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RECLAIMING BLACK AND INDIGENOUS ECOLOGIES ON BLOCK ISLAND THROUGH ORAL HISTORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Public memory on Block Island largely ignores Black and Indigenous labor, life, and legacy. Reclaiming the past and present narratives of Black and Indigenous peoples on Block Island challenges historical erasure; their experiences can then become a meaningful part of the collective public memory of the region. Black and Indigenous women are a key aspect of erased and reclaimed memory, often tasked with maintaining place for their families over generations, upholding their connection to their land and their history - depended upon to maintain and pass down tradition. Developing new memory worlds would mean recognizing the contributions of Black-Indigenous peoples, particularly women, to their homes, lands, and communities. Recognizing and remembering Black-Indigenous ecologies on Block Island allows us to imagine the role of community, family, and home in shaping legacy and history and provides a necessary insight into how these women and their families persist. By looking through the eyes, the oral histories, and stories of Black-Indigenous descendants of Block Island's Manissean people, we can reveal a more holistic history of the island and may be able to provide a lens for a future environmentalism and place-based life on the island. This thesis hopes to generate new possibilities in understanding Black and Indigenous life on Block Island along with opportunities for liberation that stem from putting Black and Indigenous struggles into relationship.

ACKNOWLDGEMENTS

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Sincerest thank you to my advisor Dr. Amelia Moore for all of the discussions, encouragement, and inspiring conversations. Thank you to Dr. Jessie Frazier for generating a path for me to attend URI and for your advisement and opportunities - I am so thankful for both of your mentorship during my time at URI. Thank you also to Dr. Marcus Nevius for your advising and guidance on how to discuss aspects of this history and to Dr. Hilda Lloréns for serving as my defense chair.

Lastly, I would also like to thank my family - both biological and chosen - for your support, endless encouragement and belief in me. I am here because of you

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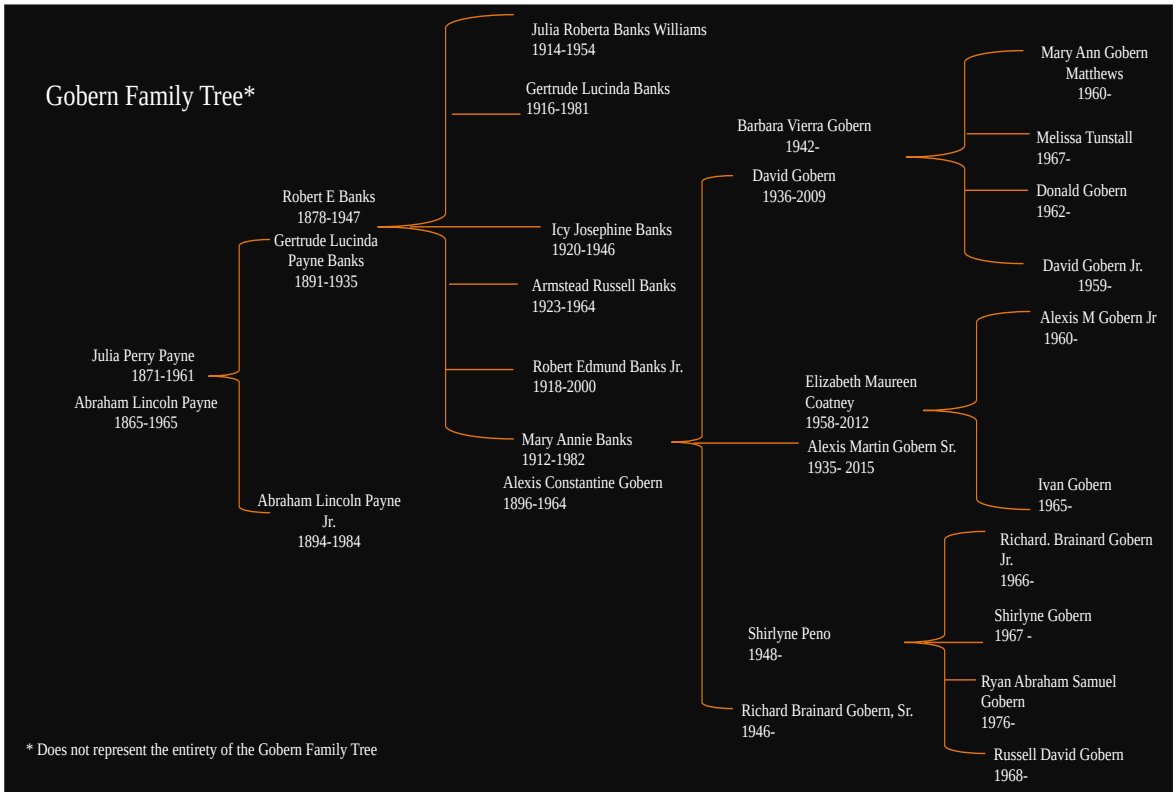
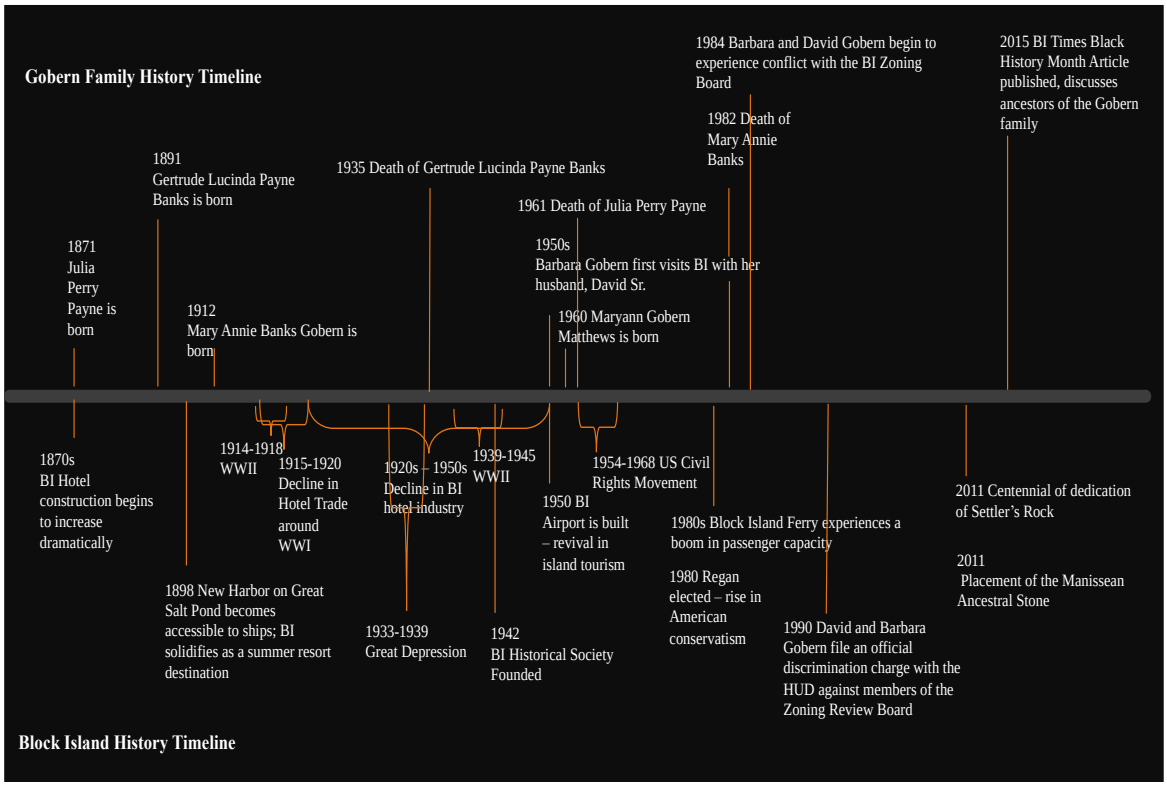

Gobern Family Tree*
Julia Roberta Banks Williams
1914-1954
Gertrude Lucinda Banks
1916-1981
Robert E Banks
1878-1947
Gertrude Lucinda
Payne Banks
1891-1935
Icy Josephine Banks
1920-1946
Armstead Russell Banks
1923-1964
Julia Perry Payne
1871-1961
Abraham Lincoln Payne
1865-1965
Robert Edmund Banks Jr.
1918-2000
Mary Annie Banks
1912-1982
Alexis Constantine Gobern
1896-1964
Abraham Lincoln Payne
Jr.
1894-1984
Barbara Vierra Gobern
1942-
David Gobern
1936-2009
Mary Ann Gobern
Matthews
1960-
Melissa Tunstall
1967-
Donald Gobern
1962-
David Gobern Jr.
1959-
Elizabeth Maureen
Coatney
1958-2012
Alexis Martin Gobern Sr.
1935- 2015
Alexis M Gobern Jr
1960-
Ivan Gobern
1965-
Shirlyne Peno
1948-
Richard Brainard Gobern, Sr.
1946-
Richard. Brainard Gobern
Jr.
1966-
Shirlyne Gobern
1967 -
Ryan Abraham Samuel
Gobern
1976-
Russell David Gobern
1968-
* Does not represent the entirety of the Gobern Family Tree


Gobern Family History Timeline
1984 Barbara and David Gobern begin to experience conflict with the BI Zoning Board
2015 BI Times Black History Month Article published, discusses ancestors of the Gobern family
1982 Death of Mary Annie Banks
1891 Gertrude Lucinda Payne Banks is born
1935 Death of Gertrude Lucinda Payne Banks
1961 Death of Julia Perry Payne
1871 Julia Perry Payne is born
1950s Barbara Gobern first visits BI with her husband, David Sr.
1912 Mary Annie Banks Gobern is born
1960 Maryann Gobern Matthews is born
1870s BI Hotel construction begins to increase dramatically
1914-1918 WWII
1915-1920 Decline in Hotel Trade around WWI
1920s – 1950s Decline in BI hotel industry
1939-1945 WWII
1954-1968 US Civil Rights Movement
1950 BI Airport is built – revival in island tourism
1980s Block Island Ferry experiences a boom in passenger capacity
2011 Centennial of dedication of Settler's Rock
2011 Placement of the Manissean Ancestral Stone
1898 New Harbor on Great Salt Pond becomes accessible to ships; BI solidifies as a summer resort destination
1933-1939 Great Depression
1942 BI Historical Society Founded
1980 Regan elected – rise in American conservatism
1990 David and Barbara Gobern file an official discrimination charge with the HUD against members of the Zoning Review Board
Block Island History Timeline

Introduction

A Black-Indigenous Ecological Tour of Block Island

After an hour-long ferry ride from Galilee to Block Island, my advisor Dr. Amelia Moore, Block Island Manissean descendent and community leader Maryann Gobern Matthews and I have arrived to Old Harbor in New Shoreham. We arrive on a sunny afternoon in August and begin what we can call *Maryann Gobern Matthews's Tour of Block Island*.

Old Harbor looks like a step back in time - the buildings and signage allude to the American colonial era in both architecture and design. We stop downtown on Dodge Street, named after one of the islands' early colonists - Trustum Dodge, a distant ancestor of many still residing on the island today. The storefronts on Dodge Street are a reminder of a summer of protests in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (Dodge 2017) (Fig 1). In the wake of national unrest rooted in police brutality after the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of police, I notice that downtown is covered in phrases of unity and *Black Lives Matter* signage. Many storefronts along Dodge Street are covered in posters evoking justice and solidarity. I remain skeptical of its usage, instead wondering about the ways in which Black lives *matter,* in physical and material ways to Block Islanders (Visperas, Brown & Sexton, 2016). We drive towards the Gobern family land on Beacon Hill in the car Maryann's family shares when they come back to the island. The area is settled deeper into the island, away from tourism in a forested area with unpaved roads.

Figure 1 Black Lives Matter signage on a Dodge Street Business

On the way to Beacon Hill, the highest point on Block Island, and the location of the Gobern family homestead, we stop at the Fresh Pond monument (Fig.2). The monument names the islands' "original settlers" who arrived on the island in 1661 (Richie, 1956). This usage of the term "original settlers" is an act of what historian Jean O'Brien's calls *firsting*, actions English colonizers undertook, and continue to perpetuate in the present, to "appropriate the category "indigenous" away from Indians and for themselves" (O'Brien 2010, p.6). Written in stone, "original settlers" references European colonizers, rather than the Manisseans, Indigenous Block Islanders, those that remain "first." The phrase "Indian Burying Hill" is placed near the base of the monument, seemingly an afterthought; structured out of historical order. The Manissean burial ground may have been utilized before colonization of the island, nevertheless the lives of the English are placed first.

