

CHAPTER 19

Gender, Race, and Place Attachment

The Recovery of a Historic Neighborhood in Coastal Mississippi

Mia Charlene White

An hour's drive east of New Orleans along the Gulf of Mexico, there thrives the largely unknown historic black settlement of North Gulfport and Turkey Creek, Mississippi, established in 1866. Despite Interstate 49, which separates North Gulfport from Turkey Creek, these two historically connected communities still organize as one and together advocate against gentrification, environmental racism, and the unsustainable infill development of the Turkey Creek watershed, which community leaders insist makes their historic enclave of kinfolk dramatically flood prone. Given the floodplain location and development-related watershed threats, it is no surprise that Hurricane Katrina raised the waters of Turkey Creek. Heavy winds and rainfall, no municipal storm-water management plan, and poor related infrastructure combined to ensure the flooding of the North Gulfport and Turkey Creek neighborhoods. Many homes were destroyed or significantly compromised. Some families who had very little to begin with found themselves with even less; others, particularly renters, found the gates to their public housing complexes chained shut despite little to no sustained damage.

Places in the Black Belt of the South, such as the site of this chapter, are characterized by, among other things, a history of ownership of the best land by a comparatively small group of white families, with landlessness and embedded poverty widespread. Yet a closer look within the Black Belt reveals many historic towns and places that survive this time of gentrification, environmental degradation, and disinvestment. Established after the U.S. Civil War, these pockets of communities proudly dot the Black Belt in rural, semi-urban, and urbanized areas. This chapter examines the work of an advocate leader, Ms. Rose, in one of these places—the Turkey Creek and North Gulfport community.

The story of North Gulfport and Turkey Creek has come to be more widely known in community development circles since Katrina through the work of a diaspora of advocacy organizations partnering with the founder of the North Gulfport Community Land Trust, Ms. Rose Johnson. For years, Ms. Rose has largely been the de facto spokeswoman for the North Gulfport community. Born and raised in the community, she is a tireless organizer and advocate, her foremost concern securing this historic community, the land and the wetlands, because as she has said, “keeping the creek and keeping our community” are the same thing. In her widely heard

advocacy narratives about the North Gulfport community, the land, and its history, she has often said that keeping the community is natural for her, that “it’s what our ancestors did and it’s what we must do now.” Ms. Rose extends ideas of home to the community through an advocacy and narrative discourse, which she presents as rules and logic that frame the establishment of a land trust. She believes that the land trust will provide a lasting testament to the heritage and survival of the people of Turkey Creek.

Here, the evolution of Ms. Rose’s life story in North Gulfport and her related community work helps guide the illustration of the diachronic connection between gender, race, and struggles about the meaning of place. This chapter examines the knowledge practices Ms. Rose uses, which are defined by racialized histories that create the unique sociospatial dialectic of Turkey Creek and convey a sense of the “social” as a spatial phenomenon. Understanding that some may dismiss Ms. Rose as an atypical community leader unrepresentative of similar places and people, I posit that establishing typicality is not this chapter’s goal. Rather, I work from a different premise: exploring the intricacies of this particular story and its author allows us to examine a place most urban theorists ignore—the Deep South—and provides an opportunity to register the ways gendered histories and memories are critical platforms for understanding race and for engaging in spatial action.

Gender, race, or place attachment alone cannot sufficiently explain why a land trust model came to prominence in this historic black community. In particular, I am interested in the path-dependent factors that led Ms. Rose to legitimize this particular community strategy, factors found in the rules she presents that motivate her community action. These are founded on a historically racialized and insecure relationship to citizenship; on the way gender frames advocacy partnerships with white women; and on the gendered nature of church “telling” and “visiting,” roles or repertoires of action that become mechanisms for maintaining the different scales of black space. These repertoires are narrative representations of place that reproduce rules and norms informed by a strong gendered regime.

