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Discordant Place-Based Literacies in the Hilton Head, South Carolina Runway Extension Debate

Emily Cooney

In making a case for ecocomposition, Sidney Dobrin has claimed that writing, place, and environment cannot be separated. As Donehower, Hogg, and Schell and Deborah Brandt might argue, literacy cannot be separated from place either. But it might sometimes be separated from environment as an ecosystem that has value distinct from, and without the influence of, humans. In the Hilton Head, South Carolina airport runway extension debate, how stakeholders read, write, and speak of the land next to the airport is inherently connected to how they interact with that place and with each other. But they do not read and write of the land as a valuable ecosystem. Opposition to the runway extension has nothing to do with environmental impacts. The place is valued for economic, social, and historical reasons. As an environment, it is not much considered.

In making a case for ecocomposition, Sidney Dobrin claims that “writing and rhetoric cannot be separated from place, from environment, from nature, or from location” (Dobrin 13). As Donehower, Hogg, and Schell and Deborah Brandt might argue, literacy cannot be separated from place either. But it might sometimes be separated from environment as an ecosystem that has value distinct from, and without the influence of, humans. In the Hilton Head, South Carolina airport runway extension debate, how stakeholders read, write, and speak of the land next to the airport is inherently connected to how they interact with that place and with each other. But they do not read and write of the land as a valuable ecosystem. Opposition to the runway extension has nothing to do with environmental impacts. The place is valued for economic, social, and historical reasons. As an environment, it is not much considered.

Hilton Head Airport Runway Extension: An Overview

The Hilton Head Airport, located on the north end of a small sea island off the coast of South Carolina, announced in 2010 that it will extend a runway in order to allow larger and fuller planes to land on the island. The extension will require the removal of a large area of trees. Currently, it has not been actualized, but the project has received approval of funding from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and state and local governments. And the developers have recently completed an environmental assessment (EA) finding no significant impact. These signs suggest the extension is moving forward.

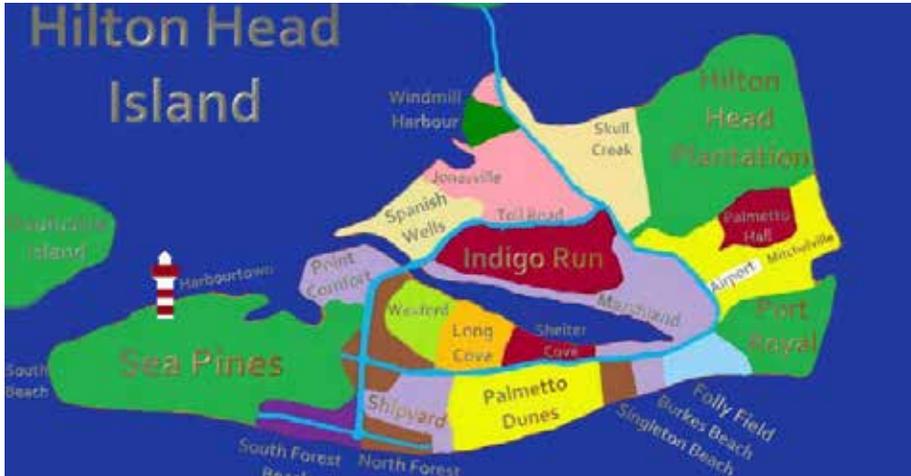


Figure 1: Map of Hilton Head Island

The trees to be cut, and the airport, are located on land that has been used and lived on by the Gullah descendants of freed slaves since the mid-nineteenth century. They founded the town of Mitchelville in the area. On the map, Mitchelville is the area above Port Royal on the far right of the island (see fig. 1). The airport is highlighted within that section. There is also a relatively new residential development and golf course called Palmetto Hall, which, on the map, is the maroon area that carves into Mitchelville. Neither the Mitchelville nor Palmetto Hall residents support the plan to increase the length of Hilton Head airport's runway. Residents of the south end of Hilton Head, which is the more developed end and is located on the left side of the map, support the extension of the runway because it will supposedly allow larger and fuller planes to land on the island. They believe the extension will enable more tourists to visit, which will increase income from golfing and resort vacations.

The residents of Mitchelville, specifically those who are members of the church located directly next to the future runway extension—St. James Baptist Church—have held two rallies in opposition to the proposal, including one on April 11, 2010. The residents of Palmetto Hall, located across the street from the airport, have also vocalized their opposition to the extension and are using the official public meetings to lodge complaints. In support of this proposal, the town of Hilton Head has held many town council meetings including: a Master Plan presentation on October 27, 2010, a meeting for questions before the presentation of the EA on April 3, 2012 and a meeting for questions after the presentation of the EA on June 27, 2012 which determined a “Finding of No Significant Impact.”²¹ The local newspaper, *The Island Packet*, has been reporting on the events as they have been unfolding. Along with the YouTube videos of the April 11 St. James rally and the published minutes from town council meetings, *The Island Packet* is one of the main public outlets for all stakeholders including Mitchelville and Palmetto Hall residents against development, and south islanders,

developers and the local government for development. It is in these published, public interactions and engagements between stakeholders that a hierarchy of place-based literacies is revealed.

The debate unfolding necessarily requires particular literacies of the treescape currently in the path of the future runway extension. That is, it requires particular ways of knowing and reading the place in question. For the developers and supporters of the runway extension and even Palmetto Hall residents, the discourse is built from literacies of development-based economics. The land represents economic value either through being developed or by supporting the value of already existing developments. The supporters see increased income potential because a larger runway means larger planes, which means more tourists. Palmetto Hall residents see the trees as property value assurance both aesthetically and as a buffer for airport noise. This way of understanding the land is place-based, but it is not place-specific. It is a way of seeing any plot of land with trees and it is driven by developers who are not local to Hilton Head, but national and international. James Guignard explains how outside developers bring generic place-based knowledge to specific places in his examination of fracking in Pennsylvania. He argues, “Industry uses a nationalized, displacing rhetoric that abstracts the region...[and] ignores local knowledge in favor of their own language and practices” (Guignard 4). By abstracting the land and trees in question, supporters of the runway *and* Palmetto Hall residents have minimized the environmental, social, and historical values and emphasized the economic.