Figure 2. Fresh Pond Monument

The Manissean burial ground lies across from the Fresh Pond monument, labeled as and known to islanders as the “Indian Cemetery”. The Manissean Ancestral Stone, lies outside of the cemetery, reading “In honor of the Manisseans their ancestors and descendants” (Figure 3). This is clearly a newer addition to the stone markers that have been placed across the island. This monument was placed at the request and advocacy of Maryann, family genealogist and Manissean descendant Coni Dubois, and other

Indigenous descendants at a dedication in June 2011. The monument was placed 100 years after the dedication of Settlers Rock near Sachem Pond and days after the rededication of Settler's Rock on Block Island Founders Day that same year (Blood, 2011). In much of the public memory of the island, a man by the name of Isaac Church is known as the "last Manissean" in an overt act of "lasting". (O'Brien, 2010). This monument is an equally overt act of what O'Brien refers to as "resisting"- asserting that Block Island Manisseans are still here, still alive, and still connected to the island (O'Brien, 2010). Sachem is a reference to the Indigenous chiefs of the island, yet this is not memorialized or recognized. The cemetery is largely unmarked, yet two of Maryann's ancestors are buried here among many undeclared others - Charles Payne and Lydia Payne, the parents of Abraham Lincoln Payne, Maryann's ancestor (Fig 4).

Figure 3. Manissean Ancestral Stone

Figure 4. Gravestones of Charles R. Payne and Lydia Payne, in the foreground are unmarked burial stones

As we continue to drive towards Beacon Hill, we pass Mohegan Bluffs. There is irritation in Maryann's voice as she speaks about the ways the island has continued to disregard and misrepresent the history of her ancestors. Here is one the few locations in which the history of the Manissean people is centered, yet the story is violent. The stone marker reads "1590 a war party of 40 Mohegan Indians were driven over these Bluffs by Block Island Indians – The Manisseans." This portrayal of Indigenous history on Block Island and the relationship between the Mohegans and the Manisseans is presented only in context of violence that occurred between them. The English colonization of Block

Island is justified and embraced in island folklore, placed under a lens of soft encouragement and welcoming, rather than conquest. The Manisseans, however are not extended the same grace. Folklore shapes a tale only of violence. Including histories of "Indian hostility" allows for colonial narratives to be framed under heroism - Block Island colonizers are portrayed as vigilant fighters against the violent Manisseans who threaten to their island civilization (O'Brien, 2010, p.33). As author of Block Island folklore, Ethel Colt Ritchie, tells of the Mohegans, "They dug a trench there and made a stand, but being penned in so small an area, they soon succumbed to the siege laid by the Islanders and no doubt those who survived, did so only to suffer torture and death at the hands of their victorious conquerors" (Ritchie, 1956, p.40).

We arrive to the Gobern family property on Beacon Hill, its down an unpaved road, an area covered in green space with views of the sea, "a million-dollar view" (M.Gobern 2020). Maryann guides us first to the property that she currently owns, formerly belonging to her Uncle Ed, it now exists as a rental for Block Island tourists. Making our way through to another portion of their property, we stop at a stone wall (Figure 5). Built by one of Maryann's neighbors, the wall which looks similar to the stonewalls built across the island. At one point she tells us it crossed into her property and those stones had to be removed. Abraham Lincoln Payne, Maryann's ancestor, was a stonemason and worked to maintain the stonewalls on the island (BI Times, 2016). I can't help but feel the irony in the wall's presence. Abraham Lincoln Payne's craftsmanship on the island, building walls to delineate property taken from his ancestors, has now been used to separate the Gobern's from their own property. Additional context provided by the amateur historian and Block Island taxi driver known as Maizie in her book, *The*

Block Island Scrapbook - which recreates island folklore as a fictional conversation between a visitor and taxi driver- adds to the irony of the wall's presence. The book states, "Island slaves could buy their freedom. The price? Slowly she told me. They had only build a wall. But it had to be all the way across the island. Four managed to accomplish it" (Rose 1957, p.31). In this brief and nameless account, the presence of the stone walls of Block Island are a visual representation of the legacy of African and Indigenous slavery on the island and in the greater New England region. In a description of the early stone walls of New England, landscape geologist Robert Thorson points to the possible accuracy of Maizie's depiction of enslaved peoples building the stone walls of Block Island. Thorson states that in an era of agricultural improvement in the eighteenth century "hundreds of thousands of walls were built and rebuilt through the region by farmers, hired labor, the unemployed and slave" (Thorson, 2009, p.65). Here on Beacon Hill they continue to be symbolic of fraught island history.

Figure 5 Stone wall built by Maryann's neighbor

Later on, in our tour, a short drive away from Dodge Street, lies the Island Cemetery, a well-groomed lawn, heavily watered and freshly green, a place to honor former residents of Block Island and their families (Fig 6.). While this space exists to recognize the lives and eventual deaths of Block Islanders, —predominantly whites—the presence of Indigenous and Black peoples in death although highlighted in monuments across the island, is minimal in this cemetery. Maryann leads us to the gravestone of Abraham Lincoln Payne Jr., who served in World War I. The lone Gobern family member in the main section of the Island Cemetery (Fig 7).

Figure 6 Block Island Cemetery

Figure 7 Gravestone of Abraham Lincoln Payne Jr. in Block Island Cemetery

Figure 8 Pathway Leading up to cemetery where people of African descent are buried

A short distance away, down a grassy path nearly hidden by brush is where some of the Black decedents of Block Island lie to rest (Fig 8). Many of the markers are covered, behind layers of greenery. The Gobern family feels this disrespect for the dead as blatant racism. For instance, David Gobern, Maryann's oldest brother, explained that when an acquaintance brought him into a conversation about the supposed lack of racism on the island David took the opportunity to reply,

"Oh, hell yeah there is, [racism on the island] just take where's blacks being buried on Block Island?".' And [my acquaintance] said "'What are you talking about?' I said, Where do you bury blacks on Block Island? "Oh", the black cemetery. "And" where's that? In the back in a hole in the back of the white cemetery! And you don't maintain it!"'" (D. Gobern, 2020)

Figure 11 Epitaph of Robert E Banks and Lupetta S Banks

Ancestors of the Gobern family are buried in this back cemetery, with the most recent being their uncle Robert E. Banks in 2000 (Fig 11). Maryann remarks that she has relatives underneath the overgrowth, as well (Fig 12). The manicured lawn of the main section of the Island Cemetery is in stark contrast to that apportioned to Black bodies. In their deaths, consumed by overgrowth and brush, Maryann's ancestors remain unrecognized, unheard - not matter(ed) (Visperas, Brown, and Sexton 2016). This is reflective of the islands' Black and Indigenous history, placed in the brush behind that of the history of white settlers.

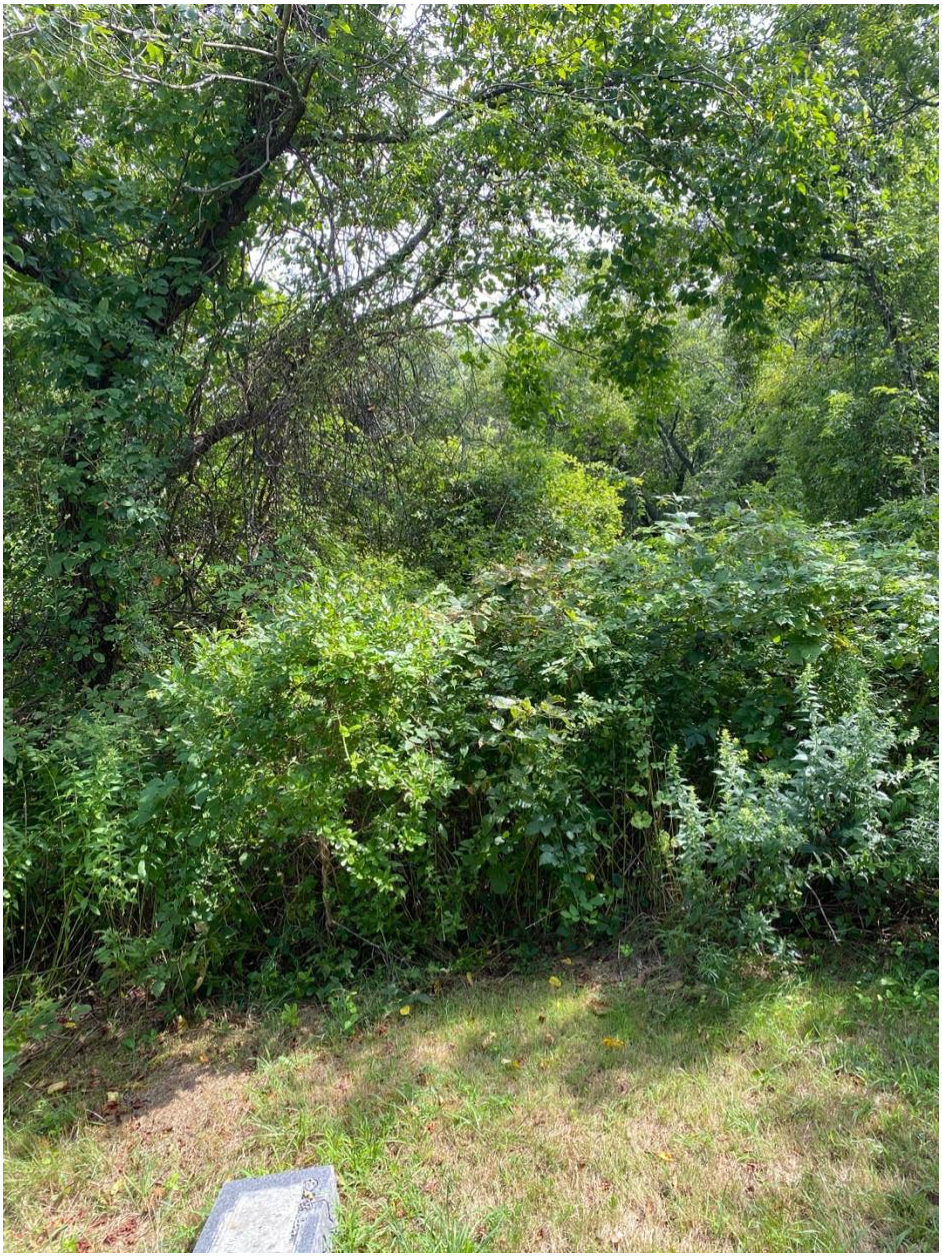


Figure 12 Cemetery Overgrowth

For those of us that live on the shoreline

This thesis hopes to generate new possibilities in understanding Black and Indigenous life on Block Island and the opportunities for liberation that an analysis of intersecting relationships provides – to put Black and Indigenous struggles into relationship in an effort to recenter those *never meant to survive* while imagining what can be otherwise (King, Navarro & Smith, 2020 (Lorde 1978)(Crawley 2020). To be and live otherwise is an investment in disorder and decolonization (King, Navarro & Smith 2020) (Crawley 2020). In 1945, Dr. Harold W. Browning, the Vice-President of Rhode Island State College, which would later become the University of Rhode Island, led the dedication ceremony the Block Island Historical Society. In his address, Browning made a direct call to emphasize the positive aspects of the tumultuous history of the island (Gobern, Frazier & Moore, 2020). He encouraged the historical society to "Take from the altar of the past, the fire, not the ashes"- to keep the heroes, of Block Island as "bright and shining." Based on what followed, we can presume these heroes are the European colonizers of Block Island from Browning's references to the "hard fighting" on the Island, done by the island's forefathers (Browning 1945, para. 12). In this call to "accentuate the positive" Browning reinforces a precedent for the portrayal of Block Island history - of colonization as heroism. A precedent already set within public history on Block Island with the establishment of Settler's Rock by the descendants of Block Island's European colonizers in 1911 (The Block Island Times 2011). This precedent, reinforced many times over throughout the intervening years, renders the histories of trauma and the resilience of Black and Indigenous communities and of Black and

Indigenous women in the face of colonialism as inconsequential (Browning 1945, para. 20) (Gobern, Frazier & Moore, 2020).

Black studies scholar Tiffany Lethabo King narrates the intersections between Black and Native studies. King provides a description of an event in 2015 on the North End of Boston in which a statue of Christopher Columbus was covered in red paint to simulate blood and spray-painted with "BLACK-LIVES-MATTER" (King 2020). King names that "For many, Columbus and the unfortunate yet inevitable genocide of Indigenous peoples are traditionally treated as unrelated to Black life and death within public discourses of the history of the Americas" (King, 2019, p.78). This event is a crux of the intersecting struggles of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism - they are not separate, but rather remain intertwined in the American imagination and the creation of the United States.

In the Fall of 2017, I attended a week-long training on feminist organizing, as newly hired staff of an environmental justice non-profit. On one particular day we read from the Combahee River Collective statement, written by a group of Black lesbian feminists in Boston in the 1970s. The collective states that "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." (Combahee River Collective, 1973). This statement places Black women at the center of liberation for all people; that is, their freedom, and recognition, would mean recognition for all others. With this statement, the tension among Black and Indigenous feminist thinkers present at the 2017 training became clear, just as the similar tensions in the Civil Rights era of the 1970s may have been made more clear by the Combahee River Statement. Many

questions began to arise with intensity and raw emotion. *Does the freedom of Indigenous women also rely on the freedom of Black women, or is this separate? In what ways are Indigenous communities left out of a movement towards liberation? Where is anti-Blackness present within Indigenous communities? Are Black women also participants in settler-colonialism?* Yet, these questions alone do not acknowledge the entanglements that Lethabo-King highlights, the struggles that Black and Indigenous communities have faced and continue to face under settler-colonialism, together (King 2020).

