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Southern Anthropologist



Volume 29, No. 1, Fall 2002

Southern Anthropologist

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Fall 2002]

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Volume 29 Number 1
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“Gigabyte” Johnson

Editor's Corner

Welcome to the Fall 2002 Southern Anthropologist!

This issue features Mike Addabbo's winning entry in the Undergraduate Student Paper Competition from the Annual Spring meetings this year in Asheville, N C, as well as Melissa Hargrove's winning Graduate paper from the same competition. There are also reviews of the books chosen as the Mooney Award winners for this year.

I am also very pleased to be able to reprint here Dr Kilpatrick's talk, delivered at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, N C, on Cherokee Medical History. This was part of a very special reception and learning time at the Museum (and featuring a bus ride to the Museum and some excellent food!) which helped showcase the refurbished Museum. I am delighted that Dr Kilpatrick has agreed to share his thoughts with this publication.

Call for New Editor of *Southern Anthropologist*

I have decided to leave this Editor's position, effective at the end of this academic year (2002-03). I have enjoyed the job a lot, but am ready to move on to other challenges. The job is what you make it, and can be a lot of fun!

I encourage those who have an interest in the position to contact Barbara Hendry about their interest and contact me for specifics about how I have been doing the job. She can be reached at bhendry@gsaix2.cc.gasou.edu. I give below some

discussion of the Editor's tasks, as I have been doing them; I have a longer discussion that I can email interested parties if they contact me.

General tasks of the Editor:

In general, the Editor has to collect and assemble the material for each issue and then oversee the layout of this into a printed form (and probably electronic, when that happens in the future). These materials include:

The Student Paper Competition winning papers.

Material from Committees and organizers, including:

- Mooney committee
- Endowment Chair
- Statement about the

upcoming annual meeting program
President column from the current President

other columnists (including Editor, if so desired)

lists of current officers of the Society

Advertisements from the various Presses involved with the Society.

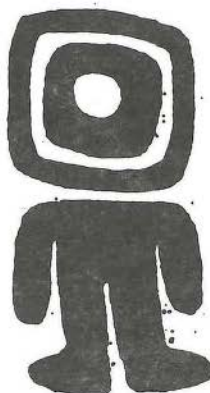
When the material is collected, it needs to be organized into a layout and fed into a template so it will match the format of previous issues.

This layout is printed and mailed with labels supplied by the Sec/Treas.

Ways to reach me:

- (1) Voice mail at (336) 334-7894 at my office, or (336) 854-4374 at home
- (2) E-mail via the Internet at johnsond@ncat.edu
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President's Column

John Studstill
Columbus State University

Small Societies Can Be Beautiful!

It is tradition to thank past presidents and organizers for their work, and to remind everyone of the upcoming annual meeting. Certainly, Barbara Hendry did a great job as president last year, the meeting organizers in Asheville, Lisa Lefler and Margaret Bender (who is also our new Secretary-Treasurer) did a fine job. I especially enjoyed the session at Cherokee and the keynote address. The story of the migratory Yellow Mockingbird who could never quite get back north in time to see ice sticks with me—it is like the opening line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Marquez, about “discovering ice” and facing a firing squad—even if we aren’t quite sure what all they may mean, these things stick in the mind, symbols of life, death, opposites and eternal cycles.

Our big little SAS, great in heart and fellowship, with faculty-student interaction, like a true small-scale society that most anthropologists still cherish, is a beautiful organization that just keeps rolling on. I don’t think it needs to be a giant and growing organism, like a capitalist economy. Yet we all have to work to maintain it, all who love it, or it might wither away like some hunting and gathering band in the Kalahari. But that’s not likely to happen soon, not so long as there are leaders like past presidents Hendry, Mark Moberg, Daryl White, president-elect Dan Ingersoll, and SA editor David Johnson around to keep us on the right path. The meeting in Baton Rouge this year looks to be very attractive. (See info in this issue about Louisiana and Mardi Gras). While not the topic of the Key

Symposium in Baton Rouge, the session I am hoping to organize will be student-packed from my little anthropology group at Columbus State around the theme of social problems and homelessness in Columbus, GA.

On a personal note, I am particularly grateful for those of you who helped get me out of the trenches of part-time teaching and into a tenure-track position after many years fighting the employment wars. In fact, in three years I moved from trench warfare to president of the SAS, and, with a record like that, I’m now thinking of challenging George W. Bush for the “Most undemocratically elected President of the Year” award! You know who you are, but I mention especially David Johnson, White, and Ingersoll who published my diatribe against part-time employment in the *Southern Anthropologist*, who encouraged me to research Latin immigration in Georgia, and who helped nominate me for this present figurehead position. Hans Baer, another past president of SAS, got it all started with his article in the S.A. called the Tripartite Division of Labor in U.S. Education (SA, Fall 1996:20-3). That encouraged me to an additional critique of the dangerous trend towards the proletarianization of teachers published in the S.A. (Fall 1997:11-17). And that fight definitely Ain’t over yet. Thanks, David, for your many years as volunteer editor. Small can be beautiful, the best things often come in small packages, bigger isn’t necessarily better. Vive the SAS! Y’all all pitch in and keep this thing going strong now.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Southern Anthropological Society

2003 Annual Meeting

Mardi Gras!**February 26 – March 1 Baton Rouge, Louisiana****Sheraton Baton Rouge Convention Center Hotel, www.sheraton.com/batonrouge****102 France Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802****Rates: \$80/room, single or double****Call 225-242-2662, by January 27, 2003, to make reservations.****Local arrangements: Miles Richardson**225-578-6192; gamile@lsu.edu

Department of Geography and Anthropology

Louisiana State University

Key Symposium*Caribbean and Southern:**Transnational Perspectives on the U.S. South***Symposium Organizer and Program Chair: Helen Regis****504-949-3322; hregis1@lsu.edu****All Abstracts Due: December 2, 2002****Email abstracts to sasbr2003@yahoo.com****Send abstract (hard copy), registration form, and membership fees to:**

Helen Regis, 2003 SAS Department of Geography and Anthropology

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803

Registration: \$40, regular; \$20, student SAS Membership: \$40, regular; \$20, student

Student paper competition**The SAS welcomes student presenters. Abstracts due December 2, 2002. Papers due January 15, 2003.****For further information contact the Student Paper Competition Chair:****Kate Meatyard, 301-884-3712, katemeatyard@aol.com, Department of Anthropology and Sociology,****St. Mary's College of Maryland****Co-Sponsored by Louisiana State University, University of New Orleans, and the Deep South Regional Humanities Center at Tulane University**

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Contact Barbara Hendry if interested in the position, at <bhendry@gsaix2.cc.gasou.edu>, or (Dept. of Soc/Anth, Georgia Southern Univ., P. O. Box 8051, Statesboro, GA 30460), and contact David Johnson at <johnsond@ncat.edu> for more details on the activities associated with the position!

SAS Endowment Campaign for

Education and Outreach in the South

The Endowment is now in its seventh year of fund-raising towards a \$30,000 goal.

The purpose of the endowment is to:

- support student participation in the meetings and the student prize competition,
- expand the knowledge of anthropology in and of the South and to smaller colleges and universities which do not yet offer courses in anthropology,
- bring the message of our discipline to minority institutions through a dynamic speakers bureau,
- encourage minority participation in the field and at our meetings, and
- reward outstanding scholarship in the anthropology of the South with the annual presentation of an enhanced James Mooney prize.

At present the Endowment is about one-third of the way to the goal, so your contributions are needed!

Please take time to make a campaign pledge or donation and send it to:

Dr Max E White
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Piedmont College
PO Box 10
Demorest, GA 30535

email: <mwhite@piedmont.edu>; Tel: (706) 778-3000 ext 261; Fax: (706) 776-2811

Mooney Award Committee Reviews

The 2001 James Mooney Award Committee reviewed ten books submitted by six university presses. As we made our final evaluations we soon reached a consensus that two of the ten books were superior in meeting the criteria for the Mooney Award. These books were: *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950* by Laurie Wilkie; and *The Estuary's Gift: An Atlantic Coast Biography* by David Griffith.

Both Wilkie and Griffith were present at the 2002 annual meeting where, in a public ceremony, they each received a certificate of recognition from the Mooney Committee and a monetary gift from SAS. Wilkie received the 2001 James Mooney Award and Griffith received the 2001 James Mooney Honorable Mention Award. Following are reviews of the winning books by two members of the 2001 Mooney Award Committee. (Introduction by Harry Lefever, Committee Chair.)

