values and intricately connected to their joint tenancy in the land among family groups. And it is this complex heritage that undergirds the assets at the heart of their contemporary economy.





Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and Dr. Najmah Thomas of the 'Gullah/Geechee Agroculture Project' enjoying the St. Helena Farmers' Market.

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My artwork is mostly in acrylic, and it's mostly based on family. I started out doing mostly portraits. Now I do a variety of things, portraits, figure drawings or landscapes. My Gullah/Geechee identity influences the subject matter and the people I depict. I like to capture what's happening in the African American culture. Being a mother of nine, my artwork mostly features children and family. My work is very personal. I like to feature the singers and the music from our culture.






Retired homeschool educator, mother of nine, and creative entrepreneur, Ms. Gore's artwork captures her passion for Gullah/Geechee culture and family.

*Woke up dis mawnin wid e  
mind stayed pun freedom*



# CONTEMPORARY FACETS OF THE GULLAH ECONOMY

**Empirical expertise in agricultural engineering, indigenous knowledge of Sea Island waters, and African traditions have shaped the primary occupations and core economic activities in Gullah communities.**



For instance, unregulated access to coastal waters created a fishery industry that supported business ownership and robust forms of self-employment. While business formation has maintained a narrower scope, traditional shrimping and fishing practices have enabled medium-sized businesses to scale. Hoskins-Brown's analysis of the decline of the fishing industry between 1950 and 2015 within the Sea Island region magnifies Gullah coastal communities' capacity to generate family-owned boat fleets, processing plants, and subsistence-level fishery-related employment. Despite the distinct cultural significance, she finds that this vocation has declined substantially over time due to factors constraining fishing productivity, such as inadequate



**I maintain a digital presence online mostly to advertise my shop. Access to the internet is vital for my business. If I don't have the internet, I can't really make a sale most of the time because most people are not walking around with much money. If I didn't have my Square to run a credit card, I might as well not even open my shop or hope to make a sale. I would like to see everybody have access to the internet. People need it."**

**Elizabeth Alexandria Gore**  
**Gullah/Geechee Artist**

vessels to follow seasonal migration patterns and compete with European and American fleets.<sup>6</sup> Historic disparities in small business lending that have adversely impacted Black entrepreneurs undoubtedly apply to Gullah-owned small businesses as well. Thus, considerations about inadequate access to capital compound competitive disadvantage limiting critical investments in vessel maintenance or mechanical system upgrades.

Gullah/Geechee artisans are recognized nationally for their exceptional craftsmanship and remarkable expressions of heritage-infused art and cuisine. Rooted in a rich blend of African traditions, Gullah agriculture—steeped in small-crop farming staples such as okra—underpins a culinary economy integral to the Low Country's heritage tourism economy, which generates billions of dollars annually. According to Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor's (GGCHC) 2020 market assessment, Gullah heritage tourism is a substantial contributor to the region's leisure industry with the potential to drive up to \$34 billion in tourist spending—cuisine is the impetus behind the market's ability to thrive.<sup>7,8</sup> Gullah craftsmanship is as multidimensional as the mosaic of African tribes at its genesis. Craftworkers like Elizabeth Alexandria Allie Gore transcribes spiritual indigo blues into hand-painted family albums featuring children and elders. She notes that her artisanship maintains a retail presence but acknowledges that she draws on other sources of income to supplement her artisan earnings, which are generally too low to cover her basic needs.

However, talented visual artists such as Natalie Daise, *cumya* creative, have managed to create thriving cultural practices drawing on organic materials intrinsic to Gullah/Geechee culture. Ms. Daise's original pieces like the exquisite "Collard Queen" retail for up to \$20,000; she capitalizes on digital platforms to reach online markets. Her sharp instincts inspired her to leverage her creative assets to enhance her brand and boost revenue. Being an early adopter of e-commerce platforms subsequently helped her business survive the COVID-19 downturn. Her success and adaptability are evidence of the Gullah culture's tremendous income

**My visual artwork is very much based in the community that I come from. It focuses on [the] African American story. It includes a lot of natural elements—leaves, trees, collard greens, things that tie me to my community and celebrate the community. My performing art comes out of Gullah/Geechee and the African American experience. My favorite thing is when I get to tie the two together.**

**Natalie Daise**  
**Creative Artist**

potentiality. The spectrum of Gullah entrepreneurship ranges from viable enterprises to an ensemble of informal, home-based businesses existing in the gray economy but lacking formal support to fully harness their entrepreneurial promise.