I'm a multiracial Black woman - navigating intersections is where I am most comfortable, where I feel most impassioned. I am interested in unpacking narratives that are not singular and lives that are not placed easily into binaries. What I seek to understand is the intersection of Black and Indigenous identity, experience, place-making and kinship especially through the eyes of Black and Indigenous women who live with these identities at a crossroads.

The legacy of the Gobern family on Block Island is exactly that, entangled in the influence of settler colonialism in the construction of history and place, and of the erasure of Black and Indigenous voices from our imaginings of the New England region, especially along the coast; one that cannot be easily narrated, although this is my attempt to do so. Just as the conditions for the creation of the United States were laid on a foundation of Indigenous erasure and Indigenous and African slavery, so too can we understand the settler colonial project on Block Island as a "logic of indigenous erasure that has developed and sustained itself through anti-blackness" (Leroy 2016, p.4).

The existence of the Americas is due to both the dispossession of Black and Indigenous peoples and their respective enslavement. Liberation requires both the address

of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, as they are integral aspects of our American imaginings and a part of the same conditions responsible for environmental harm. There *must* be an acknowledgement of both the ways in which anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity work to create our current conditions. Potawatomi scholar-activist, Kyle Whyte provides context for the connections between settler colonialism, capitalism and climate change and their subsequent impacts on Indigenous communities. He states that colonialism and capitalism - foundations for industrialization, are the drivers for anthropogenic climate change (Whyte, 2017). As geographer Kathyrn Yusoff articulates

> "If the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism. The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing settler colonialism have been ending worlds as long as they have been in existence" (Yusoff 2018, p.3)

The dystopia that the Anthropocene seems to forebode, has already been forced upon Black and Indigenous communities under settler colonialism (Yusoff, 2018). In the introduction to their anthology *Otherwise Worlds*, Black and Native Studies Scholars Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smith echo this stating that "Indigenous and Black folks have already experienced the apocalypse, and now we must figure out how to coordinate love and kinship back into our lives to reorder all our relations with the entire biosphere" (King, Navarro & Smith 2020, p.20). Climate change and the so-called dystopia within the Anthropocene, is an intensification of change -

environmental, social and cultural - forced upon Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism (Whyte, 2017).

Methods

The main purpose of this research is to analyze the collective memory and folklore of Block Island through the lens of the Gobern family, an Indigenous Manissean and African American Block Island family. The research seeks to understand the intersections of race, place, and memory-making on our imaginings of Rhode Island's coasts and communities. This thesis works with a combination of oral history and ethnographic methods, as an interdisciplinary study guided by lenses provided primarily under Black Studies, Native Studies, History, Anthropology, and the emerging field of Black Ecologies. The thesis works to understand the contemporary experience of people of color on Block Island, through the lens of the Gobern family of Black-Indigenous heritage.

The failure to incorporate Black and Indigenous voices in the historical narrative of Block Island is an act of "silence" in the construction of history (Trouillot, 1995). Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot states that the boundary between "what happened and that which is said to have happened in not always clear" and that power works in conjunction with history (Trouillot 1995, p.3) (Trouillot 1995, p.28). "Silences" occur within the construction of history as sources, archives, and narratives are created and finally in the eventual creation of history (Trouillot 1995). To address these historical silences, requires incorporation of sources, archives and narratives provided from the Black and Indigenous perspective - to reconstruct history and reclaim power over historical narratives of Block Island.

Within conceptions of justice, "a lack of recognition in the social and political realms…inflicts damage to oppressed individuals and communities in the political and

cultural realms" (Schlosberg 2009, p.14). Lack of recognition, or misrecognition, of Black and Indigenous history on Block Island contributes to pervasive erasure of these communities on the island. Recognizing and reconciling historical silences is therefore an act of social justice. In other words, incorporating this knowledge and silenced voices is a form of justice through recognition (Schlosberg 2009).

As stated by qualitative research theorist Valerie Janesick "A sense of history empowers us. By reading or viewing oral histories, we seek that which is common in our own experience" (Janesick 2007, p.116). Unpacking individual memories of Black-Indigenous families on Block Island and in Rhode Island, is a reflection of the missing memories and experiences from the current public memory of Block Island We can turn to interdisciplinary scholar Lisa Lowe in her discussion of Asian immigrant women and their activism work within the garment industry to connect testimonial and the role of personal narrative and oral history within resistance. "Forms of individual and collective narrative are not merely representations disconnected from "real" political life; neither are these expressions "transparent" records of histories of struggle. Rather these forms – life stories, oral histories, histories of community literature – are crucial media that connect subjects to social relations" (Lowe, 1998).

With the usage of personal testimony through oral history, the individual does not have to be compartmentalized as "a site of resolution." Rather, narratives can be included within how we understand and evaluate society and struggle. Oral history has a role in working to facilitate this "inspired identification" building solidarity within communities. The hope is that personal narrative in this case can work to reshape our understanding of history on Block Island, encouraging solidarity towards a more complete and just

production of the island's historical narrative, with the inclusion of personal narrative from voices, not often heard, expanding the scholarship of "what constitute[s] legitimate knowledges" (Lowe,1998). As stated by Geographer Darius Scott "oral history as a method has provided a means of privileging the particular and personal voices of those excluded from official archival records" (Scott, 2019, p.1099). In this way oral history is both complex and politized in which historians work to re-constitute the past, and re-write culture (Riley & Harvey, 2007, p.345). Positivist critiques discuss the reliability of oral history, its selective nature, nostalgia and personal bias of interviewers and interviewees (Riley & Harvey, 2007). In response we can understanding this "so-called unreliability" as a strength and the subjectivity of memory as able to provide "clues about not only the meanings of historical experience but also the relationships between past and presents, between memory and personal identity and between individual and collective identity" (Riley & Harvey, 2007). Within this literature we find the importance of my thesis work - understanding that the subjectivity of the members of the Gobern family and their experiences are essential to understanding the change in Block Island for people of color over time, the relationship between their memory and identities, and how their individual memories differ from collective memories of the island.

This thesis takes from what Janesick names as postmodern oral history which frames participants as co-researchers, and collaborators (Janesick, 2007). As stated by Janesick "Postmodernists also see oral history as a way to repair the historical record by including the voices of participants outside the mainstream of society" (Janesick, 2007 p.112). Members of the Gobern family within this research were given a set of guiding questions, but conversations often ran their own course, covering what interviewees were

interested in discussing and providing additional context too. The usage of oral history in this case is to give context to place and to reveal hidden histories – Black and Indigenous experiences and ecologies on Block Island (Scott, 2019).

It is known that collective memory is shaped by power relations (Weedon & Jordan, 2012). Although it is personal, it is reflective of the ways in which a particular society remembers and is shaped by the state, which acts as a gatekeeper of memory and forgetting (Weedon & Jordan, 2012). A major method in this research is the usage of "counter-memory" of Black-Indigenous peoples which is often at odds with what is known as state memory (Hanchard 2008). Developed by Foucault, "counter-memory" and subsequently "counter-history" work to reassert hidden voices and reject notions of omission and distortion within the construction of history (Medina, 2011). The access to written history of Black-Indigenous experience on Block Island is minimal, or written by white researchers, and arguably riddled with inaccuracies (Block Island Times, 2016). As articulated by Africana Studies scholar, Michael Hanchard "In the absence of written history, memory may serve as a bulwark against the erasure, neglect or elision of a memory as a potential source and opportunity from history (Hanchard, 2008, p.52). In challenging state memory, or the dominant narratives about Black-Indigenous peoples on Block Island and New England, the memory of the Gobern family members provides an alternative. The hope is that this can work to transform dominant narrative and "challenge hegemonic collective memory" which in many ways has been shaped by white supremacy (Weedon & Jordan, 2012, p.150). Historian Tiya Miles names that "For the void that remains when we refuse to speak of the past is in fact a presence, a presence both haunting and destructive" (Miles, 2015, p.XVI). Bringing Black-Indigenous

memory into the present is intended to reconcile this destruction. Anthropologist Ann Stoler provides additional context on understanding the archive. Stoler asserts the necessity to move away from an "extractive exercise to an ethnographic one" in treatment of the archives, in recognizing power in archival production (Stoler, 2010, p.47).

Ethnographic portions of this thesis draw from feminist standpoint theory and feminist ethnography. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges that knowledge is situated - this thesis includes those that have experienced marginalization into knowledge production about Block Island. Feminist ethnography differs from "standard" ethnography in its focus on women's lives and experiences (Naples & Gurrr 2014). Sociologists Nancy A. Naples and Barbara Gurr assert that within the concept of feminist standpoint theory "the strongest approach to knowledge production is one that takes into account the most diverse set of experiences" (Naples & Gurr 2014, p.19). Ethnographic components included visits to locations of significance to the Gobern family on the island. I also considered online attendance to events such as the meeting of the Block Island Historical Society, as additional ethnographic portions of this thesis. The current pandemic has called for a shift from "the physical realm into a digital reality" (Howlett, 2021, p.2). In many cases, I have also considered the "field" as that of online communication and presence with members of the Gobern family through Zoom communications. Video-technology allows for a more personable interaction and spontaneity in responses from interviewees (Howlett, 2021). Although there is an idea that fieldwork requires co-location, in particular geographic area, this research expands the concept of the field, including both online Zoom communications and meetings, in addition to physical trips to Block Island. This can be considered to be "remote

embeddedness", a shift from co-location to co-presence, allowing for grounded-ness, while at a distance (Howlett, 2021).

Literature Review

New England Social History

Residents of New England hold an identity strongly connected to narratives about its past(Conforti, 2001). This creates, in the words of political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson, an "imagined community," yet the popular imaginings of New England are built on false narratives, dependent upon an erasure of Indigenous existence and manipulation of the narrative of African slavery (Anderson, 1983). Historian Margret Ellen Newell builds on this issue in the construction of the historical narrative of New England, implying that the popular imagination of American history places slavery in context of the colonial South or Caribbean rather than within New England. This narrative is unwilling to acknowledge the pervasive enslavement of both Indigenous and Black life (Newell, 2015). The historical narrative of New England obscures or ignores these events and instead focuses on a narrative of "historically free, white New England" (Melish, 1998, p2). The institution of slavery is cast as the history of "other" regions rather than recognized as essential to the economic and social development of New England. This erasure is especially poignant for the state of Rhode Island due to its participation and economic gain from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with Newport, Rhode Island becoming the most important slave trading port of departure within North America (Clark-Pujara, 2016). By 1750, 10% of the Rhode Island population was enslaved, almost double the northern average (Clark-Pujara, 2016). Acknowledging this history and the descendants who continue to be affected by the implication of this history is an act to combat what Justin Leroy calls "colonial unknowing," the refusal to recognize the scope of slavery and settlement as interconnected (Leroy, 2016).

Bringing in coastal narratives of Black and Indigenous individuals, we can turn to the work of American Studies scholar Ayasha Guerin and what she names as "Black Marine Entanglements." Speaking to the "colonization of knowledge" which occurred in maritime regions, Guerin calls the whaling industry within New England, "an intersectional history of species and racial exploitation" (Guerin 2019, p.33). Throughout the 19th century free and fugitive Black Americans gravitated towards whaling hubs in Sag Harbor, Martha's Vineyard and New Bedford. This also represents an important intersection of Indigenous and Black history and ecologies on the water, in which the "dwindling Native whaling workforce intermarried with Black workers, some of which were fugitive slaves. Many of the most prominent men in the New England marine industries were of enslaved-African and Native American descent (Guerin 2019, p.32). Additionally, we can generate an understanding of coastal New England and its racialized ecologies from historians Andrew Kahrl and Jeffery Bolster. The work of Bolster highlights the impact and creation of maritime experience and culture by African American seafarers. Historian Jeffery Bolster's work informs the notion that there have been connected histories with African American and the sea, highlighting the role of seafaring on the development of New England Black society (Bolster 1998). While the participation of Black men in the seafaring industry shifted after the 19th century, their presence had a lasting impact on the development of maritime culture in the region (Bolster 1998). The commonly portrayed history of maritime culture, which omits or minimizes the presence of African Americans in maritime society and culture in New England, is representative of an issue in the whole of the region; Black presence is often overlooked in collective memory. Bolster's work speaks to the connection that African

Americans have to coastal life - a life and connection which the Gobern family also maintain to Block Island.

Historian Andrew Kahrl gives context to the more recent experiences of Black New England residents through the history of Connecticut beach privatization and usage. As stated by Kahrl "in New England and across America, this was how many Black children first encountered the color line; during the summer and at the beach" (Kahrl 2018, p.15). The privatization of the shoreline mainly by wealthy white residents, across Connecticut and the greater New England region, led to the segregation of Black New Englanders from the New England coastline and its beaches, and to their subsequent removal from the narratives about these spaces. (Kahrl, 2018). This systematic separation of Black residents from their land is repeated in the history of Block Island.