Wilkie, Laurie

2000 *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950*. Louisiana State University Press. 248 pages, 9 maps, 47 figures, 24 tables, appendix, references cited, index.

Reviewed by Hester A. Davis
Mooney Award Committee
Arkansas Archeological Survey

There have certainly been many books written on antebellum/postbellum plantation life in the South, some vastly romanticized, some “first hand” from diaries, some biased—but almost all (until recently) from the viewpoint of the white owners. Historic archeologists are trying to broaden and deepen, if you will, the story of plantation life by excavating at the sites representing the silent majority of these Southern communities, the African Americans who made the white planters way of life possible.

Oakley Plantation is well known in the Lower Mississippi Valley, an area where, actually, several plantation houses survive, mostly as reconstructed tourist attractions, and Oakley is one of these. The last of the original “planter” family died in the mid-1940s and the State of Louisiana acquired the property in 1947 as a part of the Audubon State

Commemorative Area. The Great House does not have the traditional two-story white columns, but the ground-floor rooms are overshadowed by a wide long stair and the veranda. The planters living quarters were on the second and third stories. In addition to this extant building, a few outbuildings remain, but none of the less substantial houses of the African Americans (there were some 200 slaves on the plantation prior to the Civil War) survive. Documents on the plantation, however, do survive, a wealth of them in fact, back to the late 18th century. Laurie Wilkie excavated the remains of four African American households, families associated with the owners as servants or laborers. Because of the wealth of documents, including the WPA ex-slave interviews in the early 1940s, Wilkie was able to put names to all those who lived in these houses; in addition, she was able to conduct oral interviews with a few people who had lived on the plantation in the 1920s and 30s. Her goal, as the title implies, was to use all these sources—the material objects recovered in the excavation, the living memory of individuals, the wills, diaries, and other legal and historical documents dealing directly with Oakley—to provide an “identity” for these African Americans’ families, not as individuals, but as a microcosm, a community, if you will, that is not reflected in any other single source. She achieved this goal using an over-arching theoretical approach—the concept of *habitus*

(Bourdieu 1977, 1990)—and by integrating her historic, ethnohistoric, and archeological interpretations.

After setting the stage with the historic background of ante- and postbellum South, and of the historic and social context of Oakley Plantation itself, there is a detailed chapter on the archeological excavations and the material culture recovered. Chapter 5 sets another stage, this one entitled “Conflicting Influences on Identity Construction: African Heritage and Planter Imposition.” Then comes the meat of her work in four chapters: “Creating Household Identities;” “Constructing Personal and Family Ritual;” “Creating Public Personas;” and finally, “Constructing African American Identities.” Wilkie writes well, her deductions seem fine-grained and well argued, and there is a LOT of information in this book—on magic and hoodoo, on the role of African American churches in educating the children, on ethnomedical practices, on the wide-spread barter

system in the South after the Civil War, for example. There is a certain amount of what I have heard called “creeping concretism” in her interpretations; suggestions made for the possible meaning of information in the documents or in the archeological record which become fact in the summary. There is a certain amount of jargon (“communication-related artifacts” are inkwells, pen nibs, ends of pencil erasers), but this is not a book for the general public. This IS a book for professors to use for supplemental reading—in classes in Historic Archeology or in History of the South, for starters. It well deserves the Mooney Award.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre
1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK
1990 *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Griffith, David
1999 The Estuary's Gift: An Atlantic Coast Cultural Biography. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Review by Helen Regis
Mooney Award Committee
Louisiana State University

David Griffith's at times, poetic, humorous, and passionate prose, draws us into the life history of the Atlantic coast, recounting the human drama of settlement, conquest, resistance, enslavement, migration, racism and struggle for freedom which took place on its shores. Beginning with the first Native American inhabitants and working through the arrival of Europeans, Africans, and recent Central American and Caribbean migrants, Griffith's is a profoundly historicized and dialectical account of changing parameters of gift exchange between human populations and the natural world, culminating in the

current crisis of the Atlantic coast's estuaries. He shows us how changes in complex relations of reciprocity between people and their environment and with each other, can become unbalanced, making way for abuses of power, exploitation, and silencing of the oppressed. Through engagement with ecological theory, political economy, critical ethnohistory, and making deft use of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and a Foucaultian analysis of power/knowledge relations, he lays out a critical, bottom-up history of a beautiful place haunted by a history of violence and threatened by monolithic capital-expansion and development.

In Griffith's ethnohistory of the Atlantic coast, privatization of public space, globalization, transnational labor flows, racialized oppression all interact in this lyrical ethnography of a fragmented landscape. Intimate portraits of coastal fishers, labor contractors, and Mexican crab pickers alternative

with subtle analysis of social settings, and clear-minded expose of dysfunctional government agencies working at cross-purposes with one another. Among the strongest ethnographic material is Griffith's rendering of the tortured itineraries of H-2 visa migrants, many of them young women seeking to better their lives in circumstances ripe for exploitation. Among the central questions asked by the author: What prevents fishers from organizing effectively across boundaries of place, gender, and ethnicity to save a common value, the estuaries from which they make their living? As fishers strive to maintain their autonomy (their "belligerent independence") in the face of monopolistic tendencies and vertical integration of the harvesting-processing-marketing sectors of the fishing industry, they also face the government agencies reliance of expert knowledge of scientists and dismissal of the intimate experiential knowledge of the fishers whose observations are based on working with natural resources, though they may not have the language to express

their knowledge in authoritative terms.

The author's political engagement is neither concealed nor un-grounded, inviting readers to enter into a humanistic, socially engaged, cultural, political, and aesthetic narrative, which is also a plea for the recognition of the commercial fisher's role in maintaining an profoundly diverse biological and cultural landscape. Griffith's essay demonstrates the social relevance of theory and the practical relevance of ethnographic knowledge. At the same time, it is so well written that it remains accessible to a general readership, and as such, could work well in broad variety of courses as an introduction to the ethnography of complex societies. Contrary to the discourse of the recreational fishing industry, which claims for itself the moral high ground in ecological debates, Griffith argues it is the commercial fishers who are our best hope for the survival of a diversified coast. In a phrase that embodies the culmination of the book-length essay, Griffith warns "they are the estuary's gift to us."

Special SAS Invited Lecture *

My Mother's People: On Reconstructing a Cherokee Medical History

by Alan Kilpatrick

Sequoyah Professor of Anthropology
Western Carolina University

I was asked to say a few words about my own research as the Sequoyah Professor of Cherokee Studies, a position which I am very honored to hold at present. More so, since this venerated Cherokee was evidently a direct ancestor of mine. According to my mother's reckoning, Sequoyah's daughter, Hayana, was, in fact, my great, great grandmother.

While my own intellectual accomplishments are diminutive in comparison to those of my distinguished predecessor, I am, nevertheless, currently involved in a very ambitious project which is to reconstruct the medical history of the Cherokee people from the perspective of the last three hundred years. I am particularly interested in chronicling the historical impact of such diseases as smallpox in the colonial period as well as cholera and tuberculosis during the Civil War era. From our modern era, I am interested in examining the devastating effects of diabetes and cancer as well as a plethora of health problems related to the use of tobacco.

Before I discuss this project in greater detail, I wanted to frame my talk around a folktale because it says a lot about my own motivations and why I believe this research is important. This story was once told to me by my grandfather, a fellow whose Indian name was Yansa (a word which means "buffalo" in Cherokee). This is a curious appellation for a man who probably never saw a live buffalo in his life. Nevertheless, Yansa was a man who loved the birds

and would endlessly watch them in the sky. He once told me that he "always wanted to be there for them when they returned in the spring." So it is no accident that this particular folktale held especial meaning for him.

It concerns a mythical Yellow Mockingbird who had only one ambition in life- to see ice. It seems that this Yellow Mockingbird had always heard reports about ice, its shape, its smooth textile, its cooling qualities, etc. As a result, he was very curious to see it, touch it, smell it. But because every winter he had to fly south to escape the cold when he returned in the Spring, the ice was always gone, vanished without a trace.

So one fine day, he asked his good friend, the Squirrel ("saloli"), to do something about this vexing situation.

Upon hearing this request, the Squirrel said, "My friend, when winter comes, I'll break off a big piece of it and I'll put it in the hollow of that black oak tree over there and when you return you can inspect it." When the Yellow Mockingbird heard this, he was quite pleased and thanked his friend over and over again, saying: "Howah! Wadoh!"