Repeatedly framing Gullah artisanship as heritage craftsmanship produces a problematic portrayal of Gullah as mere culture bearers, which disassociates them from the formal language of small business and entrepreneurship. Placing rigid borders between heritage and the formal small business framework further trivializes Gullah work to a quaint historical curiosity. This depiction prevents stakeholders who engage with these communities from addressing members' needs—for both capital and programmatic supports to facilitate entry into platform markets or digital payment systems. Marilyn Hemingway, CEO and founder of Gullah/Geechee Chamber of Commerce, recognizes the harm of this imagined boundary that impedes the viability of home-based businesses. She firmly believes that Gullah entrepreneurial power, if properly resourced and nurtured, could transform fledgling Gullah micro-businesses into viable entities capable of generating family-thriving incomes.

Ms. Hemingway hopes to meld these kitchen-economy businesses into a robust small-business ecosystem. Building entrepreneurs' financial competencies is core to the Chamber's mission to enable indigenous ventures to access formal resources and subsidy networks. The pandemic decimated small businesses. In many instances, businesses operating in the shadows failed to benefit from critical supports like the Paycheck Protection Program or pandemic unemployment benefits targeting self-employed individuals—such as Gullah artisans whose livelihoods were destroyed by mandated lockdowns. As Ms. Daise noted, Gullah micro-businesses would benefit from business incubators that provide integrated support, such as affordable working creative spaces to professionalize these businesses. Relentless development in and around Gullah communities exerts tremendous forces on already fragile businesses, threatening their longer-term viability. Incubators could serve as crucial anchor institutions capable of scaling affordable broadband access, vital to businesses in rural communities where high-

**We must learn how to monetize 10% of who we are, so we can have 100% ownership.**

**Marilyn Hemingway**  
**Director**  
**Gullah/Geechee Chamber of Commerce**

speed internet is simply unaffordable. The Chamber of Commerce could provide a crucial advocacy infrastructure with the capacity to coordinate multi-agency investments and provide indigenous entrepreneurs a differentiated support system to create a more sustainable Gullah economy.

Gullah sweetgrass basket sewing requires little introduction. This craft possesses a distinctive brand identity that has, since the early days, forged a strong artisanship economy for Gullah/Geechee women. The pronounced brand identity and remarkably expressive designs have cemented sweetgrass's iconic status in Black South Carolina culture. Opportunists have sometimes conveniently erased Gullah associations; such unethical attempts to misappropriate the culture typically fail. Nevertheless, this durable artform has assumed a broader meaning to become a source of pride for South Carolina culture bearers. Gullah basket makers have succeeded in translating an antebellum African tradition into a tangible commodity.<sup>9</sup> Despite their crucial contributions to the tourism economy, basket makers are selling at prices that are grossly misaligned with production costs.

Upon totaling production costs, these skilled artisans likely earn a negative real wage. Even a small basket involves intricate designs that can take up to eight hours to construct. Once complete, the artisan then faces the tricky decision of competitively pricing her inventory. In an era where consumers expect cheap fast fashion and inexpensive goods, the space to appropriately price this basket to account for skill, raw materials, and overhead is extremely limited. In the real world, this hypothetical basket retails for approximately \$40. If skill were the only production input, she would earn a \$5 hourly wage—67% lower than the gold standard \$15 minimum wage threshold. This wage obviously disregards inputs such as transportation or the rising cost of sweetgrass bundles. Such materials were once freely available but now increasingly require payment to access;<sup>10</sup> waterfront development has altered the environmental and political ecology of sweetgrass habitats. Altogether, the artform is likely to produce negative incomes for these artisans. Adding the layer of merchant payment fees for the few artisans participating in the digital economy worsens this value proposition.



Culture and economics are interconnected. I cannot do what I do without the culture or community. Even though Gullah/Geechee is a foundational culture of the Low Country region, we have never benefited financially. We don't have generational wealth as a community. We are excluded and marginalized. I was intentional in starting the Gullah/Geechee Chamber of Commerce, because I wanted to be part of a solution.