Methods

This chapter interrogates a case study of place-maker Ms. Rose and her community development work in Turkey Creek and North Gulfport, Mississippi, in order to elaborate on the ways in which gender, race, and place reassemble the social (LaTour 2005) and give meaning to black spaces.¹ I explore the idea that places are ideas maintained by people, and women in particular, through the use of local histories. These histories provide ways of knowing and repertoires of action, and these place repertoires can reflect informal (and gendered) community rules and norms for planning. To better understand redevelopment planning, we must understand how individuals develop identification and attachment to both social and physical places, the context under which their attachments are translated outward, and whether these identification processes themselves are structured by broader dominating narratives/narrators.

I have pursued the case study approach as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin 2003, 13), particu-

larly because the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly and immediately evident in this instance. I used an open coding method, creating labels to classify and assign meaning to pieces of information Ms. Rose shared with me, which helped me make sense of the data. Codes answer the questions, What do I see going on here? and How do I categorize the information? I eventually developed race, gender, place attachment, history, land, religion, and justice as my main codes (code names are abbreviated here).

Participant observation and informal, open-ended interviews occurred between November 2005 and July 2007, during which time I was a program officer leading the Katrina Women's Response Fund of the Ms. Foundation for Women, a national grant-making organization located in New York City. I developed relationships with many individuals in Turkey Creek and North Gulfport, and with Ms. Rose especially, and spent time working alongside community members in a variety of efforts. As a mixed-race woman of color with African American, Korean, and Oneida heritage who at the time resided in New York, I carried certain privileges and ways of knowing that impacted how I understood events and practices. My perspectives were influenced by several factors, including feeling a level of familiarity with the Turkey Creek community because of my own African American roots in the South. As well, previous work on a 9/11 redevelopment portfolio at the Robin Hood Foundation had organized my thought models about redevelopment and disaster in the context of marginalized communities, and I was specifically in search of understanding what role, if any, women play in local recovery processes.

Materials I rely on from my participant observation and open-ended interviews include travel notebooks I kept in order to report back to my team in New York, documents Ms. Rose shared with me, informal memos and reports I created for the Ms. Foundation based on time spent with Ms. Rose, as well as recordings from a community radio project in the community that I helped organize in 2006. I also rely on analysis of the Turkey Creek and North Gulfport Neighborhoods Community Plan, a review of website material related to the land trust, and news reports, literature reviews, and personal reflections.

This research is based on narrative understanding, because the rationale and legitimization of the land trust occurred through a coherent system of practices, narratives, and tools. Ms. Rose's narratives tell us about the logic and ideologies she uses to develop and talk about the land trust; an ideology is defined as "an articulated and self-conscious belief and ritual system aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action" (Swidler 2001, 96), and narration as a process of production that involves an agent who produces a story or text. Listening to narratives about people's lives helps the researcher figure out what a particular place meant or means, how the actor understands the world, and how the actor perceives causality for the unfolding of life.

There is broad agreement on the dualistic nature of narrative, that it has a "what" and a "way." The "what" of narrative can be viewed in terms of content about events, actors, time, and location. The "way" has to do with how the narrative is told: arrangement of stories, emphasis/deemphasis, or magnification/diminution of any of the elements of the content. The "what" therefore is the story, while the "way" is the discourse. Discourse has a strong relationship to the "glue" that Latour describes as

signifying the social: “the social is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is what is glued together by the types of connections made” (2005, 5).