Autumn fell into winter. Winter finally thawed into spring. The Yellow Mockingbird who was away, vacationing in Florida, slept very little. For he could hardly contain himself he was so excited about the prospect of seeing ice for the first time. So

* this talk was originally given at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, N C, during a reception for the SAS during the Asheville spring meetings, 2002

when dawn awoke, he flew back immediately to the Smoky Mountains and frantically began to look everywhere for his friend, the Squirrel. Finally, he found him sitting rather dejectedly at the foot of the black oak tree.

"My friend, what's wrong?" asked the concerned bird. The Squirrel looked at him with downcast eyes and said rather sadly, "Look, it's not my fault. I did as you asked. When winter came, I broke off a nice big piece of ice and stored it away in the hollow of this tree. But the problem is that you were late. So just two days ago, it all melted. It's gone."

This little folktale haunts me because one can read several meanings into it. Certainly, it celebrates the need for good timing in life - being at the right place, at the right time. But more importantly, the story makes a metaphysical statement about the transitory nature of the things we seek, that everything can melt away, or disappear from our vision before we can grasp it.

Certainly, those of us who have studied the cultures of other people know that such things as language, customs, folk beliefs (or even medical knowledge, for that matter) are by their very nature elusive, susceptible to change and loss, sometimes becoming irretrievably lost after only a single generation.

So to reconstruct something as complex as a medical history of a singular group can be a rather daunting intellectual task. Whether we are talking about documenting the medical practices of a Bombara village along the lowland tributaries of the Niger or a Cherokee township high in the Smoky Mountains, the problems are always the same. The questions we ask are usually the same as well: How do these people react to, how do they categorize disease, and how do they organize themselves to affect a treatment? The scientific part of us always wants to know if these native therapies are universally efficacious. In other words, do they really work? Is the pharmacology real or is it all smoke and mirrors, or the placebo effect?

For us to answer such questions, we must

construct a reasonable methodology since Science demands no less. In terms of my own Cherokee medical project, I envision three phases of investigation.

First, considerable archival work needs to be undertaken. At a starting point, we have the published sources such as Mooney and Olbrechts' classic works on Cherokee traditional medicine (*Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, 1891 and *The Swimmer Manuscript*, 1932) but beyond that, there exists an enormous corpus of unpublished material preserved in various archives around the country which needs to be examined further. Notable among such repositories is the extraordinary Uwedatat collection of Cherokee medico-magical manuscripts, written in the Sequoyah script, which resides in the Bienecke Rare Book Library at Yale University. Among these arcane papers, some of which date to the period of the Civil War, are several hundred untranslated texts which present a range of ethnobotanical therapies for a variety of human ailments, none of which, to my knowledge, have ever seriously been studied by western scholars.

Moreover, in regions like North Carolina, we have very detailed information on the vital statistics of Cherokee communities from about 1831 to the present. By cross-linking tribal enrollments (like the Baker roll) with the available death certificates preserved in county records, we should be able to capture the incidence of mortality rates as well as to compile the genealogical dynamics of family medical histories.

In the second phase of this research, we can further fill in this picture by interviewing selected community members. It will be important not only to record which relative died from what disease but also to discover, if possible, fresh information about local plant lore. If we can achieve some success in identifying certain auspicious varieties of flora, then in the final phase, I will turn to a team of specialists to help me collect and catalogue the most promising medical specimens and submit these items to laboratory analysis to determine their unique pharmacological

properties.

I want to move beyond my own speculative research now and speak about three modern medical problems (Diabetes, Cancer, and Tobacco-related afflictions) which need to be investigated further since they directly affect the Cherokee populations living in this area. As most of you know, the so-called Type II Diabetes Mellitus remains one of the critical health problems plaguing Native American populations today. Much of the recent research has focused on etymologies of diet, genetics, or lifestyle changes and considerable energy has been spent studying Indians living in the southwest, particularly the Tohono O'odham Nation near Phoenix, Arizona whose members exhibit an extraordinarily high incidence of this condition.

While the statistics nationwide are alarming, the Eastern Cherokee are evidently not immune to Diabetes either. According to the 1999 Indian Health Service Reports, there were about 1191 cases diagnosed here as well. In response to this, there has been sporadic research conducted in western North Carolina but these studies (at least the ones I have read) are usually handicapped by the fact that they are limited to one geographic locality or they are focused too narrowly on only one gender set, such as adult Cherokee women. As a result, one cannot extrapolate much useful regional information from these studies.

Like Diabetes, Cancer has evolved from being virtually an unknown (or underreported) phenomenon at the beginning of this century to achieving a modern status as the second major cause of death among Native Americans. If one looks at the rates of cervical cancer among these same groups, you encounter some arresting facts. In the southwest, we have a very high incidence of this type of malignancy about the Tohono O'odham, the Navajo, and the Apache. The Eastern Cherokee appear to be somewhere in the middle of this scale (they suffer from about 24.4 cases per 100,000) while the same condition is somewhat rare among the Oklahoma Cherokee (10.7 cases per 100,000). What accounts for these

differences? Is it genetics? Is it environmental factors, or can we trace it to personal behaviors such as diet or frequency of exercise? Who really knows.

Smoking accounts for about 30% of all cancer deaths besides contributing mightily to cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension, etc. Research which has been conducted here in Western Carolina demonstrates that Cherokee women, for instance, tend to smoke quite a bit (39% of those interviewed in one such study). There have also been some preliminary findings which demonstrate a discernible association between the use of smokeless (chewing) tobacco and an increased risk of breast cancer among the same group.

While we are all aware of the harmful effects of tobacco use in general, the beneficial uses of certain strains of tobacco have not been well studied nor understood. One area of potential investigation is the local use of a rarified species of wild tobacco known botanically as *Nicotiana Rustica* L. but in Cherokee as *tso:la gayv:li* or "ancient tobacco." Because of the widespread use of this species in the shamanistic curing rituals of Latin American, it has been theorized that this particular strain of tobacco (with its highly potent levels of Nicotine) was first cultivated in the Peruvian Andes and later brought to the indigenous tribes of North America via trade.

From a cursory survey of Cherokee texts, one can readily observe that *Nicotiana Rustica* L. held a prominent place in the medico-magical literature since it was employed therapeutically in an astounding variety of ways: to relieve pain from headaches and toothaches, to expel worms, as an anti-convulsive to treat certain forms of epilepsy, as a purgative, as a diaphoretic to increase perspiration, to increase urine flow, as a dermatological aid and a topical ointment. But even more intriguing, is the use of *Nicotiana Rustica* L. as an aid to relieve gastrointestinal disorders and kidney malfunctions. Such therapeutic applications need to be explored further.

I want to conclude by stressing that all of this research is, to me, not an empty intellectual exer-

cise. My own mother, after a long and painful ordeal, died from a terrible form of bone cancer. My own father died of heart failure brought on, in part, by his excessive smoking habits. Even Yansa, the man who loved the birds, died of complications from contracting diabetes and all of his direct offspring (my aunts and uncles) suffer from the same disease. So the medical history of the Cherokee is, in fact, a microcosm of my own family.

I am always asked why I spend my time studying (here or in Mexico or Peru) something as elusive and unscientific as folk medicine. One answer might be that as I grow older, the world seems to be more bio-technically sophisticated but, at the same time, less rooted in the natural order of things. And, as we all surmise, there is a definite cost to this life choice. We speak often about the threat to the existence of gold frogs, whooping cranes, and spotted owls. But given the present pace of global development and environmental degradation, who is to say that we humans may not also end up on some endangered species list?

Here in these great forests, my ancestors

first harvested the vast knowledge of nature, extracted from the roots, leaves, and bark of various herbs, plants, and trees potent tonics, diuretics, anti-spasmodics to treat a whole range of human disorders. With enough imagination, will, and a dose of good luck, we may yet re-discover in these great biospheres some vestige of these elusive cures. There may yet be some long-forgotten plant or herb whose essence harbors some powerful alkaloid or chemical compound which can revitalize and restore our human health.

History does not record how the Yellow Mockingbird reacted to discovering that his precious ice had literally melted away from him. We can only assume that he was shocked and somewhat saddened. Yet there is a part of me that wishes to see this mythical bird in a different light, invested with indefatigable energy and eternal optimism. So that he would return to the mountains to try again, year after year, to achieve the very thing he had so long sought. It is this type of relentless hope that drives me forward in my own investigations to recover what I can of the medical past of my mother's people, the Cherokee.