Marilyn Hemingway  
Director  
Gullah/Geechee Chamber of Commerce





Marilyn Hemingway  
founded the Gullah/Geechee  
Chamber of Commerce  
as a private organization  
dedicated to marshaling  
resources to support the  
sustainability and growth of  
Gullah/Geechee-owned and  
operated small and micro-  
businesses.



*Emptee sak caan stan  
upright 'lone*



# FORCED ECOLOGICAL EVOLUTION

**For decades, intense political and economic processes rapidly reshaped the socioeconomic ecology of Gullah/Geechee communities.**



A combination of demographic and economic trends altered indigenous Gullah commercial bases, trade, and land ownership. The growing importance of tourism as the backbone of Charleston's economic influence and political ecological process pushed highway development that connected Sea Island's valuable waterfront views to the Beaufort County mainland. Policymakers resolved to maximally develop the tourism sector; they consequently prioritized massive highway expansion projects and urban cluster development over the needs of incumbent communities. According to planning board discussions involving Highway 21 improvements in 1993, "[G]iven Beaufort County's and South Carolina's substantial reliance on the tourism industry, investments toward that end are clearly worthwhile. The traveling experience should be enhanced for the driver, cyclist, and pedestrian alike." This politically informed process profoundly influenced the Gullah/Geechee ecosystem and its social spaces.



Intense coastal gentrification emerged from wider demographic mobility patterns, such as affluent retirees relocating to warm coastal areas—and bringing with them tremendous purchasing power, an increased tax base, and demand for amenities such as golf courses. Accommodating a mushrooming tourism industry tethered to resort development and recreational activities imposes considerable environmental costs on beneficiary communities. Political officials emphasize job creation, expanding the tax base, and other economic externalities while explicitly ignoring the ecological penalties imposed on indigenous Gullah/Geechee communities. Even when cultural preservation policies are incorporated into development initiatives, these solutions are often poorly conceptualized and are antithetical to the basic ecological indigenous identity.<sup>11</sup> The resort development of golf courses and luxury condominiums with waterfront views were direct affronts to sweetgrass cultivation and set off a cultural displacement phenomenon that negatively affected Gullah basket makers.<sup>12</sup> St. Helena's arable marsh lands form a habitat amenable to abundant sweetgrass cultivation. Basket sewing seeded a commercial market that has scaled and thrived even as intrusive causeway construction through prime cultivation lands endangered the craft.

The urban cluster development of shopping centers and local housing developments pushed Gullah artisans into obscurity. More recent artisan progress, such as moving into shopping centers, has caused the competition for commercial real estate space to collide with a national trend of dying malls in response to shifting consumer shopping habits. Small businesses hitched to physical retail locations have been slow to adjust to consumers favoring online shopping over in-person excursions. Poor adaptation to permanent consumer trends threatens Gullah/Geechee artisans in low-broadband environments or those without access to the capital needed to transition to platforms like Amazon and Etsy. Cumulatively, these ecological alterations create what researchers Dean Hardy and Nik Heyen characterize as a form of cultural genocide.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars point to the importation of low-wage tourism service jobs as a mechanism that has gradually changed the complexion of the Gullah ecosystem. Low-skilled service sector jobs present low barriers to entry that could present an appealing alternative for artisans confronting hollowed-out markets or others seeking less labor-intensive fishery jobs. Hoskin-Brown's study highlights the physical hazards of fishing-related work that have resulted in negative health outcomes, particularly for women working

in processing plants.<sup>14</sup> Shifting away from labor-intensive or dying small businesses into tourist service jobs is not a community-enhancing outcome. Instead, this substitution produces the opposite effect: tourism service workers generally earn low wages, have the lowest mobility rates, and are exposed to seasonality that affects working hours and income volatility due to unsteady jobs. Developing the Low Country tourism economy foisted evolutionary dynamics on the Gullah/Geechee that, over time, created two dimensions of Gullah identity: one indigenous that is roped to the land economy and a variation formed within the African diaspora that largely landed in more urban settings. Each of these identities carries significant implications for Gullah/Geechee landownership.

