

# Redefining Home: The Impact of Land Loss on Native Gulf Coast Communities

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Houma, Louisiana—Main Street and Park Avenue run through the main drag of Houma, a town in southern Louisiana with a population that hovers just above 33,000 people<sup>1</sup>. The streets hug either side of the Bayou Terrebonne, a river that snakes down the rest of the state before emptying out into the Gulf of Mexico. Main and Park are lined with restaurants and hotels and the local schools. There’s a baseball game going on when I arrive on a Friday evening.

I’m surprised by how much there is to do in the small community. Later, Pete LeBeouf, a college student from the area, will laugh at this comment. “People are always surprised when there’s actually people out here in the Bayou. All of those ‘gator hunting shows? Makes us seem like the only people who live out here are crazy rednecks.”<sup>2</sup>

I check into my hotel, located just off Main Street, and offer a smile to the woman dressed in white button-down shirt and black slacks who checks me in. It’s late, and she can tell I’m exhausted, “Here on business?” She says when I ask if I can pay with the Department of American Studies purchasing card that made the hotel reservation.

“Sort of. Research. I’m a student at the University of Alabama.” I say as she hands me my key card.

“Ah. I assume you’re going down to the Bayous then?”

I nod. I don’t press, but I can only assume I’m not the first university-affiliate to come stay at the Fairfield Inn in Houma with the intention of driving down to the five Bayous that stretch out like twisted fingers into the lower Mississippi River: Montegut, Chauvin, Dulac, Lafourche, and

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<sup>1</sup> “Houma, Louisiana Population 2019.” World Population Review. Accessed April 26 2019. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/houma-la-population/>.

<sup>2</sup> LeBeouf, Pete. “Pete LeBeouf Interview.” Interview by author. March 23, 2019.

Pointe-au-Chien, my destination<sup>3</sup>. The Fairfield Inn was still about half an hour away from Pointe-au-Chien, but once one gets further into southern Louisiana, hotels are replaced by camper come-for-the-weekend parks. I, unfortunately, don't own a camper. And, I imagine, neither do many of the researchers that come to Houma looking to get answers about climate change.

<sup>4</sup>It's become one of the most topical environmental areas of study in recent years and has infiltrated nearly every aspect of media, from academic conferences dedicated to discussing long term studies on global warming to Lil Dicky's viral song and music video "We Love the Earth."<sup>5</sup> In 2019 it's well known that eventually we will all be impacted by climate change, a threat that feels distant when pitted against the more pressing concerns of terrorism and taxation. But for Houma and the five Bayous that stretch from it, climate change and the land loss that stems from it has become something no one can ignore.



In the last eighty years, the Louisiana coast has lost over 2,000 square miles of land due to rising sea levels linked to climate change<sup>6</sup>. The loss of land has become so severe that

the southern state loses a football field of land every one hundred minutes.<sup>7</sup> New Orleans is still

<sup>3</sup> LeBeouf, "Pete LeBeouf Interview."

<sup>4</sup> Alford, Jeremy. "Louisiana Land Loss. Map. Louisiana Sportsman. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://www.louisiana sportsman.com/news-breaker/a-moving-target/>.

<sup>5</sup> Lil Dicky. "We Love the Earth." Benny Blanco and Cashmere Cat, 2019. April 18, 2019. Accessed April 26, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvuN\\_WvFlto](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvuN_WvFlto).

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, Bob, The Lens, Brian Jacobs, and Al Shaw. "This Is What Louisiana Stands to Lose in the next 50 Years." ProPublica. August 28, 2014. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://projects.propublica.org/louisiana/>

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, "This Is What Louisiana Stands."

recovering from the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina almost fifteen years ago.<sup>8</sup> Now, it has the Gulf of Mexico knocking at its backdoor, a constant reminder of what kind of devastation another round of hurricanes and flooding could bring to the city of almost 1.2 million<sup>9</sup>. It doesn't help these anxieties to know that the rapidly changing climate has also been linked to a rise in natural disasters. The long list of hurricanes Gulf states have endured in more recent years—Ike, Gustav, Harvey, Matthew, Irma, Michael—has acted as some of the most convincing evidence that things aren't getting better for these states. They're only getting worse.

