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SPECIAL FORUM ON THE CHARLESTON MASSACRE OF 2015

The Assassination of Clementa Pinckney

KATE DRISCOLL DERICKSON

University of Minnesota

In late June of 2015 I was on the outskirts of Charleston, SC in the neighboring city of Mt. Pleasant with Queen Quet, the Chieftess and Head of State of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, her son, and two members of the Gullah/Geechee Nation Council of Elders. We were embarking on a road trip to Seabreeze, North Carolina, in the northernmost reaches of Gullah/Geechee Nation to check in on the status of that small coastal beach community that was once a busy destination for Black vacationers. Queen Quet had heard from a woman who owned a home along the Intracoastal Waterway a few years back that she and her family were struggling to hold on to their land, and Queen and the Elders wanted to see for themselves what was happening in Seabreeze.

As we ate our lunch in preparation for the trip, Queen and the Elders reflected on the funeral of their friend and ally, Senator Clementa Pinckney, one of the 9 people murdered during Bible study in the basement of the Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC just 10 days earlier. President Obama had delivered one of the eulogies at the televised funeral, surprising some viewers by breaking into the hymn "Amazing Grace" in the midst of his eulogy

in the tradition of Black church sermons, and not at all in the tradition of American presidential speech. Reflecting on the jarring juxtaposition in that moment and the national response to the eulogy, one of the Elders noted that it was "America's first Black funeral."

That we could elect America's First Black President before ever experiencing America's First Black Funeral was disorienting to me, especially juxtaposed against the relentless hegemony of what Mary Thomas (2011) has called "banal multiculturalism" that characterizes the racial and political discourse of the so-called "post-racial" New South. The observation that this was America's First Black Funeral is more than a witty quip; it is a comment on the pervasive cultural, political and socio-economic gulf between Black and white America. This gulf is responsible for the general failure to recognize this event as an act of terrorism and an assassination of an important political leader. Indeed, the terror incited that afternoon was not targeted at our collective polity, but a very specific group of people. The location the shooter chose was likewise not fully recognized in popular media, or even in the white community of Charleston, for its

Figure 1. Queen Quet, Chiefess and Head of State of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and Senator Clementa Pinckney. Courtesy of the Gullah/Geechee Alkebulan Archive.

Photo Credit: Kumar L. Goodwine-Kennedy.

proper place in the people's history of the United States. If we understand the life of Senator Pinckney and the Emanuel AME Church from the vantage point of Gullah/Geechee Nation, however, we might better understand the events of June 17, 2015 in both their historical and present day political and racial context. It may, in Senator Pinckney's words, "give us new eyes for seeing."

Highway 17, where we were stopped for lunch, is the primary thoroughfare through Gullah/Geechee Nation,¹ which runs from Jacksonville, North Carolina to

Jacksonville, Florida, and westward from the coast to 30 miles inland. Queen Quet is the elected representative of the Gullah/Geechee people, enstooled as Queen and Head of State after representing Gullah/Geechee people at the UN and many years of activism and advocacy on behalf of Gullah/Geechee people. The Gullah/Geechee people are descendants of Africans brought to the US from the "Rice Coast" of Africa. Africans from that region were targeted by slave traders and valued by South Carolina plantation owners for their knowledge of rice cultivation. Because many whites

were intolerant of the coastal lowland climate and environment, enslaved Africans on plantations in the region were often left alone to carry out the work of the plantation. Later, as they escaped or were freed, many gravitated to the Sea Islands, barrier islands along the South Carolina and Georgia coast, which remained relatively isolated until the mid-20th century, when mosquito control tactics, air conditioning, and bridges made for a more compelling environment for the region's middle class and wealthy whites attracted to the beaches, natural beauty and natural resources of the region. The century of isolation allowed Black residents to retain many of the traditions which they and their ancestors had brought from Africa and to produce new traditions. Studies have shown that the Gullah language has strong ties to African languages and dialects, and that the Gullah/Geechee culture has retained more Africanisms than any other group in the US (Turner 2002, Goodwine 1998, Pollitzer 1999, Campell 2008, Cross 2008). Until fairly recently, "unassimilated" Gullah/Geechees practiced subsistence livelihoods, feeding their families and making a little extra money by harvesting seafood from the creeks and oceans and farms. For many Gullah/Geechees, these activities remain a crucial component of their livelihoods.

