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The Tide is Turning: Gullah Vernacular Knowledge and the Ecologies of Lowcountry Basketmaking

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Introduction: Salvage and the History of Coiled Basketry

Coiled baskets are wetland landscapes as tangible objects, ecosystems made as something we can hold and carry. The ecologies of coastal Georgia and South Carolina are instantly recognizable in the fragrant materials. The base of a coiled basket looks like a ripple, its spirals of bundled sweetgrass pulsing to the outer row where a basket’s wall begins to rise. Depending on how recently the basket was made, the sweetgrass ranges from coarse and dry to smooth and slightly waxy to the touch (fig. 1).

Golden-brown bulrush baskets were the precursors to coiled sweetgrass baskets. These bulrush baskets, or fanners, were sewn by enslaved people who used them to winnow threshed rice on Lowcountry¹ rice plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition to their centrality to rice production, baskets were also used by enslaved people to carry produce and babies.² After slavery, basket shapes burgeoned as rice production waned. Meanwhile, coiled basketry was taught to the children of freed people in schools like the Penn School on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina. In the third decade of the twentieth century, sweetgrass began superseding bulrush as a favored basketry material. When tourists began driving down the newly paved Highway 17, African American women in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, set up stands on the side of the road to sell their baskets to the motorists.³ African American artisans in Mount Pleasant, Charleston, and the surrounding Sea Islands—many of whom identify as Gullah or Gullah/Geechee—continue to sew and sell baskets today.



Fig. 1. Celestine Johnson, Coiled basket, 2021. Longleaf pine needles (*Pinus palustris*), sabal palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*), sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia filipes* or *M. capillaris*), black rush or bulrush (*Juncus roemarianus*). Photo: Molly Robinson

The dawn of the sweetgrass era coincided with the Works Progress Administration (WPA)–sponsored folklore collection in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Writers, amanuenses, and intellectuals arrived in the region to collect folklore from Black communities whose culture, scholars feared, was at risk of being washed away by a tide of modernity.⁴ Among this group was William Bascom, a mentee of the scholar of early African American Studies, Melville Herskovits. With Herskovits's imprimatur, Bascom visited the Sea Islands to ferret out folklore and procure material culture from Gullah communities. As was typical of the collecting interests of anthropologists at the time, the old was in, and the new was out. Although sweetgrass baskets had become popular, Bascom was primarily interested in collecting fanner baskets that, by the 1930s, had become alluring artifacts of slavery. He was partially motivated by questions about the extent to which West African social and agricultural practices had survived in the Americas, and he believed that wooden spoons, canes, and coiled baskets held the answer. Although perhaps more systematic in his research than the WPA workers who consulted his expertise, Bascom nonetheless probably saw himself on a rescue mission to save a vanishing culture.⁵

The questions of salvage—what to save, how to save it, who should save it, and why—form a red thread running through the story of Gullah coiled basketry. In this essay, I argue that although the salvage mentality that animated Bascom's efforts no longer exists, Western scientific typologies continue to limit what scholars can learn from basketmakers and their creations about the changing environmental conditions and land-use regimes in coastal South Carolina. At issue is a problem of translation and the privileging of scientific knowledge that is oblivious to vernacular ways of knowing. Basketmakers and their families are stewards of Lowcountry marshes and maritime forests in which community members have historically harvested basketry materials. As such, they are keepers of traditional knowledge that scholars tend to overlook in the pursuit of scientific answers to ongoing problems of diminished sweetgrass supply. While recent scholarship in political ecology has carefully assessed how basketmakers struggle to access tracts of land to harvest sweetgrass, this body of literature is less attentive to what basketmakers say about the plant materials, how these materials grow, and which are suitable for basketmaking.

In recent years, the term salvage is increasingly animated by fear of environmental loss. Sea-level rise due to anthropogenic climate change threatens the integrity of Lowcountry environments, livelihoods, and cultural practices, including Gullah coiled basketry. Scientists agree that human influence accounts for over half of observed sea-level rise in the twentieth century and that over the past decade, more than half of observed flood days would not have occurred without human contribution.⁶ These findings precipitate from global averages but signal the growing need for studies that address local impacts. Climate-change studies should be concerned not only with numerical data that assess and predict measurable impacts on a global scale but also with qualitative observations that capture the texture of everyday life in particular places with changing environments. How should people tell stories that do not succumb to the flattened arc of climate catastrophe? Coiled baskets are uniquely situated to serve as a plot device. In their material makeup, they embody the environmental changes that basketmakers navigate to sustain the practice.

