Preserving Gullah Geechee Culture in Charleston

The erasure of cultural heritage is a longstanding struggle within the United States and the rest of the world. Because of this, cultural heritage projects have been created to help support fading cultures. One such project in Charleston is the Charleston Jewish Heritage Collection, which is located within the College of Charleston’s campus. Many heritage projects like this are being created in Charleston but there are still more to be created for other cultures within the community, such as the Gullah Geechee culture. While I cannot create an entire heritage collection for this project, I can create artifacts that inspire people to help preserve the culture.

For this remix project, I chose to remix my Problem in the Community Report because my research showed that people need to learn how they can combat threats to the Gullah Geechee culture’s preservation. In my original project, I wrote about threats to the culture in Charleston and attempts to help preserve it. I then found two interesting subsets of this problem that could be exigences for the artifacts of this project. First, people need to know about Gullah Geechee culture and local businesses that help to preserve it. For this problem, I made a travel brochure that gives a brief history of Gullah Geechee culture and lists a few local businesses that support it in Charleston. Second, sweetgrass is becoming increasingly difficult for Gullah Geechee basket makers to obtain and needs to be more accessible because of its significance to the culture.
People should therefore be made aware of the problem and how they can help solve it. For this problem, I created an online news article that makes suggestions for how Charleston locals can help make sweetgrass available to basketmakers and support their trade. Through this rationale, I will explain my reason for creating these artifacts and how they will help solve threats to Gullah Geechee culture, thus contributing to its preservation in Charleston.

**Genre 1: Travel Brochure**

My first artifact is a *travel brochure* that addresses the rhetorical situation of providing the audience with information about Gullah Geechee culture and local businesses that help support the culture’s preservation. I chose this rhetorical situation because granting people with this information creates more individuals to help preserve the culture. Although I didn’t fully elaborate on it in the original project, one threat was the tourism industry’s emphasis on activities that consequently drive Gullah Geechee people off of the islands where their culture flourished. Once exclusively Gullah Geechee islands like Kiawah and Johns Island are “now nearly unrecognizable” as private golf resorts, beaches, and developments fueled by the tourism industry are taking hold. (Stewart). Therefore, tourists of Charleston need to be made aware of Gullah Geechee culture and businesses that support its preservation so they can contribute to the activities that protect it.

The exigence of this artifact is people not knowing about Gullah Geechee culture and/or where to find businesses that support its preservation. When my original project was peer-reviewed, my peers informed me that they were not even aware that Gullah Geechee culture existed before reviewing my project. This is a common problem for
many tourists and residents of Charleston; people are simply not aware of its existence. Considering that it is a uniquely American culture extending from North Carolina to Florida along the South-Eastern United States, it should at least be known of and recognized by tourists from other parts of the United States ("Gullah"). If people are not aware that a culture exists, then they will not specifically search for businesses that sell products from or support that culture. Therefore, this artifact needs to solve both the exigence of people not knowing about Gullah Geechee culture as well as the exigence of people not knowing how to support the culture's preservation. To solve the exigence, my travel brochure includes a brief history of the culture and then lists relevant businesses that the audience can support.

The audience of this brochure is anyone who is able to learn about Gullah culture, how to support it, and will support it and its preservation. While the brochure is directed towards tourists, the information can still be utilized by locals. The artifact allows and encourages the audience to be "mediators of change" by providing them with lists and brief descriptions of relevant local businesses. The businesses I chose to represent in the brochure are Neema Fine Art Gallery, Hannibal's Kitchen, Charleston City Market, and Gullah Geechee Tours. It was essential that I chose businesses that actually contribute to the Gullah Geechee cultural preservation and don't only utilize the culture's name and vernacular in marketing and branding. Sometimes businesses will utilize ethnic vernacular and names but do not accurately represent the culture that originated the language. They therefore are not helping to preserve the culture and its traditions. Marsh Hen Mill, formerly called Geechie Boy Mill, is one of these businesses ("About"). While the brand sold grits and beans that would be utilized in Gullah Geechee
culture, it was not owned or operated by anyone from the culture and did not disclose this fact for many years (Galasso). When provided with businesses that support Gullah Geechee culture, the audience is able to become “mediators of change” when they utilize the information to support the businesses and thus help preserve the culture.