History as Context

In 1866, former slaves settled on a few hundred acres along Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, most of which was undesirable swampland. Over time the area became a community place of related neighbors, or kinfolk, made up of farms and the first African American school in the Gulfport region; it became a safe place for African Americans after the Civil War. The brutality of this period and the struggle for citizenship and human rights in Mississippi have been well documented (Bond 2003; Dittmer 1995; Erenrich 1999; Payne 1995).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the Mississippi coast as the site both of a resort economy and of sawmill, turpentine, boat, and brickyard industries. Men from Turkey Creek and nearby districts sorted, shaved, trimmed, and treated longleaf pine to be used as railroad ties and utility poles. Women worked largely as domestics, traveling back and forth between large plantation and beach-front homes that by this time had resumed antebellum prominence as weekend and summer retreats for well-off southern whites (D. Evans, personal communication, May 2006). Land was security, passed informally from one generation to the next in shared models of inheritance often referred to as “heir property.” Important community fixtures like the Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church and the Turkey Creek ball diamond, as well as several juke joints, stores, and other small businesses preserved the settlements’ distinct local fabric.

Today, the communities of Turkey Creek and North Gulfport are incorporated neighborhoods within Harrison County and the City of Gulfport, the second-largest city in the state of Mississippi. Military bases and casinos largely shape the local economy. From a planning perspective, major circulation routes are jeopardizing neighborhood sustainability, forcing residents to act on their concerns of being “priced and flooded out” (ibid.). In Gulfport, African American community leaders have formed a steering committee for community-based planning modeled on the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative in Roxbury, Massachusetts. They have formed relationships with out-of-town organizing entities and political and legal organizations, increasing their networks and framing capacities. In particular, the North Gulfport Community Land Trust and Turkey Creek Community Initiatives (led by the brilliant and strategic Derrick Evans) have taken the lead on planning the future of the area, focusing on community self-determination and on ecological and historic preservation, which together provide the basis for organizing since Katrina.

Resistance through Narrative

Ms. Rose Johnson is a retired middle-class black woman in her midsixties who stayed in her North Gulfport home during Hurricane Katrina along with her daughter, grandkids, friends, and neighbors. Born and raised in North Gulfport, Ms. Rose has very deep knowledge and place attachment to the community she has organized for

so many years. It would be very difficult to find a single person in this community who does not know Ms. Rose or who does not claim some measure of relation to her. At one of my first meetings with Ms. Rose, in her home soon after the hurricane, I noticed that all her furniture was very clean despite the water damage to the floors and ceiling. I was pregnant, and we sat drinking tea, breaching the initial distance between us through talk of our experiences with pregnancy and the pains and joys I was yet to know. Afterward she showed me where she had used a sharp umbrella point to pop holes into the ceiling plaster to let some of the water out during Katrina. On countless later visits with her as she called on others, or as we enjoyed a church service or a fish fry, I saw the deference paid to Ms. Rose by every kind of resident (including Derrick Evans), as well as the consistency of her narrative throughout the visits. She tells the hurricane story like this:

My daughter's van's brakes were bad and needed work; I couldn't leave my daughter and grandkids. When I realized it would be bad, we knew we were too late, we were there to stay. I wasn't afraid because I had been there when Camille hit. The only thing that frightened me was that it hovered for eight hours. We took the hit of the hurricane. But people forgot about us because New Orleans is so damaged.

Given the damage sustained by her community at large, Ms. Rose feels lucky.

I was blessed. Our house was built out of cinderblock. My dad built it, fifty years ago. We lost all our shingles; water started to come in, maybe six hours into the hurricane. There were fourteen of us in the house, and you could hear the roof almost coming off.

Ms. Rose told me that the day after Katrina, she went to the Good Deeds Community Center to begin fulfilling her promise to God to preserve her community should she and her kin survive. She worked for twelve days straight, feeding the hungry, organizing care, and giving comfort. Ms. Rose says:

We had no water. Every day, I would go home and bathe in a bucket. Despite having no running water, I would go to sleep and think, "I can't go again." Then I would be wide awake at 6 a.m. The people who came to eat were so thankful—just the look on their faces kept me going. God saved me and my entire family. I'm so grateful. My promise to him is that I will work the rest of my life to help others. It was just like Jesus on the water, when he said, "Be still." All of the sudden, everything was still. It was a spiritual thing I went through; it transformed me. I decided then, . . . the land trust will be my vehicle.