I first encountered coiled baskets at City Market in Savannah, Georgia, in the fall of 2017. My move to Savannah was motivated by the loss of my biological father and a desire to sketch the contours of my own adoption story. At the time, I sought to reconnect with my birth family, a dream that I had nurtured since childhood. For some basketmakers, the art of coiled basketry gives shape to historical loss. Fifth-generation basketmaker Nakia Wigfall

told me that her practice is a thread back to her West African ancestors, the original cultivators of an African species of rice, *Oryza glaberrima*.⁷ On a 2019 homecoming trip to Sierra Leone, Wigfall collaborated with Sierra Leonean women to make hybrid baskets that sutured together a culture cleaved by the violence of chattel slavery. Experts in the art of negative space, Gullah basketmakers animate physical and historical absence. I found, in their graceful explorations of loss, continuity, and real and imagined kinships, the courage to explore these themes in my own life.

From where I sit writing in Williamsburg, Virginia, my lifestyle is enabled by the quiet but enduring dispossession of land from the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway), Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Nottoway, Pamunkey, Patawomeck, Upper Mattaponi, and Rappahannock tribes. I cite these tribes to acknowledge my complicity in an ongoing settler-colonial project, to highlight the vitality of their sovereignty movements, and to signal that the plants I write about in this essay likely mean and have meant a great deal to the Indigenous communities whose land I occupy. I recently encountered *Juncus roemarianus*, which Gullah basketmakers call bulrush and scientists here call needle rush, growing in a tidal salt marsh at Indian Field Creek. A colleague brought to my attention that Indian Field Creek is the site of Kiskiack, formerly a town in the chiefdom of Powhatan.⁸ The growth of basketry materials like bulrush among Indigenous landscapes of the South Carolina Lowcountry and Virginia Tidewater compels me to note that wetland plants have participated in human life for thousands of years and continue to do so, especially in their service as the first line of defense against sea-level rise and eroding coastlines.

Recognition and Visibility in Mount Pleasant's Heritage Regime

The Lowcountry heritage regime that aims to promote and preserve Gullah basketry also tends to conceal splintering ecological relationships at the crux of the sweetgrass supply shortage. In this section, I take up the concept of recognition as an analytic. At one level, a basketmaker's intimate, haptic recognition of sweetgrass tells her whether the grass is suitable for basketry. In another sense, the extensive plantings of brittle but lush ornamental sweetgrass as a landscape feature in Mount Pleasant has turned the plant into a visual metonym for the city. Sweetgrass is recognized as an icon in Mount Pleasant. Finally, I discuss the increased visibility and recognition that accompanies efforts to "revitalize" basket stands in Towne Centre. I argue that although these efforts may benefit some basketmakers, they also mark the demise of the traditional roadside stands along Highway 17.

"You changed it . . . this isn't sweetgrass!" Robert Dufault recorded basketmaker Mary Jackson as saying after trying to harvest from a plot of fertilized sweetgrass.⁹ Dufault, a horticulturalist, attempted to grow the increasingly rare basketry material for Jackson in the early 1990s, chronicling the effort in *Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass* (2013):

I remember vividly, driving Mary down the dirt road to the sweetgrass plot, and within about 300 feet, it became visible. Mary became very excited about how great it looked from a distance. And it did, but to my great dismay, when Mary tried to harvest this grass, it all broke apart in her hands. The sweetgrass became so succulent and brittle, low in fiber, lush, and very fragile

for pulling. The leaves unfurled, and rather than being very tight, wirelike ‘threads,’ they opened up like lawn grass into flat blades.¹⁰

This passage that describes Jackson’s encounter with fertilized sweetgrass illuminates the difficulties of trying to grow it for basketry. As it turns out, sweetgrass can be resistant to domestication. This is not to say that the grass will not grow. Rather, resistance registers at a structural and anatomical level, so that despite appearing lush, stalks deteriorate when basketmakers handle them. In this case, fertilizing the plant hindered its ability to participate in basketmaking. Though visually stunning, the fertilized sweetgrass had become alien to Jackson. Fertilizer altered the plant beyond recognition.