Winning Entry 2002 SAS Student Paper Competition: Undergraduate

Rocking the Washington Monument, Subverting Capitalism: The Punk Rock Subculture in Washington, D.C.

by Mike Addabbo

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Abstract

The punk subculture of Washington, D.C., proclaims a strong, anti-commercial, anti-consumerism, and anti-capitalism sentiment. Operating as a separate network of bands and listeners from the major record labels of the U.S., the subculture attempts to challenge the role of profit in musical production. The creation of CDs, T-shirts, and other commodities by the subculture suggests otherwise, but through its independent network of bands, labels, and venues, these commodities circulate at a lower cost than those within its parent culture. In emphasizing artistic credibility over profit, the ideals of the subculture attempt to challenge those of the profit-oriented music and fashion industries of mainstream America.

I ain't your money maker

I'll dodge your money scraper

You want me to give up my dignity

You want me to give up my conscience too

- The Crownhate Ruin, "Ride Your Ride"

Introduction

For over twenty-five years, the capitol of the United States has been home to a music-oriented subculture. Labeled punk rock by most of its members, this subculture revolves around an interwoven network of bands, independent music labels, activist groups, and musical audiences. However, as a subculture, punk supersedes its attachment to music by becoming a way of life for its members—a way of life unique in dress, rituals, and ideologies. It relies heavily on popular, MTV-influenced, mainstream American culture primarily as a set of standards to react against; but, as a subculture, it cannot remain separate. Punk uses many similar modes of communication and expression found in mainstream culture such as the Internet, CDs, records, and flyers. Through these media, punk evaluates American ideals, creating its own ideologies that deal with topics such as the role of capitalism in the music industry. Punk rock embraces music as a form of expression—not as a vehicle for profit.

Do-it-yourself (DIY) stands as one of, if not the most, fundamental values that permeate the Washington D.C. punk rock subculture. Such a standard seems to adhere easily to the tough, working-class foundations of America that emphasize individuality, fighting for your rights, and standing tall subculture seems to proclaim a strong anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism, and anti-American sentiment. However, a deeper look into the subculture's discourse, rituals, and ideologies does not expose an anti-American sentiment but instead reveals a

different type of consumerism and capitalism that stress the subculture's self-awareness as a group reacting against mainstream America.

The Observing Participant

The research for this paper involved general participation and analysis over three years, in which the last six months focused on consumerism and capitalism within the punk subculture. I have been a quasi-active participant in this subculture over the last five to six years and have thus experienced the social interaction, symbols, and subcultural standards of punk firsthand. My interest in understanding the punk subculture stems from my desire to grasp the nature of American culture, whose immensity clearly affects the rest of the world's cultures and thus serves as an important starting point for any modern-day social scientist. I have chosen the punk subculture because I feel that because of its size and nature—a nature that involves an intense self-awareness of its own inner-workings and its relationship with its parent culture—the subculture provides an interesting setting in which a balance between pro-American and anti-American sentiments exist. In this balance, the subculture reveals much about the struggle of identity that any subculture or subcultural participant must face when confronted with American mainstream culture and its values.

The majority of my fieldwork for this paper took place within the city limits of Washington D.C., particularly at two nightclubs, several bars, and one outdoor concert venue. The nightclubs are places where punk concerts, commonly referred to as "shows," take place. Shows happen at these clubs nearly every night of the week. The outdoor venue, Fort Reno Park, plays host to an annual summer concert series where local, punk, or indie¹ bands perform every Monday and Thursday. The bars often serve as a meeting place, before or after shows, for the members of the subculture who are twenty-one or over and on nights when shows are not happening. These bars often have a jukebox that features local

bands or other bands that have played an influential role in the development of the Washington punk subculture. Given that the show serves as the central ritual for the members of the punk subculture, I spent most of my fieldwork observing and talking to participants of the subculture while in the show context. However, because the show involves loud music in the main stage areas, I conducted my formal interviews apart from the show milieu.

During the last six months of ethnographic research for this paper, I conducted several informal interviews and three formal, extended interviews. I attempted to interview two prominent bands in the subculture, but both declined because of personal and/or professional time restraints. Given the time restraints of my analysis and the general demographics of the punk subculture, I conducted formal interviews only with people that fit the dominant (approximately sixty-five percent) ethnic and economic group within the subculture—white, middle-class males aged fifteen to twenty-eight. My informants, as well as my personal experiences, have given me an abundance of information necessary to observe, understand, and analyze punk's structures, symbols, and ideologies that permeate throughout the subculture in the nation's capitol. This paper describes the information I have discovered by first looking at the clothing of the subculture; next at the commodities produced and/or utilized by the subculture; and lastly at the relationship between the commodities of the punk subculture with commodities of its parent culture.

As Angela McRobbie points out, "most of the youth subcultures of the post-war period have relied on second-hand clothes found in jumble sales and ragmarkets as the raw material for the creation of style" (1997: 191). For the D.C. punk subculture, the thrift store, which allows the participants to purchase their clothes at less expensive prices than a department store, serves as the key tool used in creating authentic punk garb. Common forms of dress found

in the subculture, and purchased at thrift stores, include: tight slacks or dress pants; dark jeans with two-inch rolled cuffs; tight-fitting, colorful T-shirts like those worn in youth sports and band T-shirts (often made by bands themselves, or by the labels that put out the band's musical releases); sweaters; hooded sweatshirts; and New Balance, Saucony or other similar brands of tennis shoes², and fashionable dress shoes. When combined properly, these types of clothing usually create a "retro" aesthetic that often harks back to the fashions found in such movements as the British Mod movement as well as other European-influenced fashion trends. Punk's incorporation of such an aesthetic also reflects many of today's fashion trends, only with a twist. Since department stores, malls, and stores like The Gap dictate current mainstream fashion trends, many people within mainstream America purchase their clothing from such stores at high prices. The main causes for this type of consumption include the prevalence of such stores in the American media, i.e. in commercials and magazines, and within the shopping centers and malls throughout the American landscape. Further, unlike thrift stores where shoppers have to seek out items to create a fashionable look, stores like The Gap already have it done. Through the display of mannequins, posters, and with the help of store employees, the current fashionable standards bombard the shopper. At a thrift store, these media do not exist. Thus, the twist that the punk subculture places on fashion trends lies primarily in the creative efforts involved in shopping at second-hand stores where the difference between fashion and trash equals energy spent on sifting through countless racks of clothing. In the creation of this style, participants feel that their clothing represents a unique type of fashion which, in turn, creates a unique identity, "the wearing of fashionable attire enables individuals to separate themselves from their family, to develop a more distinct identity and a more unique sense of self, and yet to maintain an affiliation with the prestigious

aggregate" (Rubinstein 2001: 206)—that prestigious aggregate being the punk subculture. In this identity that participants construct through fashion, they use clothing as a tool to differentiate themselves from non-participants, thus creating solidarity within the subculture: "dress may serve as a public announcement that the group has declined to accept the ideas or values of mainstream culture" (Rubinstein 2001: 14). Because of this uniformity, participants are able to recognize other members of the subculture clearly in non-subcultural spaces. Joseph A. Kotarba and Laura Wells describe this phenomenon of collective separation achieved through fashion:

They [punks] construct and play with identities that most other adolescents would not or could not consider. Their... fashions are intended to set them apart from other adolescents. As the children of middle-class families, they have been given the sense of self-worth and autonomy needed to display individuality. The sociological magic of all this is the way they exercise individuality collectively. [1987: 408]

The ritualized nature of thrift-store shopping and the wearing of punk clothes serve as the biggest factors contributing to this collective separation or collective individuality. Participants seek out particular stores on a regular basis knowing that discovering the correct outfit may take several trips. Further, once the member finds one or more outfit(s) that fit the subculture's standards, she or he must choose the appropriate outfit for any subcultural ritual, particularly the show. The importance surrounding all of these decisions and identifications lies in the fact that consumerism acts as the driving force. The participants of the punk subculture use money to purchase goods at stores that participate in the American capitalist system. However, this outwardly visible manifestation of consumerism within the subculture acts differently from the other, arguably more important, artifacts consumed and produced by the

subculture.

