



Research Paper

Safe havens: The intersection of family, religion, and community in black cultural landscapes of the southeastern United States

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Black land loss, limited engagement with natural resource professionals.
- Black land ownership as a signifier of wealth, status, freedom from oppression.
- Black cultural landscapes: memories, family legacies, and shared values.
- Land decisions guided by family relationships, religious beliefs, and community.

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ABSTRACT

While land loss is a central narrative in the story of the black cultural landscape of the southeastern United States, some black families have held the land since Emancipation. Black-owned landholdings today are geophysical and ecological spaces where social, political, cultural, and economic worlds intersect and where the past (often painful) is being both honored and renegotiated in ways that create opportunities for the future. Three dominant themes emerged from our research as key elements of the black cultural landscape today: 1) the importance of family history, (2) the ways that religious beliefs guide understanding of land ownership, and (3) the importance of land ownership to the broader black community. These three components are so intertwined that it is difficult to tease them apart, and their intersubjectivities create a cultural and social system that is not just superimposed upon, but deeply rooted in and enmeshed with, an ecological one.

“Remembering, dreaming, contemplating, even commiserating – land is somehow always on my mind.... It is born of my ancestors’ sweat equity. These ancestors toiled on the land as enslaved Africans, eventually owned some of it, and then gave away many of its riches for pennies on the dollar. It is born of my frustration with fragmented farms and the families whose lives would be more whole if their land was, too” (Drew Lanham 2016, 181).

1. Introduction

People of African descent have been shaping the landscape of the southeastern United States since they arrived in the British colonies as enslaved persons in the late 1500s (Araujo, 2017). While many were

forced to labor on white-owned land (which was often in turn stolen from Native American tribes), some farmed and used natural resources in maroon colonies or as freedmen in or near slave territories (Diouf, 2016; Sayers, 2016). Following Emancipation, some land was deeded to formerly enslaved persons, and some black families were able to purchase land from white landowners for whom they had been working as sharecroppers. Some received land as a “gift” from General Sherman through his Special Field Order No. 15 in 1865 or through the Southern Homesteading Act of 1866, which allocated land to be parceled out to black settlers (Edwards, 2019). However the land was acquired, at a time when many African Americans had very few financial resources, land ownership signified status and wealth, as well as relative freedom from an oppressive political and financial system in which they had few opportunities. Land ownership, for black Americans, has long been seen

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as a “safe haven” from mainstream society.

The ability of black Americans to own land and to fully utilize its resources is an ongoing challenge (Gordon et al., 2013), and racial dynamics are deeply embedded in the landscape of the southeastern United States. The history of racial violence, dispossession, and disparities in the region directly affects differential valuations of land, development policies, and environmental issues such as pollution and climate change, as well as divergent framings of social and economic issues and visions of a sustainable and just future. We view this black cultural landscape of the rural southeastern United States as not merely an ecoregion, but also as a network of people whose lives and family ties are rooted in, but extend beyond, its borders.

While our primary objective was documenting the diversity of black-owned landholdings in terms of acreage; length and history of ownership, age and profession of the owners; and land management structure, strategies, and goals (Goyke et al., 2019; Schelhas et al., 2012), we found that several themes consistently emerged as having deep value to landowners. These include: 1) the importance of family history literally and figuratively embedded in the landscape, (2) the ways that religious beliefs guide their understanding of the land and their role as its stewards, and (3) implications of land ownership for the broader black community. While we did specifically ask about family history, we did not ask about religion or the wider community; we include them in this analysis because they were prominent and recurring themes in the interviews. These three components of what we are terming a “black cultural landscape” are so intertwined that it is difficult to tease them apart, as their intersubjectivities create a cultural system that is not just superimposed upon, but deeply rooted in, an ecological one.

During our research, we visited numerous black landholdings (residential, farmland, and forestland), which are geophysical and ecological spaces where social, political, cultural, and economic worlds intersect. These cultured spaces are also the literal and symbolic bridges between past and future, places where the past (often painful) is being both honored and renegotiated in ways that aim to create opportunities for the future. This occurs, we have found, primarily through stemming black land loss, creating economic opportunities for black landowners, teaching younger generations about the legacy of landownership, strengthening ties within and between black families, fostering a sense of community among dispersed and non-related black landowners, and forging new paths for black land ownership and management. As the title of a recently published book (Hood & Tada, 2020) suggests, “black landscapes matter.”