“Sweetgrass on steroids,” as one basketmaker referred to it, has become a visual icon in Mount Pleasant. Fertilizer-fortified stands dominate the landscape, tufts of it blanketing flower beds and springing up from road medians. The transformation of sweetgrass into a visual metonym for Mount Pleasant is supported by the number of establishments that have adopted “sweetgrass” in their names, like Sweetgrass Mercantile, Sweetgrass Flowers, and the Sweetgrass Corner Shopping Center. In other words, “sweetgrass” has become code for commercial viability, drawing its power from notions of authenticity rooted in popular understandings of Gullah coiled basketry. However, many visitors to Mount Pleasant remain unaware that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, basketmakers struggle to procure enough sweetgrass that is suitable for basketry. One basketmaker I spoke to was relieved when I agreed to pay the asking price for her basket. She said that most visitors do not understand that basket prices reflect not only the time that it takes to sew them but also the price of increasingly expensive materials, which many makers purchase from members in the community rather than collect themselves.¹¹



Fig. 2, 3. Left: Ornamental sweetgrass lining gated community in Folly Beach, South Carolina, 2021; right: Sweetgrass stands planted in front of sign that reads “Welcome to the Edge of America: Folly Beach,” 2021. Photos: Molly Robinson

As an ornamental plant, sweetgrass also lines the driveways to gated communities (fig. 2). The nearby community of Folly Beach welcomes visitors to the “Edge of America” on a sign vignettted by stands of grass with silky purple-pink flowers (fig. 3). In a region characterized by the involuntary loss of Black-owned land and ongoing community battles to avert development in historic Black neighborhoods, the incorporation of sweetgrass into a visual regime that seizes on Gullah heritage while failing to support its continuance is ironic if not sinister.¹² This visual regime encourages non-Gullah residents to identify with the heritage

of sweetgrass but not the fragile ecological relationships that basket makers struggle to maintain. As Mary Jackson indicated, sight alone betrays the complexity of a supply shortage that goes undetected by outsiders.

The political dimension of "recognition" is reflected in recent efforts to "revitalize" Mount Pleasant basket stands. Amid proposals to widen Highway 41 and pushback from the African American community of Seven Mile, the city of Mount Pleasant has begun rebuilding visually uniform basket stands in Towne Centre.¹³ Widening Highway 41 would likely displace basketmakers where the road intersects with Highway 17, which was expanded in 2012 to accommodate heavy traffic. Evidence suggests that road-widening projects have contributed to the decline of basket stands. Geographer Brian Grabbatin wrote that the number of basket stands had fallen from ninety-seven in 2007 to eighty-five in April 2012.¹⁴ By November 2021, I saw piles of wood where many deserted stands had collapsed.

The decline in basket stands might be a bellwether for other forms of displacement. Recently, Mount Pleasant proposed to construct a multiuse path through the African American community of Six Mile, planning to name the path the "Six Mile Cultural Heritage Trail."¹⁵ The town applied for \$735,630 in funding from Charleston County to acquire privately owned land in the community to build the path. One official even floated using condemnation, government's seizure of land under the law of eminent domain, to complete the project. Amid protests by community members, the request for funding was ultimately denied.

The proposal to call the path the "Six Mile Cultural Heritage Trail" finds echoes in the city's move to capitalize on the symbolic value of sweetgrass. This is why the efforts of the Mount Pleasant Culture, Arts, and Pride (CAP) Commission to "revitalize" basket stands at Towne Centre should be understood as a coda to the story of displaced basket stands, even as the move may present some basketmakers with new opportunities to sell their art. At this central location, basketmakers may gain visibility and business. However, this move also hems in the geographic range in which the craft was initially sold. Thus, where stands were once visually diverse and unevenly spaced, they are now uniform and increasingly confined to a single space in the city.