While the genre fits the exigence I am attempting to solve, it is not void of constraints. Many people do not seek out travel brochures and would therefore not receive the information from this one. Even if someone is given a travel brochure, that does not mean they will read it. The brochure would most likely only be read by individuals who are interested in learning about cultures and businesses. However, this is not exclusively a negative constraint. Since the majority of people that read this brochure are interested in learning about cultures and businesses, then the brochure is more likely to solve the exigence than a genre that might be consumed by people outside of the intended audience.

The inaccessibility of travel brochures and their target demographics are also constraints. Unlike a web article that can easily be pushed to a large audience, physical travel brochures are usually only found in airports, hotels, information centers, museums, and small local businesses. So while the brochure may contain information targeted towards tourists, not all tourists will see it depending on how widespread it is throughout the city. Some people who might otherwise support the local businesses and heritage projects may never see the travel brochure. Younger people are also less likely to seek out physical sources of information, which is a problem since a large segment of Charleston tourists are young. Even if they find the brochure and are interested in the information it provides, they may not want to carry it around. Therefore the brochure
may never reach its intended audience because they don’t want to carry a physical copy or are never exposed to it.

When creating this brochure, I needed to make sure that properly utilized writerly choices so the genre was suitable to solve the exigence. To do this, I utilized photos of people who work at the businesses supporting Gullah Geechee culture. This adds a more human and emotional connection to the businesses instead of them just feeling like entities that exist for the consumer. To help expand the reach of the brochure, I would have it placed in as many places as possible including highbrow restaurants, buses, and the Charleston City Market in addition to the usual brochure locations. With these added locations, both tourists and locals may come across the brochure. Despite brochures usually targeting older individuals, I added a QR code to the front and back for younger tourists. When someone scans the code, they will be taken to an online version of the brochure. The information will then be spread to more people who wouldn’t usually be the target demographic because they generally don’t want to carry around extra items. Overall, the brochure allowed me to provide the audience with information in a physical or digital format that they can utilize during their time in Charleston to help protect Gullah Geechee culture.

**Genre 2: Online News Article**

For my second artifact, I chose to create an [online news article](#) that encourages individuals living in Charleston to help support Gullah Geechee basket makers and sweetgrass accessibility. I chose this rhetorical situation because access to sweetgrass is diminishing and the grass is needed to make these traditional baskets. In [Project 1](#) I wrote that “the disappearance or preservation of this tradition at any moment in time is a
strong indicator of how well the Gullah culture as a whole is being preserved.” This is because sweetgrass baskets are an essential part of Gullah Geechee culture. Those in the culture are descendants of West African slaves brought to the Americas as early as the 1600s (“Gullah”). The traditional methods used to make sweetgrass baskets are derived from West African “coiling” techniques (“SC State”). While originally used for functional purposes on plantations, Gullah Geechee individuals have continued to create these baskets for artistic and cultural purposes. Unfortunately, as more developments are being made in Charleston and its surrounding islands, sweetgrass is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Golf courses and new resort developments destroy the natural habitat where sweetgrass prospers, and basketmakers can no longer access the land where they once harvested sweetgrass. Therefore, the local community needs to be made aware of the importance of sweetgrass accessibility for basketmakers and how they can help make it more accessible.