From Mt. Pleasant to the southern reaches of Francis Marion National Forest, Highway 17 is known for the basket stands Gullah/Geechee people set up on their own land, or that of a relative's, to sell the handmade sweet grass baskets sewn in an African basket making tradition. As the city of Mt. Pleasant grew and the Jim Crow era waned, zoning changes, infrastructure development, and demand

by white homebuyers for waterfront property intensified, and traditionally Gullah/Geechee neighborhoods in Mt. Pleasant along Highway 17 were threatened with displacement. Today basket stands sit precariously on the edge of an expanded Highway 17, in the shadow of intensified commercial and residential development.

When we arrived at Seabreeze, passing Gullah/Geechee family compounds recognizable for their mobile homes arranged on land with garden plots, we found For Sale signs in front of former juke joints and land once owned by Gullah/Geechee families, in the shadow of new homes in the midst of construction.

Real estate listings for these new homes invited potential buyers to come own a piece of "historic Seabreeze" without a hint of irony at the idea that these homes were remaking that history. The home of the woman who had contacted Queen a few years ago still stood, but her son's land adjacent to her own featured a large For Sale sign.

The telos of cultural eradication looms large in most mainstream representations of Gullah/Geechee culture. It is almost always represented by outsiders as an endangered or almost extinct relic of the past, a quaint footnote in the history of a region that sells itself as "Where History Lives," a menacing—if perversely accurate—tagline for a region where 40% of enslaved Africans first set foot in the U.S. Queen Quet has said there is something pathological about proclaiming a culture that is standing in front of you dead, and has devoted her life to documenting and advocating for the well-being of Gullah/Geechee people and the environmental health of Gullah/Geechee Nation.

Figure 2. Sweetgrass basket stand along Highway 17 in Mt. Pleasant, SC. Photo Credit: Author.

As the Senator for the 45th district in South Carolina, a 50% Black and mostly rural district that includes some of the poorest counties in the state, Clementa Pinckney represented a large swath of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and had a track record of championing issues that were of crucial importance to Gullah/Geechee lives and livelihoods. Many Gullah/Geechee families live on land purchased by their ancestors during reconstruction. Sherman's Field Order 15 (where the myth of "40 acres and a mule" originated) was issued in Savannah and set aside 400,000 acres of land along the Georgia and South Carolina coast, right in the heart of where Gullah/Geechees lived, but land occupied by Blacks in fulfillment of this promise was, for the most part, returned to

plantation owners (Du Bois 1962, 393). Eager to put their skills, knowledge, and labor to work for the benefit of their families and to achieve self-sufficiency, many Blacks worked to purchase land in the region, and proceeded to cultivate the land and harvest the creeks and waterways in a largely subsistence livelihood. Today, many descendants of those landowners still live on the land purchased by their ancestors, and many still have large garden plots and fish and hunt to supplement their diets and maintain culturally rooted diets and livelihoods. During focus groups Queen Quet and I conducted throughout Gullah/Geechee Nation in the summer of 2015, we heard repeatedly the sorrow people felt that rules enforced by the Department of Natural Resources

Figure 3. New construction in Seabreeze, North Carolina. Photo credit: Author.

meant they could no longer catch enough fish to share with their neighbors and family members, as they once did, and that they could no longer feed themselves and their families in accordance with their traditions.

