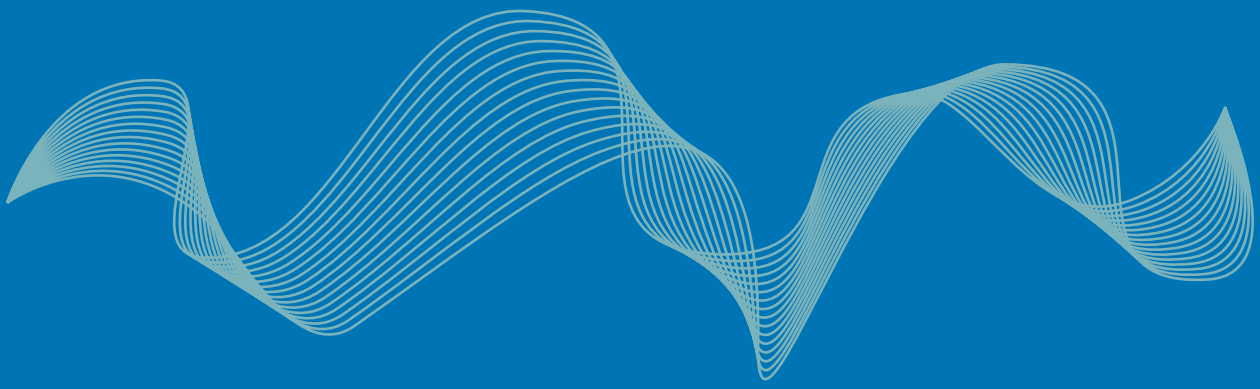
A Just Recovery

Weathering the storm in a Freedmen's Town: An exploration of residents' cultural resilience through defiance



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All images in this report illustrate recent hazards impacting Louisiana. Photographs by Gary George.

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Executive Summary

Black communities are some of the most at risk for climate-induced disasters, mainly through flooding (Wing et al., 2022). Modeling has predicted an increase in flood risk of approximately 26 percent within the next 30 years due to climate change. Disaster planning is needed to prevent the acceleration of such risks and dangers, specifically for communities of color. In addition, the disaster recovery field must redefine what an equitable recovery looks like and understand how to preserve the culture of marginalized groups. The field has historically used the term "cultural resilience" to to describe the preservation of physical buildings. In this way, the term does not account for the social and historical connections between people and places, nor does it address how people preserve, safeguard, and commemorate their values, oral histories, and traditions. Disaster mitigation practices must account for the communal customs used by marginalized communities to nurture, grow, protect, and preserve their culture in the face of systemic racism and ongoing and repeated weather-related disasters.

Disaster mitigation practices must account for the communal customs used by marginalized communities to nurture, grow, protect, and preserve their culture in the face of systemic racism and ongoing and repeated weather-related disasters.

An interdisciplinary research team at the Coastal Resilience Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill received funding for July 2023 to June 2024 to assess how a historically Black community, the Freedmen's Town* of Ironton, has weathered consecutive climate hazards and to discover the strategies residents have used to maintain cultural resilience. In short, we explored what a *just recovery* looks like for marginalized communities that are continually harmed by environmental and contemporaneous conditions. The team has leveraged findings from the literature and community voices to develop initial recommendations designed to increase understanding of what a *just recovery* looks like for historically marginalized populations. The study results will help to provide actionable steps for practitioners as they address issues of justice around recovery for marginalized populations.

* After the U.S. Civil War, Freedmen's Towns were established by formerly enslaved Africans as spaces where Black people could commune, work, learn, and worship together safely. The communities are also sometimes referred to as Freedom Towns or Freedom Settlements.

Research goals

1. Develop a theoretical framework around cultural resilience and a *just recovery.*
2. Conduct a literature review, using scholarship from various disciplines, to define cultural resilience.
3. Based on convenience and access to residents, identify a Freedmen's Town to explore further.
4. Conduct informal individual and group interviews with residents from a Freedmen's Town about their experiences with repeated climate hazard events, their responses to the events, and how they define and demonstrate cultural resilience.
5. Collect visual artifacts (images and videos) that document weathering and cultural perseverance.
6. Summarize the research findings, identify barriers, and provide policy recommendations.
7. Identify future research opportunities to improve the understanding of how to support historically and socially marginalized communities, with the framework centered around a *just recovery.*