For the residents of Mitchelville, however, the place is very specific. Their discourse is built from social and historical literacies. While the other stakeholders see the land as (sub)urban, Mitchelville residents see it decidedly as what Donehower, Hogg, and Schell would term *rural*. In their book, the authors define rural literacies as, “The particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas—or...to pursue the opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (Donehower, Hogg, and Shell 4). The Mitchelville residents appear in their public discourse to have the first part of this definition as their goal. The aim is to sustain their way of life and their ways of reading, seeing and using that place. They want the land to remain as is because it is part of *their* community. It is undeveloped not because of missed opportunity, but because it is a rural part of a historically rural area. These residents’ very particular place-based literacy is at a distinct disconnect with two major factors in the runway debate. First, it clashes with the urban or suburban-based literacies held by the other stakeholders. Second, in the way the Mitchelville residents publicly present the goal of sustaining their way of life, they are not looking to “pursue the opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities” needed to sustain that way of life. In fact, as this paper suggests, they are at times actively rejecting certain paths towards those policies. Specifically, they are rejecting environmental literacies. So, too, are all other publicly active stakeholders in the debate. So the Mitchelville residents are missing an opportunity—perhaps, as the rally reveals, purposefully—to take on an additional place-based environmental literacy that could help them achieve their

goal of stopping the runway extension. The result of these two disconnects is an almost foregone conclusion that the extension will be developed without anyone ever publicly taking up the cause of environmentalism.

The Role of Discourse and Literacy in the Hilton Head Airport Runway Debate

Sidney Dobrin argues we should be focusing on “understanding how discursive construction interacts with [the places we inhabit], builds those places, maps those places, defines those places, and ultimately controls those places” (Dorbin 24). The discursive constructions of stakeholders in the Hilton Head case are what *should* build a shared place-based literacy. The published, public presentations and reactions from multiple stakeholders reveal two unequal literacies instead. In this paper, I aim to determine how the developers manage to maintain control over the public discourse and why the Mitchelville stakeholders, who use the only dissenting literacy, are willing to let those in control be the only voice on environmental matters.

Deborah Brandt’s theories of literacy are a useful starting point. *Literacy as Involvement* shares Brandt’s theory of writing and reading as requiring an active participation and acknowledgement between writer and reader that must take the place of corporeal interactions. She explains:

Readers must be able to see illocutionary presence despite corporeal absence and to see how a text relates to their own presence on the scene, to what they, as readers, are doing moment to moment. Only by maintaining this intimate awareness can readers carry out the work of reading. Authors also trade on this awareness with frequent references, both direct and oblique, to the acts of writing and reading in progress, and with language that indexes the developing history of joint writer-reader accomplishments (*Literacy as Involvement* 87).

The necessity of following along with a written argument is that both reader and writer acknowledge each other and what they both must agree on in order for understanding to occur. In the Hilton Head case, this necessary component is often missing—not only in written discourse, but also in spoken. Stakeholders either do not acknowledge each other in their writing and speaking or they mock each other. This is evident at the St. James rally when a prominent citizen, Dr. Emory Campbell, publicly dismisses an environmental literacy of the contested land by mocking coastal animal and plant conservation efforts. Instead, he promotes social and historical literacies by emphasizing the Mitchelville community’s long history of living on that land and their connection to the slaves who settled it. As another example, one letter to the editor by a south island resident, Mr. Faust, explicitly makes fun of a group who wants to save “two trees” rather than dozens of lives. The tree-savers are not publicly active enough to have published any easily findable objections. But more importantly, Mr. Faust shows an outright disdain for environmental concern. Both of these examples will be explored

in detail later, but for now it is important to point to their competing literacy practices. Both men mock an opposition that comes from an environmental reading of the land, but they also cannot agree on the correct way to read, write, or speak of the land. There is dissonance.

That dissonance of literacy practices appears to make shared understanding or communication impossible. The developers, south island residents, and newspaper have a public discourse deriving from literacies of development-based economics. Even one opposition group, the Palmetto Hall residents, uses that discourse. The Mitchelville residents reject that discourse entirely and, in turn, the other stakeholders reject Mitchelville's social and historical literacies. Brandt explains, "Literacy is a resource...a means of production and reproduction, including a means by which legacies of human experience move from past to future and by which, for many, identities are made and sustained" (*Literacy in American Lives* 6). Brandt goes on to note that there are "multiple literacy practices" developing differently depending on context and location of learning that are not only a sign of "cultural variety" but "also a sign of stratification and struggle" (8). Position in society is often reflected *and* shaped by literacy practices. Whether a person or group is taken seriously in a public debate can depend heavily on the literacy practices they bring. The literacies that have the most impact on the Hilton Head runway debate reveal an almost foregone conclusion that the extension will happen. They are the literacies of those who are responsible for the project. The discourses taking place in the public sphere most often come from those literacies—those of development-based economics.² Other literacies, including other ways of knowing the place and other ways of reading and writing, sometimes make an appearance, but they are not sustained and they do not alter that foregone conclusion. It is as if a stalemate has occurred among stakeholders because they are not fluent in each other's literacies. This appears to be the case for all points but one. Each community stakeholder group has conceded to the developers and government that there will be no real environmental harm from the runway extension. Something about how the developers and FAA presented their findings to the public gave the impression that this was an aspect of the proposal not to be challenged.

Brandt's concept of literacy practices suggests that our ways of being literate become defining parts of who we are as individuals and groups. Literacy takes on a kind of materiality because it is identificatory.³ Stakeholders understand their particularities through and because of their literacies. In Hilton Head, it makes it difficult not only to understand other stakeholders, but also to grasp the best ways of addressing those other groups. If dominant stakeholders are controlling the public sphere and locked into their discourse because it develops from identity-forming literacy, their ability to share in the meaning-making Brandt writes of in *Literacy as Involvement* is undeveloped. And the Mitchelville residents face the doubly difficult task of manipulating their own discourse to include the dominant literacies *and* represent their own. So far, Mitchelville stakeholders have actively and vocally chosen not to manipulate their discourse. It is obvious those using the dominant discourse feel no need to manipulate their own, either. Instead, they all use their specific place-based literacies to "[function] as a tool to identify...with one

cultural group and to dis-identify with another group” (Donehower 49). Across the board there is a lack of recognition, a lack of understanding, and a lack of desire to recognize or understand.

