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ARTICULATING RACE, GEOGRAPHY, AND NOSTALGIA IN RURAL LOCALITIES OF THE POTOMAC RIVER

SURF Conference Panel Session 2A

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Mentor: Associate Professor Ignacio Chapela, Environmental Science,
Policy, and Management

I. Introduction

Sitting in the Berkeley Springs Museum in West Virginia I pondered about a passing remark made by John Douglas, one of seven white, elderly residents interviewed that day. “All these towns had small black communities...,”¹ he said. I was surprised. I had heard nothing about African-Americans in the Appalachian Mountains in over a dozen interviews from a number of towns.

This research examines how a white population and an African-American population remember, and forget, the transitions their rural landscapes underwent in the last fifty years. During the summer of 2013 I spent one month each in two rural communities along the Potomac River. A region that straddles the border of the North and South, the Potomac flows across two distinct, although connected, racial and economic landscapes. From its headwaters in the Appalachian Mountains the Upper River flows from a place that relied upon manufacturing and heavy industry from the 1840s to the 1970s, an area with little slavery and small African American enclaves. From the 1970s onward the mountains lost industry and witnessed increased poverty.² The Lower River, in the tidal Chesapeake Bay, was a site of some of the earliest slave plantations—from the late 1600s onwards a site of major agricultural production,—and today is still home to a large African American population. As of the 1980s, suburbs from Washington, DC, have developed there.³ This work compares the racial dynamics of late 20th century economic transitions in these two communities because of their shared experience of either tourist or suburban development from nearby Washington, D.C.

This multi-disciplinary research, conducted with colleagues Adam Moskowitz, Sandra

1 John Douglas, Interviewed by author. Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. June 19th, 2013.

2 Henry Louis Gates, *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 15.

3 Garrett Peck, *The Potomac River: A History & Guide* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2012).

Stibitz, Jackson Wilke, and Tessa Shippy, found that these two sites represent instances where African-American enclaves lost economic independence during the rural economic transitions. In the Lower River, African-American populations have remained high in numbers, and some communities have seen increased income levels over the last fifty years. The Upper River African-American enclaves have all but disappeared as industry has vanished and with it job prospects.⁴

To examine the transition above this work engages with the concepts of nostalgia and autonomy. I define nostalgia as a fond remembrance. I define autonomy as a process of political, economic, and cultural self-determination for populations that find themselves in “imagined communities.” Scholar Benedict Anderson defines imagined communities as non-face-to-face entities that require social constructions to produce mutual affinity—constructions such as nostalgia.⁵ After conducting twenty-two oral histories with community members over sixty years old, I faced a major contradiction: why do white populations on the Upper River and African-American populations on the Lower River both have a nostalgia for a time in the past, a “good old days,” which is also a racially segregated time period? Empirically, African-American populations on the Lower River have witnessed increased income and white Appalachians have seen poverty levels rise and jobs disappear.⁶ In short, African-Americans have witnessed what looks ostensibly like economic development, yet are still nostalgic for a segregated, lower income, past. In attempts to make sense of this question, I have found the need to reckon with black theorists writing at the time of segregation, understanding the present landscape as articulated (a term cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall uses to mean joined or hinged) to the historical moment of 1950s and 60s desegregation. I also found the need to reckon with my own racial position in this research project—as a white male who was raised in a suburb off the Potomac.

Methodologically this research relies on oral history: long, open-ended interviews. In each locale the research team worked with community historians to identify older residents that were interested in sharing their stories.