Methods

This study is in its first year of application. First, the team conducted an extensive literature review to redefine cultural resilience. Our systematic review relied on identifying key terms among abstracts. The initial sample totaled 1780 articles. After removing duplicates and reviewing articles to ensure relevance, the final sample totaled 60 articles. Secondly, we identified a Freedmen's Town and held a community-researcher meeting to discuss the cultural wealth harnessed by the community and instances of injustice faced by residents. We toured the community, collected visual artifacts, and listened to residents' interpretation of cultural resilience. Lastly, the team compiled the data from the literature review and the Freedmen's Town discussions to construct a conceptual framework that encapsulates a *just recovery* and grounds the findings of this report.

Key findings

Our work this year has revealed that a *just recovery* is a recovery that addresses and repairs centuries of injustice. This approach is marked by a commitment to justice, with the goal of ensuring residents can thrive even after a climate-induced disaster that has disrupted their community.

> A *just recovery* is a recovery that addresses and repairs centuries of injustice.

The following is a summary of major themes that emerged from our framework, literature review, and informal interviews with community residents.

1. **Disaster recovery can be just or unjust.** Our research has found that modal definitions of recovery are unjust when applied to communities of color that are under threat from climate-induced disasters. The term "recovery," which is defined as a return to a standard state of health, attitude, or strength, has embedded in it an assumption that pre-recovery states are ones of health and

strength. And yet, our scholarly investigation and on-the-ground research have revealed that, in fact, for towns that have persisted for generations without access to clean water, adequate economic and social infrastructure, and civic health, returning to a pre-recovery state is not a *just recovery*. Instead, this "recovery" represents a return to injustice—to crumbling homes, to food deserts, and to failing education and health care systems.

2 **Climate-induced disasters are contributing to the erasure of Freedmen's Towns.** The literature makes one thing clear: Freedmen's Towns are at risk of and are in the process of erasure. Historically, these communities of color have suffered weather-related devastation at disproportionate rates compared to neighboring White communities. Established on discarded land, the Freedmen's Towns in the United States have suffered through floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Forecasters predict that climate change will continue to threaten the existence of Freedmen's Towns. The generations of formerly enslaved Black people who built these Freedmen's Towns have triumphed and persisted; however, climate change is an unstoppable force that could lead to their physical erasure.

3 **Injustice is contributing to the erasure of Freedmen's Towns.** The process of erasure via injustice has evolved in many ways. First, formerly enslaved Black Americans who established towns had to fight to gain access to the often-uninhabitable land that they sought to settle. Once they settled the land, access to infrastructure and opportunity was typically scarce. Residents often had a lack of political representation—a tool that would have helped them secure financial and educational resources. And yet, our research shows that Freedmen's Towns persisted and thrived in intangible yet vital ways, even amid racism and injustice. The resilient aspects of Freedmen's Towns are themselves community cultural wealth but are not valued post-disaster and are often erased. The town of Ironton, Louisiana, like many Freedmen's Towns around the country, has resisted erasure through defiance and through maintaining a strong sense of community.

The resilient aspects of Freedmen's Towns are themselves community cultural wealth but are not valued post-disaster and are often erased.

4 **Cultural resilience relies on preserving buildings and the built environment.** When climate-induced disasters hit, they decimate many things, including infrastructure and buildings. The damage and loss of buildings through hazards can be disastrous and profoundly affect residents' safety, shelter, and livelihood. For these reasons, rebuilding structures has been a critical focus in disaster recovery and has assisted in providing a sense of normalcy for impacted residents. Freedmen's Towns possess buildings that can be and are damaged by hazards, and these structures must be repaired post-disaster to help commemorate the physical representations of culture within the community.

5 **Cultural resilience also relies on preserving communities' culture.** Our research and analysis showed that focusing on the resilience of the built environment is necessary but not sufficient. Freedmen's Towns possess another sort of cultural resilience, which is embedded in the centuries-old communities they have built. Although often unacknowledged and unseen, this cultural resilience is embodied in the histories and cultural customs through which these towns have thrived in defiance of systemic racism. Resilience can be found in the systems of community uplift, philanthropy, education, and service that unite Freedmen's Towns in the face of hardship and serve to wrap their citizens in community care. The residents of Ironton, Louisiana, said they believed that the resilience of a community depends on the people and enduring customs that are created and maintained within the town's physical structures.