Intersections of Blackness and Indigeneity

In her introduction to *Ties that Bind,* discussing an Afro-Cherokee family, Tiya Miles states the risk involved in acknowledging the kinship between Black and Indigenous peoples and the "triangled" relationship between "Indian, African, and European people" (Miles 2005, p. XV). "This relationship has existed ever since African and Native people came into contact in massive numbers during European colonial expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it continues to prohibit blacks and Indians from speaking directly with one another, forcing them instead to speak through and against the material and discursive elements of American colonialism (Miles 2005, p.XV).

We can turn to the work of political theology scholar Tapaji Garba and critical theory scholar Sara-Maria Sorentino to further understand the relationship between Black

and Indigenous history and liberation. The recognition of the Americas as a settler-colonial project dependent upon a triad of settler-native-slave provides a lens through which we can understand Black and Native studies in conjunction, rather than at opposite poles. The refusal to acknowledge the establishment of the American colonies as dependent upon dispossession of Indigenous land AND the enslavement of African people places Black Americans as a tool of settler colonialism rather than a historically marginalized group which also experienced the impacts of settler colonialism. Decolonization requires that we address both slavery and the dispossession of Indigenous land by settlers-- the triad according to Garba and Sorentino-- because a conceptual dyad between native and settler is unable to fully encompass the impacts of settler colonialism within the Americas. Within the realm of Black and Native studies it becomes essential to recognize where these areas of study remain at a crossroads, where the liberation of Indigenous people of the Americas intersects with liberation for people of the African diaspora. Although some scholars work to define decolonization in concrete terms, with land at its focal point, they sometimes fail to fully include slavery into their notions of what constitutes settler colonialism - in doing so slavery's impact and its implication are added as an afterthought (Garba & Sorentino 2020). The categorization of enslaved peoples as "victims and antagonists" and the categorization of Indigenous people's as having lost only land leaves no room for reconciliation and reparation (Garba & Sorentino 2020, p. 776).

Within the fields Black and Native studies, this reveals a tension - there is liberation for Black lives in the form of civil rights and abolition, or there is liberation for Indigenous lives in the form of decolonization. What Garba and Sorentino argue for,

what has resonance for these fields is anti-exceptionalism. In their analysis they refuse to accept binary thinking in terms of settler colonialism. There is no "Indigenous/settler binary constituted in relation to land" nor is there a "black/non-black binary" founded on racial slavery (Garba & Sorentino 2020 p.776). However, there is a lack of recognition of the current impact of settler colonialism on our current conditions, land ownership, incarceration and other racially mediated social constructs. I ask whether there is a third area of study that remains to be explored, one which considers the intersection of Black and Indigenous life and their influences beyond the settler. This might perhaps provide a praxis in which to imagine future liberation in the conjunction of Blackness and Indigeneity – this thesis is a step in that direction.

Black-Indigenous Ecologies

In her work, *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Harraway's hyphenated usage of the words *living-with* and *dying-with* provides a sense of dependency in these terms: to live with is to live because another organism is living, to die with is to die because another organism is dying. Building on work at the intersections of Blackness and Indigeneity, I am led by historians Tiya Miles, Jared Ross Hardesty, and Black Studies scholars Tiffany Lethabo King and Sharon Holland. To represent this interconnectedness, the terms Black-Indigenous will be used throughout to imply a deep inter-connection between the terms, in opposition to their independent histories in the United States as siloed racial categorizations**.** This thesis pulls from these historians and scholars to understand the impact of these intersections on what we can call Black-Indigenous ecology, to understand the impact of Black-Indigenous Manissean peoples on Block Island.

First coined by the sociologist Nathan Hare, the movement for Black Ecology argues that Black lives and the environmental movement should cease to stand in opposition to one another (Hare, 1979). Black Ecology asserts the reality that Black communities in the African diaspora are most susceptible to the effects of climate change and toxic exposure. It also names that there is knowledge produced by these same communities that has relevance for imagining a future outside of dispossession and destruction (Roane & Hoseby, 2019 "In turning to ecology and race we might begin to disentangle nature from the natural, the naturalized or even the biological". (Rusert, 2010, p.161)

Island studies scholar, Phillip Hayward provides an essential lens through which to view island communities with the term 'aquapelago' to describe locations that are defined by the interconnectedness of their aquatic spaces and land (Hayward 2012). Within its early history Block Island was characterized as part of the colonial New England coastal aquapelagic society with an economy supported through fishing and agriculture and defined by its connections to both land and water. Guerin points to the usage of the aquapelagic framework, in which she names that "An aquapelagic framework might encourage us to study racially dissonant experiences of time, and thus history" connected to land and sea (Guerin p.36). Guerin uses the aquapelagic framework to understand the inter-species relations in New York's 19th century harbor, and this thesis uses a similar frame to understand the "entanglements between land and oceanic space" on Block Island, specifically for peoples of Black and Indigenous descent (Guerin, 2019, p.36).

Black Feminist Ecological Thought

Black and Indigenous women are often tasked with maintaining place for their families, upholding their connection to their land and their history - depended upon to maintain and pass down tradition.)..The Combahee Collective statement, discussed within my introduction, received its namesake from the Combahee River, where Harriet Tubman led a military campaign to free enslaved Black Americans during the Civil War. The Combahee River provides not only a lens in which to draw an understanding of Black Women and their freedom, but also a lesson in Black Ecology If we can consider the legacy of the Combahee River as one of Black women's Ecology-- as one of many places where Black women are tasked with saving themselves and others, upholding legacy, and maintaining survival-- we can begin to consider the Black-Indigenous women of Block Island as one story among many where Black women have been tasked with survival and care, of maintaining a particular ecology.

For the Gobern family, connection to environment and land has therefore been dependent on women. At the end of her manifesto, *Black Feminist Ecological Thought*, Dr. Chelsea Mikael Frazier maintains that "Black Feminist Ecological Thought asks all of us to keep our eyes peeled for the very subtle ways that environmental harm and discourses around environmental harm tend to blame, neglect, or obscure Black women's complex relationships to themselves, their families, and their environments" (Frazier, 2020, para. 16). We can consider the following chapters 2 through 4 as vignettes of Black and Indigenous women's complex relationships to themselves, their families, and their island.

Black feminist ecologies scholar, Carlyn Ferrari speaks to this in what she has called the "legacy of Black feminist environmental consciousness." The work of Black

women is found at the frontlines of climate change and environmental justice, while the faces of the mainstream environmental movement are predominantly white and male (Ferrari 2020). African American studies scholar Valerie Ann Kaalund remarks on the role of Black women within the environmental justice movement discussing Hazel Johnson, a grandmother, who became involved in environmental justice activism in response to the asthma, cancer, skin rash, kidney and liver problems of people in southeast Chicago. (Kaalund, 2004, p.79) Johnson eventually becomes known as the "mother of the environmental justice movement" and it is no coincidence that this mother is a Black grandmother. "These women and others, acting with moral agency, were instrumental in launching the national movement for environmental justice, advocating for fit communities in which to live, work, play, pray, and learn. This moral agency is based in part on an ethical consciousness that is an articulation of principles and values that affirms the activists' humanity and the humanity of those in their communities (Kaalund, 2004, p.79). Here, Black women are as Kaalund's title suggests *Heading the Call*. The Gobern family legacy exemplifies this call to maintain family well-being and legacy.

Chapter 1 Imagining Block Island

Historical Depictions

Block Island, a small island community off the coast of Rhode Island, represents an opportunity to understand the long-lasting impact of settler colonialism on the construction of history and identity. This erasure is reinforced by island tourism; a draw of Block Island is its attachment to colonial cultural sites. The following will analyze the dominant historical narratives and contemporary history of Block Island to determine what is missing from this constructed narrative and also attempt to construct a Block Island identity – to determine both who is considered a Block Islander today and who is left out of this distinction and associated claims to the island.

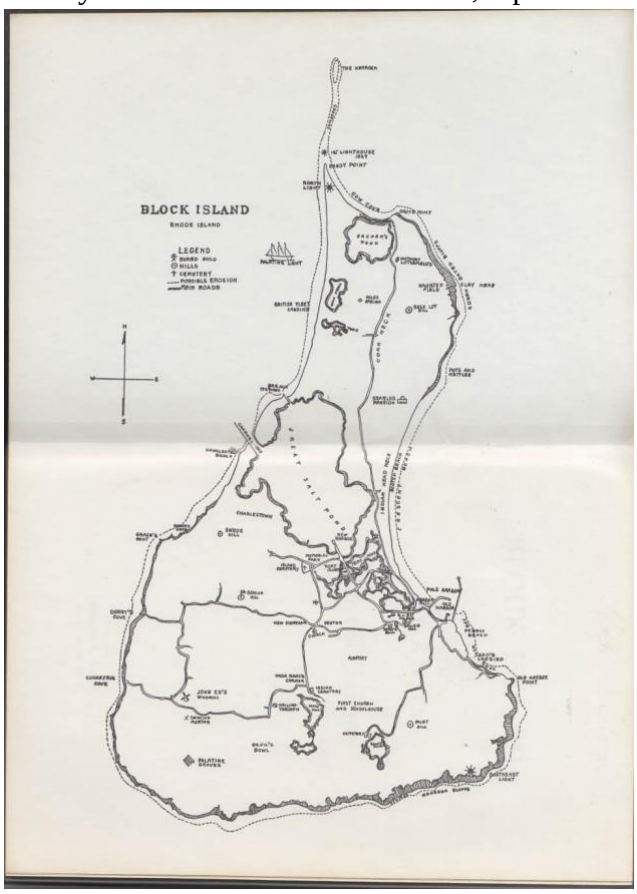


Fig 13 Map of Block Island taken from Ethel Colt Ritchie's Block Island Lore and Legends

The location of Block Island, with its intense fog and seas not easily navigated, limited access to the island and its overall development (Historical and Architectural Resources ,1991). Because of this, and the absence of a natural harbor, Block Island remained a majority remote agricultural and maritime community for the first two

centuries post-European contact in 1614, until the construction of two harbors, Old Harbor in 1870 and New Harbor in 1895, encouraging development and also shaping the social experiences of people on the island (Historic and Architectural Resources 1991). The island's location also limited communication and interaction with mainland Rhode Island (Historic and Architectural Resources,1991).

In many historical depictions of Block Island, the story of the island begins in 1614, with the arrival of Dutch trader Adrian Block (Livermore ,1877). After that, the arrival of John Oldham, an early European colonizer - frames the first altercation between the Manissean people and European settlers (Livermore, 1877). It is portrayed in the historical narrative that Oldham is killed by members of the tribe after an altercation (Livermore 1877). As stated by Island historian Reverend S.T. Livermore, relaying the words of one Captain Underhill

> "The cause of our war against the Block Islanders was for taking away the life of one Master John Oldham, who made it common course to trade among the Indians. He coming to Block Island to drive trade with them, the Islanders came to his boat, and having goa a full view of commodities which gave them fill consent, consulted how they might destroy him and his company, to the end they might clothier their bloody flesh with his lawful garments" (Livermore 1877, p.51)

Oldham's death presents a key point in the development of the historical narrative about Block Island and the Manissean people; conquest became justified and righteous for the state of Massachusetts (Livermore 1877).

In the 20th Century, Block Islander, Ethel Colt Richie, frames the island in context of its history, folklore, and known legends (Richie 1956). As Block Island historian Benjamin Hruska points out the beginning to Richie's account of Block Island points to the fame in which much of the island history is portrayed (Hruska, 2013). Richie states that "The earliest history of Block Island is found in the yellowed records of colonial New England (Richie 1955, p.1). In this way, Richie directly lays the foundations of Block Island as a place whose value is tied to its role as a colony. Much of this history portrays a "fight" for settlement. A Block Island taxi driver known as Maizie, recounts that "the white men wrestled" the island from Indigenous people (Rose 1957, p.5-6). For Richie, Maizie, and Livermore, authors attempting to write the history of Block Island, indigenous presence is characterized as combative or framed as subversive to the act of settlement – "their belligerent attitude was often supported by fire-water, sold to them by unscrupulous traders who made periodical visits among the tribes to barter with them" (Richie 1980, p.24). In these historical accounts the foundational narratives of Block Island are framed around the act of occupying land and "conquering" Indigenous peoples.

The existence of slavery on Block Island echoes that of much of the Americas with a history of settler colonialism, in which Indigenous people were enslaved or brought into bond-servitude, followed by the inclusion of African slavery on the island (Hixon 2013). Within the constructed narrative of the island, there is some small recognition of the presence of slavery on Block Island, but this recognition has only been discussed within the context of death. Richie states that the island's "Indian Cemetery"

contains “Island Indians, Indian bond-servants, and the negro slaves brought over by the early proprietors of the island, together with their descendants” (Richie 1956, p.36).

In terms of the African American experience, the life of Fred Benson is unique to the Block Island narrative. Born to racially mixed parents from England, he was sent to the island to work as a “house boy” where he remained on the island for much of his life (Benson, 1977). In his own historical accounts, Benson describes the history of slavery on the island in brief terms, stating “It may be of interest to some of my readers to know that there were slaves on Block Island” (Benson 1977, p.35). Benson turns to petitions, town meeting notes, and newspaper and magazine publications to narrate this history of Block Island from 1877 – 1935. To date, there is no other account of the contemporary African American experience on Block Island, as told by people of African descent, outside of Benson’s own short biography.