Land loss is a phenomenon constantly operating in the background. South Carolina's planning officials enthusiastically welcome resort and luxury housing developments. These activities generate positive economic dollar-based externalities for recipient communities, including higher property taxes while simultaneously bringing a myriad of negative impacts to native Gullah/Geechees. South Carolina's property tax system is tremendously complex and based on tiered millage rates that vary between jurisdictional boundaries. Ultimately, tax assessments are grounded on factors such as residential or commercial use, location, and property size. The typical homeowner faces a property tax liability covering roughly half an acre—but, as noted, Black Sea Islanders controlled land holdings ranging in size from five, 10, or 20 acres held in cooperative tenancy akin to family-based land trusts.<sup>15</sup> The genesis of Gullah land acquisition in large parcels contributes to grave vulnerability in a tax system wherein waterfront properties are disproportionately assessed at higher rates. Regardless of location, large parcel holdings inevitably come with higher tax liabilities.

Altogether, in a post-modern property tax assessment system, the ability to pay regulates property rights and ownership. Gullah/Geechee landowners have experienced tremendous land loss from being unable to pay higher property taxes. This circumstance has forced some property owners into tax delinquency. It is difficult to precisely quantify the enormity of land expropriated from the Gullah/Geechee people because of forced tax lien sales. Scholars such as Andrew Kahrl and investigative journalists have assembled an account of the extractive effects of resort development and egregious predatorial actions to exploit defenseless landholders, including outright larceny.<sup>16</sup> Public authorities also contributed to the erosion of Gullah landownership under the rubric of economic development.

Furthermore, political land acquisition strategies such as eminent domain played a prominent role in Gullah land divestment. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 facilitated a national spatial mobility project that paved the way for interstate highway systems like I-95 and the locus of highways offshoots that disproportionately impacted Black neighborhoods walled in by high levels of poverty, joblessness, and effectively segregated from opportunity.<sup>17</sup> The federal government in coordination with state and local authorities aggressively leveraged eminent domain (a legal process that gives government authorities the preeminent right to purchase privately-held property for public use purposes). This discussion should not be misconstrued as a historical account: A simple Google search—limited to 2010 and 2022—on this issue returns thousands of media stories. According to Director Smalls, eminent domain was instrumental in gutting Gullah land control in Hilton Head, S.C. where often disempowered communities lost enormous amounts of land because they lacked adequate interest group representation.

Advocacy groups like the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition have developed despite the power imbalance. The Coalition is a vocal organization within the advocacy environment that champions Gullah/Geechee's interests. Founded in 1996 by St. Helena Island native Marquette L. Goodwine, enstooled in 2000 as "Queen Quet, chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation," the organization is focused on protecting Gullah/Geechee human rights and land ownership. The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition has convened thousands of focus groups over the years of its existence and engaged with numerous elders throughout the coast. The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition continues to be the leading organization fighting a myriad of land cases on behalf of native Gullah/Geechees. Queen Quet's political activism has been instrumental in the push for the community's visibility across legislative platforms at the local, state, and federal levels.

Exploitation of Gullah/Geechee elders has been a decisive source of land title leakage. The ability to draw parallels between the broader policy discourse on older Americans' financial vulnerabilities has perhaps led journalists to stress this aspect of land loss. This similarity makes the plight of Gullah elders more relatable to the general public. Less examined is the generational effect of out-migration as young Gullah members move away from ancestral lands. The out-migration of young Gullah members seeking better employment and educational opportunities has caused the stayer community to age quickly; the aging demographic plays an essential role in the elder abuse phenomenon. Out-migration is a slow process that has been unfolding since



**Every single Gullah community has the same economic struggles with the land. Some of those fights are against state agencies, federal agencies, cities, and towns. I've found that cities and towns are going to be the largest owners of former Gullah/Geechee land that people have been taxed out of, that they can no longer afford the land, or they have not found a way to keep the land productive and profitable.**

**Victoria Smalls**  
Executive Director  
Gullah/Geechee Cultural  
Heritage Corridor Commission

the Sea Islands were connected to the mainland via bridges. It is critical to understand how this process reinforces land loss. The distinctiveness of the language can be lost on those who have not encountered indigenous Gullah/Geechee members. However, immigrants in the Caribbean diaspora immediately recognize the linguistic correspondence between the diverse Caribbean patois variants and the Gullah/Geechee language. The overlap in linguistic symbolism is remarkable.