Over the course of two years and many visits to the region, I and others I brought with me listened to Ms. Rose talk about her memories of life in Turkey Creek and North Gulfport—asserting a specific history of place and people that she had readily available to her. Younger advocates such as Derrick Evans would defer to her, as would other men in our company, often as we sat outside or walked the neighborhood. As we walked, as we visited people, as we got groceries, as we gave other

people rides to places, or as we sat outside, Ms. Rose shared vivid memories of what life was like when she was a child—fishing, picking blackberries, playing softball—all on the Turkey Creek. She often talked about the current state of things—children with no safe places to play, abandoned lots owned by speculative developers taken over by drug dealers. Ms. Rose is clear about the social reasons that the physical place of Turkey Creek provided safe haven to African Americans. She said that blacks were not permitted to swim in the Gulf of Mexico, so “we played in the Turkey Creek” and

we also used it for baptizing and fishing. We didn't have to worry about white people driving by and yelling, “Niggers go home!” and throwing stuff at us. Nobody else wanted this area, so our parents and grandparents created these little neighborhoods and churches. We must save the Turkey Creek. It saved us.

Ms. Rose is instructive on how the now diminished wetlands used to absorb water and filter out the pollutants after a strong rain, when flooding was not as bad as it has been in her later years. She refers to the creek and the wetlands as the “the greatest filter in the world,” saying “we were safer with the wetlands,” both environmentally and socially.

It was a neck injury that conspired with fate to enlist Ms. Rose, a former employee of the Mississippi Department of Highway Patrol and Safety, into her current role of community and environmental activist. Her physical therapy program required that she walk every day in order to heal, and as she walked, Ms. Rose began to take in very deeply how her neighborhood was changing for the worse. No longer working outside the neighborhood full-time, she noticed, for example, that a wooden pallet company had moved into town and had become an eyesore, so she decided to fight to have it removed. With the backing of her church, as well as many signatures, she won that fight. Ms. Rose learned the intricacies of local bureaucratic policies and she tapped into the leadership of other mature black women leaders such as the locally elected House representative.

Eventually, her activism led Ms. Rose to the Sierra Club, or rather, led the Sierra Club to her. They wanted to know “what the black community thought” about what was happening to the watershed and needed an African American chair for the local chapter, and Ms. Rose says she needed the Sierra Club. She tells me that they sent her to chapter chair trainings, where she learned how to frame development issues in the context of environmental justice. Already armed with a historical narrative unique to her voice and moral ethic, Ms. Rose was soon seamlessly connecting environmental justice, unsustainable development, and gentrification, invoking history through her memories of North Gulfport. She turned to the question of real estate at the urging of a friend who pointed out that “there's white people buying up all our property and selling it back [to us].” Hearing this sentiment echoed through her church visits with others in the community, Ms. Rose felt she was on to something. Through her connections with longtime racial justice advocates like Gus Newport, as well as growing advocacy relationships from a sewer lines fight, Ms. Rose heard about the concept of land trusts and decided such a trust would be a perfect solution for her community. She often invoked God and said that the way to fight the temporary was to invoke

the eternal. Forever practical, Ms. Rose theorized that any planning solution for her community needed to incorporate both affordable housing and environmental protection. With her authority as a longtime resident, Ms. Rose developed steadily into a sophisticated and aggressive public figure.

Such work by Ms. Rose finds confirmation in other studies by social movement scholars who have long observed that, on a global scale, women are consistently the first to both become aware of *and* to take action on environmental problems in their communities (Di Chiro 1992; Merchant 1996; Seager 1993; Stein 2004; Sturgeon 1997). Ms. Rose's analysis, intuition, and narrative also reflect what the disaster literature has established—that without proper collective or private tenure systems in place, overexploitation of resources and environmental degradation are thought to increase a community's vulnerability to disaster (Brown and Crawford 2006). With lived experience in mind, Ms. Rose began to organize and handpicked nine people to help her develop a vision for a local land trust:

I picked people I knew I could work with and we created a mission “to protect the culture, historic character, and environment of the community.” It honors our parents and our grandparents who worked so hard to raise us, to care for our families and the land, and they weren't treated well. This land is so sacred and deserves to be protected. It is my vision, my dream, to give people an affordable home on this land, so that they can have a part of the American dream, so they can raise their kids in a home, so they are here to protect the land.