In the last decade, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority has built over 60 miles of barrier islands and 297 miles of levee with the intention of stemming flooding and the impacts of ocean storms away from the coast.<sup>10</sup> However, Anya Groner of *Orion* reports in her article “Between Worlds” that “if more measures aren't taken another 1,750 square miles—an area larger than Rhode Island—will give way by 2064.”<sup>11</sup> The 2017 Louisiana State Master Plan has estimated that the state will see the highest sea level rise in the nation, a predicted two feet over the next fifty years.<sup>12</sup> In the same year, Governor John Bel Edwards declared a state of emergency for Louisiana's coast in response to the predicted loss.<sup>13</sup>

Pointe-au-Chien, the fifth Bayou that trails out from Houma, is the ancestral home of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe, or PACIT. The tribe has just under 700 members and inhabits both the Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes<sup>14</sup>. The small French-speaking community is recognized by

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<sup>8</sup> Editors, History.com. “Hurricane Katrina.” History.com. November 09, 2009. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/natural-disasters-and-environment/hurricane-katrina>.

<sup>9</sup> “New Orleans. Louisiana Population 2019.” World Population Review. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/new-orleans-population/>.

<sup>10</sup> Groner, Anya. “Between Worlds.” *Orion*, March/April 2019, 15-26.

<sup>11</sup> Groner. “Between Worlds.”

<sup>12</sup> Groner. “Between Worlds.”

<sup>13</sup> Groner. “Between Worlds.”

<sup>14</sup> Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. “History/Background.” Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://pactribe.tripod.com/id2.html>

the state of Louisiana but has struggled for decades to try to obtain federal recognition due to some gaps in records of leadership and incorrect writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers who attempted to complete anthropological studies of the tribe<sup>15</sup>. However, the biggest concern for the tribe has consistently been the land loss that has resulted in acres of their historically-held land eroding away: their community is literally disappearing.

I'm here to learn about how the loss of land is impacting the culture of PACIT and their community holistically, beyond just what it means to physically have land washing away. I'll be interviewing members of the tribe in the next few days to get a sense of how they are thinking about the loss.

That night, I get a pizza. It feels wrong, somehow, with the countless seafood restaurants all boasting the freshest shrimp, crabs, and fish around that popped up on my Yelp app when I searched "quick dinner." But, funnily enough, Houma has the same Americanized Italian restaurant that I grew up eating in my hometown: Apex, North Carolina. It sparks a distinct feeling of nostalgia, and, even though I go to sleep that night in a bed I don't recognize in a state I've never been to with stacks of consent forms and ideas for interview questions stuffed inside of my backpack, it feels a little bit like home.

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<sup>15</sup> Verdin, Christine and Esther Billiot. "Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot." Interview by author. March 24, 2019.

<sup>16</sup>Ponchatoula, Louisiana—The next day I have an hour’s drive to Middendorf’s, a waterside restaurant specializing in fried catfish. It has been promised as the perfect place for an interview with Pete LeBeouf, a twenty-something student at Southeastern Louisiana University who is a member of PACIT and grew up in the community. When I arrive, I get distracted taking pictures. Despite the German-sounding name, it’s a typical beachy restaurant, looking well-loved



framed by the cloudless sky. Nearby is a deck that allows patrons to eat against the picturesque backdrop of the still water just a few yards away. Pete emerges from the deck to shepherd me to where he had already gotten us a table.

We order and start chatting. He’s talkative, his light southern drawl filling the table with stories about his weekend and how, despite Middendorf’s being known for its catfish, I should really order the shrimp. And poppers, a breaded shrimp ball to be dipped in a creamy jalapeno sauce.