I do not mean to suggest that Mount Pleasant basketmakers will not benefit from revitalized basket stands at Towne Centre. CAP Commissioner Corey Alston, who ranks among the region's most accomplished sweetgrass basketmakers, has led the project.¹⁶ But for some basketmakers, the visibility gained from selling wares at this new location may be a trade-off. Some of the stands along Highway 17 are shared by families of makers and thus serve as a locus for family gatherings. Other stands were built at the edge of basketmakers' properties, affording makers the convenience of walking outside to sell their craft. The spatial constriction of basket stands demonstrates what cultural studies scholar George Lipsitz deems the "racialization of space," where seemingly race-neutral policy decisions, like expanding a highway or building a multiuse path, actually bolster the logics of "hostile privatism."¹⁷ In urban and suburban areas, Lipsitz writes, these policy decisions culminate in the "white spatial imaginary," which "idealizes 'pure' and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior," thus seeking to "hide social problems rather than solve them."¹⁸

The new geography of basket stands is a microcosm for shifting regional demographics. At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans represented the majority population in South Carolina’s coastal counties, but the number of Black residents in the region has steeply declined in recent years.¹⁹ Development, driven in large part by tourism, has led to astronomical tax hikes on Black property owners, making their land vulnerable to tax sale.²⁰ According to the Lowcountry Gullah Foundation, Gullah families once owned over 3,500 acres of land on Hilton Head—a thriving vacation destination—but presently retain less than 700 acres.²¹ Hilton Head once boasted a large number of basketmakers, but historian Dale Rosengarten notes that, by the late 1980s, few basketmakers remained.²²

Basketmakers’ perceptions of how the dominant property regime shapes access to sweetgrass are revealing. One Mount Pleasant basketmaker told me that sweetgrass became difficult to harvest with the development of new subdivisions, citing “private property” as a barrier to access. According to this artisan, the problem became particularly severe ten years ago and worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.²³ Perceptions of property ownership are crucial to understanding how basketmakers know what is acceptable to gather, where, and with whose permission. In place of symbolic recognition of the craft’s importance, the city should consider how to affirm basketmakers’ rights to access resources for their craft.

Basketmaking Vernaculars: Hard and Soft Sweetgrass

To begin a coiled sweetgrass basket, soak longleaf pine needles in water. This will make the needles malleable enough to tie into a knot. After the knot has been tied, start the coil by feeding needles into the bundle. After the third row, or perhaps the fifth, begin feeding in sweetgrass. Notice that the sweetgrass may be slightly green and pliable, like the grass in Nakia Wigfall’s tightly coiled fanner basket (fig. 4).²⁴ To secure the spiraling bundle, fold a strip of sabal palmetto, preserved up until this point in the refrigerator, across the row closest to the center and thread it through the bottom of the advancing row. Feed bulrush into the bundle for contrast.



Fig. 4. Celestine Johnson (bottom left), Nakia Wigfall (top), unknown basketmaker (bottom right), Coiled baskets, 2021. Sweetgrass (*M. filipes* or *M. capillaris*), longleaf pine needles

(*Pinus palustris*), sabal palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*), black rush or bulrush (*Juncus roemarianus*). Photo: Molly Robinson

This basic technique can be learned by looking carefully at how a basket is constructed. However, coiled basketry is rooted in knowledge that extends beyond visual apprehension. As Jackson notes by expressing dismay at the fertilized sweetgrass, which looked beautiful but crumbled in her hands, the texture and pliability of sweetgrass are key characteristics revealed through touch rather than sight. Haptic ways of knowing grant basketmakers insight into the biographies of their materials.

As many historians of science have pointed out, Western scientific knowledge privileges sight in its arsenal of senses.²⁵ Western science and art history developed in a mutually reinforcing manner, as engines of an Enlightenment discourse that sought to establish a theory of transcendent aesthetics and scientific rationality. As Michel Foucault points out in his reading of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), sight—manifest in the act of viewing and being viewed—became the principal conduit for representing the world.²⁶ For Foucault, sight created subjects and subjectivities, be they sitters for portraits or specimens for scientific exploration. Evidence for the reign of sight is supported by dominant methods in the field of contemporary art history. As the foremost sense in the wheelhouse of art historians, sight guides the reader of art in a visual interpretation. In both Western science and art history, touch and smell are supplemental if not completely marginalized. But coiled baskets most fully engage the hands and nose, the senses of touch and smell. The salty-sweet fragrance of sweetgrass precedes its sight.

This mode of understanding centered on sight influenced Bascom during his field work. In 1939, Bascom interviewed a blind basketmaker named Isaac Baisden from the Harris Neck community in McIntosh County, Georgia. Baisden told Bascom that he had learned to sew coiled baskets after becoming blind because he was “[searching] for something to do and thought of making [them].” When Bascom asked how he had learned, Baisden said that he “felt over an old rice fanner to see how it was made. Must have wasted about 5 pounds of material before [I] got one that was any good.”²⁷ In Baisden’s story, sight is substituted by touch as the primary sense in making.²⁸ Baisden’s practice demonstrates that tactile reception is of utmost importance to a basket’s construction.