Folklore and Legends

The folklore and legends of Block Island contribute to the perception of the island as “mythical and unreal” (Baldacchino 2006, p.5). Pirates, shipwrecks, and hidden treasure are all aspects of Block Island folklore which define the island and represent important aspects of the Block Island identity. Livermore’s depiction of the importance of the legend of Block Island hidden treasure is depicted in his quote “There has been considerable effort by the Islanders to find hidden treasures on their shores. Marvelous stories have been told of sights seen, and of sounds heard while prospecting from the imagined pots of gold and silver” (Livermore 1877, p.181). The Palatine shipwreck also represents one of the many Block Island mysteries (Livermore 1877). The exact fate of the Palatine is contested, and some narratives state that the ship was burned and looted by

Block Islanders, while others state that it was never burned by islanders specifically, or that it was never burned at all and was not wrecked on the island's shores (Livermore 1877). The lingering folklore of the wreck on Block Island has been the Palatine Light, the lingering ghost ship of the Palatine whose bright light can be seen from the island (New England Historical Society 2020). The folklore of the Palatine and hidden treasure on the island are representative of the myths that often shroud islands. In another tale, portaying interracial relations surrounding the Palatine, it is presented in folklore that an enslaved African named New Port, marries one of the women who survived the wreckage, Kate (Livermore 1877). this case Block Island becomes one of these "places of extremes"- an uncertain past ship wreck becomes a ghost ship, pirates on the island result in hidden treasure (Lovejoy 2019). This also allows for critical questions about the island's history to be foregone – colonization is shrouded in mystery and folklore.

In the same way that some of the island's historical events are masked by folklore, particular Block Island historical figures have become immortalized through not entirely factual means. Fred Benson is a popular figure in the contemporary history of Block Island as a mentor and lifelong Block Islander. Benson becomes a "living legend" to the community and is known in some accounts as the island's "only" black resident (Hillinger, 1985), although in a 1979 interview, Benson, a former teacher, describes four black children in his high school class, this inaccurate singularity is a part of his legacy (Burns & Benson, 1979).

Isaac Church, a Manissean man who was well-known on the island during the 19th century, has a similar characterization to Benson. He was well-liked by the residents of the island, and as described by Livermore, they "speak well of "Uncle Isaac Church," and

his comfortable home is proof of his temperance and industry in former days." (Livermore, 1877, p.65). This also hints at the perception of Manissean people on the island, as Church is viewed as an exception. More importantly, the folklore around Church is intended to represent that of the "last Manissean" on the island (Hruska 2013). Church's representation as the last indigenous person on the island is fueled by the perception of him as "fully" Manissean, and his descendants as only "part", a trope that works to erase the presence of Manissean people on Block Island (Livermore 1877, p.65). This also works to accomplish what O'Brien calls "lasting" in the erasure of Indigenous peoples within New England (O'Brien, 2010). Benson and Church are now physically immortalized as Block Island "legends" with the geographic naming of Uncle Issacs's corner and Fred Benson Beach, as such they remain singular figures of Black and Indigenous people on Block Island (Block Island Info 2020).

Island Identity

The contemporary history of Block Island functions to create an overarching Block Island tale that informs the island's identity. Hayward's term 'aquapelago' again becomes relevant here. Within its early history Block Island was characterized similarly to much of colonial New England with an economy supported through fishing and agriculture, an aquapelagic society, defined by its connections to both land and water. Over time, the Block Island economy has shifted away from these industries to a tourism economy (New Shoreham, 2016). Patterns of unemployment on the island reflect the impact of seasonal work on the economy with rates dipping May through October, and then steadily increasing in the off season (New Shoreham, 2016).

These characteristics support the notion that Block Island's current identity has transitioned away from an aquapelagic society as neither agriculture nor fishing provide much of the Island's economy or identity today (Hayward, 2010). The Block Island Wind Farm is another example of a shift in the island's identity, with energy development now influencing the perception of the island. The wind farm, as the first operational wind farm project in the US, is slowly becoming a part of the modern identity of Block Island (Dwyer and Bidwell 2011). Although not without controversy and opposition, the wind farm is becoming accepted as a part of the landscape of the island and an area of interest for visitors to the island (Moore, 2018).

There are many facets to island identity that are present in historical texts and that can be elucidated through interviews with Block Islanders; it can be concluded that being a resident of Block Island presents a unique identity. One of the main consistencies in descriptions of the island's residents is their sense of resiliency and independence. Richie stated in the 1950s that "The Islanders are enterprising and well-do-do, self-reliant and very proud of their small insular township" (Richie 1956, p.3). This is echoed in oral history interviews of Block Island residents in the early 2000s . In describing the difference between "newcomers and Block Islanders" Luella Ball, a Block Island teacher, and founding director of the Block Island Conservancy states "you have to be a certain type of person to be able to live on the island – you have to make life for yourself" (Burns & Ball 1979).

Ball's 20th century account of newcomers to Block Island reflects a similar tension described on the Dutch island of Texel between "original islanders and othersiders" (Duim & Lengkeek 2004, p.275). There is a difference between those that

are locals and new residents of the island. Those that are *true* Block Islanders are hard-working, don't complain, and aren't concerned with having the same exact entertainment and modern amenities as mainland Rhode Island – they're content with island life (Burns & Ball 1979). As stated in an interview by Captain Rob Lewis, a Block Island local, "Life was good and it was wholesome" (Lewis, 2000). Being a Block Island resident in this case presents a sense of pride in a sensible life that is self-reliant and independent, and these characteristics also determine who is a "true resident" versus a temporary guest.

A Time Warp

While a major aspect of the island's modern economy is tourism, the image projected to visitors of the island is shaped by tales of the past. Here, visitors are able to encounter "innocent and healthful amusements" common to the island (Livermore 1877, p.230.) This echoes the characterization of the Block Islander identity, as "wholesome" (Lewis, 2000). Cultural and historical sites are major draws to vacationing on Block Island from historic buildings in the Old Harbor downtown to witnessing the scenic views at the Mohegan Bluffs. In a description of vacationing on the island in the 1980s, *New York Times* reporter Ralph Blumenthal describes Block Island through a lens of its charm of the past. Blumenthal states "Block Island remains a time warp of 19th century vacation pleasures" (Blumenthal 1985, para. 1) Somewhat disturbingly, the characterizations of Block Island tourism by Blumenthal and Livermore although more than 100 years apart, remain mostly unchanged. Although viewed as a major aspect of the appeal of the island, this frame of Block Island as a "time warp", and its focus on its colonial past, contributes to the island and its tourist attractions as relics of settler

colonialism that erase the experience of indigenous and black Block Island residents.

Another major historical site, first dedicated in 1911 and subsequently memorialized with a plaque during the island's 1961 tricentennial, Settler's Rock, presents a list of men who first participated in the settlement of Block Island (Richie 1956). As a site, Settler's Rock is another example of a consistent narrative celebrating the role of white settlement to the history of Block Island, while failing to acknowledge its impact on the Manissean people. While the narrative of tourism on Block Island emphasizes and uplifts this is island history, and its preservation, it fails to adequately incorporate and acknowledge the destruction of Manissean life and the settler participation in the slave trade that was an integral aspect of the island's history. In this way, modern tourism on the island continues to retell a white-washed version of the colonial past.

Implications for Island Studies

The portrayal of island history through a Euro-centric lens has contributed to the marginalization and erasure of Indigenous and Black descendants on Block Island (Hruska 2013). Indigenous life is mainly framed after contact with settlers in terms of violence, disease and cowardice, from the Manissean people, in order to assist in providing justification for conquest. Discussions of slavery and its impact on the island are provided in extremely limited terms. If mentioned at all, Black life on the island begins and ends with enslavement with few exceptions.

There is an overarching question of why this may be the case and what purpose the erasure of black and native voicess from the history and narrative of Block Island

serves. The current narrative of Block Island reinforced by the tourism industry is not currently served by inclusion of these voices. Their erasure allows for a continuation of pride in identity, focusing on the achievements present within the Euro-centric history of the island, rather than the more complex and and fraught history – there is no need to be critical of being a resident of Block Island. This gradual erasure of the past and construction of an identity and history that does not recognize the negative impacts of settler colonialism can be considered an aspect of historical bystander trauma (Sanchez 2016).

Colonization on islands plays a role in the construction of memory and history. For example, Bahn and Flenley, in their analysis of the history of Easter Island, blame the Rapa Nui for their own population decline, due to overexploitation of resources, failing to acknowledge the role of western contact. The Rapa Nui civilization then becomes a legend, shrouded in mystery and a lesson for environmental sustainability. Acknowledging continued indigenous presence on Easter Island would recognize the influence of western colonization on the island population and that these islands are not isolated systems (Bahn & Flenley 1992, Malm 2003). The folklore and legends on Block Island clearly play a similar role in historical erasure; as myths and legends, these stories are not unpacked any further. The lives of Fred Benson and Isaac Church are limited to their role as island legends and the additional details of their lives on the island as people of color is never explored and other possible truths are never ever addressed. Identifying and showcasing that there are, and have always have been,, people of Manissean descent on Block Island brings the fraught history of colonialism forward into the light. Block

Island is an opportunity to reshape narratives about colonialism and its long-lasting impacts on history, memory, and representation.

Acknowledging the variety of knowledge that has been lost about Block Island from the perspective of indigenous peoples that have experienced historic erasure and attempting to reconcile this loss and erasure, is an act of decolonizing the Block Island narrative. Linda Tuhiwai Smith provides insight into the role of understanding history through the process of decolonization stating "Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges" (Tuhiwai Smith 2013, p. 36). Recognizing the continued presence of Manissean and black life on the island, asserts that colonization does not only exist in the past; descendants are dealing with these implications in the present. Through the perspective of island studies, island colonization is a process, not an event, and therefore the process of decolonizing the narrative of Block Island will take time (Nadarajah & Grydehøj 2016). Because of the intersection of settler colonialism in the histories of islands, unpacking the ways in which historical narrative and identity are shaped by this process allows for thethe possibility of reconciling these past histories, rather than disregarding them.

Within the field of island studies,, understanding island identity and history is especially poignant in areas in which tourism is a prominent industry. In these areas, tourism can continue to perpetuate colonial narratives that are not holistic or just. Recognizing and acknowledging a colonial past isn't inherently an issue when showcasing the culture and history of the island, but it is when these narratives systematically erase, omit, or misrepresent communities that this becomes a form of

erasure. As Nadarajah and Grydehøj state “There is no going back to pre-contact indigenous cultures, to precolonial political structures or economies” but within historical narratives, there is an ability to acknowledge that these cultures existed and continue to exist and to incorporate their narrative into the overall story and identity of Block Island. (Nadarajah and Grydehøj 438).

Chapter 2 The Land on Beacon Hill

The Tractor

One stop on Maryann's tour of Block Island is the Fort Island Monument. It is a stone marker that eerily looks like a tombstone, somewhat hidden among the brush – if you were not looking for it, it would be unlikely for you to happen upon it (Moore 2020). It feels out of place across the street from the mass movement of tourists and scooters. The monument reads "On this spot 300 Block Island Indians were challenged to battle by sixteen men and one boy. Here Indians held feasts making many shell heaps" along with the names of the island's "original settlers." This monument is a poignant example of the portrayal of Manissean people on the island and the centering of English settlers within the historical narratives of Block Island. The strength of the English men is superior to that of the Indigenous peoples, in framing the Manisseans as weak - it only takes a few white men and a child to "conquer" a group of hundreds.

Figure 12. Fort Island Indian Fort Monument

Within the text of the monument, the English, rather than the Manissean people are considered to be the "original settlers" of the island. The discussion of Indigenous life is brief and sandwiched between praise of settlement and Indigenous erasure. "Here Indians held feasts making many shell heaps" an almost comical rhyme, fails to encompass the impact of violence and English settlement on the Manissean people.

As Historian Jean O'Brien names, this monument is one of many examples of the "replacement narrative" (O'Brien 2013 p.55 -56). The text of the monument indicates that "the sixteen men and one boy" replace the Indians who "held feasts making many shell heaps." This is a narrative that implies this is a place that only belonged to the Manisseans in the distant past, they are only known by objects, shell heaps, that make them visible. The Fort Island Monument is one of many examples in which the construction of history has been shaped through a lens of settler colonialism and white supremacy. For Manissean descendent Maryann Gobern Mathews, these monuments are not a celebration, but indicate the loss of life and ways of life of the

Figure 14. Julia Perry Payne's tractor

Indigenous community on Block Island. Sites like this beg the question: Are there places that portray the resilience of Black and Indigenous life and ecology on the island, and if so, where and what are they?