“So you’re here to talk about Pointe-au-Chien.” He says, finally circling back to the reason why I texted him at the prompting of his aunt, Ms. Christine Verdin who I had a meeting with the next day, “What do you want to know?”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Middendorf’s. Ponchatoula, Louisiana. Personal photograph by author. March 23, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

I quickly produce my list of interview questions which had been folded up into my purse until now, “Really, I just wanted to hear more about where you grew up. You can talk as much or as little as you feel comfortable doing.”

He laughs, something that rings through the whole restaurant, “Oh no, with me you’re going to get a whole damn story. But that’s going to be most of the people you ask down here because, trust me, we like to talk.”<sup>18</sup>

He tells me he’s studying environmental biology. Even though he lives in Hammond, Louisiana for school, he plans on going back to Pointe-au-Chien after he graduates with the intent to use his education to help fight land loss in his community, “I’m like Shrek,” he explains, “I want my swamp. I love my peace and quiet. I love just being in the water. That is where I belong.”<sup>19</sup> And the Pointe-au-Chien Bayou allows him to do just that. Everyone in the community fishes and shrimps and crabs. It’s the lifeblood of the township and PACIT, in which most members have boats and rely on shrimping and crabbing to at least supplement their annual earnings, if not provide the sole income for their household.

LeBeouf says he grew up on boats, “I don’t even remember [the first time I was on a boat] because I was still that young of a baby. My dad used to take us when we were two or three years old, wrap us up in a blanket, throw us in the boat, just so that he could get an extra limit of ducks.”<sup>20</sup> The LeBeoufs, along with being avid crabbers, also loved duck hunting. They go out into the swamps on mud boats and wait to catch some of the many ducks that migrate south during the winter, “I’d be in the bottom of the boat, and I would just sleep. You could put a shotgun to

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<sup>18</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>19</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>20</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

my head, right by my ear, and pull the trigger and I will not wake up. That's... that used to be the life."<sup>21</sup>

"Used to be? I ask, taking a bite of my shrimp. He was right. I couldn't imagine the catfish could be any better than this.

"Yeah."

For LeBeouf and the rest of the PACIT, the land was more than just the place their ancestors happened to settle on. Living in one of Louisiana's Bayous, complete with the sweltering, 100% humidity and ninety-degree summers, was a way of life. It was what LeBeouf grew up knowing. He explained, though, that he's seen his community change a lot, even in the twenty odd years he's been alive.

"Duck hunting down here is crap [now]. It changed around the same time as Katrina, Rita, all that stuff. All that saltwater that came in killed a lot of the grass that the ducks feed on."<sup>22</sup> The impacts of Katrina and Rita, and Gustav and Ike three years later, hit Pointe-au-Chien hard. The land was washed with salt water, making it impossible for tribal members to plant traditionally maintained gardens and impacting the hunting, shrimping, and crabbing in the area.<sup>23</sup>

The hurricanes also hit the barrier islands hard, a string of small land masses that sit parallel to Louisiana. According to NPR, "the name 'barrier' describes how these islands protect natural and human communities against ocean storms."<sup>24</sup> As the name suggests, these islands act as a

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<sup>21</sup> LeBeouf, "Pete LeBeouf Interview."

<sup>22</sup> LeBeouf, "Pete LeBeouf Interview."

<sup>23</sup> Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. "Hurricanes Gustav and Ike -- 2008." Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://pactribe.tripod.com/id2.html>

<sup>24</sup> "Barrier Islands." National Parks Service. October 31, 2018. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/guis/learn/nature/barrierislands.htm>.

barrier against the worst of severe storms and natural disasters, like hurricanes, so the mainland remains protected from the brunt of the force. Most of these islands are also seeing the impacts of sea level rise: the U.S. Geological Survey reports that some estimates predict they will have eroded away completely by the end of the century, which means ocean storms will only continue to hit the Louisiana coast—and Pointe-au-Chien—harder.<sup>25</sup>

For LeBeouf, losing the barrier islands means more than just coastal protection. When I ask about what he remembers most from growing up in Pointe-au-Chien, he gives me a sad smile, “This is where I’m going to kind of get sentimental.”<sup>26</sup> He starts describing Timbailer Island, a barrier island off the southeastern coast of the state. He tells me it’s one of the last ones that’s still “kind of out there,” but it used to be much larger than the small strip of land that exists today.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>28</sup>“My family has a house boat, and, every summer, we have been going out to Timbailer



Island, and we spend weeks out there at a time. We go fishing, we go to the beach, we just hang out and enjoy time there. But that island is almost gone. The entire barrier island in my lifespan, I have seen it

<sup>25</sup> “Louisiana Barrier Islands: A Vanishing Resource.” USGS. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/barrier-islands/>.