Hallmarks of a just recovery

1 **A *just recovery* must seek to redress historic underinvestment, not simply rebuild buildings**. A *just recovery* must begin with appraisal of historic underinvestment and the effects of systemic racism, as well as contemporaneous damage to the built environment. Restoring Freedmen's Towns' built environments without attending to the longstanding effects of racism—polluted air from nearby factories, food deserts, lack of transportation, lack of economic investment, limited employment opportunities, and lack of access to health care—is unjust.

2 **The practice of recovery must account for not simply the individual, but the individual as nested within the community.** A critical component of a *just recovery* is the safeguarding of community resilience. Breaking up families and communities that have prayed together, learned together, and thrived together for generations is unjust.

Future direction

The next phase of this project is dependent on future funding. With additional support we will focus on collecting expanded qualitative data. The research team will administer interviews and surveys, including asking respondents to complete a photovoice survey (i.e., digital storytelling). The additional qualitative data collection will aim to assess if the framework on cultural resilience aligns with dominant discourse. We will also identify additional sites to expand our sample for future exploration.

This work will help inform policy recommendations regarding how to listen to and best support marginalized populations through repeated climate hazards. Given that historically marginalized communities are at greater risk of increased climate-induced hazards, our project can ameliorate the impact of disasters by providing greater insight on what it means for those communities to be culturally resilient.

Introduction

To date, there is little research on how historically marginalized communities can sustain their culture in the face of increased climate-induced hazards and inequitable government response. A recent study showed that Black communities are some of the most at risk for climate hazards, mainly through flooding (Wing et al., 2022). Modeling has predicted an increase in flood risk within the next 30 years due to climate change. Freedmen's Towns specifically are at an increased risk of erasure.

Freedmen's Towns grew through familial and communal connections of support, and often these communities were built on land deemed uninhabitable and routinely impacted by hazardous events

Freedmen's Towns, also known as Freedom Towns or Freedom Settlements, were established by newly freed Black people who sought a place of refuge during and after the U.S. Civil War and through the Jim Crow era (Little, 2020). In these places, Black households could own their homes, educate their children, worship together, and support their neighbors' philanthropic interests. Thus, Freedmen's Towns were places of cultural richness, resistance, and generational community.

Due to systems of oppression and underinvestment, Black people could not own or maintain hospitable land in most communities (Davis et al., 2021; Davis, 2023). However, Freedmen's Towns grew through familial and communal connections of support, and often these communities were built on land deemed uninhabitable and routinely impacted by hazardous events (e.g., flooding) (Cooper, 2019; Davis, 2023). In other instances where the land was hospitable, Blacks were stripped of their land by force or through the enactment of policy (Davis et al., 2021). In this study, we focus on the former and assess how generations of hazards have specifically impacted Ironton, the first Freedmen's Town in Louisiana. In addition, we explore what a *just recovery* looks like, specifically through the lived experiences of residents of a Freedmen's Town, and how cultural resilience is defined in the extant literature, thereby revealing the intersection of historical marginalization and climate-induced disasters.

The overarching goal of this research project is to investigate a *just recovery* for communities that are continually impacted by harmful environmental and contemporaneous conditions.

Our research—both scholarly and in the field—has found that modal definitions of recovery are unjust when applied to communities of color that are under threat from climate-induced disasters. The term "recovery" is one that seems to speak for itself. It is hard to imagine how recovery might be hurtful

or even damaging. And yet, history precedes the word, changing it from a neutral or even a positive term to one that has historical baggage and meaning. The term "recovery," which can be defined as "a return to a normal state of health, mind, or strength," has embedded in it an assumption that stasis—the moments of pre-recovery—are ones of health and strength. And yet, our scholarly investigation and on-the-ground research reveal that for towns that have lacked access to clean water, economic and social infrastructure, and civic health, returning to stasis is not a *just recovery.* Recovery, instead, must address and rectify centuries of underinvestment. Without addressing historic underinvestment, "recovery" is a return to injustice—to crumbling homes, to food deserts, to failing schools. Traditional conceptions of recovery also pay little, if any, heed to the cultural resilience that communities have constructed. This resilience is based on intangible assets that transform a gathering of people into a sustaining community.