As is common in southern African-American communities, land is often owned in an “heirs’ property” arrangement (Jones 2013). According to U.S. law, if landowners do not designate an heir in their will, equal shares of land ownership are inherited by the next of kin. This dynamic continues in each generation unless costly legal procedures are followed to produce a clear title to the land by a single entity or individual. Heirs’ property creates a series of challenges for those who occupy the land. According to

William Heyward, attorney with the Heirs’ Property Law Center in Charleston, financial institutions will not lend money for improvements to land or building structures when residents do not possess a clear title. Lacking such a title, many Gullah/Geechee families live in mobile or prefabricated homes. Selling the property is a complicated and costly process because all heirs are required to be bought out or compensated, including many who have never paid taxes on the land. More urgently, the tax burden for land falls to those who live on the land, and in some parts of Gullah/Geechee Nation, rising property taxes create unmanageable hardships. Where tourist- and second-home oriented development and associated commercial and residential land uses have proliferated

along the coast, many Gullah/Geechee families face increased tax burdens due to rezoned land or increasing property values. In the case of the latter, Gullah/Geechee land owners are not in a position to capitalize on higher land values because they cannot borrow against the value of the land, but they are subject to increased taxes. When Gullah/Geechee families are unable to make tax payments, their land is seized by the state and auctioned in a sheriff's sale. This possibility looms large for many such families, and non-profit organizations and fundraisers have been established to assist Gullah/Geechee land owners with their tax burdens. Coupled with predatory tactics by investors and developers, rising taxes are a major cause of land loss by Gullah/Geechee families. And while losing one's land and home are traumatic for anyone, Gullah/Geechees consider the land to be part of their family, and their livelihood strategies are deeply bound up with the land. "Without the land," one interviewee who worked on these issues told me, "there is no culture."

In his capacity as a state senator, Clementa Pinckney was instrumental in passing a bill to allow families to break up property tax payments into 5 installments. Pan-African Family Empowerment Network CEO Theresa White, who is leading a charge to raise funds to pay back taxes on Gullah/Geechee land in danger of being lost through delinquent tax sales, called Senator Pinckney one of "the biggest protectors of Gullah/Geechee land ownership" (PAFN 2015). Pinckney also sponsored Senate Resolution 1458, which passed in 2008, to formally recognize and honor Queen Quet as a representative of the Gullah/Geechee people by the state of South Carolina. After Walter

Scott, a Gullah/Geechee man, was shot in the back by a police officer in North Charleston in April 2015, Pinckney passionately advocated for the use of body cameras by police officers.

In addition to his legislative achievements and advocacy for Gullah/Geechee lives, livelihoods, and well-being, he was the spiritual leader of a church and congregation that has symbolic importance to Gullah/Geechee life and history. Not only are many members of the congregation of Emanuel AME themselves Gullah/Geechee, the church itself holds a powerful place in the history of the culture in the region. As a result of the news coverage after the shooting, many are now more familiar with the people's history of the church and its central role in the slave revolt planned by a church leader, Denmark Vesey, in 1822. Ultimately thwarted, Vesey was hanged not long before his co-conspirator "Gullah Jack" Pritchard, who was tasked with organizing the enslaved men and woman on the Sea Islands, met a similar fate (Rucker 2001). Mother Emanuel has also remained a towering reminder of the presence of Black Charleston in the midst of the rapid gentrification of downtown. In the past decade, there has been a 55% decline in the Black population of the city (Slade and Parker 2014)—the perverse evacuation of history so that it might "live" for tourists. Mother Emanuel is a towering and powerful assertion of the Black history and presence in a city where strategies of urban development promote the intensification of what Hargrove calls the "social field of whiteness" (2009).

We don't yet know—and may not care—what was in the heart of the shooter,

whether he intended to murder Senator Pinckney because of who he was and the work he did. But if we see the events of June 17, 2015 from the perspective of the history, priorities, needs and values of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, we can see the day for what it was—the assassination of a political and spiritual leader of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

NOTES

1. “Gullah/Geechee Nation” refers to both geographical space where Gullah/Geechee culture and people are primarily concentrated as well as the diaspora of those descended from Gullah/Geechees throughout the world.

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KATE DERICKSON (kdericks@umn.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography, Environment and Society at the University of Minnesota. Her work is concerned with the political economy of racialization, urbanization, and natural resource management as well as the ethics and praxis of community-based research.