This shared linguistic bond informs another parallel that is particularly problematic for the Gullah/Geechee: Their dialect functions as a marker of immigrant status rather than natural-born African American ancestry. Numerous scholars have documented Gullah community members' alienation due to their foreign-sounding dialect that, in some instances, has been disparaged and associated with an inferior version of Blackness. Adopting American English is an essential acculturation strategy most new immigrants deploy to facilitate assimilation into American social life. This language shedding accelerates cultural integration and invites fewer questions about one's origins. Justice Clarence Thomas's experience as Gullah/Geechee illustrates the alienating effects of owning the Gullah dialect. He explained how dialect shaming forced him to adopt coping mechanisms to survive in a world that rejected his indigenous foreign-sounding but American-bred Geechee dialect.<sup>18</sup> But distancing oneself from this dialect creates an organic distancing from the lineage itself. African diasporic cultures like Gullah pass their empirical indigenous knowledge through an oral transfer process—how to grow land, nurture babies, use herbal medicines, and connect with one's lineage. The latter element is especially relevant to the land loss issue.

Intergenerational inheritance of Gullah land is still shaped by the early days of cooperative purchasing at Lincoln's land auctions. A natural residual of this form of ownership is the non-severable joint tenancy of family land—titled heirs' claims to thousands of acres of land passed from generation to generation through an established lineage. Severing the association with the Gullah language reinforces a disconnect

from one's lineage within the diaspora. Out-migration also disturbs a learning process about lineage links among community members. Disrupting the transfer of lineage-related knowledge means that fewer members of successive descendants will realize their legitimate claim to vast amounts of land. Moreover, the connection to the symbolic significance of the land's genesis weakens considerably, as does the place attachment to communities devoid of links to one's birth or development. Inheritance conferred through oral traditions and expectations to carry on the legacy is notoriously susceptible to wealth leakage: Oftentimes, wealth transfer occurs without legal documentation or defensible subdivisions.

Heirs' property respects the weighty symbolism of a heritage of landownership forged in the determination of freed men and women. However, the legal court system is not equipped to effectively protect this mode of wealth transfer. Speculative developers, on the other hand, can deploy resources such as title and genealogy tracing to perfect their extraction. They are keenly aware of the cumulative effects of place detachment and have exploited distance, the cooperative landownership inheritance structure, and income inequality to continue to expropriate Gullah/Geechee lands.<sup>19</sup> The Center for Heirs Property Preservation is a nonprofit organization founded on a singular mission to help vulnerable persons formalize legal claims to their inheritance and to provide tools to reverse dispossession and preserve the most tangible form of Gullah/Geechee heritage. The enormity of Gullah land loss deserves national attention. As the Biden administration drafts headline-grabbing racial equity executive orders, Gullah/Geechee landowners continue to be stripped of their heritage because of active land loss processes that exacerbate the community's marginalization.

My visual artwork is very much based on the community that I come from. It focuses on the African American story. It includes a lot of natural elements—leaves, trees, collard greens, things that tie me to my community and celebrate the community. My performing art comes out of Gullah/Geechee and the African American experience. My favorite thing is when I get to tie the two together.






Natalie Daise is a storyteller, performing artist, and visual creative. Based in Georgetown, S.C. Ms. Daise runs a thriving multimedia creative practice that provides arts education workshops and stunning culturally-informed artwork.



# THE EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

**Along the cultural heritage corridor's coastlines, the Gullah community has constructed interdependent social and economic spaces mediated by the community's environmental resources.**



This socioeconomic ecosystem faces existential threats from climate change. Warming seas, a rising sea level, eroding marshlands, and other anthropogenic global warming effects have compromised various aspects of Gullah/Geechee's marine economy and biosphere. Warmer coastal waters have changed oceanic patterns of several marine species, including oysters, shrimp, and fish with natural estuarine habitats—core staples of the Gullah diet and commercial fisheries.<sup>20</sup> Warming temperatures have also spurred the collapse of coastal shrimp populations, while higher oceanic acidity imperils the resilience and survival of certain oyster genus.<sup>21</sup>

**Ocean acidification continues to rise because of overbuilt shorelines, chemical runoff from private docks, golf courses, and yachts. These anthropogenic intrusions have now hindered our seafood industry a great deal. Some species in some counties are not here anymore and other species have been minimized to the extreme.**