<sup>26</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>27</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>28</sup> Zobrist, Erik. R0000252. July 2000. NOAA’s Restoration Center Collection. NOAA. Louisiana, East Timbailer Island. Lafourche Parish.

disappear. It has been eroded away.”<sup>29</sup>

He talks about the island, how the docks he used to play on when he was little are now two feet underwater, and the beaches he spent weeks on with his family were eroding away. How now, even though his family still goes back to the island sometimes, it’s mostly just for fishing. The way LeBeouf talks about Timbalier Island, it’s clear he’s talking about more than just a favorite childhood vacation spot. Instead, he’s talking about an extension of his home, a place full of memory and knowledge and history of his family and his community. It’s mostly been washed away into an ocean that now creeps closer and closer to the place where his family history is weaved inseparably into the earth they’ve lived on “since the dawn of time,” as LeBeouf puts it.<sup>30</sup>

In Keith Basso’s book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, he explores the connection to the land that Apache tribes have in the southwestern United States. After spending decades with the community of Cibecue on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona, Basso quotes Dudley Patterson, a member of the Cibecue community, in saying “Wisdom sits in places. It’s like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don’t you? Well you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking.”<sup>31</sup>

While Patterson spoke on the importance of land in the Apache community in Arizona, I can hear his words being echoed in the way that LeBeouf speaks about Timbalier Island and Pointe-au-Chien. For many Native American tribes that exist throughout the country, the land that they live on is more than just a home. It is the root of their culture, their generational knowledge,

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<sup>29</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>30</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>31</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2010. 127.

their identity. It's hard to understand if one isn't a part of a community where the place is just as important as the people.

Basso retells an Apache story in his book about the Gad 'O'ááhñ people. He describes a group of people who planted corn in a field with a sole Juniper tree, which they named Juniper Tree Stands Alone. When they return to harvest their corn later in the season, they are shocked, "There is so much corn! There is corn in abundance! They are excited and happy... 'Juniper Tree Stands Alone has looked after us.'<sup>32</sup>

"Later, their leaders are talking: '...These fields look after us by helping our corn to grow. Our children eat it and continue to live. Our corn draws life from this earth and we draw life from our corn. This earth is part of us! We are *of* this place, Juniper Tree Stands Alone. We should name ourselves of this place.'"<sup>33</sup> Gad 'O'ááhñ translates to Juniper Tree Stands Alone People.<sup>34</sup> For the Gad 'O'ááhñ People and the generations of descendants that continue to work the land of Juniper Tree Stands Alone, the land became more than just a place that allowed them to farm corn. It became the distinct essence of how they were a community. Hundreds of years spent working the field translated into the land being embedded with the cultural wisdom and ancestral knowledge of the tribe.

For Pointe-au-Chien to lose their physical land meant they were losing a part of themselves as well.

Before we leave lunch, I ask LeBeouf what the plan is. What happens when their community inevitably erodes away?

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<sup>32</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places.* " 20.

<sup>33</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places.* " 21.

<sup>34</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places.* " 21.

“I don’t really know.” He says, walking me to my car, “But right now we’re trying to fix it as much as we can so that way the next generation can actually have a home. Have a place where our family’s been. To know: this is where we are.”<sup>35</sup>

Pointe-au-Chien, Louisiana—When I see Christine Verdin, she immediately wraps me up in a hug. We’re communicated over email and phone for the past few months, and this is the first time we’ve met face-to-face.