Given Western science’s culture of visual supremacy, it should perhaps come as no surprise that scholarship on dwindling sweetgrass supply declines to foreground basketmaking’s vocabulary, which characterizes how sweetgrass feels to the touch. Basketmakers use what they call “soft” and “hard” sweetgrass types to craft different basketry items. The former is used to make items like earrings, and the latter to sew baskets.²⁹ The flexibility of the supple soft grass is good for making tight, small details that are difficult to render with the more rigid hard grass. But in spite of this craft-based typology, scholars who have investigated the “disappearance” of sweetgrass use an obfuscating scientific vocabulary to depict the plant’s habitat range. One 2013 study mistakenly identifies separate varieties—perhaps even separate species—of sweetgrass as one kind.³⁰ Robert Dufault was among the first scholars to note that what basketmakers refer to as soft and hard sweetgrass are most likely different species. He writes that soft grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) usually grows in interior habitats like woodlands, and hard grass (*Muhlenbergia filipes*) lines ocean dunes (fig. 5).³¹



Fig. 5. Sweetgrass (likely *M. capillaris*) growing at the edge of a forest in McClellanville, South Carolina, 2021. Photo: Molly Robinson

Scholars’ conflation of the types of sweetgrass in the wild might be tied to the production of knowledge about the plant in experimental settings. Botanists Joseph N. Pinson Jr. and Wade T. Batson note that the difference between *M. filipes* and *M. capillaris* is “less conspicuous on herbarium specimens” because specimens of *M. filipes* were pressed before reaching their full development. The authors’ acknowledgment is an important reminder that experiments conducted in controlled settings do not perfectly imitate the environments or phenomena that scientists seek to understand. In Pinson and Batson’s study, the difference between hard and soft sweetgrass comes to light through other considerations, such as observations of neighboring plant species growing in association with the respective sweetgrass types. These plants include whiskey grass (*Andropogon virginicus*), turkey tangle (*Lippia nodiflora*), and Jesuit’s bark (*Iva frutescens*).³² In short, the identity of sweetgrass primarily becomes clear through its ecological relation to other plants.

Writing at the intersection of Black and Indigenous thought, scholar Tiffany Lethabo King highlights the porous nature of ecological relationships: in other words, the connections between human and nonhuman life that practices of Western scientific knowledge have not yet theorized.³³ King’s concept of porosity is also useful for understanding how to bridge the epistemic gulf separating basketmakers’ texture-oriented knowledge of sweetgrass and non-Gullah scientists’ observations. As Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer points out, translating knowledge across seemingly impermeable boundaries requires critical awareness of what motivates the questions we ask and how that motivation informs how we ask the questions.³⁴ Despite situated nomenclatures and varied methods of recognizing sweetgrass, basketmakers and scientists both aim to preserve the plants as members of an ecological community. As vanguards of sweetgrass preservation, basketmakers and their families possess environmental expertise arising from centuries of land stewardship. The point is to open channels between ways of knowing without compromising the integrity of

the original tributaries, so that knowledge may mix to form new territories of understanding.

Conclusion: Climate Change and the Future of Coiled Basketry

There is more to coiled baskets than meets the eye. Nonetheless, visibility conditions the political dynamics that govern basketmakers' access to materials in Mount Pleasant. Visibility has also established the iconicity of fertilizer-fortified sweetgrass that belies the perennial issue of the disappearing supply of sweetgrass. Yet in the realm of craftsmanship, sight may be less important to the creation of coiled baskets. As the central senses in the act of basketmaking, touch and smell throw into question Enlightenment-backed registers of knowing the world through sight.

Rearranging sight in the order of senses may have profound implications for how communities understand the impacts of climate change, particularly in regions like the Lowcountry, where sea-level rise threatens to irreversibly change the environments that Gullah families know as home. The spectacular visibility of climate catastrophe has come to dominate news cycles through images of devastation: photos of wildfires and videos of floods, accompanied by captions charged with the rhetoric of crisis and devastation. This image-centric portrayal of climate change misses the quieter changes that fly below the radar of visibility. Visually striking environmental transformations wrought by climate change, such as the departure of a plant species from the tidal marsh, often result from changes that do not give themselves up to easy imaging. This is one reason why vernacular knowledge practices rooted in abundantly sensuous, haptic, and olfactory observations of local phenomena are key to preparing for and adapting to environmental change. As stewards of Lowcountry environments, Gullah basketmakers and their families are attuned to change unfolding on scales that resist visual spectacle.