**Queen Quet**  
**Chieftess, Gullah/Geechee Nation**  
**Founder, Gullah/Geechee Sea**  
**Island Coalition**

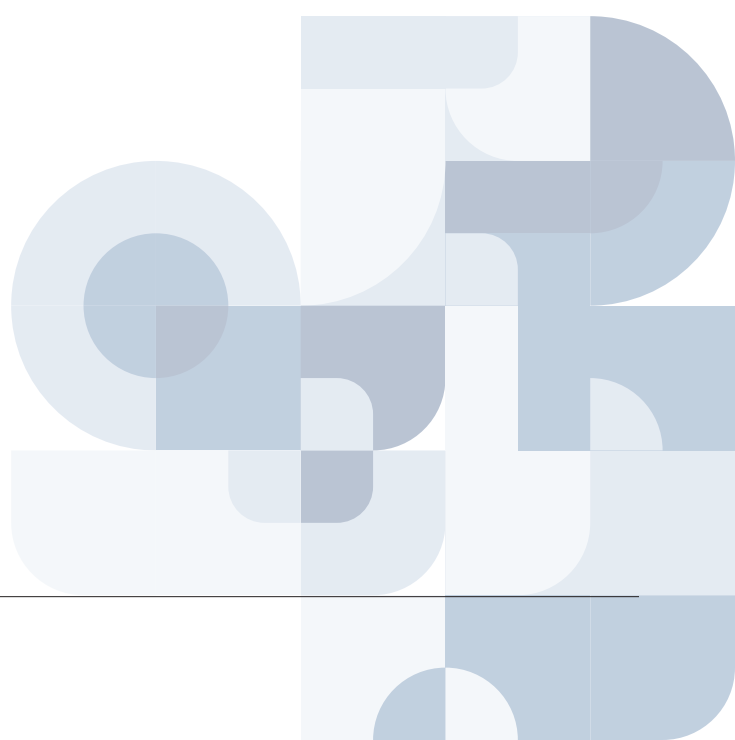
Rising ocean temperatures have sparked dramatic shifts in migration patterns, pushing commercially valuable species to cooler waters in the north and destroying indigenous habitats.<sup>22</sup> Commercial fishers urgently need resources to follow changing marine migration to source primary food supplies and earn incomes. These assets are crucial to sustaining the commercial aspects of a fishery-based economy. Even more crucial is the threat to food security in communities on the Gullah/Geechee coast, which depend on seafood as a primary diet. The effects of climate change have increased the cost of commercial fishing and increased urgent concerns about food insecurity and public health concerns about food safety.

Apart from marine concerns, changes in climatic patterns have hindered essential agricultural activities as well. Okra holds a core place in Gullah cuisine, serving as both an artform and a traditional dietary staple. Okra cultivation is particularly sensitive to ecological stressors such as temperature and precipitation that can negatively affect food quality or yield and even lead to outright crop failure.<sup>23</sup> Rising temperatures effectively shorten harvest season as farmers grapple with extreme temperature variations or intense heat waves burn valuable harvest yields. The region's low elevation once provided a comparative advantage in rice cultivation and buttressed a robust plantation economy. Today, the terrain has made low elevation in coastal areas like Gullah lands highly susceptible to extreme flooding from intense tropical storms, extreme hurricanes, and flooding caused by king tides. A lack of naturally occurring geo-defenses between freshwater plains and the sea exposes low-lying farms to saltwater floods with significant repercussions for the community's agricultural staples and drinkable water sources.<sup>24</sup> Queen Quet has lobbied Congress as well as federal and international agencies for decades to recognize the multilayered crises menacing the Gullah/Geechee biosphere.<sup>25</sup>



For Queen Quet, climate change is not simply a matter of environmental preservation or protecting the traditions and heritage harmed by climacteric trends. Global warming has imposed tangible penalties on the Gullah/Geechee. It has jeopardized their health and well-being via direct effects on their environment: acidic oceans killing oysters and crabs, flooding marshlands eroding sweetgrass habitats, and toxins poisoning dietary seafood staples. A 2019 study of contaminants in edible fish species in the Charleston, S.C. region confirmed elevated levels of chemical toxins in popular fish species that exceeded cancer-screening thresholds in some cases. The authors warned that their findings augur significant implications for subsistence fish consumers. In other words, fishing communities like the Gullah/Geechee disproportionately confront health risks associated with contaminated fish. These risks are then amplified through mundane daily activities given the centrality of the marine environment to the area's social ecology.<sup>26</sup>