“So you met Pete yesterday?” She asks as she leads me up the steep wooden steps to the



Pointe-au-Chien tribal building.<sup>36</sup> It’s on tall stilts, just like the rest of the small township of Pointe-au-Chien, a constant reminder of the creeping water on either side of the narrow road that winds all the way from the highway to the Pointe-au-Chien Marina.

“Yes! He was so helpful. I’m really excited to talk to you today.” Inside, the building looks reminiscent of a bee hive. The walls and floor are lined with light wood and the ceiling a curving honeycomb, giving the gray tables and chairs that fill the room a dull yellow glow. We sit down and start talking about my trip so far, how she’ll have to show me the marina after the interview

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<sup>35</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>36</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

and take me down to the Island—the Isle de Jean Charles, a small community just south of Pointe-au-Chien that eroding away at an ever-increasing speed.

Christine is warm and welcoming, with dark hair that falls past her shoulders. She’s an instructional coach at Montegut Elementary, and I can tell why: she’s animated and excited to talk about anything, her voice echoing in the empty room we’re sitting in. Christine is Pete’s aunt and a member of one of the big families of PACIT. Despite living in Bourg, a town a few miles inland from where she grew up in Pointe-au-Chien, she tells me quickly that she wants to return as soon as she retires from teaching.

As we chat, the building becomes a revolving door for different members of Christine’s family: Uncle Jake come first, talking about his time crabbing this season and how, next time I’m in town I’ll have to come out on his boat. Two of Christine’s aunts come as well—Esther and Shirley—who talk about cousins and nephews and nieces, and I’m reminded of how tight knit Pete described his community as the day before, “Literally down there, if you ask anybody for anything they will try to help you as best they can. Even if they can’t actually help you, they’ll still try. It’s a great place.”<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, Ms. Esther Billiot and Christine sit down with me to start the interview. When I start asking them about growing up in Pointe-au-Chien, I can tell the immediate wave of nostalgia that hits. Christine tells me about playing in her grandma’s back yard, “She had a lot of animals, cows and pigs and chicken and ducks and lots of trees. She had her own garden, and whatever they ate came from there.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> LeBeouf, “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

<sup>38</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”



<sup>39</sup>She tells me about how much property used to be on what is now a tiny peninsula, “We called it the woods because there were trees everywhere. Not like now where the property ends because the water beings. We were able to go deep into the woods to play.”<sup>40</sup> Christine recounts all the

small waterways that she remembers being able to hop over or use a pirogue, a long narrow canoe, to cross that now she must drive to safely travel over.

Esther has similar stories, “Growing up, we played in the trees and the tall grass. We had vines and we made little houses. We swam in the Bayou. It was nice. We sat on the porch. It was different. I miss that.”<sup>41</sup>

Christine pipes in, “My grandma would go pick beans or peas or whatever and everybody would gather on the porch and fix them together.”<sup>42</sup>

“Then she would cook and we’d all eat. You know, you raise your chickens, your hogs, cattle, everything was homegrown. It wasn’t bought from the store.”<sup>43</sup> Esther talks about the woods, too, and how she used to be scared to walk up to one of the grocery stores in the community when she was younger because she had to walk through a dense forest to get there. “I was so scared to walk that way—it was like nighttime, with all the trees.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pointe-au-Chien Marnia Dock, Pointe-au-Chien, Louisiana. Personal photography by author. March 24, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>41</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>42</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>43</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>44</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

As they talk, I ask them if they miss the subsistence community that Pointe-au-Chien used to be, and they both talk about how, when they were younger, if Pointe-au-Chien was completely cut off from town—in this case, Houma, where I was staying—they could have been totally self-sufficient.