The Difference between Hilton Head and Previous Case Studies

Case studies of similar disputes have been instrumental in distinguishing how and why sites of disagreement arise in order to come to conclusions about how to move forward. But they have predominantly included at least one stakeholder group that represents environmental concern. Studies such as Steven B. Katz and Carolyn R. Miller’s “The Low-Level Radioactive Waste Siting Controversy in North Carolina,” Hannah Scialdone-Kimberly and David Metzger’s “Writing in the Third Space from the Sun,” and Peter Goggin and Elenore Long’s “The Co-Construction of a Local Public Environmental Discourse” have furthered rhetorical understanding of how environmentalism is perceived and acted out in real-world situations. They each highlight the public encounters that occur when environmental issues are brought forward. But what happens when a real-world situation that will adversely affect a real, physical environment is not publicly and consistently approached from any environmentalist perspective? The Hilton Head case reveals that perhaps what happens is that the assurance from the local government and corporations who want the runway extension that there will be no significant harm is accepted as good enough and stakeholders against development forego a chance to unite and/or stop the construction.

The disconnects between place-based literacies appear to be a major factor in why those in opposition have not joined forces or taken on an environmental literacy. In the Hilton Head airport runway dispute, the rural, place-based literacies of the Mitchelville community are historical and social. For example, at a rally held at St. James church in Mitchelville residents and supporters speak of their connections to the church and the amount of time their families have lived in Mitchelville. But they are not in control of the majority of public discourse. Michelle Simmons’ bases her analysis of citizen participation in environmental policy on the premise that “it is the institutions...with their rules and practices that determine the ways in which citizens participate in the production of environmental decisions and policy” (Simmons 10). In the case of the Hilton Head runway, those in power have created a public discourse that emphasizes literacies of development-based economics. Mitchelville’s historical and social literacies, and virtually all environmental literacies, rank lower in the hierarchy and are often ignored by those in power and those reporting on the debate. For example, there was no official, public response to the St. James rally by either the local government or the airport developers. And while the newspaper did cover that event, the majority of articles about the runway extension are in terms of development and economics and not in terms of historical, social, or environmental significance of the place. This is especially evident in the articles covering the meeting after the presentation of the environmental assessment in which only Palmetto Hall residents are quoted and

concerns are limited to property values and noise increase.

So far, case studies focus on instances in which the public addresses sustainability or environmental concerns. Katz and Miller's study of allowing a radioactive waste site in North Carolina deals with how communication in a hotly disputed situation plays out and its effect on community relationships. Their approach to the waste-siting controversy focuses on "the rule-making process of the Authority and on the specific provisions it developed for involving the public...[and] where assumptions about the nature of communication and the role of the public come to the surface" (Katz and Miller 116). That is, they examine how the general public is perceived by the "Authority" when it raises questions about the environmental and health impacts of allowing a radioactive waste site in their county. They study a situation centered on a pressing and clear environmental concern and find an "intensity of public dissatisfaction" as a result (Katz and Miller 113). While the public Katz and Miller encounter is different from the public in Hilton Head, their study reveals important components of similar stakeholder relationships. They analyze "the ways in which communication structures the relationship between communities" through the interactions the Authority sponsors between itself and the public, including its communication of risk to the residents directly affected by the waste site (Katz and Miller 116). What Katz and Miller find appears to hold true in the Hilton Head case as well:

Communication takes place between parties who have different...knowledge about the risk and different degrees of access to power; the parties are often characterized as "experts" on the one hand and citizens, laypeople, or the general public on the other. In decision-making contexts, risk communication developed as an attempt to overcome these differences by "correcting" the public's "risk perceptions" so that they would better match the "risk analyses" made by the experts (116).

In the case of the waste-siting controversy, the public continued to express concern, but this method of "correcting" any perception of environmental harm seems to have worked well in Hilton Head. Each "non-expert" group defers the matter of environmental impact to the experts without publicly vocalizing any concerns.

Scialdone-Kimberly and Metzger's case study examines the *multiple* stakeholders who represent their environmental concerns at the 2007 United Nations Forum on Forests. In this study, the authors focus on how stakeholders understand their roles in the forum knowing that "guaranteeing a place in the dialogue [does] not guarantee stakeholders a place from which they [can] be heard" (Scialdone and Metzger 40). Their use of Burke's pentad as a lens for reading the forum allows them to focus on how groups identify themselves with each other and with the Authority, the United Nations, when publicly presenting their arguments on forest sustainability. Scialdone-Kimberly and Metzger's conclusion is that stakeholders can affect sustainable change even when interacting with a powerful group such as the United Nations "when [sustainability's] discursive burdens are also acknowledged and addressed" (51). The keys to the positive takeaway of this case study are a willing Authority in the United

Nations and an acknowledgement of “discursive burdens.” In the Hilton Head case, there is neither a willing Authority nor an acknowledgement that there are natural and seemingly unconquerable discursive conflicts between stakeholders. Without the glue of a shared goal, those with authority and those without do not seem to be able to share a discourse either.

Goggin and Long examine the role of the public in promoting sustainable practices. The authors analyze a collection of letters to the editor in a Bermudan newspaper, the *Royal Gazette*, written by citizens concerned over a proposed hotel development along a strip of beachfront property. Goggin and Long expect that the study “can teach us about the limits and possibilities of constructing democratic discourse about the environment that is at once focused and sustained and also accessible to local people” (11). In this instance, the community is utilizing public discourse to create a community literacy about an event that will affect their lives and their environment. Goggin and Long have some unusual fortune and are able to examine letters that have been published in their entirety by the newspaper and argue, “Few information venues have as much outreach and influence in promoting and informing literacies of environment and sustainability in the lives of ordinary people as the daily news media” (6). The unchanged letters to the editor may reveal a coalition between two stakeholders, the residents and the newspaper, because of their shared environmental concern. In this case, groups in the community use environmental discourse to achieve their end goal of halting the development of beachfront property. The local newspaper, by publishing these letters in their entirety, appears to choose sides in the argument, and they have not chosen to align with the developers. Stakeholders in the Hilton Head case can also be seen working together and sharing a discourse. But *The Island Packet*, Hilton Head’s daily newspaper, does not actively participate in the alliance the way Bermuda’s *Royal Gazette* appears to do. Instead, *The Island Packet* reflects the alliance in the way stories of the runway extension are written. For example, there is a stock reason for the runway extension that seems to accompany most articles in a variation similar to this one written by Tom Barton in October 2010: “The current runway and tree obstructions force airlines to reduce aircraft weight and fly them at less than capacity, making routes less profitable and less likely to continue, [airport officials] said” (Barton). As opposed to the *Royal Gazette*, this newspaper does not seem to be obviously allying with stakeholders who oppose the runway extension, but discretely aligning with those who support it as articles are almost always from the perspective of the “progress” of the extension. And neither the newspaper nor Mitchelville and Palmetto Hall residents publicly speak of the place with any environmental literacy. The newspaper maintains a discourse using the (sub)urban development-based economic literacies of the developers, government sponsors, airlines, and south island residents. The groups who oppose the runway do not even publicly acknowledge each other very often. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their appearances in public debates are not as unified or as prevalent as the developers, airlines, and south island residents.