The Gullah/Geechee proverb *de wata bring we and de wata gwine tek we bak* succinctly captures a literal state of climate emergency that has permeated every domain of life in this coastal community. While the public is slowly coming to appreciate the seriousness of climate change, disempowered coastal communities like the Gullah/Geechee are facing an ecological crisis that is wholly incompatible with the technocratic strategies taking center stage at climate change conferences. The default response to relocate climate-impacted communities with each successive hurricane from Katrina to Harvey is not functionally feasible for this community. Uprooting an ancestral culture without its land would have cascading calamitous effects that could well be impervious to reparations.





Gullah/Geechee commercial fishers need resources to follow changing marine migration patterns to source primary food supplies and earn income. Subsidizing small businesses is crucial to sustaining the community's food environment.

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With rising temperatures, the harvest season is shorter because your crops literally burn. We want to engage in hydroponics, but the community doesn't have the funds to purchase a unit for the land. We need to educate growers on how to adapt to grow food in the field, and grow some food in an indoor place, so that when it's blazing hot—we can still eat. Tradition and technology must balance.





Queen Quet, Chieftess of the  
Gullah/Geechee Nation in the  
Gullah/Geechee Ga'dun" on  
historic St. Helena Island, S.C.

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*Plantain nah eat like rice*



# IS PRESERVING HERITAGE SUFFICIENT?

**Gullah/Geechee heritage is more than a relic that can be distilled into ancestral stories, artifacts, or symbols curated and spotlighted in commemorative museums.**



Congress established the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor in 2006 to preserve the community's folklore, arts, crafts, and music.<sup>27</sup> Since its establishment, the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor has enabled a thriving heritage tourism cottage industry integral to the Low Country's tourism sector. The Commission responsible for stewarding these cultural assets confirmed their multibillion-dollar income-generating potential.<sup>28</sup> Formalizing the Corridor provided space and a means for entrepreneurs to commercialize authentic Gullah heritage. Expressions of heritage tourism include micro-scale entrepreneurship basket sewers, expressive art creators, fashion designers, jewelry makers, culinary experience providers, and storytellers. Moreover, the Corridor serves as a vital commercial avenue for artisans who draw on the anthropological meanings of Gullah heritage to earn family-sustaining incomes.



Legislative artifacts like the Heritage Act and the empowered institutions emanating from its authority are important symbolic acts that should convey visibility and a sense of reverence for indigenous groups. The Gullah/Geechee Heritage Act accorded the Gullah/Geechee community national recognition as an indigenous minority group with a uniquely American heritage.<sup>29</sup> While the Heritage Act addressed the commercial functions of heritage, it did not establish political authority to protect the land anchoring Gullah/Geechee indigeneity. In 2008, the National Park Service (NPS) acknowledged the role of land ownership in Gullah/Geechee cultural preservation but emphatically stated that “the preservation of lands lies largely in the hands of government entities that regulate property taxes and control real estate development, and the Gullah/Geechee people themselves.”<sup>30</sup> The inherent power imbalance between capital juggernauts and disempowered communities has propelled the erosion of Gullah/Geechee wealth.

Political impotence deteriorates a community’s capacity to draw protective boundaries. For example, establishing cultural protection overlay districts, a protective zoning exemption prohibiting development on culturally significant land, is exceptionally difficult. Still, the Gullah/Geechees of historic St. Helena Island, S.C. succeeded in establishing the only cultural protection overlay district that exists within the Gullah/Geechee Nation; it protects the Gullah culture on St. Helena Island and the outer lying hammocks that surround this distinctive Gullah/Geechee Sea Island. Queen Quet and St. Helena Island Gullah/Geechee elders worked to establish a family compound exception in Beaufort County’s Zoning District Standard Ordinance that allows native Gullah/Geechee to sustain their land use patterns for family compounds. Unfortunately, hard-won outcomes such as these rarely occur—success in isolation thwarts progress. Queen Quet chaired the Cultural Protection Overlay (CPO) District Committee for a decade and attempted to have other counties beyond Beaufort County, S.C. to duplicate this unique land use planning district throughout the coast. Overall Gullah/Geechee communities continually face an uphill battle to replicate CPOs to preserve their land and way of life.