Christine says that land loss has made that impossible today, however:

“It’s affected everything. It’s affected our trees, our gardens, because, like [Esther] was saying, it was all forest down here. And now, there’s not many. They had a bunch of oak trees, cypress trees. There are not many left at all. You can’t raise cattle and pigs because there’s no room for them. The way my grandparents lived on the land, nobody does that anymore. You can’t do that here, even if you wanted to.”<sup>45</sup>

Researcher Glenn Albrecht in his 2012 article “The Age of Solastalgia” defined the term “solastalgia” as “an emplaced or existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation (desolation) of a loved home environment.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, it’s the idea of missing one’s home environment after it’s been destroyed. Despite having lived in and around Pointe-au-Chien their entire lives, there was a distinct tone of mourning in the way that Esther and Christine spoke about their community from years ago. The way their tribe had existed for hundreds of years had been wiped away in the past several decades because of the rapidly eroding land that they had grown up on.

For Pointe-au-Chien and the rest of the southern Louisiana, climate change is only partially responsible for that erosion. The two biggest industries on the Gulf of the state are seafood and oil.

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<sup>45</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>46</sup> Albrecht, Glenn. “The Age of Solastalgia.” *The Conversation*. August 07, 2012. Accessed April 27, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8377>.

According to *The Advocate*, the energy production industry employed almost 45,000 people in Louisiana and pays \$4.3 billion annually to those employees.<sup>47</sup> While most of that money is given to those in upper management, most people in coastal Louisiana communities either are or know someone employed in the oil or gas field.

However, the oil industry has essentially cut up the land on the coast of the state, carving out narrow waterways throughout towns like Pointe-au-Chien in order to allow for easier transportation of machinery into the Gulf.<sup>48</sup> However, because of the rising sea levels and constant erosion of the land, the streams have grown into large, fast-moving rivers that only make land loss worse in those communities. Christine explained, “You have all of these little, I don’t know how wide, waterways, and now they’re huge. Like a Bayou. Because little by little they started growing, and it just erodes the land continuously.”<sup>49</sup>

These cuts into the land are what’s causing one of the tribe’s historic mounds to erode. These large earthen mounds were built for ceremonial purposes by Pointe-au-Chien tribal ancestors and helps connect their community to their family members who lived on this land hundreds of years prior.<sup>50</sup> The tribe has recently received grant money to put oyster shells on the mound to help prevent further erosion.<sup>51</sup> While they know it won’t stop the water from coming in eventually, they are hoping it will at least allow them more time to figure out what their next step is.

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<sup>47</sup> Advocate Staff Report. “Louisiana’s Energy Industries Employ 45,000, Pay \$4.3 Billion in Wages, Economic Impact Report Says.” *The Advocate*. April 16, 2018. Accessed April 26, 2019.

[https://www.theadvocate.com/baton\\_rouge/news/business/article\\_2dfe4a9a-3f66-11e8-bfd6-331eba6a6c4a.html](https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/business/article_2dfe4a9a-3f66-11e8-bfd6-331eba6a6c4a.html)

<sup>48</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>49</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>50</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>51</sup> “Our Communities – Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe.” First People’s Conservation Council. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://fpccloisiana.org/our-communities/our-communities-pointe-au-chien-indian-tribe/>.

<sup>52</sup>As we wrap up the interview, I ask the most basic question that has been driving my research the past two years I have been working on it, “Would you say your tribe, your community has a relationship to the land that they’re on?”



Their answer comes immediately and synchronously, “Yes.”<sup>53</sup>

“How do you think things would change if you were forced to relocate because of land loss?”

“Our people have already said they wouldn’t [relocate]. They’d stay here until there’s water and you have to come here by boat.” Christine answers.<sup>54</sup>

I try again, “How do you think your community would change if you moved? I know you said you won’t, but if, for some reason, you did. How do you think things would change if you were on different land?”

There’s a long, pregnant pause.