The Commodification of Punk

At the core of the punk subculture in Washington D.C. lies a network of bands, record labels, listeners, show venues, and record stores each playing a vital role in the production and/or consumption of the centerpiece of the subculture: music. In the documentary entitled *Instrument* (1999) about Fugazi, a very active D.C. band involved in the subculture, guitarist/singer Guy Picciotto describes the way the subculture functions now, in comparison to the earlier days of D.C. punk:

A lot of the way the band works now is kind of based on what we learned in the hardcore scene of the early 80s. That was a time when... kids were taking control of their own bands, setting up touring networks across the country, ... starting their own record labels, putting out their own fanzines. It was basically kids creating a whole underground without the interest or blessing of the music industry. And it was motivated without any hope for profit—it was really just fueled by their own energy. [Cohen, 1999: Audio Transcription]

In the same film, Ian Mackaye, also a member of Fugazi and co-owner of D.C. based, indie-label Dischord Records, offers an explanation for the formation of this “underground:”

I have a lot of contempt for the record industry and I don't particularly want to be a part of it more than I have to... The fact that we started our own label is proof of that, you know? When you don't want to be a part of something, you do it yourself. So, we did. To exist... independent of the mainstream is a political... it's a political feat in my opinion. [Cohen, 1999: Audio Transcription]

In this quote, Mackaye refers directly to one of the

core values of the D.C. punk scene: do-it-yourself. As a result of this DIY mentality, the subculture has formed around a vast network, as described by Picciotto, relying on the production of music in live and studio formats. Once written, the music of the subculture becomes the centerpiece of several modes of communication including records, CDs, tapes, zines (a.k.a. fan magazines or fanzines), web sites, and the live performance. Within these modes, the commodification of punk occurs.

The Internet

The Internet facilitates communication in the punk subculture more than any other means of communication. Other forms have not become obsolete—local, usually free papers, such as the weekly distributed *Washington City Paper*, still cover the punk subculture, providing articles on bands as well as club listings—but their availability and coverage lack the extensive amounts of information available on the internet. Originally, the punk subculture used flyers and word-of-mouth as the main sources for advertising shows or record releases. Flyers, though still an integral part of the subculture, also lack the ease with which the Internet provides information. The subculture uses the Internet for show listings, release dates, zine pages, record label pages, personal fan pages, message boards, and the selling of musical releases, videos, stickers, and t-shirts. As long as those responsible for updating the websites keep them current (usually the big websites feature updates at least once a day) participants with access to the Internet receive a wealth of information concerning bands and the scene. Further, with websites that feature messageboards or review sections, participants add their own input to the subcultural news and information. They post show listings, album reviews, pictures of bands they may have taken, or any other news they may hear about particular bands or the whole subculture.

Zines

As a creative product differing from music, zines give the punk subculture members an entirely separate way to contribute to the creative production of subcultural commodities. No set structure or rules encompass the production of zines, but generally, they involve band interviews, band photos, record reviews, record advertisements, letters from readers, and personal reflections on the punk subculture. Zines, if not free, usually sell for only a couple of dollars and are usually cheaper than mainstream music magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, which sells for \$8.50 per issue.

Musical Releases

The production and distribution of records, CDs, and tapes function as the largest economic exchanges within the punk subculture. Most bands record their music at the same group of punk-oriented recording studios or they record at their own homes. Oftentimes, labels will pay for the recording expenses. Otherwise, the band must pay for all recording and distribution expenses. After recording and mixing the record, a label (or the band) pays to have the records³ created. Most labels then do the following with the releases: First, they make them available for direct purchase either through mail order or online ordering; second, by request as well, the labels sell multiple copies to record stores; third, some labels distribute promotional copies to college radio stations and other types of non-commercial radio; and fourth, labels give numerous copies directly to the band to distribute on their own. Generally, most purchases of records occur within locally run record stores that primarily sell the types of music found within the punk subculture. However, many participants purchase their records directly from labels or the bands.

For many participants, the collecting of records resembles a highly active hobby because many releases disappear from label stock and store shelves quickly. As Matthew Smith-Larhman

explains, "independent labels do not have the resources to compete with major labels in the areas of manufacture and distribution, publishing, or promotion" (1996: 181). As a result, record labels often produce a much smaller quantity of records than major labels. Given the small proportion of people in the subculture in comparison to those in the mainstream, one might assume that the availability of records would never be an issue. However, when labels release only one thousand copies of a single record, their availability drastically decreases. If such a case occurs, any participant desiring such a release, especially one that came out at least a couple of years prior, must frequently search the "used" or "rare" bins of record stores across the city. If a participant does not visit the record stores often, he or she may lose the opportunity to purchase such a record.⁴

The practice of finding rare records becomes highly ritualized. Participants will often shop at record stores at least twice a month. In addition, trading serves as a way to find records. Participants will trade their rare records to a friend or acquaintance in order to receive a more desirable record. Alternatively, if one refuses to sell or trade her or his record, she or he may offer to make a tape of the record or burn a copy of the CD to give away.

The Show

As the most interactive ritual, the show provides a setting where the most meaningful economic exchanges occur within the punk subculture. At venues that charge for the musical performances, the economic interaction begins at the front door. Participants enter and pay club employees somewhere between five and twelve dollars (a price considerably lower than most mainstream rock or pop concerts which cost between twenty-five to seventy-five dollars). Much of this money will go directly to the bands playing, in which the headlining band gets the most. Depending on how much money the bar makes, the club will take some of the money to cover

its own expenses. Once inside the club, before and during the performance, participants continue to spend money by purchasing drinks and food. Again, depending on how much the club-goers spend, it is possible that the bands may receive more money directly from the bar.

During and after performances bands set up “merch” tables—tables where they sell their own merchandise such as records, t-shirts, and posters, as well as related merchandise such as compilation records (which feature many bands), zines, and t-shirts representing the label that puts out their releases. At these merch tables, participants can interact directly with the band members. Often, they will tell the bands how much they liked the band’s performance or how much they like the band’s musical releases. Usually the band members exhibit responsiveness and willingness to converse with the show participants. Such interaction allows the non-band participants to feel a personal connection with the bands. Since music-listeners often experience music in a highly personalized manner—a manner in which they feel bonds between themselves and the musicians—the face-to-face interaction only heightens the experience. Buying a record directly from the band, an interaction that may even include physical contact such as a handshake, places much more meaning on the purchase than buying a record from a mall music store where the band could be thousands of miles away.

and Mainstream Commodities

One of the biggest problems in trying to define the basic standards of the punk subculture, or any group or subculture or larger culture for that matter, lies in the fact that the subculture contains groups of people trying to define their group and their standards in their own way. There is no rulebook. There are no judges. Stephen A. Tyler describes this as a common problem of finite ethnography:

It is instead a failure of the whole visualist ideology of referential discourse, with its

rhetoric of ‘describing,’ ‘comparing,’ ‘classifying,’ and ‘generalizing,’ and its presumption of representational significance. In ethnography there are no ‘things’ there to be the objects of a description... there is rather a discourse. [1997: 257]

Tyler’s conception of ethnography as a description of “discourse” functions strongly in the analysis of the punk subculture because much of what exists as describable are the conversations between the ideologies that circulate throughout the subculture—ideologies that present themselves in the various aspects of the subculture such as dress, consumption, and verbal discourse. In this conversation, individual participants and bands⁵ extrapolate and apply those aspects of the ideology that they see appropriate to their own identity. By looking into these conversations one can then attempt to place meaning on the rituals, fashions, and commodities produced within the subculture.

The importance of seeing these ideological conversations draws not from the variability of them, but from the potential, overall meanings they communicate. In the punk subculture, the underlying do-it-yourself theme varies from band to band and from individual to individual. Some bands have attempted to put out releases on major labels.⁶ Other bands do not sell t-shirts or stickers. Some individuals only purchase their records directly from the independent record companies, while others will purchase them from mainstream music stores. However, even though such differences exist, each participant in the subculture seems to have some affinity to the playing of, production of, and the consumption of independent music, as well as certain types of dress. In many ways, one could link this affinity to what Sarah Thornton refers to as the “tastes” of club cultures:

Club cultures are taste cultures. The crowds generally congregate on the basis of their

shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures, in turn, builds further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture. [1997: 200]

It is in these general tastes (which as Stephen Tyler describes are a discourse rather than a collection of objects) that the differences between the parent culture and the punk subculture manifest themselves.

The very nature of a subculture explicitly requires the existence of a parent culture. Subcultures are not autonomous. They do not exist in their own realm: "the subculture tends to be presented as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts. As a result, the picture of subculture is often incomplete" (Hebdige 1979: 76). Subcultures, although differing in some ways from the parent culture, cannot remain separate. Albert K. Cohen describes this as the result of our reliance on preexisting social standards: "Our dependence upon our social milieu provides us with a strong incentive to select our solutions from among those already established" (1997: 47). Because of this dependence, subcultures become interpretive groups rather than revolutionary groups. Their difference from the parent culture lies in the ways in which they adopt the standards of the parent culture and then twist it around for the purpose of a type of social commentary. John Clarke, et al. describe this process:

Subculture must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their 'parent' culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artifacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the

wider culture. But, since they are sub-sets, there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the 'parent' culture. [1997: 100]

This process of subcultural formation results in a sort of dual identity or ambiguity that permeates throughout the subculture.