The Gullah/Geechee story, as it began, endures in the spirit of resourcefulness and determination to preserve the community. Convention dictates that we conclude with actionable strategies to address highlighted issues. We agree and choose to adopt a deliberative practice informed by the Gullah/Geechee saying *Cumya nah bin ya*, which loosely translates to the idea that people



who create communities produce solutions in harmony with the experience of being indigenous to those places and are vested in the well-being of its future and those that are not indigenous cannot fully grasp all that it takes to do so. As NPS conceded, the preservation of Gullah/Geechee lands lies in the hands of its people. We reflect, without translation, organic solutions, ideas, and initiatives created by Gullah/Geechee advocates: Queen Quet—chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and founder of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, Victoria Smalls—executive director of Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, and Marilyn Hemmingway, CEO of Chamber of Commerce—who have dedicated tremendous resources and emotional labor to preserve and protect the Gullah/Geechee heritage:

1. Create permanent Gullah/Geechee taskforces in every town and municipality to represent the interest of Gullah landowners in development debates, establish historical preservation protected areas, waive impact fees for Gullah primary residence construction, and implement cultural overlay protections in critical rural farmland areas.
2. Financially support mission-critical institutions such as the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, the Gullah/Geechee Angel Network, Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, The Center for Heirs Property Preservation, and the Gullah/Geechee Chamber of Commerce with unrestricted, match-free funds to support ongoing initiatives such as: will codification clinics, learning farms, programs to document and preserve the culture and its language, among others.
3. Partner with Gullah/Geechee-owned and operated organizations to build infrastructure to develop Gullah micro- and small-businesses access grant resources, technical assistance, online marketplace platforms, technical expertise to integrate their artisan practices into the digital financial marketplace, and resources to build a robust broadband infrastructure.
4. Support Gullah/Geechee fishing bills such as that put forth a decade ago by the Gullah/Geechee Fishing Association. These legislative proposals protect Gullah/Geechee subsistence fishing. They allocate protected fishing right Gullah/Geechee fisheries equivalent to the protected rights of other recognized tribes. All states ensure that Gullah/Geechee's have their own subsistence fishing rights.

5. Prioritize Gullah environmental programs in the Biden administration's Justice40 Initiative. The federal government should allocate infrastructure funds and technical support to implement the Gullah/Geechee Living Landscape Project, which develops resilience hubs, builds living landscapes and shorelines, retrofits cause ways, and builds bioswales. Infrastructure funds would help Gullah/Geechee farmers build geo-engineering defenses such as hydroponic farms that adopt new technologies to protect critical food sources.
6. Prioritize public health in coastal cultural heritage communities. Urbanization and suburbanization of the coast have created serious public health concerns for Gullah coastal communities. Urbanization of rural coastal areas has harmed the environment through ocean acidification and biohazards that affect the water table and increase seafood toxins.
7. Fund geo-engineering defense projects. The federal government should finance the South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative aimed at preserving, restoring, and protecting 1 million acres of salt marsh in the southeast.
8. Redesign Heirs Property Loan Program. Biden administration should convert the Heirs Property Loan program into a grant program that provides financial resources to low-income Gullah/Geechee families to clear title claims, rehabilitate distressed properties, pay outstanding tax liabilities, and educate Gullah/Geechee communities about USDA resources that support land retention.

The strategies reflected in this case study have worked slowly to create political power for the Gullah/Geechee. In some places, governance institutions imbued with authority have been created to shape decisions that affect their ancestral lands.<sup>31</sup> However, much more work is needed to support Gullah/Geechee institutions and organizations. For example, it is necessary to invest in set-aside procurement contracts for Gullah/Geechee fishers who maintain sustainable fishing practices. Programs should be funded that enable Gullah/Geechee entrepreneurs to transition to the digital economy. Part of that transition should include payment platform fee waivers for verified Gullah/Geechee micro- and small-business owners capable of digital commerce. Policymakers are slowly developing the competency to appreciate Black cultural assets. But the pace of progress is slow. Preserving the living heritage and existing wealth of indigenous Gullah/Geechee communities demands urgent responses.

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