Shaping the Dominant Discourse through Literacies of Development-based Economics

The presentations held by the town council on the extension Master Plan and the EA reveal a specific literacy of development-based economics that has come to dictate the dominant discourse of the Hilton Head debate. Michele W. Simmons emphasizes in her introduction a focus that “involves investigating the power relations and resulting subject positions that inhibit or encourage significant citizen participation in the decisions of environmental policy” (Simmons 10). She claims current models of environmental risk communication do not work because communicators present findings in one-way models and “do not account for cultural differences across communities” even though “public participation should be determined by real and localized situations, not hypothetical, decontextualized questions” (Simmons 27). Because the Hilton Head runway extension requires tree removal and trimming, the project requires an EA. But the requirement of assessment and the assessment itself have been shaped and determined by those in power. So the discourse of environmentalism in this project has remained stagnant and unchallenged by other stakeholders with different cultural ties to the area and different literacies. Interestingly, there are significant public responses to the developers by the Palmetto Hall residents in these official meetings, especially after the EA is released. But the Mitchelville residents are glaringly absent from both the reports published by the council and the newspaper articles covering the events. As established in the previous section, multiple stakeholders have *access* to the public sphere. However, in these official settings the sphere requires a particular type of discourse in order for a group’s argument to be validated. And the presentation of information brings with it the assurance that the project and the tree removal/trimming are going to happen. The Palmetto Hall residents, as opposed to those from Mitchelville, maintain the discourse of economics in their official complaints. So their complaints are heard. They are recorded in the official minutes and newspaper accounts. But even as they are heard, the project continues to move forward.

In the “Hilton Head Airport Master Plan Update” presentation put forth on October 27, 2010, the project team highlights sixteen town meetings/presentations about the project since August 2009. Of those, only three included comments and/or questions from the public. During the presentation, the Master Plan was highlighted the steps that have been made toward achieving the plan and those still needed to be made. Included in the latter is a section dedicated to what they label “Environmental Considerations” that includes, but is not limited to, considerations of air quality, compatible land use, hazardous materials, and socioeconomic impact/environmental justice. None of the items on that list had been performed to as of October 27, 2010. Materiality theorist Ronald Greene argues, “[W]e should focus on how rhetoric distributes different elements on a terrain of a governing apparatus”(38). In this instance, the focus should be on what elements are not being distributed on the terrain. Not only is environmentalism only nodded to by way of explaining how the EA will take place, the conditions of the Mitchelville residents and the trees set to be clear-cut

do not warrant the same nod. The dominant discourse does not even make room in this presentation to better understand the position of the Mitchelville stakeholders. It is not in the dominant group's perceived interests so they put it off until later, when they will present their findings in their own discourse, influenced by their own literacies.

Towards the end of the Master Plan presentation, there is a question-and-answer section. A few questions regarding environmental concerns like tree removal and wetland impact are asked. The responses to the questions are almost rote and remain focused on legal requirements and guidelines. For example, in response to "What is the impact of Alternative 2 on trees, as well as the protected wetlands and buffers," the Master Plan explains, "No *additional* tree removal is anticipated at this time and wetlands impacts... will be permitted in accordance with USACE regulations" (emphasis added, "Master Plan" B-25). Altogether, the presentation regarding the Master Plan works to negate the environmental considerations of the proposal by presenting them and then promising to do the analyses needed while still moving forward with the plans. In fact, included in the presentation are letters from different airlines, the airport board, and federal, state, and county governments giving their approval and commitment to move forward with the extension plan *even though they have not done an EA*. In this instance, the developers as dominant stakeholders are certainly making "judgments about the welfare of a population" in their public presentation without actually considering the discourses of part of the population and without being held responsible for the lack of attention paid to the environmental impact (Greene 39).

On April 3, 2012, the county and developers held a meeting to present initial fieldwork findings in preparation for the EA. The official report states:

[B]etween 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., at the Hilton Head Island Branch Library... [t]he project team set up displays that included the proposed time line for the EA and a field work results map. Project team representatives were available to answer questions. A table was set up for those who wished to fill out the public comment form at the meeting ("April 3" 1).

There were seventy-two people present at the meeting and a total of thirty comment cards turned in. The published comments from the meeting reveal a strong presence of the dominant discourse of development-based economics, with many complainants taking up property value, quality of life, and noise pollution as key factors against the project. Comments include: "The FAA should step up and provide necessary financial support to protect the peaceful life of surrounding communities," "[P]lease ensure that future noise standards are considered in the impact analysis," "A key issue, that is now more evident, is ground noise created by aircraft... A 75-foot buffer of trees and shrubs will have little impact on noise mitigation" ("April 3" 2-3).

There are a few comments that are not in the dominant discourse, but they are answered in the dominant discourse and they reveal an interesting component of the EA. In answer to, "What about the Church and that beautiful tree?" one of only two comments specifically about St. James church⁴ and three about the trees, the officials

respond, “The church will remain in its current place...The large trees on church property are to be trimmed as part of the off-airport tree trimming project, which is not part of the environmental assessment being prepared for the extension of the runway” (“April 3” 3). The discourse of the question is cultural and personal. The person asking the question clearly reads and understands that location with a social and/or historical literacy. The discourse of the response is logical and matter-of-fact. Any impediments from the existence of the church and trees have already been overcome and now they are not an issue. The way they seem to have overcome those trees is by keeping them beyond the scope of “airport property.” Because the trees are not going to be cut down, they are not subject to an EA. And because the church is out of the path of the runway, any impact is minimal.

