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Know Your Place: Black Leisure as an Expression of Freedom and Citizenship

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Introduction

This study presents initial findings exploring the contemporary implications of historic Black beach settlements across the East and Gulf Coast. We analyzed particularly how racial and class boundaries work together within contemporary leisure and tourism-based economies. During the era of segregation, Black Americans were barred from public spaces, causing them to need to identify safe places without fear of violence and discrimination. This led to the rise of designated Black coastal settlements that developed their own unique culture and history. Historic Black beaches represent a sense of resistance, resilience, and personal freedom in a time of restriction.
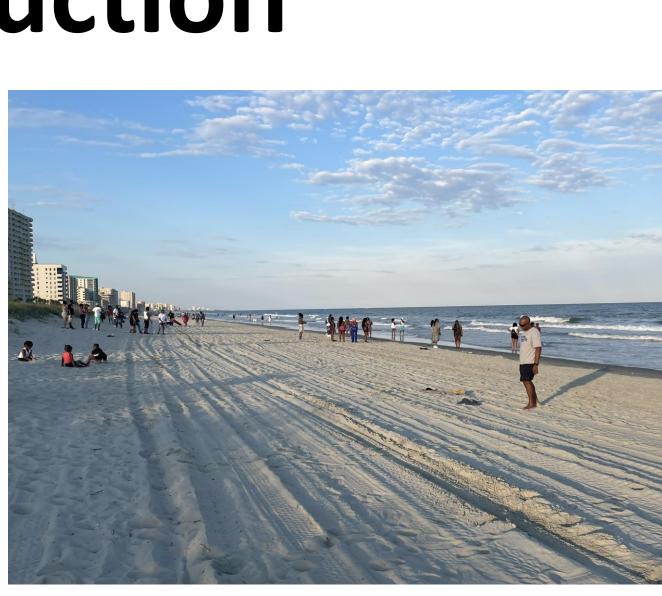
Photo taken at Atlantic Beach, South Carolina

History

- The history of Black coastal settlements on the East and Gulf Coast became more popular between 1890s and 1930s as discriminatory practices ramped up post slavery as Black residents started to attempt building wealth. The coast has been inaccessible to African Americans due to a number of reasons, including Jim Crow laws that plagued the nation from the 1890's-1960's (Karhl 2012, Goldberg 2017, DuBois 1929)

"I was actually down there on the oceanfront. Yeah. And it always made me laugh. Because I said to myself, 'now waters flowing.. You get my blackness on you every way you go.'"

- From 1936-1966, the "Negro Motorist Green Book" outlined safe places for African American travelers to stay. Most settlements we studied were listed in this Green Book.

- Black settlements are threatened by increasing climate change concerns and coastal capitalism (Karhl 2012). Hurricanes Hazel and Katrina devastated many Black beach communities. Integration, increase in air travel and urban renewal brought about difficulties for settlements to stay afloat.

"To combat Jim Crow, you have to be an environmental advocate and racial advocate." (Goldberg, The Retreats of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure and Politics of Segregation at the Shore 1865-1920)

Research Questions

1. What was and is the social and economic significance of previous Black leisure communities?
2. What is the historic and contemporary process of *coastal capitalism* in historically Black leisure communities?

Photo taken at Lincoln Beach in New Orleans East, Louisiana

Methods

- Know Your Place is a qualitative inductive research project conducted from May of 2022 to March of 2023. Through the use of archival research and interviews, we explored how four beach communities became cultural cornerstones along the coast and the overall struggle to preserve them.

- Sites: Atlantic Beach, South Carolina; Highland Beach, Maryland, Lincoln Beach, New Orleans, LA; Cape May, New Jersey

- The principal investigator traveled to each site collecting photos, documenting history, fieldnotes and conducted 8 60-90 minute long interviews with Black residents invested in the beach community. Using a snowball method, the PI developed relationships with community members and built rapport to document their story.
- We then used open coding, closed coding and memo writing to identify key findings and trends across all 4 sites.

Findings

*Difficulty Maintaining Safe Haven and Sanctuary

-Safe Havens: Beaches provided spaces in which it was safe for Black tourists to just exist during a time of more overt racial tension; it provided an escape from reality that was riddled with injustice and danger.

-Community Connection Reaffirming Value and Worth: Beaches would include many community gathering events, amenities and activities to bring the community together. Part of what made these beaches such effective safe havens was that even though they were segregated, upscale amenities would help people of color feel less unequal.

"Not only that, the swimming pool that was put on Lincoln Beach was the largest outdoor swimming pool in Louisiana...ever constructed! So the Black people had all the amenities [there]!"

-Efforts to Preserve: All beach communities engaged in serious historic preservation efforts (collecting stories, collecting archives, digitization). Black residents struggle over preserving sanctuary spaces and using its profits to continue to develop an affordable place for Black tourists. Formal Black beach owners like Atlantic Beach or Highland Beach have an easier time in making decisions over the space than non-Black owned communities. Places like Cape May or Lincoln Beach use existing residents and grassroots groups to gaining power over decision-making with the city or more awareness of their history.

*Climate Change and Environmental Concerns

"Why didn't it get rebuilt? But it actually ended because of the hurricane. Hurricane tore it apart. And they just never rebuilt. And then desegregation happened and everybody just went to the white beach"

-Environmental Vulnerability: A common thread is that many have been severely affected by climate change, mostly Hurricane Hazel (1954) and Katrina (2005) as well as beach erosion. As these beaches have been allocated less resources, it is generally a slower and more difficult process for these beaches to recover from environmental damage.

Environmental Sustainability: There is struggle in working with organizations to develop environmentally sustainable plans for the coast. A big factor in the preservation and sustainability of beaches is political power. Oftentimes, the preservation of historically black beaches is not a big priority for politicians, as opposed to new expensive developments for the coast.