II. Potomac River Geographies, Outside the District

The Potomac River flows from its headwaters in the Appalachian Plateau down along the border of Maryland and Virginia. As it passes Washington, D.C., it turns into a tidal estuary, emptying into the Chesapeake Bay. The populations studied reside in the rural mountains and the rural bay region, but first I find it important to examine the role of Washington, D.C., as an expanding urban force on these rural spaces, meaning the relational geography of the automobile industry.⁷ As automobiles and new infrastructures associated with them changed the landscape of Washington, D.C., the geography of the rural areas that were accessible to city dwellers also underwent change. Housing developments pushed out towards rural agricultural areas outside of the city, and from the 1970s to the 90s many residents with capital moved to suburbs outside

4 Henry Louis Gates, *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 15.

5 Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

6 “Maryland Economy - Income,” accessed January 9, 2014, <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/01glance/economy/html/income.html>.

7 William W Warner and Williamsburg Regional Library, *Beautiful Swimmers*, 1994.

the Washington, D.C. metropolitan core.⁸

The Appalachian Mountains were filled with small mill, mine, and agricultural towns, beginning in the 18th century and initially drawn by the waterpower that elevation change brings. In the 19th century enslaved and freed African-Americans were important labor sources for the construction of regional transportation networks, including railroads and canals, and of mountain resorts, as well as mines, mills, and furnaces.⁹ These small industries came to an end in the 1970s and 80s. As small, rural, industrial towns on the Upper Potomac were often unionized, companies found themselves running close to profit margins and moved to anti-union states farther south. Other industries decreased employment to compete with non-union competitors, like the paper mill and coalmine industries.¹⁰ African-American populations started to disappear in the 1980s, and now only a fraction of one former enclave lives dispersed around Cumberland, MD, the area's biggest city.¹¹

The lower Potomac, and the Chesapeake Bay region in general, had been an agricultural area since the 17th century. Southern Maryland, and the lower Potomac in particular, had some of the largest and earliest slave populations in Maryland.¹² In the 1940s and 50s the area saw the growth of key naval and military installations along the Potomac, bringing new jobs and new intellectual and professional populations to the region. Suburban development companies moved into the area in the 1980s as Washington, D.C. began to expand. Housing developments brought new shops and strip malls to places that had once had a series of African-American owned and operated businesses. Income began to rise and many of the new residents were African-Americans.¹³

III. Interviews and Analysis

The strongest theme through all the interviews was nostalgia for the epoch before 1970. Geoff Mann, a cultural geographer, theorizes that nostalgia relies on imagining the past as good and bright, and perhaps bears as much upon the past as upon the present.¹⁴ On the Upper River the nostalgic memories retold in oral histories forgot entire African-American enclaves that once were vital parts of their towns. The director of a regional museum, nestled in the mountain town of Cumberland, showed me around the place. "And in this room we have a model recreation of the community that was by the water, called Shantytown. The people there worked the canal and

8 Francine Cary, *Urban Odyssey: A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

9 Ronald D Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

10 Ronald D Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945.* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

11 Ibid.

12 Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

13 William W. Warner, *Beautiful Swimmers* (Williamsburg, Va., Regional Library, 1994).

14 Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 73-100, doi:10.1080/01419870701538893.

rail road.”¹⁵ He failed to mention that Shantytown was the African-American neighborhood of the area, nor did his overview of town history acknowledge that African-American labor was a critical part of the economy. The director painted a picture of a community that had harmoniously flourished as, I assumed, a white working-class mountain paradise.

On the Upper River, in places like Cumberland, it was clear from looking around that the economic engines of the place had changed—the shops and downtown areas of the small mill and mine towns were boarded up and decaying. John Cushinghacker, who also shared his history, was a public servant for the paper mill town in the mountains. “The mill used to employ about six times the men it employs now... Westernport was really the place to be back then.”¹⁶ The people I interviewed were from a generation that predated the new political economy. The Upper River interviewees were in love with a memory of a town that was theirs, a political economy they felt they owned. Most of the Upper River white populations do not see the need to publicly remember the racial tensions and inequalities that lurk in the stories of the rural industrial hey-day.