2. Background

A central narrative in the history of the southeastern United States is the devastating loss of black-owned family land (Brown, 2014, 33; see also Mitchell, 2005; Gilbert et al., 2002; Dyer & Bailey, 2008). This is due to a number of factors, including outmigration; failure to pay property taxes; voluntary sales; foreclosures; lack of access to capital and credit; land theft; violence; heirs' property (land passed intestate without a will); and racism and discrimination by individuals, organizations, and government agencies (Foner, 2014 [1988]; Stack, 1996; Reid, 2003; Hinson & Robinson, 2008; Butkus, 2012; Zabawa et al., 1990; Hitchner et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2001; Baab, 2011). While much land has been lost, some black families have been making land management decisions that have shaped the landscape for more than a century.

Our studies show that for many black landowners, the connection to the landscape is alive and strong. Family land left to them by their predecessors, who obtained the land during times of slavery, Reconstruction, or intense Jim Crow racism, and land that often literally contains the bones of their ancestors, has more than sentimental value; ties to the land are deeply embedded in their identity as individuals, families, and communities (Merem, 2006; Dyer & Bailey, 2008; Dyer et al., 2009). Many black families feel that their ancestors left the land to all the heirs to be held jointly by them in perpetuity as “homeplaces”

that “were established originally as a challenge to racism – to repossess a sense of self, heritage, and family security” (Goluboff, 2011, 390). Documentation of the history and cultural value of black-owned land is vital to address issues of equity and sustainable land management.

Landscapes link humans and nature, and as noted by The World Heritage Centre of UNESCO (2009, 17), describing landscapes as “cultural” shows “the human interaction with the environment and the presence of tangible and intangible cultural values in the landscape.” While the only official cultural landscape designated by UNESCO is the United States in Hawai'i (Papahānaumokuākea), the term has been applied to many regions around the world in which nature and culture are deeply intertwined. Like all habitable ecoregions, the southeastern United States is a palimpsest of many layers of human history, consisting of numerous and overlapping cultural influences, historical events and movements, and economic systems whose influence reaches far beyond its geophysical boundaries. The landscape has undergone numerous changes throughout human history, from land and resource use by prehistoric peoples to complex land management structures by various Native American tribes, to the arrival of European settlers whose subsequent “conquest” of the New World led to the “plantation kingdom” based on large-scale monoculture of such crops as cotton, rice, sugar cane, and tobacco (Follett et al., 2016). Persons enslaved on these plantations were intricately tied to the land through both forced agricultural labor and subsistence gardening to supplement meager rations, and these ancestral experiences continue to influence the values, goals, and identities of black landowners today.

Kimberly Smith (2007, 1), writes: “One might think that 250 years of slavery would have left black Americans permanently alienated from the American landscape”; however, she shows through numerous examples (historical and contemporary) that this is not the case. While “the environmental history of black Americans is a history of struggle against these forces of alienation and dispossession” (Smith, 2007, 12), it is also a story of how ownership of land “means more than acquiring wealth; it means civic membership, political autonomy and personality, and community integrity” (Smith, 2007, 9). We show how intersections between family, religion, and community produce spaces that feel like “safe havens.”

3. Methods

This article is based on data collected as part of several distinct research projects involving black landowners in the rural southeastern United States. These data were extracted from interviews that focused on documenting a range of land histories, memories, and sentimental attachments associated with family-owned properties, and forest management objectives and actions, as well as interviewees' social networks and patterns of communication. From 2014 – 2017, we conducted a total of 87 interviews with 60 different black landowners or families in Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina (24 landowners were interviewed twice three years apart) as part of the Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Program¹ (Schelhas & Hitchner, 2020; Schelhas et al., 2019, 2018, 2017a, 2017b; Hitchner et al., 2019, 2017). In 2018, we conducted 40 interviews with black landowners in Georgia as part of a research project funded by the USDA SARE program² (Goyke et al., 2019). We also interviewed several black foresters and natural resource specialists. Interviews usually lasted one to two hours and were conducted in a variety of locales. These interviews focused heavily on forest landowners, though we also spoke with farmers (many of whom also

¹ “Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program” jointly funded by The U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the USDA Forest Service.

² “Increasing Practice of Sustainable Forestry Among Minority and Limited Resource Forest Landowners in Georgia,” funded by USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education.

owned forestland), and some residential landowners with very small acreages.

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, almost all our interviewees were older than age 50 (94%) and highly educated, holding at least a college degree (60%). Most had inherited family land (72%); some land was currently held as heirs' property (26%), while most interviewees had a clear title (64%) (an additional 10% had both). The sizes of the interviewees' landholdings ranged considerably, from <20 acres (18%) to over 100 acres (40%). Many were retired (59%), often currently living on family land where they either grew up or visited as children.