The EA itself, while clearly made public, is not easy to find. It is buried on the official city website for Hilton Head within a long list of documents that require a lot of searching to find. The language is dense and the document is ninety-five pages long. And the assessment covers everything initially reported as “needing assessment” in the Master Plan update including “Affected Environment” and “Environmental Consequences” that handle a broad range of issues from land use to historical significance to water and air quality. It is not written in a discourse easily accessible to those with literacy histories that do not include very specific legal, scientific, and economic language. The treatment of the physical space and the trees does not reflect a social or historical way of knowing and reading. But the most important component of the EA is that the final determination is “No Significant Impact.” With all of the opposition before and after the presentation of the EA, no one questions this determination in terms of traditional environmental concerns. If those who performed the EA say the wetlands and wildlife will be fine and that appears to be good enough. Opponents vocalize distress over noise and economic impact, but not environmental impact. In this respect those in power have been very successful in mitigating potential problems with moving the project forward. They’ve maintained tight control.

A clear example of this success is the second meeting held in 2012 to present the findings of the EA. It took place on June 27 during the same time and in the same location as the previous meeting. It is at this meeting that the lack of impactful presence from the Mitchelville stakeholders is most noticeable as the subsequent newspaper article on the meeting quotes only residents of Palmetto Hall and the officially published comments show those same interests of economic impact, noise pollution, and quality of life. Any social or historical literacy of the place and any discourse that reflects those literacies are significantly absent from these two public representations of the meeting held and controlled by those in power. The discourse from the St. James rally is not present. Maintaining the discourse of those in power is the goal of these meetings *and* the EA as a step towards completing the project. Michele Simmons tells us that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) “model implies a one-way flow of technical information that positions members of the public as consumers and entities to be managed” (13). In their 1995 article, “Risk Communication, Metacommunication, and Rhetorical Stases in the Aspen-EPA Superfund Controversy,” Stratman et al.

reveal further the predetermined nature of communicating EAs and other types of risk assessment:

The answer seems to be to let people be heard, but in highly formalized, highly controlled ways that will *not interfere* with either EPA's control of protocol or EPA's ownership of risk determination expertise... [I]t is interesting to observe that the guidelines make no mention of ways to handle or acknowledge explicit disagreements over substantive issues; specifically, there is no mention that argumentation and counterargumentation are inevitable during risk controversies, nor is there mention of ways to respond to argumentation as part of the larger communication process. (Emphasis in the original, 13)

For Hilton Head, the one-way communication model seems even more planned than the situations outlined by Simmons and earlier by Stratman et. al. because the presentation is not given by the EPA. Rather, the presentation is given by the project developers in coordination with the local government. So the shaping of communication and discourse remains in the hands of those in power over the project.

The official Master Plan report claims:

One hundred and twenty-eight people attended the...meeting. Forty-three comment forms were turned in at the meeting, and 64 comment forms were received by mail and email during the 30-day open comment period...Review of the comment forms indicated 66 in favor of the proposed improvements at the Airport and 39 opposed to the improvements (several submitted two comment forms) ("June 27" 1).

Even in this summative language are specific choices to emphasize support and deemphasize opposition. The parenthetical aside that there are not actually 39 people opposed to the project is supposed to be substantial proof that this project is overwhelmingly popular and good. Within the comments, however, we see where those in power have let people be heard. As mentioned earlier, the most prominent opposition comes from Palmetto Hall residents or people who align with the Palmetto Hall residents. And the discourse remains within the limits of economics and development set by those controlling the project: "Mitigate noise for land owners," "Reduction in property values because of noise and tree removal," "Noise barrier needs to be considered" ("June 27" 2). Most of the comments published are in support of the project: "Expect extension of the runway to improve the economy of Hilton Head Island," "The Airport is a vital and important community asset," "Hilton Head Island is a destination location, people need to be able to get to the Island quickly and easily ("June 27" 2)" There is no mention of St. James or Mitchelville specifically. There is no discourse reminiscent of the public discourses that community has used publicly in the past. The presentation and the comments reflect developers' literacies. Even the noise complaints and the one comment about tree removal have to do with property values.

Responding with Dissenting Place-based Literacies

I have been maintaining throughout this paper that the Mitchelville stakeholders are driven by social and historical place-based literacies. Those literacies are the origins of their discourse in this case and they consider the location to be vitally important. The concept of knowing oneself through the surrounding world seems, from their public presence, to be an integral part of the history of Mitchelville. The native islanders of Mitchelville live in a section of Hilton Head that is still largely rural by Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's definition in *Rural Literacies*. In the first chapter of the text, the authors explain rural as "a quantitative measure, involving statistics on population and region as described by the U.S. Census; as a geographic term, denoting particular regions and areas or spaces and places; and as a cultural term, one that involves the interaction of people in groups and communities" (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 2). While much of the rest of Hilton Head has become a popular destination for golfers and resort vacationers, Mitchelville remains steeped in the cultural traditions of its historic, native residents—the Gullah people descended from slaves. Mitchelville is located on the north end of Hilton Head Island, which is also where the airport is currently located, and is also largely undeveloped compared to the way the south side of the island has been developed. The land has historically been the source of livelihood for Mitchelville residents. This relationship between land and people, so distinctly tied to culture because the land is home to the church and generations of families, means their discourse does not reflect environmental literacies as they are commonly understood. Instead, discussion of the land to be cleared for the runway extension centers on the common notion that their lives, their culture, are literally "rooted" in that land. As such, the dominant stakeholder group, the developers, is not accepting—at least not in publicly available texts—the requests to completely halt progress on the runway extension because it is not being offered in a discourse recognized in the public sphere—which is controlled by the dominant stakeholders.

The original proposal for the runway extension involved purchasing a large parcel of land currently used by Mitchelville residents and tearing down St. James Baptist Church, an institution that has been in that place since the 1860s. This church, being such a part of the history of these stakeholders is, in many ways, what Brandt terms a "literacy sponsor" for its members and community. Brandt explains, "Sponsors... are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy...[they] set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty" (*Literacy in American Lives* 19). The residents, as is proven in the rallies against the extension, see the church as a vital part of their identities. It is a historical root for them to the place they live. The trees on the property are not the important, knowledge-building part of that history. It is the church that sponsors how the residents see, read, and know that land. Because it is this place that has been chosen for the extension, in the debate the residents of Mitchelville speak of "roots [that] go deep" in the land and in the church ("Gullah/Geechee Nayshun Nyews with Queen Quet YouTube Ep 30 Pt 3").