On Maryann's tour we drive towards the portion of the property that is no longer in physical possession of the Gobern family, but where their history and ecology is poignant. A rusted tractor that lies on Beacon Hill is a material representation of the legacy of the Gobern family, a Black and Indigenous legacy on Block Island (Fig 14). Nestled deeply into the ground, the tractor is a material representation of the family's connection to Block Island. Weathered, yet resilient. The presence of the tractor articulates that the land remains a part of the family legacy despite its changing ownership – here is Black and Indigenous history and life. The land, much like that of her family, is the legacy of Julia Perry Payne, a Manissean woman born on Block Island in 1871and ancestor to Maryann Gobern Matthews. Accounting for the lives of Julia Perry Payne and her husband Abraham Lincoln Payne Sr. as well as their descendants allows for a reclamation of the island's history - naming that Manissean life has always been and has continued to be present on Block Island and "silencing" in the construction of the island's history (Trouillot 1995).

Julia Perry Payne

Julia Ann Perry was born on Block Island on December 29th, 1871 to Mary Sheffield Perry (1844-1929) and John T. Perry (1843-1918) in New Shoreham. Both Mary and John, were of Indigenous descent, Manissean and Narragansett also born in New Shoreham, a testament to the Gobern families deep roots on the island. Although the relationship between the Narragansett and Manissean tribes maintains uncertainty there

are multiple narratives which point to the possible relationship between the tribes. History points to relationship between the Narragansett and Manisseans, being one of Manisseans receiving protection in exchange for tribute , in the 16th century, under the authority of the Narragansett peoples (Narragansett Indian Tribe 2018). In 2011, Narragansett representative and Medicine Man, John Brown provided accounts which add to the folklore of the relationship between the tribes. Speaking to the Block Island times in 2011, Brown names the island as a ""no-mans-land" where the Narragansett tribe would send people "who did not have the physical or mental capacity to live on the mainland" (BI Times 2011). This comment is indicative of the Narragansett view of the Indigenous peoples of Block Island, their intertwined and complex history, and the connection that the Gobern family maintains with both the Manissean and Narragansett tribes.

Figure 15. Julia Perry Payne, age unknown

At the period in which Mary and John Perry were living on Block Island, the New England region continued to go through a process of Indigenous erasure through documentation. After colonization, the replacement of Indigenous peoples continued to be exemplified through census data. John Perry is listed as Black within the New

Shoreham 1860 census. In her "Return of a Death" Mary is also listed as Black. Later, within census data in 1910 and 1920, Julia Perry is listed as Black, but in 1905, at the age of 33, she is listed as colored. In 1940 at age 69, she is listed as Negro. Julia's listing in the census and that of her parents is representative of Indigenous erasure in the New England region, what O'Brien calls "problematic slippage in categories in the census", also known as paper genocide (O'Brien p.202). Within documentation, Julia has been stripped of her indigenous identity, although this aspect of her identity and life remains strongly held within her family structure and her role and existence on the island. Amateur Historian Ethel Colt Ritchie speaks to the ways in which the Block Island Indian cemetery comes to blur lines between Blackness and Indigeneity specifically on Block Island, naming that "Island Indians, Indian bond-servants, and the negro slaves brought over by the early proprietors of the Island, together with their descendants" (Ritchie p.36)

The identity of Black and Indigenous peoples of Block Island, is known mainly from oral history, the identities they held for themselves and passed down through their families through word of mouth and traditions. It can also be understood through sources such as census data and the local newspaper *The Block Island Times*. Within 18th century New England, Indigenous and African peoples married, brought together first through shared experiences of enslavement and later the sharing of neighborhoods and communities (Mandell 1998). Block Island historian Benjamin Hurska claims that on Block Island, this intermarriage specifically complicates the story of heritage of Indigenous and African American communities on the island (Hurska 2013). To be Manissean on Block Island may in fact mean to carry both African and Indigenous heritage, yet census data works to completely erasure one aspect of this family's heritage through documentation.

Fig 16. Julia Perry Payne and Abraham Lincoln Payne Sr.

The legacy of farming for this family on Block Island is exemplified through the life of Julia Perry Payne. Her father, a farmer by occupation, maintained his living like

many of the other residents of Block Island during the late 19th century. In the latter part of the 19th century, Block Island was in transition – changing from a farming and fishing hub with a lush landscape, to a New England vacation destination and summer resort (Historic and Architectural Resources 1991). The physical ecology of Block Island is largely a result of the social changes to the island. The changes that occur to the land, while increased maritime activities shaped the island's ecology, also deeply altered the experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples on the island. These ecological shifts take place in the material experiences of people of color on the island. As the tourism industry began to increase, tourism activities developed changes on the agricultural landscape and the occupations and experiences of Black and Brown communities on Block Island (Historic Architectural Resources, 1991). At the time of Julia's birth, Block Island slightly shifted from its identity as an aquapelago, becoming dependent on resort development and tourism, rather than mainly defined by its status as a remote fishing and farming island. The development of the tourism industry and the impact of hotels and resorts increased heavily in the 1870s (Historic and Architectural Resources 1991). In adulthood, Julia and her husband assist in sustaining the tourism industry on the island, washing sheets for the Hotel Manisses. "She'd wash the sheets and stuff for the hotel and her husband Abraham Lincoln Payne senior used to deliver them from the house back to the hotel. That's how they did, and they did some other trading. (B. Gobern 2020). Participating in the industry became a part of many lives on the island.

For Julia Perry Payne, life on the island revolved around care work. Julia married Abraham Lincoln Payne Sr. in 1889. Abraham Lincoln Payne Sr. was born on April 8th, 1865 to Charles Payne (1832-1893) and Lydia Sheffield Payne (1834-1906). They

resided on land acquired from the Perry and Payne families, their lives revolved around the land on Beacon Hill, the tallest point on Block Island, gardening and caring for animals and the land. The life of Abraham Lincoln Payne Sr, his tenacity and persistent presence on Block Island, is documented at multiple points in the *Block Island Times*, the island's local newspaper. For many years he received the Boston Post Gold Cane, described as "a fine gold-headed ebony stick to be always carried by the oldest citizen of this town" from 1854-1965. In a newspaper article from 1962, naming Payne's 97th birthday states that although Payne refused the offering, stating that the cane was a marker of someone's impending death (Oldest Block Island Citizen Article) "Everybody who gets it dies" (Oldest Blok Island Citizen Article). Reflecting a denial in becoming an island relic, Payne continued to be this presence on the island until moving to Providence late into his 90s.

Nineteenth century amateur historian Samuel Truesdale Livermore portrayed Isaac Church, as the last Manissean man on Block Island (Livermore 1877). As described by Livermore, they "speak well of "Uncle Isaac Church," and his comfortable home is proof of his temperance and industry in former days." (Livermore 1877, p.65). This hints at the perception of Manissean people on the island, as Church is viewed as an exception. Church's representation as the last Indigenous person on the island is fueled by the perception of him as "fully" Manissean, and his descendants as only "part" - a trope that works to erase the lives of Manissean descendants on Block Island (Livermore, 1877). Payne's rejection of the Boston Post Gold Cane is perhaps a rejection of the symbol that Isaac Church becomes on Block Island, a relic, a symbol of someone idealized only in the past.

Payne is known in public memory as a fishermen and stonemason, building the stonewalls along the road of Lakeside Drive (BI Times 2011). His life is reflected in public memory through the physical work completed on the island, but he also maintained a large garden. In fact, Abraham Lincoln Payne was an avid gardener, working with his hands in the family garden late until his 90s.

“Her husband would be out. He had a big garden. And they had cows and chickens and pigs. He continued to do the garden all that stuff right up until his 90s. And he walked with two canes. Later on, he had to have his legs removed but they said his body was strong as a 40 something year old man.” (B. Gobern 2020)

1962

Oldest Block Island Citizen Has 97th Birthday Today

Abraham Lincoln Payne, 97, Block Island's oldest citizen, is celebrating his birthday in Providence today.

"Time has gone; most everybody has gone," Mr. Payne said yesterday from a wheelchair at the home of his granddaughter, Mrs. Alexis C. Gobern of 196 Hanover St.

But the retired mason and fisherman isn't in any hurry to go. When offered Block Island's oldest-citizen cane several years ago, he refused to accept it, saying, "Everybody who gets it dies."

Mr. Payne occasionally looks around and calls for his wife, the former Julia Perry, who died last Oct. 22, several weeks shy of her 90th birthday. She was one of the last Block Islanders of Narragansett Indian extraction.

Mr. Payne's father was a Cape Verdean who went to Block Island from Cuttyhunk. From him Mr. Payne acquired the fisherman's trade. "Used to get a pile of codfish, some this big," he said, stretching out his hands.

They are strong hands, which did plastering and stonework at many island houses. He supervised the laying of countless stone "face" walls which give Block Island its picturesque touch. The walls were set up without mortar but with a cut, smooth face.

"I used to walk a lot and fix a lot of things, but by gosh, I got my legs cut off and that's bothered me," he said. Circulatory trouble led to the amputation of both legs within the last two years, his granddaughter explained.

Mr. Payne voted regularly at town meetings. The big secret, now out, is that he was an ardent Democrat. "For years, he wouldn't tell anyone," Mrs. Gobern said. He cast a shut-in ballot in 1960 for President Kennedy.

In the summer, he and his family are in residence on Block Island, where they have a house below Beacon Hill. He knew all the old Yankee families and was a favorite of theirs. As a boy, he went occasionally to Middletown to work on farms. He was married at the age of 25.

Television is a boon to Mr. Payne, who watches the screen without eyeglasses. A wrestling program was on as he entertained the press. Mr. Payne said he liked the wrestling, but wasn't pleased with some gory tactics.

Except for his legs, Mr. Payne is in excellent health, his granddaughter said. She has advised him to cut down on pipe-smoking, but he replies, "I've always done it and I always will."

His favorite hobby was gardening, but this has been given up. Now he enjoys looking out the window onto Hanover Street at all the houses that have sprung up in a section he once knew as inhabited by

Gertrude Godfrey of Providence, Robert Banks of Block Island and Russel Banks of Stonington.

The family includes 15 great-grandchildren and six great-great-grandchildren. Mr. Payne himself is the last of eight children.

"A little something" in the way of a birthday party is planned today, Mrs. Gobern said. Come summer, Mr. Payne hopes to see Block Island again and smell the salt air of his lifetime home. The island wants to see him, too.

Abraham Lincoln Payne and his great great-grandson, Alexis Martin Gobern, 14 months old. Mr. Payne is 97.
—Journal-Bulletin Photo

200 More Sign Good Neighbor Pledge in Week

A total of 200 more persons has signed the Good Neighbor Pledge since an advertisement containing 8,700 names was printed a week ago, it was announced yesterday.

Mrs. Martin Miller of the Women's Intergroup Committee of the National Conference of Christians and Jews said another advertisement will be printed if enough new names are received.

Mrs. Miller announced that between 350 and 400 names on the original petitions were lost and did not appear in the advertisement last Sunday. She asked signers to check the advertisement and resubmit their names if they are not included.

Only one person whose name appeared in the advertisement asked that his name be removed from the list, Mrs. Miller said. He was a young man who said his parents objected to his name being included.

Signers of the petitions pledge themselves to the practice and principle of equal housing opportunity.

Driver Killed In Groton Crash

A Bay State driver was fatally injured yesterday when his truck collided with an auto driven by a Providence motorist on Route 95, Groton. The truck driver was identified as

Fig. 17 Photo of Abraham Lincoln Payne, age 97 with great great-grandson Alexis M Gobern 14 months (1962)

His work on the ecology of Block Island is visible both within the land and soil on Beacon Hill and in the stonewalls built across the island. Although well known by the community and remembered by Barbara Gobern through her connection to the people of the Block Island harbor, her care work is not documented within public memory but left in the memory of her life known and passed down within the Gobern family. Both Abraham Lincoln Payne and Julia Payne are present in the physical ecology of Block Island, as well as the long-term care of the community on the island.

Barbara Gobern, Julia's great-granddaughter through her marriage to David Gobern, remembers her vividly. She was an Indigenous woman central to their family gatherings and to their lives on Beacon Hill. Julia was well known in the Block Island community during the early 20th century. She would often invite people from the harbor to her home on Sundays to have breakfast and chat with her.

> "So, a lot of them, people, their neighbors and the people she was close to, used to come up on Sundays and chat and have breakfast with her. She would have a big breakfast all ready. The house was small, but they all took turns having breakfast because that's how it was then back then" (B. Gobern 2020)

For Barbara, a woman who spent many years visiting and living on Block Island, Julia is her strongest memory on the island.

> "The strongest memory I have was my husband's great grandmother and some days she would make a big breakfast and it would have johnny cakes, fish, home fries, bacon pancakes, scrambled eggs, you name it. Everybody would go and get their plate and eat, that sort of thing. She would have her neighbors, some of the

people on the island would come up and they would come up and have breakfast with and that was their thing."

(B. Gobern 2020).

She created community through food, sharing meals with her fellow Block Islanders and shared her home on Beacon Hill with family and friends during the summer months. Barbara began visiting Block Island in the 1950s during summer trips to Julia's home, at the time Julia is in her late 70s and early 80s.