We transcribed all qualitative text from our semi-structured interviews and used NVivo software to code text thematically. We returned our transcriptions, when requested, to the interviewees for their records and to ask for any clarifications or corrections; however, all qualitative analysis was done based on the original data. Reports for each state, a comprehensive report including results from all states, and all publications were presented to the funding agencies and each partnering agency, and they were also offered to all research participants.

4. Results

4.1. Family

Maintaining the cohesion of the family, honoring the struggles of their enslaved ancestors, and carrying on the family legacy are primary goals of keeping family land. The process of managing inherited land requires cooperation among and within generations, and the land binds them together through shared history. One man explained his return to family land:

About 1826, a slave ship landed in lowcountry South Carolina. On that ship was a mother, father, and young daughter. They were sold. Man sold them to different plantations. The mother and daughter were sold to a plantation in [county name] – that was my great-great-great-great-grandmother. That's why I came back here. That's the point of origin. [GA25]

The history of the family is often embedded in the landscape, and as family stories are told to new generations, the land itself becomes a central character. One woman [NC04] walked part of her land with us, showing us recently cleared areas, forests, and farmland thick with soybeans. She showed us the site where the house in which her mother was born once stood. She also showed us three pecan trees planted by her grandparents for their three daughters. She said that the characteristics of the trees represented the personalities of the daughters. One was mean and always getting into trouble, and her tree was crooked and

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of landowners interviewed (NC, SC, GA, AL).

| | Number | Percent |
|---------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Age (in years) | | |
| <50 | 6 | 6 |
| 51-70 | 66 | 66 |
| >70 | | |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 49 | 49 |
| Female | 31 | 31 |
| Couple | 20 | 20 |
| Education (Primary Interviewee) | | |
| High School | 10 | 10 |
| Some College | 26 | 26 |
| Bachelors | 15 | 15 |
| Post-graduate | 45 | 45 |
| No response | 4 | 4 |
| Employment | | |
| Part-time employed | 6 | 6 |
| Full-time employed | 35 | 35 |
| Retired | 59 | 59 |

Table 2

Ownership characteristics of land for interviewees (NC, SC, GA, AL).

| | Number | Percent |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|
| Acres Held | | |
| <20 | 18 | 18 |
| 21-50 | 20 | 20 |
| 51-100 | 22 | 22 |
| 101-500 | 37 | 37 |
| >500 | 3 | 3 |
| Tenure | | |
| Title | 64 | 64 |
| Heirs' Property | 26 | 26 |
| Both | 10 | 10 |
| How land was obtained | | |
| Purchase | 26 | 26 |
| Inherit | 59 | 59 |
| Combination | 13 | 13 |
| No response | 2 | 2 |
| Productivity | | |
| Makes money | 11 | 11 |
| Costs money | 48 | 48 |
| About even | 31 | 31 |
| No response | 10 | 10 |

did not produce many pecans. Her mother was very hard-working and good, and her tree always produced a lot of pecans. Former house sites around the world are often marked by the presence of fruit and nut trees (Hitchner, 2009; Peluso, 1996), and these particular mature pecan trees symbolize not just a slice of history, but particular individuals. These stories make a piece of land a living cultural landscape.

We asked all interviewees with family land to recall some of their early memories of the land. Many described subsistence and row crop farming and working in the fields with other family members. They described the overall farm landscape, including crops, trees, pastures, and fields. One person stated: "We raised hogs, children. Grew cotton, corn, peanuts. Milked cows, churned butter, had pecans, pears. It was a self-sustaining property. There was a grits mill and a syrup mill" [AL16]). Many people spoke of the cooperation and interdependence between family members that the family farming lifestyle fostered. One person said:

When we dug potatoes, it was really fun. My aunt would come over. My dad would drive the tractor. We'd finish ours, then dig up my great-aunt's, then my aunt's. It was a big family thing. People shared what they got. It went beyond the immediate family, to family members in Maryland and other places. [SC4].

Others spoke about their sentimental attachment to the land as a result of associating it with family. One interviewee, who visited her grandparents' farm often as a child, stated that:

I remember going on the back porch – my grandmother would do a lot of things on the back porch. We'd snap the string beans and the peas and harvest the vegetables. They didn't have running water – they had a pump. I was taught to get water. Being a city girl, I didn't know about that. That water was cold and crystal clear. There's no taste like that water... I'm interested in preserving the history of the land [NC20].