They do not speak of the environmental impact a runway would have on the land. The discourse they use to reach outside communities is not removed from their particular place-based literacy of the land, the church, and their history. And a compromise with outside environmental discourses—despite both the trees and the people on that land having “roots [that] go deep”—has not yet happened as is evidenced in the April 11, 2010 rally.

On April 11, 2010, the St. James Baptist Church, residents of Mitchelville, and the broader Gullah community held a rally when the church was in danger of being torn down along with the surrounding trees. They met, along with other supporters from Hilton Head, under the trees of St. James’ property. Their rally is publicly available on YouTube. It started off, as all Gullah events start off, with an invocation. Throughout the rally, the participants break into call and response hymns as they feel moved to do so. The Reverend begins the invocation with, “[God] let *your* will be done on this island, in this community, in the hearts of your people everywhere...that we might have a reverence for things that are *sacred*, that we might have a reverence, dear God, for your *bethel spots*” (Emphasis added, “YouTube Ep 30 Pt 1”). In this opening prayer, the group has determined it is *their* cause which is sacred, *their* understanding of the land that is God’s understanding. And though they understand that this rally is meant to “make some noise,” in the public sphere because, as Mr. Young declares, otherwise “nobody will care,” the noise they are making is fixed on their own idea of the situation (“YouTube Ep 30 Pt 1”). This immediately closes off their discourse from those in the dominant group and it certainly does not translate into a discourse that the public sphere will readily accept as valid. In this rally, the speakers are literally preaching to the choir.

More telling of the social and historical place-based literacies of the Mitchelville stakeholders than the religious overtones is the public relationship this group has with environmental causes. In his rally speech, Emory Campbell, a well-respected member of the Gullah community and a member of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, attempts to utilize the dominant discourse to point out the disservice constantly being done to the Gullah culture. In his speech he also makes an adversary of environmentalism and sustainability:

Over the past forty years we have witnessed consistent displacement of one of... America’s most unique cultures—the Gullah/Geechee culture. These cultural assets have been displaced along the coast because of taxes, waterfront access closures, prohibitive ordinances for use of land, and now we’re hearing that we need a longer runway for the airplanes. We have watched the town and county over the years protect the trees, wildlife, wetlands, special programs for turtles [laughter], and even alligators [more laughter]. And I believe it’s time now for them to recognize the value of the indigenous people (“YouTube Ep 30 Pt 2”).

Here Dr. Campbell displays an obvious grasp of the dominant discourse. However, in trying to subvert the discourse, and in making environmentalism a foe, his public representation of the Mitchelville and Gullah stakeholder group further removes

that group from the dominant discourse in the public sphere. It's an abdication of Mitchelville's place in the debate by intentionally not grounding the discourse of the rally in a literacy to which the dominant stakeholders legally *have* to pay attention. And it is a choice. Clearly, they are familiar with the successes of environmental causes or Dr. Campbell would not have mentioned them and the audience would not have laughed. Brandt notes the lasting influence of context in literacy development. But Donehower, Hogg, and Schell perhaps explain this particular choice most accurately. They write of "the global movement toward increased privatization of public services and toward a market economy... [that] has been promoted as a historical inevitability... [and has] meant the systematic dislocation of people" (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 10). The sense of inevitability that the runway extension will happen reflects the authors' critique. The Mitchelville stakeholders maintaining their particular literacies even in public discourse is therefore an important and, I want to stress, valid choice. However, the speech reveals the important role environmental causes can play in fighting against development. So Dr. Campbell's opportunity to utilize a place-based literacy that has a proven track record within dominant discourses of other cases is *outweighed* by the immediacy of shared literacies and therefore a shared discourse with the other rally members. Whether the choice not to engage with any dominant literacy is a form of power in itself because development is inevitable or whether the choice is because they just don't want to, what matters is that they are rejecting it in favor of their own social and historical literacies.

The April 11 rally was not only attended by Mitchelville residents and Gullah community members, there were also two residents of the south end of the island in attendance who oppose the runway extension. The speeches made by these men are the closest any speaker at the rally comes to harmonizing environmentalism with the dominant discourse, of which they are members. There are two things of note in recognizing the environmental appeal of these speakers. First, it is the outsiders of the Mitchelville stakeholder group who call for environmentalism, not members of the group. Second, the speeches are inflammatory and accusatory, allowing those of the dominant discourse who want the extension to cast off these appeals as mere "tree-hugging" rhetoric and not as valid concerns about the future of the land. The first council member to speak recalls a comment he made at a recent council meeting, "Well why don't we put this down in Sea Pines [on the south side of the island]? We don't need a golf course down there... We can use the 18th fairway as a nice flight path... Let's hear what the crying would be then" ("YouTube Ep 30 Pt 3") The obvious point the councilman is making, that this extension is being pushed through because it is not proposing to take over valuable south island property, is validating for the group at the rally. However, in the development-based dominant discourse, it can easily be dismissed. After all, putting the runway on a current, profitable golf course would take income away from Hilton Head and the driving factor for the extension is to bring more income to the island. The second speaker, a small plane pilot, is the only speaker at the rally to make connections between clear-cutting the trees and environmental distress. While the first speaker is driven by pathos, the second speaker maintains a

tone of logic that reflects the type of discourse most likely to be validated in the public sphere that has been created for this debate. He explains, “As certified by the Federal Aviation Administration and the local airport authority, the Hilton Head airport is safe now without the need to extend the runway one inch” (“YouTube Ep 30 Pt 3”) He goes on to say the airport is “safe now without the need to clear-cut thousands of trees on and off airport property...before the runway is extended one inch, or before one tree is unnecessarily removed, the FAA must conduct an authoritative assessment of potential hazards and that has not been done” (“YouTube Ep 30 Pt 3”). This speaker understands the potential in requiring an EA that as of April 11, 2010 had not been done. However, he is not a member of the Mitchelville stakeholder group. His discourse is different from theirs, and his is influenced by a literacy of environmentalism that informs his argument against the extension. This is in direct contrast to the mocking acknowledgement of environmental discourse from Dr. Campbell. The members of the rally, while listening and nodding, do not take up this discourse into their own at later rallies or appeals. And once the environmental assessment was completed and presented, there are no easily findable public proclamations on behalf of environmental concern.