On the Lower River, a similar form of nostalgia took place, only the subjects, content, and imagined community was different—one that forgot the hardships, the pains, and potentially the shame of the past, and remembered a time of idyllic autonomy. Selby Beale, an African-American woman, grew up when her father and mother ran businesses all over several counties. These businesses catered exclusively to the African-American populations in the area.

Growing up in a segregated system wasn't really bad, you know, because you knew where your place was... And then when things went on, and you had your parents involved in organizations like the Elks and the Masons, and they furnished activities for children.¹⁷

During those interviews Selby and others mourned the loss of those businesses her father and other African-Americans ran. The rural transition brought wealth and prosperity to some African-Americans on the Lower River. New types of jobs—retail, technology, and other service economies or professional work—connected to Washington, D.C. replaced agricultural work and a series of locally owned service economies.¹⁸ As such, those older African-American residents that were interviewed have seen the landscape they knew and the political economies they felt included in change. Perhaps an influx of city folk, of the city itself with its strip malls and four-lane highways, caused my over sixty-year old interviewees to be nostalgic for the rural political economy, even if that meant a segregated setting. Yet, if this type of nostalgia can be explained, I am not convinced I understand it at first glance.

It seems easy for the white people to forget the black people, particularly when economic prosperity relied in part on cheap labor of African-Americans. That forgetting should be termed structural racism, and that kind of nostalgia makes sense to me. But the African-American population yearning for a time of segregation seems paradoxical, particularly when the presence of high earning African-American professionals seems to indicate progress away from racism.

As a white man who grew up off the Potomac, I need to refer to a black philosopher of that time to help me reckon with this seeming paradox. Malcom X said, in 1965:

15 Robert Woodward. Interview by author. Audio recording. Cumberland, MD., June 26, 2013.

16 John Cushinghacker. Interview by author. Video recording. Westernport, MD. June 11, 2013.

17 Selby Beale. Interview by author. Video recording. La Plata, MD. July 8th, 2013.

18 Robert Brueggemann, “Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 110–112, doi:10.1525/jsah.2013.72.1.110.

This new type of black man, he doesn't want integration; he wants separation. Not segregation, separation.... Separation is when you have your own. You control your own economy... politics... society... everything. You have yours and you control yours; we have ours and we control ours.¹⁹

His prophetic ideas live on in the memories African-American interviewees shared with me. X's vision of autonomy—of having control and meaning in their political economies—comes through in the stories they shared about autonomy in their communities.

Cornell West explains Malcom X's position as one of rage against the horrors of his time, the violence of racial inequality.²⁰ Perhaps it is a testament to the power of memory that the people who lived these same horrors on the Potomac have both turned those emotions towards ideals of separatism, as X did, while also publicly forgetting the pain of segregation.²¹ West explains that X called for "black rage," a mental state that could push black people to have a psychic conversion—to stop seeing the world, and themselves, through white lenses.²² That was X's theory of how to liberate, decolonize the black mind. Situating my own subjectivity in my white suburban body, I have found that these nostalgias make more sense if I attend to the race and politics at play in my interviews. The African-American interviewees were talking across racial lines that are fraught with suffering and struggle—and without a doubt, my race mattered in the way they approached discussing segregation. Perhaps I should look at my interviewees' nostalgia as forms of politely talking across racial lines about the autonomy they envision as key to ending the racial inequality and structural racism that still haunts their present.

IV. Conclusion

Memory is an agent of power on the landscape of the Potomac River. It took a dozen interviewees in the mountains to find out, as John Douglas told me, that "all these towns had small black communities." The white people on the Upper River have forgotten a past that is useful for them to forget. African-Americans in the mountains, the few there are, live in some of the most extreme poverty that I witnessed in the area. To forget has been strategic, even if unintentional. The African-Americans on the Lower River, however, have remembered their past before the new suburban developments as an autonomous one. This memory gives credence to claims for such autonomy today and for increased power to the African-American community. However, such nostalgic forgetting also raises questions about how empowerment and racism are each enacted.

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