"When we got there in the 50s, we were staying at my husband's great-grandmothers house. We would go down there for the summer and all the kids and grandchildren; cousins were down there in the summertime" (B. Gobern 2020)

These summers on Block Island, brought together the entire family. Children would spend time at the harbor, go off to enjoy taffy and doughnuts on the island (B. Gobern 2020). They would share the space in the house, some family members there for a few weeks or for the weekend. "They took turns" (B. Gobern 2020). Spending time together at Julia's home on Beacon Hill was a summer tradition for the entire family.

Julia's care for her family and for her community on Block Island extended beyond the space of Beacon Hill. In 2021, Block Island still does not have a hospital. The island's only medical center was not established until 1989. Julia was a midwife and doctor on the island "delivering a third of the island's babies" (B. Gobern 2020). A significant role, considering the lack of access to medical care on the island.

"All I know that the people from the harbor were close to her she was named, they call her the doctor, Dr. Payne, Grandma Payne because she helped deliver,

> they said least one third of island people that was born. She would be like the midwife and she would help them every time the baby was beginning to come, they would call her." (B. Gobern 2020)

For Barbara, Julia's care of their home and for her community is one of the most memorable aspect about her. Barbara sees herself in Julia, "She was a small thin, woman, I guess someone like me, just all business. Do what you have to do, no time sitting there playing with the children." (B. Gobern 2020) This care is intergenerational for the Gobern family, it is a part of the legacy of the Gobern family women who work to maintain place and their legacy on Block Island. We can combine these notions of care with the concept of the Black maternal figure and Black female body (Visperas, Brown & Sexton 2016). The Black maternal figure is tasked with survivorship, drawing from James Doucet-Battle on "bioethical matriarchy" and its gendered forms of exchange and obligation (Visperas, Brown & Sexton 2016). Julia's care is her survivorship.

In Barbara's description of her husband's great-grandmother, she speaks to her role on the island, one of a caregiver and healer, with an open house. She also speaks to life on Block Island in the early 20th century, a barter economy, one of shared experience. One that she says she herself was comfortable, and that this comfort has changed today. Maryann also recounts one of the stories of her ancestor,

> "She would be like a medicine doctor that the tribal people thought of her as medicine doctor. She'd give people ways to handle things that you would if they weren't was it actually pharmaceuticals in one way or the other, kind of tea" (M.Gobern 2020)

Julia Perry Payne and her legacy of care for the people of Block Island is passed down through generations through the Gobern family, yet this information is lost in the public memory of Block Island presented today. Julia represented an essential Indigenous person on Block Island, yet there is no recognition of her legacy in the public history of the island.

Chapter 3 On Family Legacy

The House of Seven Gables

Alexis Gobern's connection to nature – to the island - was enabled his grandmother Mary Annie. He tells me, "It was always like a nature walk when we were traveling with our grandmother.*"* (A. Gobern 2021). When he speaks about his grandmother, the admiration on his face is noticeable. Although we are separated by computer, speaking over Zoom and many miles apart - Alexis lives in California - he describes her in reverence, discussing how integral she was to his childhood spent on Block Island. One of his earliest memories is traveling to the cemetery with her and his cousins. "The Indian cemetery [was] where we would occasionally go to help clean up. My grandmother took us there to help clean up the Indian cemetery you know, mostly for weeds and that kind of stuff" (A. Gobern 2021). She knew the names of some of the people buried in the Indian Cemetery, even with their gravestones unmarked, and would show them to her grandchildren. Alexis

Fig. 18 Mary Annie Bank's Home

regrets not paying more attention in these moments even though he accepts that he was just a young child. This information is not written down in public archival records and may have been a missed opportunity for him to retain this history.

In her book on Black life and the natural environment, feminist scholar bell hooks, discusses her grandmother's home, Baba's house. "Her house is a place where I am learning to look at things, where I am learning how to belong in space" (hooks 2009, p.121). Through their grandmothers the Gobern grandchildren, throughout generations, learn how to belong on Block Island. Through their elder's facilitation, *space* becomes *place*. What most see as a certain kind of space, a resort island nine miles south of the mainland, maintains particular meaning through the Gobern grandmothers. It becomes a definitive place for the Gobern grandchildren (Yuan 1997). For Alexis, his grandmother *is* Block Island, his roots are deeply tied to its land and his development there – to who he has become. Alexis is currently with United Airlines, a pilot on international flights, after serving in the Air Force for 10 years. This career decision is rooted in his uncle and father flying planes to and from the island. Flight was integral part of his childhood. His father, Alexis Sr., was an aviation mechanic. Alexis Jr's career choice came "because I got so much encouragement to do things, especially when I was on the island" (A. Gobern 2021). The Gobern's mark on the ecology of Block Island is therefore not only left on the ground, but also maintains itself in the air.

Mary Annie Banks and Gertrude Lucinda Payne Banks

Julia's Payne's only daughter and Mary Annie Banks's mother, Gertrude Lucinda Payne (1891-1935) followed in her mother's footsteps as family matriarch in her adulthood. She lived in what Maryann and Barbara call *The House of Seven Gables*. Its

namesake, *The House of the Seven Gables*, is a Gothic novel written by Nathaniel Hawthorne about a New England family's ancestral home. On Block Island, this was a home where David Gobern, Gertrude's grandson spent much of his time during his teenage years on Beacon Hill. It's a fitting name for the property. This was where David's daughter, Maryann, states that he experienced his "coming of age" (M. Gobern 2020).

David Sr. later dreamt of rebuilding this property although it was torn down, it has maintained its stone foundation. "Somebody else went and tore it down on us" Barbara remarks (B. Gobern 2020). As a child David would roam the property, flying airplanes and playing with cars, Gertrude's home his playground and the backdrop for his growth. The legacy of coming of age at the house of their grandmother is repeated among the Gobern grandchildren who spend their childhood summers at their grandmother's home (M. Gobern 2020). "It was his goal [David Gobern Sr.] or dream was to keep that there until he was able to bring it back, but it was a very special home to him. That was where his grandmother lived" (M. Gobern 2020).

Mary Annie Banks, Gertrude's daughter was born August 17, 1912 to Robert Banks and Gertrude Payne. She spent her childhood on Block Island, leaving to earn her nursing degree in New York where she met Alexis Gobern Sr. Together they made their way back to Block Island. Mary Annie followed in Gertrude's legacy upholding place, maintaining traditions on the family land. For cousins Maryann, David, Shirlyne and Alexis, their grandmother's home is the center of their lives on Beacon Hill. For both Shirlyne and David Jr. vivid their memories of their grandmother include them exploring the land around Beacon Hill - picking blueberries, blackberries, and apples from their

orchard. David Jr. mentions picking blackberries and blueberries for his grandmother, then she'd make jam and syrup for them to enjoy together. In the apple orchard near their home, they would pick apples to make apple pies, a tradition passed down to Barbara Gobern, who would bake these pies at the airport restaurant for visitors to Block Island to enjoy. Taking part in harvesting from the land was essential to their experience on Beacon Hill and is central to their memories of their grandmother. The usage of land is integral to Gobern life on Block Island. For David Gobern Jr. his grandmother's house carries some of his earliest memories, she kept connections both on the island and more far-reaching places. "My grandmother had Postcards from every,[where] all around the world, pretty much all her friends that she knew that went to different places, they'll send the postcards, and she used to hang them up on a Billboard, up in this room in the center of the house. So, she had Postcards from everywhere" (D. Gobern 2020). His grandmother's postcards in her home are solidified in his memories of the island.

Fig 19. Squaw Hollow

"I guess they thought we were still hiding" (M. Gobern 2020)

Behind some of the homes on the Gobern family property is what Barbara and Maryann call “Squaw Hollow” a gully where Manissean women supposedly hid from colonists, after they killed the Manissean men, during early colonization of the island. They hid “in the trees in that little valley area where no one would look for them” (B. Gobern, 2020). Here Manissean women attempted to survive, and here is where the Gobern children roamed during the summertime, in their grandmother’s backyard (Fig 7). In describing

this area Maryann tells me that their land is wrapped up in what Maryann believes was the towns’ perception of them. She tells me “I guess they thought we were still hiding” (M. Gobern 2020).

Barbara tells me “In fact, quite a few people on the island didn't know, where we were living up on the hill, they just knew that we were up on the hill in the woods part. So, when, a few of them got to come on to the property. And they got to see the view that we had, with where we are, we can see three quarters of the island. And they weren't happy about that. So, we had a lot of problems with them” (B. Gobern 2020). The rest of the Block Island community is unaware of the full extent of the Gobern family land, when they found out, Barbara and Maryann believe that is when trouble ensued.

> “The properties have been subdivided and changed but I think for the most part, the Islanders knew the family from Grandma's lot on that lower lot so that's what they knew of us. My dad and my uncle are very private people and very self-service, they took care of themselves. There wasn't a lot that people on the island had to come up to their space for and we didn't really have people in our space, so they didn't see it. Didn't know what we had in fact they didn't know and then

> when they finally found out and the tax people came, they said "what?!". She said a million dollars! I said [Cindy] this is the same house same thing there for about 20 years what are we doing, and she said Maryann, I sat on that deck that's a million dollar view we just didn't know. Yeah and if they didn't trespass, they still wouldn't know" (M. Gobern 2020).

Married into the family through David Gobern, Sr. Barbara Vierra Gobern has carried on the legacy of the Gobern family, first visiting Block Island in the 1950s. Her experiences on the island then differed from those from the 1980s to the present. Newcomers to Block Island in the 1980s, begin to challenge Barbara and David's claims to their property and home. Today, much of that property had been reduced in size, sold to other islanders. Barbara and David moved their children to live on Block Island in the 1960s. As David Jr. put it "[We] went down for the summer and stayed for like three years" (D. Gobern 2020). The home feels rural for the Gobern children, a big difference between their newly acquired home in East Providence. David Sr. opened up a construction company on the island, D.G. Electric. In the 1950s, When she first moved to the island with her husband and their children, she remembers welcoming feelings. Barbara was made the treasurer of St. Andrew's Church the first day she arrived. She tells me "Back in the old days, you know if you were walking down the harbor and they see you walking they'll stop in their car and offer to give you a ride. When I was there at the beginning, I got involved in the church there and the first day I was there, they made my treasurer of the church. They were very nice and friendly" (B. Gobern 2020).

Her views of the present Block Island, from the 1980s on, greatly differ from those of the past. She tells me "It was very nice back in those days. I felt comfortable. I

didn't feel any different in those days. Completely different than today" (B. Gobern 2020). This generational shift is sharply felt in Barbara's experiences on the island. She tells me "The generation is different. The next generation is different. Back then they may have felt different towards you, but they don't say anything that they do. They treat…do the same to me, they treat me the same. But where the next generation comes it was totally different." (B. Gobern 2020). The differing feelings of these newcomers is also echoed in Barbara's experiences on the island. In the 1980s, she and her husband David begin to experience challenges to their property brought on by the town.

> "This time at the town hall, people were giving me problems at my property. Someone was complaining, said that we had cars and stuff on our property, and it had to be removed. It was the people [who would] come up and bring their cars up there and leave it on our lot. So when I would call the police department, they would say that they can't remove it because it's on private property. And I would tell them "Well it's got the license plate on it and tell you who its' registered to. So I want to get it off. "Nope we can't go on private property. So there, they make complaints about, you know it needs clearing up and that kind of thing. So, I would go around and take pictures of neighbor's that's worse than mine." (B. Gobern 2020).

Barbara and David's tension with the townhall, what Barbara says was a result of "the newcomers that came to the island", a likely reference to what David Jr. later tells me are people who come to the island from New York and Connecticut, is documented within the *Block Island Times*, yet the narrative presented there differs from Barbara's accounts. (B. Gobern 2020)(D. Gobern 2020)

The front page of *The Block Island Times* on Saturday, December 1, 1990, contains an article with the headline *Zoning Board and Citizen Square Off* "Although it was a short evening at Town Hall it was anything but quiet. A controlled, but tense hearing concerning Mr. David Gobern's appeal of a "notice of violation" all but erupted into a battle of wills Monday evening." Leading with this headline and the discussion of David's conflict with the review board frames the issue as a disturbance, rather than what Barbara and David name is an account of systemic discrimination against them. Barbara and David filed charges of discrimination based on color and national origin. "I had to make complaints to the NAACP, that we were being treated differently" (B. Gobern 2020). Barbara's life when Julia Perry Payne was still alive, gathering fruit and community on Beacon Hill, is a great contrast to her life on the island after the later 1980s.

David Gobern Jr. and Alexis Gobern, both account for the changes they have witnessed on Block Island, from their adolescence to their adulthood, as David Jr. put it "So some people were kind and other people weren't, but I guess we didn't really provoke it" (D.Gobern 2020). For Alexis, Block Island is wrapped up in nostalgia, the fact that they were known on the island offered some sort of recognition, that allowed him to be both secure, yet cautious. "Everybody knew the family and they knew the extended family; my grandmother was well respected on the island and well known. And my dad and uncles were for the most part, also well known, having grown up on the island and had a good rapport with all the people on the island and as children, we benefitted from that." He tells me "Strongest memories, impressions, geez, were the people on the island treating us really well, you known if they saw us, I don't think we

ever got in trouble or anything. We were always afraid of that because we were basically being babysat by an entire island" (A. Gobern 2021). For Alexis, Block Island is wrapped up in nostalgia, a cherished time in his childhood and he prefers to keep it that way.