Scholars who investigate the ecological dimensions of art are responsible for considering the politics of resource access. In such studies, scholars should foreground the knowledge practices and insights of artists and community members. This begins by adopting interlocutors' vernaculars. In a study that characterizes the habitat range of sweetgrass for the purpose of assisting basketmakers, "hard" and "soft" sweetgrass are ideal terms. Geographers, ecologists, botanists, and art historians should not shy away from language that contests gatekeeping knowledge systems, lest they overlook matters critical to understanding how individuals make and are made by the natural world.

Recalling Wigfall's description of her practice, coiled basketry's long history of giving shape to loss provides a path to grappling with the loss that arises from environmental change. What will coiled baskets of the future look like if the southeastern wetlands deteriorate?³⁵ We can anticipate innovations in the materiality of coiled basketry in a world made anew by climate change without being nostalgic for bygone environmental eras. If history is any indicator, Gullah basketmakers will adapt their practice, just as they did in response to forced separations of slavery and displacement from their ancestral homelands. The essential thing is to support basketmakers in their current efforts to harvest materials and hold onto family-owned land. As teachers of capacious connection, coiled baskets carry the key to imagining future environments.

Notes

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- ¹ The term “Lowcountry” designates coastal South Carolina and Georgia, including the region’s sea islands.
- ² Dale Rosengarten, “By the Rivers of Babylon: The Lowcountry Basket in Slavery and Freedom,” in *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, ed. Dale Rosengarten, Theodore Rosengarten, and Enid Schildkrout (New York: Museum for African Art, 2008), 105–21.
- ³ Molly Robinson, “Containers for Memory,” *PLATFORM*, June 28, 2021.
- ⁴ See especially Mary Granger, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2007). Granger led the Savannah branch of the Federal Writers Project.
- ⁵ Bascom’s field notes, correspondence, and other personal documents are filed as the William R. Bascom Papers, 1933–1981 (BANC MSS 82/163c) in the Bancroft Library Collections at the University of California, Berkeley (hereafter Bascom Papers). Of particular interest is Bascom’s system for cataloging his field notes. In a handwritten index, he cites instances of his interlocutors discussing coiled baskets, Jim Crow racial violence, and mutual aid societies, among other topics.
- ⁶ B. H. Strauss, R. E. Kopp, W. V. Sweet, and K. Bittermann, “Unnatural Coastal Floods: Sea Level Rise and the Human Fingerprint on U.S. Floods Since 1950,” *Climate Central Research Report*, February 2016, 7–9, <https://sealevel.climatecentral.org/uploads/research/Unnatural-Coastal-Floods-2016.pdf>.
- ⁷ Nakia Wigfall, phone interview with the author, February 2021.
- ⁸ Diana Gates (Nottoway; lives in Tsenacommacah) to the author, February 20, 2022.
- ⁹ Robert Dufault, *Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass: Domestication and Horticulture of the Grass Used in African-American Coiled Basketry* (New York: Springer, 2012), 29.
- ¹⁰ Dufault, *Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass*, 29.
- ¹¹ Conversation with the author, July 6, 2021.
- ¹² Darryl Fears and John Muyskens, “Black People Are About to Be Swept Aside for a South Carolina Freeway—Again,” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2021. See also Rickey Ciapha Dennis Jr., “Historic African American Communities to Combat Gentrification with \$400K Grant,” *Post and Courier* (South Carolina), November 13, 2019.
- ¹³ Paola Tristan Arruda, “Seven Mile Community Calls on Charleston Co. to Reconsider Highway Improvements,” *Live 5 WCSC*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.live5news.com/2021/07/31/seven-mile-community-calls-charleston-co-reconsider-highway-4117-improvements>.
- ¹⁴ Brian Grabbatin, “Co-producing Space along the Sweetgrass Basket Makers’ Highway in Mount Pleasant,” *Southeastern Geographer* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 249.
- ¹⁵ David Slade, “Mount Pleasant Bike Trail Raises Concerns about Land Loss in Black Communities,” *Post and Courier* (South Carolina), February 5, 2022, https://www.postandcourier.com/news/mount-pleasant-bike-trail-plan-raises-concerns-about-land-loss-in-black-communities/article_224427b0-7ca2-11ec-a04e-df9d7f53ff8f.html.
- ¹⁶ Corey Alston, “We had a great turnout of volunteers to revitalize the Sweetgrass Basket Stands at Town Center,” Instagram, November 15, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWRKgY2lviX>.
- ¹⁷ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 15.
- ¹⁸ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 29.

