Chapter 9
Digital Equity in a Traditional Culture:
Gullah Communities in South Carolina

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the history of the Gullah people of the Sea Islands of South Carolina. In examining the history of oppression and isolation of Black Americans of Gullah descent, the authors look at how a history of racism and inequity set the stage for the digital inequities experienced by Gullah communities since the onset of the information age. They find that despite the Gullahs’ tenacious struggles for education and literacy during enslavement, many are left behind in this age of digital technology. The authors examine the effects that the isolated and closed Gullah communities, which were forced conditions during slavery, had upon many Gullahs’ reluctance and resistance to engagement in information communication technologies (ICTs) centuries later. They contend that this continued isolation inadvertently contributed to the loss of Gullah land as well as a pattern of gentrification that severely compromises Gullah traditions and values.

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INTRODUCTION

In many parts of South Carolina, rural as well as urban, the traditional culture of Gullah people is confronted by rapidly changing circumstances. As neighborhoods are transformed by gentrification and entire communities displaced by development, Gullah peoples still utilize deeply-rooted values and social institutions to hold on to their unique culture (National Park Service, 2005; Housing Authority Council, 2005). Information technology has impacted Gullah communities in distinctive ways—while the digital divide so prominent in minority communities has become an agent of change the traditional culture of Gullah peoples is both a challenge to information technology as well as challenged by information technology.

This chapter uses the analytical framework of critical race theory (CRT) to develop insights into digital equity and a traditional culture. One of the central features of critical race theory is the use of the human narrative to critique as well as illustrate key issues and increase our insights and understandings. Furthermore, the authors draw on this major tenet of CRT, which is the belief that the use of narrative can serve to liberate and emancipate historically underserved and marginalized individuals and groups. Consequently, the storytelling and counter-storytelling found in CRT writings contradict and interrupt the dominant narratives and hegemonic perspectives surrounding the histories and experiences of these same social identity groups. Critical race theorists rely heavily on narrative to ‘unsilence’ and make heard the voices from the bottom rungs of societies’ hierarchies in their efforts to dispel misconceptions, myths, and untruths. While Derrick Bell (1987, 1992) and Richard Delgado (1995), for example, employ allegory and fictional storytelling to achieve these purposes, the authors of this chapter believe that other forms of narrative resulting from methods traditional to qualitative research, such as the use of interview and ‘oral’ data, as well as community engagement can also be effective in lifting up the unheard voices of Gullah people. In this chapter we use compelling narratives to show the intricacies of Gullah culture and its relation to the broader social structure. In doing so, we also discuss and critique, from CRT perspectives, the importance of property and property rights in U.S. society in determining how Gullah communities are viewed by the dominant and powerful elite and how they have come to be, once again, disempowered and threatened, through gentrification, with the loss of the very culture and traditional ways honored and voiced in their narratives.

The particular narratives used in this chapter are condensed from biographies/autobiographies as well as accounts from our more recent research to present eloquent narratives that speak to the issues of CRT and the maintenance of Gullah/Geechee culture. These narratives emanate from the lives of the following:

• **Charlotte Forten** (1837-1914): An African-American woman from the North who taught at Penn School on St. Helena Island (Beaufort County) in the years after the Civil War. Her journal speaks powerfully to the social constraints as well as the intense desire of Gullah people for education.

• **Robert Smalls** (1839-1915): Born a slave in Beaufort County, SC; a hero in the Civil war; a delegate to the 1868 South Carolina Constitutional Convention; an ardent advocate for mandatory public education; a Reconstruction-era legislator in South Carolina. A recent biography, *Yearning to Breathe Free* has been published by Andrew Billingsley (2007).

• **Septima Poinsette Clark** (1898-1987): A Charleston native, taught for several years on Johns Island, (Charleston County); went on to community organizing as well as establishing the *Citizenship Education Schools* that provided rudimentary literacy skills to thousands of African
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