In addition to agricultural memories, there were also memories of roaming the land. The forests beyond the fields, typically referred to as "woods," were places where children and adults hunted, fished, collected medicinal plants, and simply spent free time outdoors. Interviewees made statements such as: (1) "She [her mother] knew every tree. She could go into the woods and get herbs that make you feel better" [SC15]; (2) "There was a pond there. I caught my first fish out there, with a straight pin and piece of fatback" [AL11]; (3) "Growing up as a kid, my dad took us out there to hunt. He said his dad took him out there. You want to take your son out there and tell him the same story" [AL1]; and (4) "We were both born here, and we went around barefoot

and picked up fruits that were everywhere. It would be raining with the sun shining, and they'd say the devil was beating his wife. I could hear it" [AL15].

Family land is often seen as a landscape where the past, present, and future generations literally, figuratively, and even spiritually mingle. Several people spoke of family cemeteries on the land; one person said: "There's an old family cemetery where my whole lineage is buried. There are many memories that tie me to that land" [AL20]. Another landowner related a poignant family memory embedded in the landscape:

There was a pecan tree, and my grandfather would sit under it. He said, "I raised your daddy on a sharecropper farm. It was difficult. Son, you can make money farming. But you got to own the land." That was in 1963. I remember it, sitting under that tree. There were two oak trees about 125 years old in the yard. There was a swing on the front porch. My sister was born in that swing [GA36].

These childhood experiences and memories were reflected in the ways people thought about the land they had returned to as adults. Several interviewees talked about how elements of the landscape had changed and how seeing those changes renewed their love for the land. One man spoke about "seeing certain trees that I remember were small when I was a boy and seeing them grown now" [SC18].

Most interviewees also felt a great responsibility to instill the value of the land in future generations and to ensure that they also know its history. One person said:

I just want them to keep it and sustain it and conserve it. The first thing is, I want them to understand its value. It's the blood, sweat, and tears of your family – they worked hard for you to have it. Don't think you don't owe anything to the people who came before [NC4].

Another stated: "If your family left you a legacy, you want to pass it on if you can... after the Civil War, you consider a piece of land as freedom. It's in your blood, land ownership" [GA05].

Given the intergenerational importance of family land, it is important to note the various ways that people have endeavored to keep land in their families, from consolidated individual ownership to formal LLC (Limited Liability Corporation) status. Many spoke of only selling family land to other family members. One person said: "In the early days, most of the land around here belonged to family... We're all in agreement that if any of us want to sell, we'll sell it to each other... it's family first" [SC14].

While these approaches depend on family cohesion, many other landowners faced difficulty within their families, particularly when trying to clear title to heirs' property, or land passed to heirs intestate, without a will. Sometimes, when land has become highly fractionated over generations of heirs, even finding all the heirs is not possible, and to reach agreement among those that can be located presents a number of challenges that sometimes even legal mediation cannot resolve. One person spoke of trying to sort out his family's heirs' property issue: "The family didn't communicate. Black families don't – I'm not trying to put down my people, but they don't" [GA02]. Another described heirs' property as such:

It's a blessing and a curse. They wanted to divide the land. If you have five families with ten siblings, can you imagine? They're going to bicker about who gets what part. One of the families stayed on the property for years. I say, "y'all buy it." They think they own it... That's how I ended up in court. [GA30]

Many spoke of learning through experience the importance of procuring legally binding wills. One said: "[My grandparents] did it all verbal. Doesn't really work anymore...if the affairs are not in order, the family's just going at each others' throats... You got to eliminate that." [GA33].

Even a number of the professionals with whom we worked faced

similar issues with heirs' property and disagreements within the family. One black extension agent said:

My family hasn't been different than other families. It's hard. We're dealing with all of these individuals, different reasons, families. Some are doing well, others have a health crisis and need the money. I never like the fact that the land sold, but I understand why they did. To see close to 500 acres go down to 30-some acres. But that was a necessity, and that was a generation before mine. The cultural makeup of my family is that the patriarchs and matriarchs make the decision, so you just have to sit back and wait until it is your turn... I remained quiet, kept my place in the family. But when I got the land, it's a different day and you have different decision makers. That can spark disagreements. Makes it hard and very challenging... Sometimes, when dealing with family, you have to sacrifice business to still get along and be a family. I can push management things, but that can have negative effects on relationships in the family. Business and family don't mix, but that's all that forestry and farming are. [GA23]

Despite the challenges, everyone with family land expressed a strong desire to keep it in the family and pass it on to future generations. Many were struggling with how to simultaneously maintain ownership of the land, preserve family legacy, provide economic opportunities for future generations, and create a meaningful place for the family to gather for reunions (or stay if necessary). Several interviewees referred to family land as "sacred" [AL14, NC9], adding a religious element to their feelings about the land.