“I don’t know.” Esther says finally, “It’d be pretty hard to survive somewhere else.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jesus Christ Statue at Marina, Pointe-au-Chien, Louisiana. Personal photograph by author. March 24, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>54</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>55</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>56</sup>Christine continues, “Yeah, because it would truly be a real culture shock to the people here. Even to the people who don’t live here anymore, because this is still a place where they grew up and where they come back to.”<sup>57</sup>



Before she leaves, Christine drives me down to Island Road, a small street that goes straight through the water to the Isle de Jean Charles. The Isle is a narrow island and is home to mostly members of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw (BCC) Tribe.<sup>58</sup>

The tribe was relocated to the island after being displaced by Jackson-era Federal Removal policies and is now considered their ancestral land. However, that land is now being threatened, like Pointe-au-Chien, because of sea level rise and erosion. Island Road, the only land bridge from the Isle de Jean Charles to the mainland, has been flooded so many times that the state has decided the next time it washes away, it won’t be rebuilt.<sup>59</sup>

As we drive along the island, Christine counts the homes out loud, trying to remember how many families live there. “38... 39... 40... Does somebody live there? Yeah, I guess so. 41...” As she counts off, she tells me about the deal that the island community was recently offered by the State of Louisiana to relocate. According to Julie Dermansky of Desmog in her article “Isle de Jean Charles Tribe Turns Down Funds to Relocate First US ‘Climate Refugees’ as Louisiana Buys Land Anyway,” BCC turned down \$48 million of federal relocation aid because, as one of

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<sup>56</sup>Island Road, Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana. Personal photograph by author. March 24, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

<sup>58</sup> “Isle De Jean Charles, Louisiana.” Isle De Jean Charles, Louisiana. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://www.isledejeancharles.com/>.

<sup>59</sup> Verdin and Billiot, “Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview.”

Dermansky's sources Chantel Comardelle claimed, "The State has no respect for our culture."<sup>60</sup> The State made numerous changes to the original relocation agreement BCC had decided on, including purchasing land for the tribe's relocation without their knowledge.

While Christine tells me about the community and continues to count the houses, I can't help but think that the failure of the State to protect the Isle de Jean Charles is one of the reasons the tribe won't even entertain the idea of relocating. Not only would they be leaving behind a central part of their culture, but they would be moved by a government who didn't seem invested in them or their heritage.

Before I say goodbye to Christine, she gives me another hug and urges me to come back soon. "Uncle Jake will take you out on his shrimping boat, and I'm sure you'll be able to meet some more of my family, too. We'd love to have you back."<sup>61</sup>

Tuscaloosa, Alabama—Christine kept me longer than I was planning, meaning that my five hour drive back home was spent mostly in the dark. It was okay, though. For miles, the water rolled past me, the moon reflecting off of the glassy surface. It was so beautiful, even against the backdrop of the hundreds of cars that joined me on the road. It was hard to think about how much the ocean was stealing away from the communities that were now far away in my rearview mirror. It was also hard to ignore the fact that had been weighing me down most of my time in Louisiana: these weren't my problems.

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<sup>60</sup> Demansky, Julie. "Isle De Jean Charles Tribe Turns Down Funds to Relocate First US 'Climate Refugees' as Louisiana Buys Land Anyway." DeSmog Blog. January 11, 2019. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://www.desmogblog.com/2019/01/11/isle-de-jean-charles-tribe-turns-down-funds-relocate-climate-refugees-louisiana>.

<sup>61</sup> Verdin and Billiot, "Christine Verdin and Esther Billiot Interview."

While it was undeniable that climate change would impact me in my lifetime, when looking at a map of 50-year land loss projections in the United States, my hometown of Apex, North Carolina wasn't going to be underwater. It left me with a lot of unease. What was my place as a researcher who could leave? Who could drive back to the inland community of Tuscaloosa and, in some ways, put the struggles of Pointe-au-Chien and the Isle de Jean Charles and the countless other coastal, majority-native communities out of my mind?

More than that, even if my community was being threatened by land loss, it often felt like the people of Pointe-au-Chien had more at stake. Ancestral mounds. An indigenous wisdom and knowledge rooted in their land. A culture that relied on the landscape. And the historical legacy of continually being forced from their land, a cycle that seemed to once again be happening because of physical land loss.