> "The few times I visited to the island after my childhood, I think I've only been back to the island three times, and each time, it appears more alien to me each time, that I don't really enjoy going. That's the result of probably two things, the ways it actually is and two seeing things with a child eye versus seeing things with an adult's eye, so I don't like returning because I want to preserve those memories I have in my child's eye, because those were important because it reminds of my grandmother and the family and almost happy times there. Especially on the weekends." (A. Gobern 2021)

Barbara continues on Julia Perry's legacy of care on Block Island. The life of the women of color on Block Island, requires us to reject binary thinking in our understanding of Blackness and Indigeneity. To be a Manissean womena is to uphold family tradition, and to be a Black woman, like Barbara Vierra Gobern, who married into a family at the intersection of Blackness and Indigeneity, is to do the same. To exist as both, to consider Black-Indigenous women, remains essential because of the simultaneous work Black and Indigenous women are doing in preserving their communities and our collective homeplace, our environment and planet. This work is material, ingrained, unrecognized, and passed down.

This call to responsibility, to family and to community, is arguably an essential aspect of Black women's ecologies. It is presented clearly in Barbara's role as a caretaker for members of her husband's family. There is an assumed care of family

members throughout generations of the Gobern family. Barbara at one point cares for Uncle Ed, Abraham Lincoln Jr. and her mother-in-law's brother when they have all gotten sick. While the children are out playing, able to enjoy the land of Block Island, she is home doing the cooking and cleaning. Her care work, her "women's work" allows for their exploration. This is Black-Indigenous women's ecology.

Chapter 4 Matters of Black and Indigenous Life

Seeing Ghosts

In a meeting of the Block Island Historical Society on September 22, 2020, Maryann Gobern Matthews discusses her family's history with passion and fortitude. She discussed that some of her family members are buried under the brush in the unlabeled "Black section" of the Block Island cemetery. This is where many Black decedents of the African Diaspora on Block Island lie at rest. A question pops up on her PowerPoint. "*but where is my dad's favorite Aunt Icy Josephine Banks?*" There are photos of the graves visible in the Black Section of the cemetery, Elwin and Clara Perry, Robert and Luretta Banks, and Robert Smith but "all other graves are under the brush" (M. Gobern 2020).

The "Black section" of the cemetery remains an essential place to glean the Black-Indigenous ecology of Block Island, and to also understand the ways in which these lives go unrecognized. Maryann's cousin Alexis Gobern Jr. tells me that they would take trips through the cemetery as children. He tells me on one occasion he walked barefoot through the grass and by one of the graves he picks up a 1890 penny while going through the gravestones, acknowledging the names (A. Gobern 2020). The most recent relative buried in this cemetery is Robert E. Banks in 2000.

This cemetery is quite literally an example of "learning to see ghosts" within the construction and preservation of history (Subramaniam, 2014). In their unrecognized deaths, Black-Indigenous people on Block Island, Maryann's ancestors, remain unrecognized, unheard, unmattered, left to be memorialized only by their descendants and in questions posed to an predominantly white organization meant to uphold the history of *all* Block Islanders.

Maryann Gobern Matthews

On a spring? afternoon in March 2020, I speak with Maryann and her mother Barbara about their lives and experiences on Block Island. We are distant - I'm in Central Florida, at my parents' home, and they are together in East Providence. Other family members are also gathered in the living room as we speak through Zoom. In discussing her experience and discomfort on Block Island, Maryann says,

> "As a kid, I you know, I did, I always believed that to be my roots, that that's where my family was from. So I felt as though I had the right to belong there. I didn't feel as though I fit. And not that necessarily anybody came and said, "Get out of here". But I didn't look like anybody. And people there didn't listen to the same music and read the same story didn't watch the same show didn't do anything like what we did, culturally. They were very different people" (M. Gobern 2020)

Although most of the people on Block Island did not look like Maryann, she knew that she had a right to belong there, the island is part of her roots, part of her family. "Well, each of the family members as far back of each of the generations that I have are all born here" she tells me (M. Gobern 2020). Although it was not always a comfortable place to her to be she knowns that she has "the right to claim the properties or that place as home" (M. Gobern 2020). For Maryann, Block Island is home, it contains feelings of displacement, but it is home. She is drawn to the island "It wasn't my space, but now that I'm older, I like to claim and isn't that bizarre" (M.Gobern 2020).

All of the Gobern children seem to share this draw to the island, although their experiences are not singular. When speaking about his current home on the mainland,

David Gobern Jr. remarks that his choice of home was due to the thick fog and foghorns that reminded him of the island.

> "So the house I'm living in now I live in Oakland Beach. The reason why I did is because I came up to repair a deck in the back of our house, for my old landlord, and it reminded me- it was a foggy day- reminded me a lot foghorns going off and it reminded me so much and so thick coming remind me of Block Island. I said, Yeah, I'm gonna buy this house. So if I can't put a house up there on the island, I'm gonna put one over here. So I end up putting this one, redoing this one gutting it all out. And redid it. So now I live in Oakland beach. So it takes me an hour and a half. I got a boat, sits out in front of my house. So it takes me an hour and a half to get the Block Island from here and back so that's the closest I got to Block Island." (D. Gobern 2020).

Oakland Beach, is David Jr.'s piece of Block Island away from the island.

Shirlyne Gobern shares this draw to the sea of Block Island stating that the smells of the island bring her back to childhood.

> "When I'm driving through Point Judith the ocean has a smell of when I was a child, and like, Oh, it smells like it did in the early 70s when we would be coming out here. And some people don't notice that if you go to different parts of anywhere that even though it's the same body of water that it has different scents. Just brings back fond memories" (S. Gobern 2020).

The island is associated with Shirlyne's experiences as a child, she calls them "great experiences as a kid" (S. Gobern 2020). Alexis Gobern also talks about his draw to the island. When I asked if Block Island is like a second home, Alexis response encompasses

a sentiment that all the Gobern children share “it was not a second, I would say it was the other home” (A. Gobern 2021).

Recognizing the history of Black-Indigenous peoples on Block Island requires a recognition of the legacy and ecologies of the Gobern family. Land is essential for Maryann Gobern, selling the family land, and leaving it behind has never been her interest. “When we sell our land we lose our connection to each other. This property is the last bit of bonding I have with my family across the rest of the United States right now” (M.Gobern 2018). It is undeniable that the Gobern family is a part of the legacy of Block Island. Their lives have permeated the air, water, and land. The family’s life on the island is not only a testament to the lives of generations of Block Island residents, but it is also a story of the interconnected survival of Blackness and Indigeneity.

Such survival is a model praxis for environmental sustainability. An ecology for the future would follow the Gobern family legacy that sharing is not a negative thing in Maryann’s words.

> “When I remember us as a family, I remember us here, It taught me to be resourceful, it taught me to share with family. The island has taught me, I don’t throw anything away everything is reusable, I don’t care if it’s a scrap of wood that broke off, I can use it for something else. That’s what happens in island life, you make use of everything” (M. Gobern 2018).

In a conversation about her family land on Block Island and her legacy, Maryann mentions what is known as "The Seventh Generation Principle" from the Haudenosaunee. She says that “The native culture is supposed to leave something behind for the next

seven generations" (M. Gobern 2018). Recognizing Black-Indigenous life and ecology on Block Island would have to take into these values into consideration.

Conclusion

Island Changes

The focus of this thesis is positioned from the early 20th century into the 21st century, from 1900 to the present. Looking more broadly at critical events in United States history may provide additional context for the experiences of the Gobern family on Block Island. In understanding the Black-Indigenous history of Block Island, particular events are essential to recognize for their impact on the Gobern family and their experiences on the island. The Timeline included in the previous pages outlines both the Gobern Family history, along with major Block Island and larger US historic events.

World War I (1914 -1918) and World War II (1939-1945) presented a particular change in the experience of Block Island, with the decline of the hotel trade on the island beginning at the start of the war. This decline continued into World War II, with the influx of travel restrictions due to the war (Historic and Architectural Resources 1991). These two events in conjunction with the Depression era led to a decline in tourism on Block Island. Julia Perry Payne, who was well known to her community on the island, largely lived in a period prior to a major boom in visitors to the island, beginning with the construction of the Block Island airport in 1950 (Historic and Architectural Resources 1991). Browning's speech to the Block Island Historical Society was given in 1945, in the aftermath of WWII, and the speech's call to patriotism and heroism was likely influenced by national post-WWII sentiment on American patriotism.

Barbara Gobern's experiences on Block Island differ from her first visits in 1950 to living on the island in the 1980s, with additional experiences of discrimination on the island regarding her property. This experience correlates with the 1980s era of American

conservatism ushered in under Ronald Reagan (Wilentz, & Hill, 2008). Additionally, context provided by historian Andrew Kahrl is indicative that these experiences of coastal gentrification and the ushering in of "newcomers" to the island. In discussing development on the coastline of the United States, Kahrl states the amount of coastal development tripled between 1950 and 1992 (Kahrl 2012). Block Island was experiencing similar development changes.

On Survival

In discussions with the Gobern grandchildren I interviewed, David, Alexis, Maryann, and Shirlyne, there was one particular consensus: that Block Island represented a home for them – its draw is felt even today even in adulthood, and that this connection to the land, water, and air on Block Island was in many ways facilitated by their childhood explorations prompted by their grandmother. Understanding the role that Black-Indigenous women have currently on maintaining their homeplace and using this lens to view family, community, and the environment on Block Island, allows us to conceptualize what a future environmentalism can look like. Working from within the Capitalocene/Plantationocene where the "relocation of peoples, plants, and animals; the leveling of vast forests, and the violent mining of metals" takes place, within this era of apocalypse for Black and Indigenous communities, requires a recentering of the work of those that were never meant to survive, yet continue to do so" (Harraway, 2016, p.48).

In terms of notions of survival for Indigenous peoples, O'Brien provides the concept of "resisting" stating that Indigenous peoples in New England worked to survive settler colonialism and remake their lives (O'Brien, 2010). The work to establish the Manissean Ancestral Stone is an overt example of this resisting on behalf of the

descendants of the Gobern family on Block Island. Maryann has continued the legacy of her family's women – upholding place and ensuring that their legacy is heard and understood, resisting erasure. In 2015, she established The Manissean Tribal Council, a nonprofit committed to upholding Manissean heritage on Block Island. Maryann hopes to create a Manissean Community Center on her land on Beacon Hill, where a museum will showcase this history and more.

Their survival is a blueprint for the ways in which we all should strive to exist, as a collective and in the pursuit of maintaining our legacy (M. Gobern 2018). In order to move forward within the realms of conservation, of protecting our environment for future generations of humans and the other inhabitants with which we coexist requires us to recognize which communities have already faced the apocalypse (Harraway, 2016). The thinking of the Gobern family women, their ways of island living, and the maintenance of legacy is already post-apocalyptic (Whyte, 2017). Their work allows us to imagine the role of community, family, and home in the creation of more equitable environments, their collective importance and the ways in which they intersect are inseparable from one another.

Learning to live *otherwise* means to reject binary notions of the apocalypse, understanding that these conditions have always been present and may always be, but that it is still essential to work to maintain family, environment, and legacy in spite of the possibilities of loss. As stated by Tiffany Lethabo King in her work on the shoals of Black and Indigenous life, "Just as Black and Indigenous life, struggle, and joy are forged off the shoreline in the space of the shoal, so much the new worlds we desire and make

for one another" (King, 2017, p.209). Developing new worlds would mean recognizing the contributions of Black-Indigenous women to their homes, lands, and communities.

Within the field of climate change studies, Kyle Whyte argues that there must be action to support Indigenous peoples' capacity to address anthropogenic climate change (Whyte, 2017). As societies that have been "heavily disrupted by colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization, Indigenous communities have already imagined futures beyond apocalypse" (Whyte, 2017, p.153). Audre Lorde's poem, *A Litany for Survival* says that "it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive" (Lorde 1978). Despite fear, and the threat of being unheard and unwelcomed, those who are never meant to survive continue to speak. This notion of speaking, of "seeking a now that can breed futures" is much of the lifework of Black-Indigenous women on Block Island, those that live on the shoreline, the ones that were never meant to survive, yet continue to do so (Lorde 1978).

Future Work

Future pathways include expanding upon this research to include additional Black and Indigenous descendants of Block Island, in order to expand upon the experiences of Black-Indigenous residents of Block Island outside of those presented by members of the Gobern family. It may be possible to extend further into the current generation of Gobern grandchildren – learning their connections to and memories of Block Island, and their experiences in working to reclaim their presence on the island, along with their parents and grandparents. Historical context can also be developed concerning the economic and political history in New England, which worked to shape the experience of Black and Indigenous peoples in the region during the 20th and 21st centuries. Additionally, working

to interview current residents of Block Island on their memories and perceptions of the island's history would add to this work by collecting more insights and memories of Black-Indigenous figures on the island from multiple perspectives.

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