4.2. Religion

A prevailing cultural value among African Americans in the southeastern United States is religion, most often Christianity. Many people here hold the interconnected notions that land is a gift from God and that families are entrusted by God to be good stewards of the land and its resources. Several of our interviews included prayers with hands held and heads bent, and a number of interviewees spoke about the importance of religion in their lives, generally and specifically in relation to the land. One woman said: "I was a girl, but I'd be with my dad, riding around in the truck. You could see his love of the land... He saw the land not only as an asset, but as a gift from God" [SC10]. While many people spoke of land as a divine gift, they also recognized their appointed role as stewards of the land and their responsibilities to maintain it. One woman said: "We want to be good stewards of the land... The Lord gave us this land, so we want to take care of it" [AL13]. Another said: "We're just trying to be good stewards. It was here before we came, and it'll be here after we're gone. We've been blessed" [GA39].

Others spoke about God being in control, and how faith in God's plans brought them peace, particularly when faced with problems involving family land. One interviewee stated: "Some years I do [make a profit], some I don't. Either way the Lord will bless you... Everything works on the salvation of the Lord" [GA08]. One woman said: "You have to realize that God is in control... It'll take a while for things to fall into place" [AL10]. Another woman, representing a family-run LLC created specifically to manage former heirs' property, stated:

We're God-fearing people. We study the Bible, and we have a reverential fear of God... You respect your elders. In the nucleus of the family, that's something respectful, reverential... There's a fragrance and a smell of the land... The way they kept it – they had manicured land. It's amazing how well they preserved the property over all those years. It was tied by something intangible. It was their faith, their spiritual vitality. The intention and motives of our ancestors, reverence and fear to the almighty God... [SC20].

Also, in almost every interview, we heard a variation of the phrase: "God isn't making any more land." This idea, that no more land can be

made, speaks to the finiteness of land as a resource, but also to God as the provider of land and resources for people. In speaking of both the limited availability of land and the importance of religion in modern life, one interviewee stated:

They build houses and cars all the time. They don't build land every day. Land is special to me. Can't get any more of God's land. It produces life. As long as you have land, you can provide life. Go back to the beginning – everybody wants to talk about God, but nobody wants to worship him.... That's why we have shootings. Let these young men come and pick some butterbeans, he won't go to school and shoot [GA13].

Interestingly, one person who didn't invoke God was a pastor: "Grandpa would always tell us, you want to be in a position to own your land because they ain't making no more" [GA24].

Several people spoke about how their religious beliefs influenced their land management decisions. Several specifically mentioned their resistance to traditional forestry practices, such as prescribed burning and planting "pines in lines," as is common on timber plantations. For example, one man said: "I'm not too religious, but I think no one can manage it better than God. Like burning the forest, it is going to burn on its own anyway" [GA01]. Another man described his conversation with a black extension agent who was trying to convince him to grow trees as a crop, using a forest management plan written by experts:

He said, "Cut this timber. Wait a year then clean it up and then set it out." I said, "I've been doing that way." He said, "You been doing it volunteer. I'm telling you to set it out uniform." I told him, "I don't like uniforms. In the military, it's all uniform. I like God's way. Let it fall where it will." [GA08]

Another man, now a successful timber grower, mentioned resistance he met when discussing more intensive forest management among fellow African Americans: "Most people said, 'God planted these trees, let it just reseed.' They can do that, but you get other things too." [SC31].

Other interviewees used Biblical references when talking about their land and land management. One woman spoke about sharing returns from the land with her grown children as a form of tithing, as her parents had done for her [NC11], and others compared their land to the Garden of Eden. One woman described her family land: "On a hot day, it's nice and cool in that forest. It's a safe haven...It's the only place on earth that's an actual Eden" [NC1]. This reiterates the idea of land as a gift from God, humans as stewards of it, and family land as a safe haven.

The collective religious experience with most of our interviewees revolved around churches, most of which were exclusively African American, and experiences in church and with other church members played a crucial role in landowners' decisions about land management (see also Hitchner et al., 2019). The church is a central establishment in black communities, and localized groups consisting of several immediate and extended families form the backbone of black churches across the region, "to which locals have life-long and generations allegiances" (Johnson et al., 2009, 12). One interviewee stated: "We see this church as the center of our community. We see a lot of children that grow up, and if they're not in this church, I don't know them" [SC10]. Others discussed the role of revivals as community events, even for church members who have moved away; they often coincided with family reunions that brought together many family lines and distant relatives. One woman said: "My parents loved being in the South for revivals – you never gave up church membership." [NC09]. During these church and family events, changes in the landscape and plans for its future were central themes.