The exigence of this artifact is the Charleston community not knowing about the importance of sweetgrass to the Gullah Geechee heritage, the increasing inaccessibility of sweetgrass, how to help make it available, and how to support basketmakers. In my online article, I began by briefly explaining Gullah Geechee culture and how sweetgrass baskets tie into it. Then I explained the threats to the culture in Charleston and how locals can help provide sweetgrass to basketmakers so they can continue their tradition. One main threat to sweetgrass accessibility is that the land basketmakers used to harvest from are now private property (“SC State”). If the basketmakers continue to harvest in the same areas they could be charged with trespassing. Another threat is the destruction of sweetgrass habitats. With further developments encouraged by tourism,
the dunes where the grasses once grew are being destroyed for multimillion dollar homes and golf resorts (“SC State”). Therefore the artifact solves the exigence by explaining how the audience can and should provide sweetgrass from their private properties to basketmakers and help with environmental sustainability in Charleston to decrease sweetgrass habitat loss. I also explain that even if someone can’t help with sweetgrass accessibility, just buying from basketmakers helps to preserve the tradition because it encourages them to continue with their craft.

The audience of this artifact is anyone in the Charleston community that can help make sweetgrass available to basketmakers. The article is mostly directed towards locals but tourists can learn about Gullah Geechee culture through this article and purchase baskets to support the culture. The audience can read about the importance of sweetgrass, how its accessibility is declining, and help to solve the exigence by following the activities listed in the article. The article speaks directly to the reader to explain the importance of granting access to sweetgrass on their own property. It also explains that focusing on environmental preservation (through voting and projects) makes sweetgrass more accessible by preserving the natural environments where sweetgrass grows. By utilizing the information in the article, the audience can either contribute to sweetgrass accessibility or buy from basketmakers and become “mediators of change.”

Despite the high accessibility of web articles, this genre still has constraints. People viewing the article may not believe that outside influence is needed to help preserve cultural heritage. They may instead believe that it should be up to the basketmakers to cultivate the sweetgrass on their own instead of obtaining it from public
or private properties. Even though the article explains that mass manufactured
"seagrass" baskets lack the structural integrity and authenticity of sweetgrass baskets,
persons may prefer them because they are cheaper and more readily available. They
may therefore not care enough about sweetgrass accessibility or purchasing from actual
Gullah Geechee sweetgrass basketmakers.

The audience may also dislike that the article speaks negatively of new
developments and tourism activities. If the reader is either living in or visiting Charleston
because of the golf resorts, beach life, or new developments, they may feel threatened
or singled out by the contents of the article. If the audience actively engages in
something that affects environmental sustainability, they can be avoidant of their own
contribution to the problem and therefore not feel comfortable trying to solve it. The love
for Charleston tourism and developments may alienate the audience and cause the
article to not have its intended effect to create mediators of change.

I chose an online article for my genre because it allowed me to properly execute
writerly choices to solve the exigence. Like many online articles, I added a photo below
the title to help the audience visualize what they will be learning about. The photo I
chose was a basketmaker harvesting sweetgrass. This not only set the scene but also
gave the audience an idea of what sweetgrass looks like so they might be compelled to
check for it on their property. I targeted the article towards Charleston locals and
homeowners by saying, “If you notice that sweetgrass is growing on your property,
consider forming a connection with basketmakers who need the grass.” This tied in with
the photo further suggests to the audience that they should and can make a change.
Online articles are also more accessible than physical newspapers and can target a
wider age and economic demographic. Physical newspapers can be expensive and younger generations are less likely to read them. With an online article, people of different ages and economic backgrounds can access it and utilize the information to make a change.

**Conclusion**

The Gullah Geechee culture is an aspect of Charleston that needs to be preserved for the future. By remixing my original project that reported on the threats to the culture, I was able to create two artifacts that can prompt the audience to enact change. Tourists can read the travel brochure to learn about Gullah Geechee culture and support it in Charleston while locals can read the article to help provide support to Gullah Geechee basketmakers. If more artifacts like these are created, more people will be inspired to help make a difference in the Charleston community and preserve Gullah Geechee culture for generations to come.
Works Cited


Stewart, Kayla. “The South Carolina Sea Islands Preserve Gullah Geechee Ingenuity.”


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