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- ¹⁹ By 1990, African Americans represented just 34.9 percent of Charleston County and 15.7 percent of Mount Pleasant. As of 2019, that number had dwindled to 4.2 percent. Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of Mount Pleasant's Black population decreased relative to the entire population, while every other demographic increased. See Census Viewer, "Mount Pleasant, SC Population—Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts," <http://censusviewer.com/free-maps-and-data-links>.
- ²⁰ Charlotte Lawson, "Development and Taxation Threaten the Last Remaining Gullah Community," *Dispatch*, September 21, 2020, <https://thedispatch.com/p/development-and-taxation-threaten?s=r>.
- ²¹ Lowcountry Gullah Foundation, "Historic Gullah Land Preservation Program," 2021, <https://lowcountrygullah.com/historic-gullah-land-preservation-program>.
- ²² Dale Rosengarten, "Missions and Markets," in Rosengarten, Rosengarten, and Schildkrout, *Grass Roots*, 134.
- ²³ Phone conversation with author, November 13, 2021.
- ²⁴ Mary Jackson, *Low Basket with Handle*, 1999, sweetgrass, pine needles, and palmetto, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Marcia and Alan Docter, 2001.61.
- ²⁵ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison note that late nineteenth-century botanists, anatomists, physicists, and crystallographers set out to "capture the world in its types and regularities"; *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2010), 11. For more on the ascendancy of the visual in science, see Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581–90.
- ²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 3–16.
- ²⁷ Interview with Isaac Baisden, June 19, 1939, Bascom Papers, carton 26.
- ²⁸ Interview with Isaac Baisden, Bascom Papers.
- ²⁹ Dufault, *Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass*, 84.
- ³⁰ Patrick T. Hurley, Brian Grabbatin, and Angela Halfacre, "Gathering, Buying, and Growing Sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia sericea*): Urbanization and Social Networking in the Sweetgrass Basket-Making Industry of Lowcountry South Carolina," *Environmental Studies Faculty Publications* 4 (2013), https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/environment_fac/4. In this study, the authors refer to sweetgrass as *M. sericea*, a synonym for *M. filipes*, which Robert Dufault notes that basketmakers call hard grass. *M. capillaris*, or soft grass, is not referenced in the study in spite of observations of its growth bordering brackish marshes of nearby Beaufort County. See Joseph N. Pinson Jr., and Wade T. Batson, "The Status of *Muhlenbergia filipes* Curtis (Poaceae)," *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society* 87, no. 4 (Winter 1971): 190.
- ³¹ Dufault, *Stalking the Wild Sweetgrass*, 83.
- ³² Pinson and Batson, "The Status of *Muhlenbergia filipes* Curtis (Poaceae)," 190–91.
- ³³ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 115.
- ³⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2013), 156–66. In this chapter, Kimmerer describes how her mentee Laurie formulated a question about plant growth that was initially illegible to the scientists on her dissertation committee. Laurie's question, which explored the impact of human intervention on the growth of a species of sweetgrass, had been framed in such a way that emphasized interspecies relationship as a driver of growth.

³⁵ The response of wetlands to sea-level rise is highly variable. As a blanket term, "deterioration" fails to capture the complexity of how wetland environments adapt to the pressures of rising seas. A range of factors related to vegetation and sedimentation affect the contours, erodibility, and sediment accretion rates of these environments. On the whole, marshes give us reason to be optimistic about their resilience to climate change. They are uniquely situated to build vertically, often apace with sea-level rise, even as lateral erosion can threaten their integrity. See, for example, Carl T. Friedrichs and James E. Perry, "Tidal Salt Marsh Morphodynamics: A Synthesis," *Journal of Coastal Research*, Special Issue No. 27 (Winter 2001), 7-37. See also Morris et al., "Responses of Coastal Wetlands to Rising Sea Level," *Ecology* 83, no. 10 (2002), 2869-2877.