While Dr. Campbell works to distance this stakeholder group from environmental and sustainability rhetorics, and the two south island representatives work to bring the dominant discourse to the rally, another rally speaker, Ethel Rivers, works to make clear the connection between the culture and the land. She says:

My name is Ethel Green Rivers...I was born on Mitchelville Plantation. October 16, 1918. I joined this church [St. James Baptist] in 1932. I'm a mother of seventeen children [applause]...And I just want to let y'all know, I have root go deep [*sic*] in the ground...So when you talk about moving St. James you might as well take a dagger and put in right in my heart (YouTube Ep 30 Pt 3).

Rivers' speech uses a place-based literacy that assumes the culture and the land are the same. And it successfully rallies those in attendance. But however moving her story is, it is not relevant to the dominant discourse. This speech is publicly represented as being reflective of the discourse of many Mitchelville residents in attendance. It is in this speech that a major point of discord between the literacies of the Mitchelville stakeholders and those of the dominant group is most clear. The figurative “roots” of Rivers are working as material boundaries surrounding her discourse and thus the public discourse of those she represents in the speech. The church, as she explains, is her literacy sponsor. It shapes how she understands herself and the place where she lives and it shapes how she talks about them as well. In the rally, outside stakeholders attempt to bring in the place-based literacies of the dominant stakeholders and environmentalism to the Mitchelville group, but it is the literacies of Ethel Rivers and Dr. Campbell that they continue to use.

Reporting Events in the Dominant Discourse

The Hilton Head newspaper has reported its observations over the entire course of the debate. *The Island Packet*, begun in 1970, is published by the McClatchy Company and is available in print and online. It serves Hilton Head and its surrounding area. In order for any stakeholder group's message to reach the larger Hilton Head audience the local newspaper must report their stories. Not only that, *The Island Packet* must also allow room for previously unrepresented stakeholders to include their discourse in the dispute by way of letters to the editor. What becomes clear after reading the articles and letters is that the dominant discourse has, on the whole, been adopted by the newspaper and the residents of the south end of the island. There are some citizens who do not approve of the runway extension, but there is still a lack of concern for the environmental impact or sustainable practices. In fact, there is some hostility towards environmentalism even as there is not an obvious group representing the interests of the land. It seems as though in the public sphere of this Hilton Head debate, there is not room for environmental discourse in this particular representative medium, at least not in the articles and letters easily accessed online.

Focusing on articles and letters to the editor in the months of the public presentations I have previously analyzed, the rigid materiality of the dominant discourse and the inability for outside literacies to permeate it in any meaningful way should be clear. In the articles published by *The Island Packet* staff, there are reports on the progress of town council meetings, the progress of the runway extension, the EA presentation, and even reports on the rallies and legal appeals of the Mitchelville stakeholders. But the reports always assume the inevitability of the extension. In an article published about the April 10 rally, the author briefly describes the reasons for the rally, and then goes into a long description of all the government officials who attended:

Town Councilman Bill Ferguson, who represents Ward 1, where the church is located, urged protesters to "go to the polls and vote accordingly," against the runway expansion...Hilton Head Island mayoral candidates Tom Crews and John Safay, a veteran town councilman, attended the rally. Beaufort County Council member Steve Baer was also in attendance. The airport lies in Baer's district. Safay has said he favors lengthening the runway within the existing boundaries of the airport to allow for future commercial service, if it can be done without harming nearby neighborhoods. Crews said he attended the event largely to listen. "We're having these very strong opinions about the airport with very limited information," he said (Foss).

The article barely mentions members of St. James Baptist Church or Mitchelville residents, but details which officials attended and their opinions on the extension and the rally's message. Mayoral candidate Tom Crews seems even dismissive in his analysis of the event claiming that the "strong opinions" aren't well informed. Of course, there is mention of the rally's discourse: "Members of St. James, which lies under the flight path

of planes landing and taking off from the airport, say the runway expansion threatens the native island church, the Gullah-Geechee culture and the future of area residents and businesses” (Foss). The reference to hurting the future of area businesses is mostly in passing, and not at all a focus of the rally.

The article published on October 10, 2010, two weeks before the Master Plan presentation, is similarly lacking in environmental issues, and even lacks statements from anyone in the Mitchelville stakeholder group. There are official government representatives of that group, the same councilmen in attendance at the rally, who speak on behalf of Mitchelville residents, but the residents themselves are missing from the article. In addition, a brief explanation of the “reason” an extension is necessary appears early on in the article. This same explanation appears in many of the articles about the extension, and it seems to come directly from some sort of official statement made by the dominant stakeholders: “The current runway and tree obstructions force airlines to reduce aircraft weight and fly them at less than capacity, making routes less profitable and less likely to continue, [airport officials] said” (Barton). There is no mention of any stakeholders other than the airlines/airport and the customers of those airlines in this oft repeated explanation. The article does mention one community member who opposes the extension and instead focuses on the loss of revenue from Delta airline’s choice to stop service to the island. *The Island Packet*, at least in the published articles in the months of April and October 2010, does not seem to represent discourses other than the dominant in any serious way. Thus the discourse put forth at the rally, even though the speakers maintained their literacies, is ineffective in manipulating the dominant discourse represented in the newspaper. And the discourse of environmentalism is still absent from the public discussion of the runway extension case. There is still no room in the dispute, driven heavily by the government/business discourse, for the influence of environmentalism and/or sustainability.

Perhaps the most telling examples of how the dominant discourse traverses multiple stakeholder groups come from the letters to the editor. Most letters come from residents of the south side of the island, which is neither near the airport nor heavily influenced by the rural north end. Like the articles, we see in the letters the maintained dominance of the developers’ discourse. Even further, many of the letters express open hostility towards not only the Mitchelville residents, but also environmentalism even though it is largely absent from the public debate.