In 2004, Ms. Rose went to her first land sale. She caught on to how it worked and bought five parcels of land with money “cobbled together from too many people to count.” Eventually, the original black owners of those parcels, who had been unable to pay the back taxes, were able to buy their land back from her. Not long afterward, however, Katrina hit the Gulf Coast—turning the black community, once again, into what Ms. Rose calls an “invisible race”:

With a disaster, they reach to the top and start helping people at the top and nothing is left for the poor. African Americans are one of the most discriminated groups of people in the world. Katrina put a light on race, class, and indifference. People were treated like we live in the third world, and this is the richest country in the world. We were so disappointed in our federal government. They didn't show up in our community until October. It showed us what we knew: they don't value us; we have to do for ourselves.

After tending to the immediate needs of her community, Ms. Rose turned to the larger picture. To her, it was clear that developers were buying up land, taking advantage of the chaos brought by the storm. “There are a lot of greedy people,” Ms. Rose says. “A lot of money is being made off Katrina.” Her organization had developed a plan before the storm, but after the storm implementation became more urgent because of fears of an accelerated land grab. She had initially decided to start small: they were going to raise money through block parties to try to stop the prospectors, buy up the property, and then build affordable homes. Suddenly, however, after Katrina

they found they had media attention, support, and partners they hadn't expected; they filed for 501(C)3 status and funders came forward, Ms. Rose says:

People wanted to help. The nuns at Mercy Housing Corps, Healthy Builders, Youth Build, the Ms. Foundation for Women, and the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta—all were helping. In fact, I remember when you called us—right out of the blue. I thought, I remember when Gloria Steinem gave a shout-out to Mississippi women in something I read. I knew that you would understand this *whole place* is our home.

Now, several years after the storms and facing increasing health challenges, Ms. Rose remains committed to her goal of protecting African American communities and increasing their access to home ownership.

I believe if you own a home, you take care of it and the place around it. But I'm also bringing my people together and fighting the vision people have of us. I want to make the community safe and attractive. I want to see my grandchildren living here . . . and I want your grandchildren to be comfortable visiting mine.

When you have lost everything, says Ms. Rose, you know how truly “home is where the heart is”:

Home is for spiritual things to happen, for storytelling about who did what back in the day, a place to be secure. After Katrina, people were not secure, people were lost in so many ways. I saw how important home is. You know, not just your four walls. This is a place for black people to protect themselves.

These reflections illuminate the relationship between people and place attachment, the ideal of home, which is always gendered, as it is separate from work, and its amorphous boundaries (“this whole place is our home”) that shape community and wellness. Here, home means a dwelling but it also represents relational space—a means for recognized space.

Place Attachment and the Church

To further contextualize Ms. Rose's story, I turned to some of the literature on place attachment. I found that much of it focuses on individual feelings and experience and has not placed these bonds in the larger sociopolitical or historical context in which planners and scholars should operate. In another dimension exist the community development and planning literatures, which while emphasizing the importance of community participation, voice, and empowerment, overlook the emotional and cognitive connection to place. Yet Ms. Rose's narrative illuminates how emotional connections and bonds can form the basis and motivation for community action. Despite the limited gender theorization, there exists interesting research on psychological adaptation and adjustment to extreme and unusual environments. Scholars

have found that rewards from challenges met and overcome play a strong role in passion for place, a finding that clearly resonates with my observations.