The punk subculture is no exception to this dual identity. From the formal and informal interviews conducted, I found that some participants see the punk subculture as a revolutionary group attempting to break down the system. Regardless of such a sentiment, these individuals still participate in a subculture that utilizes many cultural artifacts and media of communication found within the parent culture. In other words, the way in which it promotes social change within—or at least reacts against—the parent culture relies heavily on the preexisting cultural artifacts of the parent culture. The difference that separates the subculture from the parent culture lies within the way it uses, purchases, and sells these artifacts. The fashion and commodities within the subculture come, in one way or another, from the parent culture. CDs, tapes, records, thrift shops, and nightclubs exist within the mainstream. The punk subculture chooses to use these in a different manner, a manner which one interviewee described as, "a more aware type of consumerism." Such a statement seems to sum up the role of consumerism in the punk subculture.

According to another interviewee, "Punk is supposed to be about community. The music should be free for everyone. Older bands didn't even copyright their music, but now they do and they sell it too." Stephen M. Fjellman describes an irony underlying this interviewee's sentiment as the following, "The world we live in is a world of commodities. Our physical survival and our relations with other people and with ourselves are increasingly mediated by the commodity form" (1992: 7). In the United States, most cannot survive without money,

without corporations, and without the market in which all of our necessities exist. Further, many human productions beyond those necessary for survival such as artistic creations, also take on a commodity form. Thus, the artistic creations of punk subculture fall easily into the shape of commodities. However, this takes nothing away from the meaning of the subculture. The music may not be free as the above quoted interviewee wishes, but it is available in a manner different from the music produced in the mainstream.

Further, much of the consumerism within the punk subculture is about community as the above-mentioned interview wishes. By purchasing records directly from the labels or by shopping at locally run music stores, the participants contribute to their own community, both the punk and the local—avoiding at least some interaction with the mainstream industries. Similarly, by shopping at thrift stores, which tend to be locally run and non-profit, the participants avoid commercial, profit-oriented stores such as The Gap. The nature of the subculture encourages its participants to partake in “thoughtful consumption,” not generally found in the mainstream.⁷

Conclusion

An often-quoted song, *Merchandise*, by the band Fugazi explicitly describes the weariness of capitalism felt throughout the punk subculture:

Merchandise keeps us in line/Its common sense by design/What could a business man ever want more/Than to have us sucking in his store/We owe you nothing/You have no control/You are not what you own [1990: Track 4]

The anti-corporate message of this song emphasizes taking control of the system by refusing to buy into capitalism—a goal towards which the punk subculture has progressed. But, given the power of the parent culture, the punk subculture is far removed

from the goal pronounced by Ian Svenonius (lead singer of the band The Nation of Ulysses and the Make Up), “We don’t want to be involved with the United States and the structure that exists. I think you have to try as hard as possible to be underground and not be assimilated... The Nation of Ulysses spells the end for life as we know it, society as we know it” (Anderson, et al. 2001: 294). Svenonius’ sentiment reflects (in a somewhat comical, overstated manner) the core intentions of the punk subculture—intentions that rise out of an elitist mentality common to the subculture’s participants. The punk subculture views its style, its music, and its community as part of a lifestyle that separates itself from its parent culture by placing the subculture on a higher pedestal.

At the core of the subculture’s elitist mentality lies a distinction between art and profit that attributes the nature of each to be mutually exclusive. Unlike the bands on MTV, who celebrate the role of money in music, participants in the punk subculture see money as an unavoidable aspect of musical production. Further, they see the pursuit of profit in music as an encompassing lifestyle that undermines artistic credibility because its main goal is to sell as much as possible—not to make an artistic statement. By paying five to seven dollars less per CD, ten to thirty dollars less at shows, and by having intimate contact with bands, members of the subculture feel that they participate in a more meaningful lifestyle than those in the MTV mainstream.

A noteworthy aspect of the separatist and elitist attitude of the punk subculture lies in its demographics. Its middleclass, well-educated, youth-oriented nature suggests a link between the ease of going against the system, especially when they have their parent’s income to help them survive. One of my interviewees, at the age of 22, stated that even though he will attend law school, look for a more mainstream job, and fall out of direct participation in the subculture, his views on consumption, capitalism, and art drastically changed because of the punk

direct participation in the subculture, his views on consumption, capitalism, and art drastically changed because of the punk subculture (His plans for law school include entertainment law, with the hope of defending companies such as Napster—companies that support a free exchange of music). Similarly, the interviewee's 30-year-old brother, now seven to ten years removed from the subculture, still buys punk records because he sees validity in them not found in much of mainstream music. Both of these [former] participants grew up in a household similar to many other participants in the punk subculture—households that value education and pro-active thinking. The nature of the punk subculture forces its participants to embrace and throttle their educated backgrounds in order to challenge the ideals celebrated by the mainstream—such as the maximization of profit—that seem to face little opposition. In doing so, the punk subculture creates worldviews in its participants that stress active and creative consumption, an interest in thought-provoking art and music, and an intense awareness of one's position in a

commodity driven society.

- 1 "Indie," short for independent, refers to a dominant faction with the punk subculture. Generally, "Indie" bands are known to produce a more intricate and less angry style of music in comparison to the "hardcore" or "punk" bands within the subculture. Much of my research involved participant observation within "Indie" circles of the general punk subculture.
- 2 According to one interviewee, the punk subculture wears such brands of tennis shoes like New Balance and Saucony because they often do not use leather (many participants in the subculture are vegetarian or vegan) and because they are produced in the U.S.—not in foreign countries where "sweat shops"

produce tennis shoes.

- 3 Records come in a variety of formats and lengths. The term record is a general term to describe any band's musical release. Records come in full length albums, which tend to be about 25 – 70 minutes long; EPs, which tend to be about 3-5 songs totaling no more than 25 minutes; and Singles, which usually have only 1-2 songs. The most common media format is the CD. Other formats include the 12" record, the 7" record (a.k.a. a 45), and a 10" record. Tapes, or audiocassettes, are not as common as the CD or the 7"—the two most common formats.
- 4 With the rise of online auction websites, many participants have turned to these to find rare records. Many records produced by those bands most closely associated with the D.C. subculture still sell across the U.S. and even into other countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Thus, it is possible that a person in another state has a copy of the rare record and then can sell it to a D.C. participant via the Internet.
- 5 For the purpose of this discussion, I consider the band to be an individual entity, even though it consists of individuals with their own personal ideologies and interpretations. Further, bands (not individuals) are the units that really create the basis for the subculture.
- 6 Some bands that do sign to major labels have still maintained their credibility in the punk subculture. As long as their music still reflects the standards of the subculture both musically and ideologically (as in, the topics of lyrics or in the benefit shows that the band plays), they suffer little alienation.

- 7 This lack of thoughtful consumption is particularly relevant to the music industry in which commercial radio and MTV strongly influence music consumers. The mainstream generally embraces widely known musicians that sell millions of copies of records.

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Winning Entry 2002 SAS Student Paper Competition: Graduate

Culture for Sale: Marketing Gullah Identity In the South Carolina Sea Islands

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Abstract

Gullah women of the South Carolina Sea Islands have held firmly to the traditional craft of sweetgrass basketry brought by their enslaved African ancestors. Presently their identity is being appropriated by the tourism industry. This commoditization is manifest in tourism literature, brochures, and postcards in ways that invite tourists to witness this “exoticized” cultural heritage. The chosen images serve to enforce a representation of Gullah that is tied to the colonial plantation era. This paper elucidates how the use of Gullah imagery within such exploitative contexts undermines Gullah women’s power to define and represent themselves on their own terms.

Along the coast of South Carolina lies a string of islands, referred to as the Sea Islands. These coastal communities represent a link to the earliest enslaved Africans brought to America to harvest rice and pick cotton, and their cultural survival is a testament to their cohesion and strength as a people. They are known as the Gullah. The paramount issues facing the Sea Island Gullah are the multiple risks associated with tourism: risk of land loss, risk of marginalization, and risk of losing the valuable resources necessary to preserve their cultural lifeways. Gullah women, in particular, stand to lose what has kept their culture intact thus far: their artistic identity. Gullah women¹ have held firmly to the traditional craft of sweetgrass basketry brought by their enslaved African ancestors. Presently their identity is being appropriated by the tourism industry. This commoditization is manifest in tourism literature, brochures, and postcards in ways that invite tourists to witness this “exoticized” cultural heritage. The chosen images serve to enforce a representation

of Gullah that is tied to the colonial plantation era. This paper elucidates how the use of Gullah imagery, within such exploitative contexts, undermines Gullah women’s power to define and represent themselves on their own terms.