One example of a letter to the editor that reflects all of the above comes from a south island resident on October 30, 2010. This resident, Bob Faust, has multiple letters published by the newspaper, always in support of the extension and almost always hostile. The author writes, “I thought it was decided to trim the trees to avoid a serious accident and loss of life. Now a group wants to save two trees in exchange for possibly losing 30 to 40 lives. That does not compute on my computer” (Faust). Faust goes on to explain, “The church however is a sensitive, emotional issue. I suggest moving the church to preserve its historical value, or have the town buy it and rebuild it. Whatever is best for the congregation.” The author makes two comments that devalue the opinions of stakeholders outside the dominant group. First, his comment on a group that “wants

to save two trees” is openly hostile. No airplane accidents have ever occurred at the Hilton Head airport and whatever this group is, they have not been able to vocalize their discourse in public via the rally, the presentations, or the newspaper, so their threat to the extension seems minimal. The second comment, that the church should be moved or purchased by the town to be rebuilt, shows an obvious lack of understanding of the importance of that church in that location to the Mitchelville community and a clear determination to *not* understand the place through their specific social or historical literacies.

The Mitchelville community’s concerns are also unmistakably absent from the article covering the EA presentation. Grant Martin writes, “Residents offer comments, critiques of Hilton Head airport environmental assessment,” that there was a “largely constructive—but at times contentious—informal meeting” on June 27, 2012. Intriguingly, although the official report states that feedback was overwhelmingly supportive, Martin reports, “Almost all of the input was negative.” And while the author states early on that there were concerns about “deforestation” along with noise pollution and property values, there is no other reference to the term in the article. The major focus is on the latter two concerns. Martin quotes several Palmetto Hall residents in response to the claims that the decibel level would not exceed regulatory limits and property values would not be affected: “That explanation was not enough to placate Joe Bradley... It’s been real loud; they must have broken a lot of chainsaws cutting down all those trees already” and, “Another Palmetto Hall resident, Bob DiJianne, said the economic projections fail to take into account a decline in home values... The day they cut these trees,’ he said, pointing at a map, ‘about 40 to 50 homes are going to lose \$100,000 in property value overnight.” Martin does not quote a Mitchelville resident and ends the report with, “The FAA—which would pay for most of the improvements with money from user fees and taxes on items such as airline fares, air freight and aviation fuel—approved the plan last fall.” The entire article, even though it claims residents are concerned about deforestation, maintains the same discourse of economics that the developers have shaped the debate with and that south island residents and Palmetto Hall residents have taken up. At this point, Mitchelville, in the public texts about the debate, is not considered. Its residents’ literacies and discourses are not present.

Kim Donehower’s discussion of the stigma of rural literacies in the minds of urban and suburban populations bears repeating at this point. She writes, “Literacy function[s] as a tool to identify oneself with one cultural group and to dis-identify with another group that [is] perceived as being of lower status intellectually, culturally, economically, and morally” (Donehower 49). For Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, literacy means “the skills and practices needed to gain knowledge, evaluate and interpret that knowledge, and apply knowledge to accomplish particular goals (4). In the Hilton Head case, the published texts of the dominant group and those that appear to have taken up their discourse (the newspaper, the south island residents, and the Palmetto Hall residents) reveals at least a non-acknowledgement of the Mitchelville discourse and at worst an active disregard in the vein of Donehower’s explanation of the urban opinion of

rural literacy. The letter written by Bob Faust appears to ignore the rural discourse of the Mitchelville residents *and* actively discredit a relatively un-public environmental argument. The article about the EA presentation does not even offer a disdainful or ignorant representation of the residents. They've been written out of the public debate and any environmental concerns have been successfully excluded.

Conclusion

Bob Faust's letter to *The Island Packet* and Dr. Emory Campbell's speech are examples of how seemingly impermeable place-based literacies can be. Faust's letter, along with the newspaper reports on public presentations and the presentations themselves, reveal the power of development-based economics as place-based literacies. These stakeholders have shaped the dominant discourse which has in turn shaped the Hilton Head debate by requiring their (sub)urban literacies in order to be acknowledged in public discussions. Dr. Campbell's speech, along with Ethel Rivers', reveal the Mitchelville community's clear understanding of the literacy needed to join the debate and their purposeful choice to use their own, rural, place-based literacies instead. Because all stakeholders have locked into their own literacies, the EA performed by the developers has gone unchallenged. Those in support of the project have no need to question the findings. The Palmetto Hall residents, because they are using the developers' literacies, raise only economic concerns. That leaves one major stakeholder group, the Mitchelville community, with an opportunity. But so far, they are missing it. Questioning the findings of the EA would ensure the Mitchelville residents join the dominant discourse because the EA is a legally required step in the development process. Their choice to instead use their social and historical literacies as a challenge to the dominant literacies has meant the project continues to move forward and Mitchelville has been subsumed in the debate. This Hilton Head debate reveals that context is crucial in environmental case studies. Local, place-based literacies play a key role in how national place-based literacies are approached and challenged. Previous case studies like Goggin and Long's about Bermuda and Katz and Miller's about North Carolina reveal groups already using local, place-based environmental literacies. That is not how the Mitchelville residents, or most residents of Hilton Head, see the place to be developed. As a result, the extension will likely happen without ever truly being challenged.

Endnotes

1. The EA claimed to explore all "reasonable" alternatives, that their assessment did not include the tree trimming that would take place "off airport," that they examined everything from soil erosion to noise pollution, and that the FAA determined no significant impact.

2. The public sphere in Hilton Head most accurately reflects Habermas's original conception of the term. While many important scholars have complicated the exclusionary and bourgeois public sphere first described by Habermas, including Michael Warner with

counterpublics and Nancy Fraser's multiplicity of publics, it is this original public sphere theory that shows itself. Habermas' theory is integral to understanding the debate in Hilton Head precisely because it is exclusionary and bourgeois.

3. Ronald Walter Greene explains rhetorical practices as material because of how they occupy institutional structures. Thus, those who are fluent in the right practices get to shape the discourse into what they want and lock others out. Literacies seem to work in the same way in Hilton Head. Which literacy a stakeholder uses affects the success in public discourse.

4. The runway extension plans eventually changed to no longer go through St. James Baptist Church. The church's status as an historical landmark required the developers to realign the runway so that it would pass next to the church, still clear cutting trees in the process. The church would later hold a rally against the new plan as well, due to the noise pollution.

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