Black pastors, who give sermons, conduct revivals, and lead church and community outreach activities, have great influence among many African Americans in the South. Johnson et al. (2012, 12) state that: "reverence to pastors is reminiscent of hierarchical, African social

systems that venerated their chiefs." One man in South Carolina, who thought of himself as an "evangelist" (Hitchner et al., 2019) of forestry information that could help increase the profitability of family-owned land, said:

I lay the responsibility on black pastors and churches. Black people gather around churches – that is their central hub where they get information disseminated... I bring it back to pastors, the role that pastors have. They have that big audience. Tell them the importance of forestry and land ownership... Tell them, "I need to get this information out to people, and you can serve as a conduit to do that." [SC31].

Numerous interviewees mentioned church meetings and fellow parishioners as sources of information about land management. For example, one woman in Alabama stated: "He [*black forester*] was one of the guest speakers [at church], and we started talking about forestry and agriculture. It was an outreach program. Before that, I hadn't thought about management at all" [AL09]. A black forester in South Carolina discussed connecting to people through churches:

They [forestry professionals] need to engage the churches – they're the focal point for African American community in the South... In the African American community, there are social networks. In the South, we tend to live within African American communities. You attend church, and those are the folks you're interacting with. There's a very low percentage of professional foresters in those communities... Me, I'm a black forester in the South, and people would contact me for information. [SC31].

It is worth noting, however, that interviewees did not have unilaterally good experiences with fellow churchgoers. One older woman in Alabama described being shortchanged when selling trees: "They [loggers] just tell you what they pay. I didn't have anyone to ask and didn't know who to ask. He was one of the church members, but that didn't stop him from being a snake" [AL15]. A successful black timber grower in South Carolina described his experiences with sharing information about forestry with church congregations:

With the churches, you have to take it slow. You can't just blast in there. [There are] years of distrust... There's a feeling that the white man is bad... You come back as a black person and you talk differently. I have to take off one hat and put on a different one when I talk to them. It's okay until you start talking about land. They say, "You're one of those fast-talking black boys trying to take my land." [SC31]

Black landowners often distrust natural resource professionals, regardless of race, and this issue was also mentioned by a black extension agent. He said:

Within this community, it's about maintaining a legacy. That legacy is their land. There are more failures than successes. Many people don't do anything. They don't hear you the first time. They're thick.... I'm black, and you look at me and think that they listen to me. Listen, I'm a damn government employee. I have to deal with the same thing. I'm from the government and I'm here to help you. I have that. [NC30]

However, with the blessing of a pastor, a natural resource professional can gain the trust of a church congregation. As indicated, many of the black foresters and extension agents with whom we worked had engaged churches to collectively address issues regarding heirs' property and land management and to spread information about programs and knowledge that might help them retain family land. Here we see how pastors serve as community leaders; how churches and religion bind together individuals, families, communities, and the divine; and how religious faith permeates the cultural and ecological landscape.

4.3. Community

Beyond the ecological and economic imperialism that physically displaces minority groups around the world through violence or gentrification, there is among many black Americans a heavy sense of nostalgia for a community that has become fragmented through land loss, outmigration, and general assimilation into mainstream American culture. Land ownership provided not only the economic security that comes from the ability to be self-sufficient and to generate wealth from resources on the land but also the physical and emotional security resulting from being surrounded by family and by other African American families. Together, these feelings of economic security and physical safety constituted a sense of community. One person stated: “[When I was young] we had the freedom to just walk. We’d walk around anywhere in this community. We were safe. No one ever locked their doors. I know it’s cliché, but it’s true” [SC15]. Others talked about sharing resources from their land with fellow community members. One said: “The land, not just we benefitted from it, but the community. My daddy would tell people to go collect vegetables from the land” [SC8]. Several people spoke directly about the emotional and cultural benefits of living in areas surrounded by other African Americans and the sense of security this brought. One person said: “So there are memories of security and safety, family, that nothing can bother you. That was in the 60s and 70s. There was still segregation. Society was segregated, but there was a sense of security. The area was all family” [SC20]. A pastor in South Carolina stated that:

This community goes back 40–50 years ago. It was all owned by blacks, all of it. As they died out, some of the heirs sold some property. Highway [number] to [number] area, 50 years ago, you wouldn’t have seen a white person, now they own it. Not to be prejudiced against anyone, but I’d like to keep it that way. It’s nice to have a place to feel like home, like you’re not being invaded by anybody [SC8].