Gullah Women of the South Carolina Sea Islands

The Gullah communities of the South Carolina Sea Islands have been objectified by academics for over a century. Their obvious connections to west and central Africa, from which they were brought in bondage, have intrigued scholars from a variety of disciplines. The initial focus of my research was the preservation of sweetgrass basketry in Mt. Pleasant and the role of Gullah women’s basket cooperatives; however, I soon became aware of the multiple dilemmas facing various Sea Island communities, such as increased resort development, increased tourism, and cultural commoditization, to name a few. What has emerged from years of fieldwork is the realization that the

identity of Gullah women is in question, and those concerned with its survival are redefining what it means to be Gullah in the twenty-first century.

Throughout history, women and their stories have been peripheralized (Lemert 1999) and made invisible (Jordan and Weedon 1995). Within the past three decades, however, anthropology, along with many other branches of social science, have recognized the need to recover these stories, often referred to as "subaltern" texts (Guhu and Spivak 1988) or "herstories" (Jordan and Weedon 1995). I did not begin with the intention of representing the current predicament of the South Carolina Gullah from a feminist perspective. Over time, however, I realized that women are directing the organizations and grassroots groups fighting to preserve Gullah culture. Their commitment to, and investment in, the future is evidenced by their efforts to preserve those crafts that represent their Gullah heritage. These artists of activism— the basket weavers, the quilters, the traditional rootworkers and healers, the storytellers, and the educators— they hold the keys to the future of Gullah identity.

The relationship between history and identity plays a significant role within the Sea Island quandary. The Gullah, and often other groups who experienced Western colonialism first hand, are all too often deemed people without history — (Eric Wolf's concept), those who have been prevented from defining themselves (Friedman 1992). Much of what has been canonized as factual about Gullah culture was gathered by European observers, missionaries, and academics. We must address the use of the past in the creation and recreation of identity in the present (Olwig 1999) while also encouraging such groups to define their own identity, as well as rewrite their history from the standpoint of their own unique experience.

Identity, Tourism, and Commoditization

It has been suggested that a reinvention of ethnic identity can be initiated by tourism (Van den

Berghe and Keyes 1984) however, this reinvention can sometimes become a commodity used to further the industry itself. In such cases, the commoditization of a particular culture can be detrimental to subordinate people. By cultural commoditization² I am referring to the use of particular images and ideas, which define a particular group, for the explicit function of economic benefit.

Contrary to our typical ideas about commodities, the commoditization process goes beyond land, labor, and capital and is beginning to target the history, material and folk culture, and ethnic identity of indigenous and minority groups throughout the world (Greenwood 1989). Even that which people know, think and feel is being commercialized for the purpose of increased tourism revenue. In South Carolina, this type of cultural 'marketing' is manifest through the use of traditional Gullah images in tourism literature, commercials, brochures and postcards.

The Tourism Industry and the Commoditization of Gullah Culture

The current predicament is best understood within a historical paradigm, by posing questions concerning the role of Charleston city planners in the development of the sweetgrass basket industry as a tourism draw. The Charleston Visitors Center, in historic downtown Charleston, has brochures on everything from wildlife sanctuaries to resort rentals. I collected a variety of these pamphlets, which I later realized indicated something very significant: sweetgrass baskets are used by the tourism industry to create a nostalgic image of Charleston. Pictures of women weaving, some allegedly taken without proper permission, pictures of baskets, and actual baskets can be seen throughout the Visitor's Center. There are, on any given day, basket weavers inside the center— almost as if they are "on exhibit."

Travel brochures highlight the cultural attributes of Sea Island residents and invite visitors to come and witness their colorful heritage, however,

many such brochures create and enforce a representation of Gullah that is tied to the plantation era (Hargrove 2000). The use of sweetgrass baskets in the creation of such an identity has a tripartite effect. First, images of Gullah weavers in the context of slavery and plantations “incarcerate” these figures into a construction of “cultural misrepresentation”—it freezes them in time and space (Appadurai 1988). This is very similar to the plight of Native Americans as they are represented in the media, as creatures of a particular time and place (Churchill 1992). Secondly, it appropriates the indigenous knowledge of those involved without compensation or acknowledgment; therefore creating “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 1980). Finally, it assigns the power of representation [and cultural attribution] to non-Gullah people. We recognize that knowledge is power; therefore, the use of Gullah imagery within such contexts undermines these women’s power to define and represent themselves on their own terms.

Historic Charleston

The Charleston Downtown Market is another site within which this appropriation becomes clear. The Market is famous for its nostalgic image of Gullah women weaving sweet grass baskets alongside a variety of other vendors. Selling baskets in the market is a family tradition and overwhelmingly comprises women. The spots in the market are highly competitive and families do not relinquish them voluntarily. Many who sell in the market also have a spot on Highway 17, and can be found at one when not at the other. The market spots are often rotated between family members so that each has a chance to sell at market prices, which are slightly higher than at the roadside stands. Throughout the open air market one is bombarded with the sights and sounds that bring Gullah culture to mind: sweetgrass baskets, hand sewn fishing nets, quilts, and home-made rice blends made by locals. What most caught my attention, however, were the

ways in which the word “Gullah” was being used to present the products of the market. Charleston is an historic town with much to offer tourists; however, what seems to be the idea of the day is anything labeled as Gullah.

Gullah Basket Weavers of Mt. Pleasant

A short distance outside Charleston, across the Cooper River, is the Mt. Pleasant community. Mt. Pleasant basket weavers were the first to integrate Gullah heritage into statewide tourism. The basket stands along Highway 17 have been attracting visitors for many decades, but the incursion of tourism, resorts, and gated communities has begun to threaten their existence. A difference of one year, between 1998 and 1999, transformed the basket industry. Where basket stands had stood in 1998 I found a strip mall in 1999, offering tourists and locals the luxury of Gap clothing, Baby Gap, and Bed, Bath, and Beyond. The basket stands were still present; however, the small grassy space once used as a parking lot for tourists was now blocked by a sidewalk and curb.

In the past, each basket stand was easily accessible by just pulling off the road in front of the stand you desired to browse through. Today all that has changed. I spoke with one weaver whose family had been selling baskets at the same spot for fifty years. Now there is a video store on that spot and she is continuously moving around trying to find a permanent location. A weaver once told me she felt like a gypsy—constantly moving in search of a stable place to set up shop. What began as a way to increase tourism has backfired in Mt. Pleasant because many of the tourists come to visit and never leave. They become attached to the beauty of the area and take up residence, as has been the case throughout the Sea Islands. Ultimately this situation robs basket weavers of their previous agency for representation and economic sustainability. In response to loss of space due to increased development, many weavers are turning to their church homes along

Highway 17 in the hopes of being allowed to set up temporary stands in the parking lots.

Writing Against Culture³

The traditional methodology of ethnographic fieldwork has increased our knowledge of the vast cultural diversity of humanity, yet it has also contributed to the process of Othering that now stigmatizes ethnographic work within the social sciences. Lila Abu-Lughod offers an alternative approach- "ethnographies of the particular" as instruments of tactical humanism (1991:138) - by which we can allow narrative ethnography to construct a particular window into the lives of those we work with. Such a strategy produces writings that contest the "culture concept" constructed and maintained within cultural anthropology, further acknowledging our role in deconstructing the existing boundaries between "self" and "other." Such tactics will also empower those we work with to represent themselves in ways they deem significant.

Identity is a question of empowerment, particularly for those who have been prevented from identifying themselves (Friedman 1992). This holds particular relevance for the Gullah, who have been defined repeatedly throughout their history by missionaries, historians, linguists, and anthropologists. These representations of social distinction, for the most part, have been negative, leaving a lasting impression on Sea Island residents. In retrospect I can only now understand the hesitation expressed by many residents regarding their participation in my research. As anthropologists, whether consciously or not, we are constantly involved in the "invention" of cultural identities (Friedman 1992). In order for this process to be of value to the communities we study we must begin to engage in dialogue and productive discourse with members of such groups. Through this process we can begin to support their reconstructions of identity (Friedman 1992) and, therefore, return the power of representation to its rightful owners.