In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori woman from New Zealand, spoke about the inherent connection between European colonization and research. She outlines a list of guidelines in the Maori language for native-based studies:

- “1. Aroha kit e tangata (a respect for people)
2. Kanohi kitea (the seen face, that is present yourself to people face to face)
3. Titiro, whakarongo...korero (look, listen... speak)
4. Manaaki ki te tangata (share and host people, be generous)
5. Kia tupato (be cautious)
6. Kua e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the mana of people)

7. Kia mahaki (don't flaunt your knowledge)"<sup>62</sup>

This is the part of the story where I offer a solution. Where I offer an answer to how to protect the native held lands on the edge of our country, an easily explained, previously unseen path to a beautiful end to the Pointe-au-Chien land loss concerns. But there isn't one. Or at least not one that I, an undergraduate student, can come up with alone.

I did not travel to southern Louisiana to find a solution. I traveled to Louisiana because there is a critical crux at the intersection of Native American Studies and Climatology that isn't understood, isn't emphasized, and isn't prioritized. My goal going into this project was to further understand what it means for Native communities to lose their land, and I got a small glimpse into that. As I talked with Pete and Christine and Esther, I saw a sliver of insight into what it means to not be able to drive away, to not be able to simply relocate and try out some place new. Insight into the only place in the world where you feel at home disappearing before your eyes.

However, that does not mean the answer is to simply listen more to the native tribes facing land loss. In Shepard Krech III's book *The Ecological Indian*, he claims the idea that Native Americans are the answer to our environmental and ecological problems if we just listened to their magical, all-powerful indigenous wisdom is a falsified and harmful stereotype that often leaves the burden of environmental change on the shoulders of those seeing the worst impacts of it.<sup>63</sup> Native peoples should be given more seats at the table, but not be expected to have the answer by themselves.

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<sup>62</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press, 2012. 121.

<sup>63</sup> Krech, Shepard, III. *Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. London: Norton, 2001.

After I return, I send thank you emails to Pete, Christine, and Esther. A couple days later, Christine responds.

“I’m glad you enjoyed our visit and I’m looking forward to visiting with you soon.”

A few days earlier, at the end of my interview with Pete LeBeouf, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to share about his community and land loss.

“You really just got to come see it for yourself You really want to know it? You got to come see the people. You got to come talk to them. You got to actually be here to see it because everything they tell you, most of it ain’t right... What I can say and what I can show are two very different things.”<sup>64</sup>

And I know the single thing I’m most confident on as I park my car at my apartment complex at midnight that night is that I need to learn more. I need to talk to more people. I need to understand more. I need to go back.

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<sup>64</sup> LeBeouf. “Pete LeBeouf Interview.”

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See more of Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy - GCCLP on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy - GCCLP on Facebook. Log In. Their data analysis reveals that coastal communities have traditionally had many good paying jobs that supported upward mobility for residents, but that many middle-wage jobs have been lost across the region since 2001. Notably, the loss of oil and gas jobs in recent decades seems to have been particularly hard on lower Terrebonne and Lafourche, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard parishes. A Goldman Sachs report on the impact of climate change on cities across the world makes for grim reading. Rising temperatures would lead to changing Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy - GCCLP. Coastal wetland systems and human communities will be substantially affected whether global sea level rises 0.18–0.59 m by 2100, as estimated by the IPCC (2007) [1], or at the higher rates based on more recent information and modeling [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. In Florida, local sea level rise has generally mimicked global mean sea level rise of. Human communities and coastal wetlands systems at several estuaries along the Florida Gulf of Mexico coast are especially vulnerable to SLR impacts due to their low-lying nature and the extensive development that blocks coastal wetlands from migrating to higher elevations. The Gulf Coast houses North America's largest expanse of coastal wetlands. Human actions have dramatically altered the natural hydrology of the region and significantly eroded the wetlands and protective islands, marshes, swamps, and floodplain forests that have long protected the land along the Gulf of Mexico. Because rivers were channelized and levees prevent annual flooding of the Mississippi River and certain other Gulf Coast river systems, sediment is no longer deposited to a significant extent in the deltas along the Gulf Coast; instead, high-velocity river flows erode the remaining land base