Another person said: “It felt good back then. Everyone in the community knew everybody. If one person didn’t have, someone else did. It’s not like that now” [SC10].

Many interviewees spoke about the sense of community they felt as children, whether or not they grew up on family land. One man who grew up on family land in the South stated: “There’s something about having your own land. Father would take us up and down the road picking up trash. He’d tell us, it’s not the state’s job to do this. There was a sense of community and family ownership” [SC18]. A pastor who spent summers on family land in Georgia said:

We would play as kids would play. But we did learn how to drive early. I think I was 8 years old. That pick up, he would tell us to deliver this to Miss so and so, and we would take what was needed. I never saw him transact any cash. It was always barter. For the most part, if someone was in need, they might come by, and automatically we might trade eggs for meat or corn for peas or something like that. It was a lovely experience for me. Growing up in the city, all we saw was concrete. We’d go down there, and we could walk for days. They didn’t too much worry about where you were, because there was nowhere to go. And they knew you weren’t going to be out too late because you knew it was going to be so dark. [GA24]

Many of our interviewees reflected on how things are not the same now; for example, they talk about how farming is now a business instead of a family operation. One person said: “We have people moving back to properties. They say, ‘I used to farm with my Daddy.’ But farming has changed... When you try to hit people with reality, they look at it as dream-crushing” [GA23]. Others described former black farming co-operatives; one said: “There used to be farming co-ops, where they would pool money to buy equipment. Unless you have the means to farm your own lands, you can’t” [SC10]. Others lamented ecological changes

in the landscape that made old ways of life impossible. One man of the Gullah community in coastal South Carolina stated:

Moonshine was made around here – that was about the only income around here other than farming. Some pulpwood. Everyone here did moonshine or work on the river, on the boats. Shrimping, fish, crab (they did that for themselves). It was plentiful then. Now not so much. It’s cleared out because everyone’s doing it. It’s been cleaned out. There’s so much pollution in the water now, so stuff is not good to eat [SC13].

Others spoke about elements of the landscape that are no longer there. One woman said: “All the specialness parts are gone. They’ve been removed. Only special part is trying to hang onto it as a family unit. There were some landmarks that are not here anymore” [GA08].

A central cultural value was autonomy from mainstream white society and solidarity among other black community members. One person, discussing the importance of maintaining her family land, which included an inherited pecan orchard in Georgia, said:

I know where my grandparents’ heart was. I know what was left to them by the slavemasters. I know what they purchased and what they taught. You can work for the white man, but you must have something of your own. That’s what they all did. Laundromats, barber shops, etc. You have an outside job, but you better have your own job. [GA11]

Similarly, black land ownership provides a sense of independence, as many landowners see land as a potential source of college or retirement funds and a place for family members who need a place to stay. Elements of a black landowning community remain intact, even outside direct family lines. One family, who bought land instead of inheriting it, said: “We purchased it from a black lady. She wanted us to buy it...She wanted it to stay in the black community” [GA16].

Others spoke of actively seeking to use their land to create new communities focused on supporting other African Americans in various ways. One person saw the value of their land as a self-sustaining resource and a potentially safe place for African Americans: “It’s a natural resource. It’s a recyclable. It’ll regenerate and provide over and over again. It’s defined as real property. It’s a place where if we get another president like the one we have now [Donald Trump], it’ll be a safe haven for people” [GA25]. Others spoke directly about the links between land and religion, and about faith-based businesses or organizations they plan to operate on family land. One woman described her plans for a nature-based educational program:

I have organized through my ministry – my ministerial calling in 1997 connected with developing the farm [as a] 501C3. I was set up as Christian community economic development corporation in 1999. I’m now bringing it to fruition...We have ponds, a creek, and swampland. ‘Stewards for all of God’s creation’ is going to be our slogan [NC1].

Another woman explained her vision for a Christian faith-based healing center:

We want to own property to have a City of Refuge, a Christian-based therapeutic ranch to rehabilitate the homeless and sick. We want to set people on a great path. ... It’s even more important now, how God has allowed us this heritage, and a place for people to get a fresh start and get counseling [NC18].

We also spoke with a family of Muslim landowners in Georgia, who said:

We have a non-profit focused on holistic education. There was a house on the land – maybe we’ll hire someone to look after the land and manage the educational activities. There’s a lot you can teach on the land – land management, ownership, etc. The last part would be

to have a family retreat where different generations could come and be part of the ownership. [GA35]

These visions for newly created communities based on faith and shared cultural values demonstrate the links between community, religious faith, and the landscape.