Our work has uncovered the historical and contemporaneous legacies of injustice that ensure that a "simple" recovery for communities that have never had access to civic, governmental, economic, or educational health is not actually recovery. A *just recovery* is one that addresses the historical and contemporaneous vestiges of racial injustice, rebuilds buildings and other structures, and preserves the cultural resilience that communities in Freedmen's Towns have created.

Research goals

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In this report we bring two sets of considerations into dialog with one another. The first is the history of support that the federal government has provided to previously thriving communities suffering from environmental disasters. Specifically, governmental agencies provide support in the form of building and rebuilding homes, schools, and infrastructure and by providing necessary aid to expedite recovery. In this case, support is aimed at returning communities to their pre-disaster state. For communities that have long benefited from governmental and social investment, this approach has enabled them to continue thriving.

But what happens to those communities that have suffered from decades or centuries of underinvestment before and after a hazard? This brings us to our second consideration, which is related to historic and contemporaneous racial injustice. Freedmen's Towns have not benefited from long-term or consistent support that guarantee a community's ability to thrive and recover. Instead, Ironton, Louisiana, and other Freedmen's Towns have suffered from historic and contemporaneous underinvestment even before climate disasters hit (Cooper, 2019). They are therefore unable to recover as fast as their privileged peers (Kates et al., 2006) and are more susceptible to future events. Our research shows that a new process for achieving a *just recovery* is needed for those communities that have continually faced underinvestment and injustice.

Freedmen's Town of Ironton, Louisiana

Ironton, a Freedmen's Town in coastal Louisiana, was established in 1880 in Plaquemines Parish by formerly enslaved people who worked at the St. Rosalie plantation prior to emancipation (IRAD, 2023). Like many other Freedmen's Towns, Ironton suffered decades of underinvestment; it was denied infrastructure development funds in favor of investments made in neighboring White communities and did not even receive running water until the 1980s. The town has battled adversity on several fronts, including working against the detrimental effects of climate change and hazards. Image 1 (below) provides a bird's eye view of Ironton, highlighting the town's proximity to the Mississippi River to the east and Myrtle Grove Marina to the south, which ultimately leads to the Gulf of Mexico.

Image 1. A bird's eye view of Ironton, Louisiana (via Google Maps)

Methods

This study is in its first year and explores the following overarching question: What does a *just recovery* look like for communities that are continually impacted by harmful environmental and contemporaneous conditions? The team applied an exploratory design to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How is cultural resilience defined?

RQ2: In what ways have Ironton's residents exuded cultural resilience?

How has Ironton persisted despite numerous challenges?

How have Ironton's founders built and sustained systems of mutual support, community, and thriving over centuries?

RQ3: What is a just solution to protecting and sustaining residents of Ironton through environmental and contemporaneous disasters?

