

Ethnographies of Belonging: Indigeneity and Blackness in the Americas

The ecological similarities of Sierra Leone's coastal region facilitated the importation of African traditions into what became South Carolina, thus resulting in land-based cultural practices that can be defined in an unexpected way as indigenous. My intent for this presentation is to have a conversation about the way we think about indigeneity in which narratives of belonging and long-standing relationships also play a critical role in constituting identity irrespective of hegemonic notions of race. The United States' dominant analyses on race is structured around the black/white binary that holds these two racial categories to be mutually exclusive. For those groups or identities that fall outside these categories, their racial identities are constituted along a phenotypically coded black/white continuum whereby whiteness represents the modern and blackness equates to primitive. Indianness, along this spectrum becomes synonymous with indigeneity. Blackness and indigeneity is thus inconceivable since Blackness replaces Indianness within the dominant discourse on race grounded in ideologies of biological determinism. What I am arguing is somewhat different. In this presentation I use a historical and ethnographic framework to reveal the emergence of a new people—the Gullah Geechee—as a result of distinctive linkages to and practices in a particular place. The Gullah Geechee are descendants of enslaved West Africans who have articulated cultural traditions of their ancestors with the land- and seascapes of the Sea Islands. They are simultaneously a diasporic African people who imported indigenous practices and applied them in an intimate material relation to a particular North American place.