5. Discussion

Although historically, black cultural landscapes are fragmented, they are still very much alive. Much land has been lost to black families, and many families in the southeastern United States are still limited in what they can do on their property due to ongoing issues such as lack of capital, lack of knowledge about various options available to them, and legal constraints due to communally holding land as heirs' property. However, many families are actively investigating and implementing ways to keep the land and make it economically productive for themselves and future generations. More black landowners now understand heirs' property as a historically weak legal instrument, easily exploited by others, especially when land becomes more valuable or gentrified. Many have found ways to secure the title to family land through various mechanisms. Some consolidate ownership by selling their share to other family members or purchasing the shares of others. Some form LLCs to collectively manage their land as though it were a business (which, in some cases, it is). Some keep their own fractional shares but delegate leadership and management decisions to one person or committee. Some divide the land into smaller tracts and manage them either together or separately. And many other families are still mired in heirs' property problems, with or without access to legal representation and the sometimes necessary family mediation services. Other African Americans are actively purchasing new tracts of land for various purposes: as investments, places for outdoor recreation or retirement homes, or as places for family members to gather and hold reunions. Some intend to create spaces for communal activities, such as workshops to share knowledge or retreats for religious experiences, or even intentional communities intended to be safe and positive spaces for African Americans.

This language about a "safe haven" for African Americans that we heard from several interviewees likely has roots in the maroon communities of formerly enslaved persons who escaped from plantations and in free black-only communities during Reconstruction. It also echoes the trends of other "intentional communities" that aim to create residential spaces with a high degree of social cohesion and interaction, based on shared values; these can include communes, ecovillages, and other types of cooperatives (Smith 2002). One example of a newly-created intentional community which builds on a long legacy of all-black municipalities is The Freedom Initiative in Toombsboro, Georgia, in which 19 black families joined together in September 2020 to buy 97 acres of land "to create a thriving safe haven for black families in the midst of racial trauma, a global pandemic, and economic instabilities across the United States of America brought on by COVID-19" (www.thefreedomegeorgiainitiative.com).

What we encountered during our research was a depth of feeling of land as a repository for childhood memories, legacies of the ancestors, and nostalgia for strong and cohesive black communities that struggled, and often thrived, within the wider community in which they faced a number of threats and obstacles. There is a story unfolding about how to simultaneously hold onto the past and go into the future, and we believe it is best told through the lens of black cultural landscapes. We have found that retention of family land is part of a bigger story about "passing the torch" and entrusting the next generation with the responsibility of keeping legacy alive while allowing them freedom to choose their own paths. The landowners we interviewed all wanted their heirs to keep family land, although some were so deeply embroiled in legal heirs' property issues that they viewed the cloudy title, if not necessarily the land itself, as a burden that needs to be shed. They also

recognized that while land and the agricultural memories it contained may hold sentimental value for them, their children may not have the same connections and that their ancestors had a very different experience with agricultural landscapes.

While promoting land ownership, black intellectuals such as Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois challenged the romanticism of a rural lifestyle rooted in hard agricultural labor, by examining "anti-nature" elements of slave narratives and using ideas about nostalgia and the pastoral ironically (Beilfuss, 2015; Outka, 2008). Echoing these ideas, and carrying them into the future, the black naturalist Drew Lanham (2016, 181–182) writes:

I don't expect everyone to feel the same way that I do about land. For so many of us, the scars are still too fresh. Fields of cotton stretching to the horizon – land worked, sweated, and suffered over for the profit of others – probably don't engender warm feelings amongst most black people. But the land, in spite of its history, still holds hope for making good on the promises we thought it could, especially if we can reconnect to it.

Most of our interviewees also felt that connection to the land is imperative in order to fulfill obligations to family, to God, and to the wider African American community.

6. Conclusion

Equity in all spheres of black American life remains elusive, though the recent convergence of national Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and the differential impact of COVID-19 on people of color, has sharpened national attention to ongoing institutional and systematic racism in the United States. Here we call attention to another issue of national concern that extends beyond land loss – the resulting fragmentation and fracturing of black communities and landscapes. However, we also see African Americans maintaining the legacies held within the landscapes of this region and reconnecting to the landscape in new ways. African Americans continue to shape the landscape through making management decisions on land they own individually and with family members; through advocating against environmental degradation that threatens their communities; through developing laws and policies that seek to use natural resources responsibly; and through creating and maintaining communities, social networks, and safe havens for African Americans and their allies.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sarah Hitchner: Conceptualization, Visualization, Investigation, Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **John Schelhas:** Conceptualization, Visualization, Investigation, Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Puneet Dwivedi:** Supervision, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing - review & editing.

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