Other aspects of the literature on place attachment focus on attachments that facilitate a sense of security and well-being through the definition of group boundaries and the stabilization of memories against the passage of time. A theory of place develops where place is shaped by centuries of symbolic investment in local qualities. DeFilippis (1999) elaborates “locality” (nexus of community, household, and workplace) as the scale of experience where “common sense” is formed by arguing that the state, as a codification of power relations, is one of the central structures in people’s daily lives and that it is one of the primary arenas in which contests over which people’s “common sense” get played out. A gendered lens may be interpreted from his nexus of locality, when, for example, we see that Ms. Rose engages the “state” historically through postemancipation narrative and connects a historically mediated relationship between state, people *in* place. This literature establishes place attachment, place character/identity, and sense of community (common sense) as resources for neighborhoods that require cultivation to withstand the social and economic forces that can lead to displacement through natural disaster, gentrification, segregation, or a combination of these.

The Church

The Mount Pleasant United Methodist Church operates as one of the loci of the Turkey Creek community. Ms. Rose describes the feeling of being in church after Katrina, when members—women in particular—characteristically used the community medium as an opportunity to report on who was where and on what was needed, information gathered through women’s neighboring and visiting in the community:

I’m guided by the divine spirit of God. I’m close to my minister and to praying. My minister knows that women are the backbone of the community. Praying and knowing God as I do, this work guides me. The greatest resource in the African American community is hope and our faith in God.

On almost every Sunday, the importance of protecting the environment and fighting gentrification is brought up sometime during service. This practice correlates with studies which show that church attendance strongly influences place attachment, encouraging membership in local organizations by enhancing personal leadership skills, creating social contacts, providing organizational resources for collective action, and strengthening solidarity (Barnes 2003; Harris 1999). Religion is understood as a mobilizer of African American political activism, reflecting a trend in the evolution of black churches in the U.S. South, where the 1950s saw a transformation of church missionary services into social service work—work done largely by women (Gilmore 1996).

Women’s role of carrying this social gospel via pedestrian neighboring is a significant method for creating belonging and for being the dominant place planners. In fact, Ms. Rose’s walking confirmed for her that despite her perception of neighbor-

hood disorder, this was her “place,” her home and community. Fenster finds a parallel in her work in Jerusalem: “Belonging and attachment are built on the basis of walking. A sense of belonging changes with time as these everyday experiences grow and their effects accumulate” (2005, 243). Fenster frames informal acts of belonging as springing from the casual daily encounters between people. Space is claimed through everyday acts of exchange of information about the spatial environment—“narratives of belonging.” Women claim this space in their neighboring and visiting, transferring historiographies, narratives, and repertoires of place, memory, and belonging. Historical research in the South illuminates belonging through “home” as a political centerpiece of African American life: “While white political leaders kept their eyes on black men’s electoral political presence and absence, black women organized and plotted an attack just outside their field of vision, . . . transforming church missionary societies into social service organizations” (Gilmore 1996, 226).

Conclusion

The land trust is Ms. Rose’s way of institutionalizing and memorializing the histories of her community. Memory and place are gendered because of the process through which place making and attachment are created. Sandercock spatializes belonging and memory for us: “Memory, both individual and collective, is deeply important to us. It locates us as parts of something bigger than our individual existences. . . . Memory locates us, as part of family history, as part of a tribe or community, as part of city building and nation making” (1998, 207).

In the South and in this coastal Mississippi community, issues of representation have also been issues of citizenship and the struggle for power over space and place. This chapter offers an ecological model for understanding community development, diffusing cultural concepts across disciplines to contribute to debates on the impacts of gender, race, place, and history. Although research is needed to better illuminate the relationship between citizenship and the processes of place making, as well as what might be the community ramifications of using place- or heritage-based strategies for redevelopment planning, the struggle for black space cannot, I believe, be won without women.

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NOTE

1. LaTour provides a performative definition in which the social exists through the “group-making” efforts, ways, and manners. In other words, if the “dancer stops dancing, the dance is finished. No inertia will carry the show forward” (2005, 35).

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