The negotiation of my fieldwork among Mt. Pleasant basket weavers has been a lesson in critical theory. There could be no better time than the present to restructure the relationships we envision between our research collaborators and ourselves. Previous academic work conducted among Gullah basket makers has left them feeling exploited, and they remain clear about what is expected of me. I am committed to representing each of them for their strong and courageous spirit as artists and women of the twenty-first century, and not as throwbacks to a plantation culture in need of modernization. These "ethnographies of the particular" represent only a handful of these "artists of activism" fighting to preserve Gullah culture.

Harriett Brown

Harriett Brown granted my first interview. Harriett is a kind and gentle woman with an amazing talent. She has been weaving baskets for 51 years. She was taught to weave by her father, mother, and grandparents. Her family has used the current location of her stand for over twenty years. She shared memories of growing up along Highway 17, when it was a small two-lane road. She also boasts about how her grandchildren will grow up here. Throughout our interactions I met with her daughter. She is a nurse who weaves occasionally. She is typical of the younger generation of Gullah women; she knows the art but doesn't rely on it for her economic stability. If history repeats itself, however, she will someday embrace the art as a part of her identity and heritage. The weavers all described the pull of this tradition, whether early or late.

Her mother, Wilhelmina Bailem, established the stand Harriett now occupies. Unlike most weavers, Harriett has been assured by the church, which owns the property on which the stand is located, that she will not be asked to move. Harriett's work is very unique. Just as her mother before her she likes to invent different styles, which distinguish her from other weavers. Her special design is the

“real huge fruit basket.” She is very invested in her community and works hard to preserve the art of basket weaving. She is involved in teaching demonstrations in the local public schools as well as teaching at the Mt. Pleasant Arts Council. She also works with senior citizens, teaches weaving at the Recreation Center, and does exhibitions for the local children’s festival. At the time of our first interview the local Garden Club chapter had placed a large order with Harriett for small baskets. After all was said and done, they paid around \$3 per basket, which took several hours each to sew.

Jannie P. Gourdine

Jannie was born on Boone Hall plantation, just down the road from the location of her basket stand. She passed away in 2000. This woman had the most extraordinary sense of humor, and her wit was very sharp. She claimed to have always known how to weave, but never wanted to make it her livelihood. She told me about her life’s journeys, back and forth from Mt. Pleasant to New York, until settling back home in 1979. At the time of our interactions, she been weaving and selling her baskets at her roadside stand ever since, and had seen Mt. Pleasant change so much in the course of twenty years. She pointed out the spot where her mother’s stand had been when she left Mt. Pleasant for New York. It was just across the road from where we were sitting. We discussed many things, which had nothing to do with sweetgrass baskets. She shared many stories of her grandfather, who was enslaved for the first six years of his life. He was the one who taught her mother to weave at a young age, and her mother taught her. Our lengthy conversations informed me of the historical stigmatization of Gullah identity as backward and primitive; ironically, this is the identity presently being marketed by the South Carolina tourism industry. Gullah identity has been transformed from stigma to commodity in less than a generation.

Rosalee W. Coaxum

Two stands down from Jannie I found her first cousin, Rosalee. She was taught to weave baskets by her mother and grandmother. She related stories indicating her family’s lifelong involvement in sweetgrass basket weaving. Rosalee started out making baskets only for gifts, not for sale. Like many others, her entry into basket weaving was based in tradition; but with the increasing economic benefits of cultural arts and crafts, she is now doing quite well at the family stand, located right beside her cousin Jannie. My interactions with Rosalee gave historical depth to the stigmatization of Gullah language and culture. She recalled how only twenty to thirty years ago being labeled “Gullah” translated into a negative stereotype of ignorant, backward country folk, further illustrating the rapid changes taking place within Sea Island communities. Once upon a time, and for an extensive time, it was shameful to be a “Gullah basket weaver” and the money to be made was nothing compared to today. Therefore, tourism has contributed to the economic success of basketry as a livelihood and it has played a role in establishing sweetgrass basketry as a legitimate art form. All this, however, has been accompanied by some real human (and cultural) cost.

Vera Manigault

The Manigault family is synonymous with sweetgrass basketry. I caught up with Vera Manigault at Patriots Point, setting up her temporary basket stand. Patriots Point is located on the historic Charleston harbor and is home to the Naval and Maritime Museum. The focus of this tourist attraction is a decommissioned aircraft carrier from WW II. Vera and other local basket weavers take turns setting up their stands here. Others had warned me about approaching her. I had been told that she would not consent to being interviewed. At first she was very apprehensive and assured me she could tell me nothing more than the other weavers had. She asked if I would come back several

days later to give her time to consider it. I agreed. During those few days I tried to assess the reason for her apprehension by asking lots of questions and going back over some of the academic literature on sweetgrass basketry. Anyone studying sweetgrass baskets is aware that the Manigault family is synonymous with the craft. Many of her family members were interviewed for, and appeared in, the academic publication *Row Upon Row* (Rosengarten 1986).

When I returned to Patriot's Point several days later Vera consented to be interviewed. We began to talk about the previous research that had been done among the weavers of Mt. Pleasant, more specifically within her family. Vera related to me that her family had opened their homes to many academics over the years and after the work was published they were never heard from again. This explained her obvious distrust of me. We did, however, overcome it.

Vera grew up on the side of Highway 17. Her mother had a basket stand there for over 50 years. Her mother was born in the community known as Four-Mile and was the only weaver in that area. Vera was born and raised in Mt. Pleasant and her family is well known for their history of sweetgrass basket weaving. She explained basket weaving's transition from a supplemental hobby to a craft.

VM: It was around 1975 or 1976 that lots of blacks started recognizing basket weaving as a craft. After 1976, the Bicentennial, it became a very important part of our heritage and many more people wanted to keep the art alive.

What troubles Vera most about the current popularity of sweetgrass basketry is that the older women, who have been weaving all along, are not getting the recognition they deserve. Also, the availability of materials for making baskets has declined to tragic proportions. The increasing development of Mt. Pleasant and surrounding areas has robbed the

weavers of the ability to gather their own materials. They are at risk of losing the necessary materials needed to preserve their craft, which is also their economic livelihood. The rapid rate of both retail and residential development in Mt. Pleasant has brought about a shortage of materials for weaving sweetgrass baskets. The women I interviewed have all resorted to buying their materials from Florida. Sweetgrass can no longer be found in abundance growing wild in the area. The materials needed for the baskets are being bulldozed for malls and subdivisions, and buried under parking lots for resort hotels.

Along with the normal concern with materials comes the issue of land use for basket stands along Highway 17. Vera knows this first hand; what was once her mother's stand is now a Blockbuster Video store. There was also a furniture store that displaced a family basket stand; however they offered to let the weavers stay if they would consent to taking down their stand every night and putting it back up in the morning. Perhaps they knew the impossibility of such a proposition.

VM: When a business goes in, they don't want the stand in front of their establishment, no matter how many generations of weavers it represents.

Just across the Cooper River, in the Mt. Pleasant community, the trend toward commoditization of Gullah is growing. Just before entering the stretch of Highway 17 known for the roadside basket stands, there now sits a restaurant, which boasts "authentic Gullah cuisine." I entered the restaurant in the hopes of speaking with the owner. There were baskets everywhere, all crafted by one particular basket weaver known throughout the community. From speaking with a waitress, who was wearing an apron with a big basket across the front, I was informed that the weaver had entered into a partnership with the restaurant manager. The

restaurant increases business using the Gullah image of sweetgrass baskets while the weaver is compensated through selling her baskets in the restaurant. This restaurant was not present in 1998, during my first season of fieldwork. Only time will tell how long it will remain.

Concluding Remarks

The situation facing Gullah basket weavers is a common phenomenon in our rapidly changing world. In the Sea Islands, however, there is a preservation movement building. Whether established against identity commoditization, negative impacts of tourism and development, or the steady encroachment of gated communities, grassroots organizations are well aware of the risks they are facing, particularly with respect to cultural crafts in an age of modernist mentality. Traditional arts and crafts play an important role in the maintenance of cultural identity. These embodied skills promote social memory, a sense of belonging, and pride within the cultural groups they represent. It is important, as anthropologists, that our work does not inhibit this process. Moreover, we are positioned in a unique situation in which the strength of our words within the academy can serve to legitimize or negate such struggles. Armed with the knowledge of the past, as well as an awareness of the power of the pen, I encourage each of us to move forward in a way that will support the preservation of these embodied skills and cultural legacies.

¹ Historically, Gullah men were also Gullah basket artisans, however women dominate the current basket industry.

² For a detailed explanation of cultural commoditization see Davydd J. Greenwood's

"Culture by the Pound" 1977.

³ Lila Abu-Lughod (1991).

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