First investigatory practice: Literature review

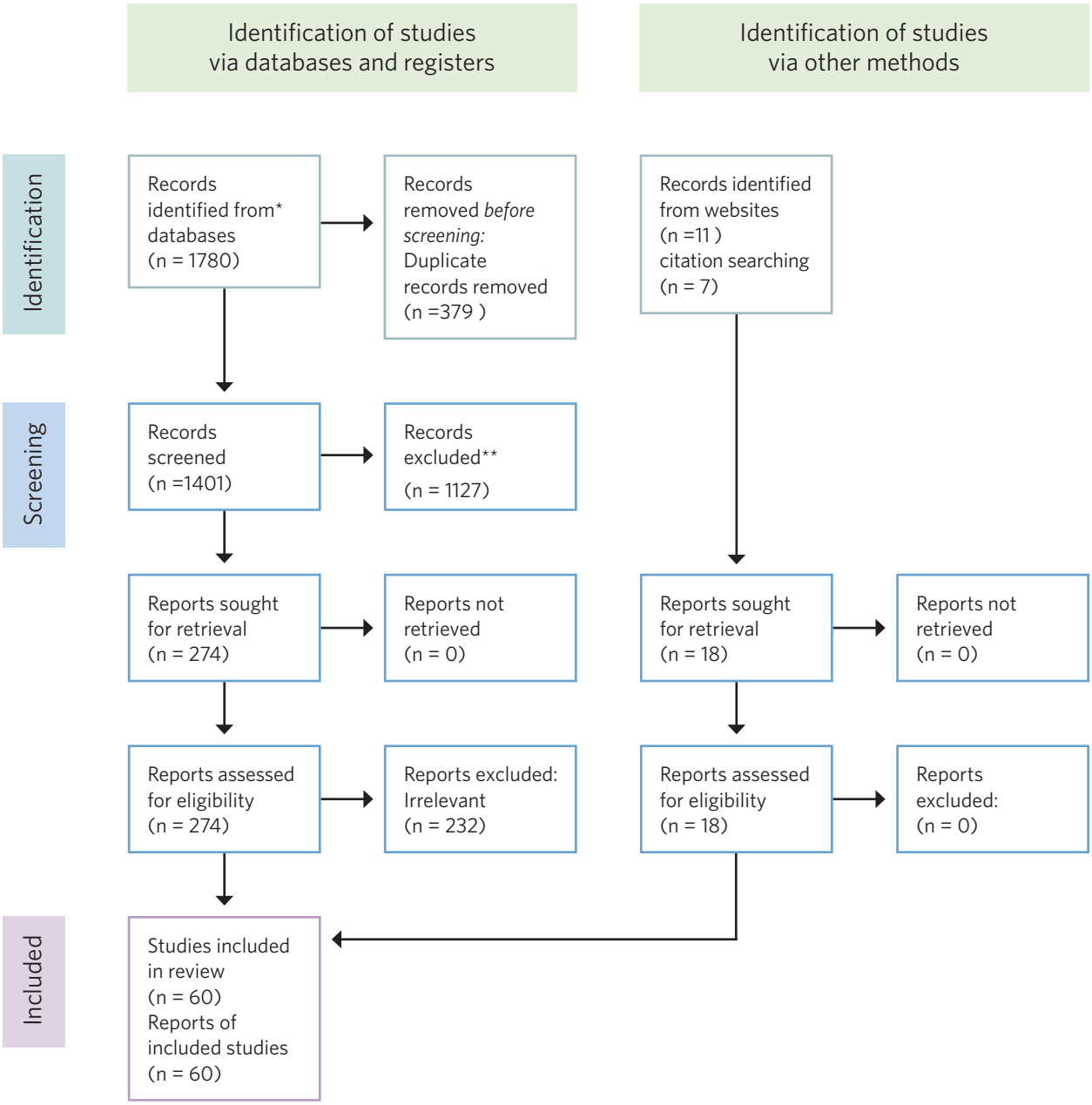
The research team's systematic review procedures followed established best practices as recommended by Cooper (2010) and Littell et al. (2008). We also incorporated the scoping review extension of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines (PRISMA, Tricco, et. al, 2018). These tools are designed to improve the transparency and quality of systematic reviews, ensuring that a literature analysis is rigorous and comprehensive. We employed the following electronic databases: Scopus, Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost), and Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest). Additional sources were identified through Google Scholar and by examining the citations of influential scholars in the field to ensure a comprehensive review of the literature. The team conducted the search in November 2023.

We then identified a group of key search terms to be applied to the PRISMA. Using these key search terms allowed the software to identify articles related to topics of interest. Our final grouping of search terms included those related to climate and weather; environmental hazards, crises, and injustices, including eco-racism; natural disasters; Freedom and Freedmen's Towns; racialized topography; as well as cultural resilience, preservation, and wealth, encompassing aspects of capital, defiance, and resistance. We also included racial identifiers for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, including variations such as Black and African American.

A total of 1780 articles were retrieved in this first stage. A total of 379 articles were identified as duplicates and removed from the sample. We kept articles if they met these criteria: 1) were set in the U.S. and 2) were relevant and within the scope of this project. Studies that were published in a language other than English, conducted outside of the U.S., or for which full text was not available were excluded from review. The research team double-screened the titles and abstracts of 1401 studies, excluding 1127 and retaining 274 for full-text review. The remaining 274 studies were double-screened

and 214 were excluded. Eighteen studies were identified via Google Scholar search. Ultimately, a final sample of 60 studies met the criteria, where the team reviewed the article and extracted results from the studies. Figure 1 illustrates our scoping review process.

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram illustrating the scoping review process



Scoping review based on guidelines from Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. For more information, visit: http://www.prisma-statement.org

Second investigatory practice: Freedmen's Towns

The research team identified four Freedmen's Towns located in these southeastern states: Florida, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia. The criteria for selection were based on proximity to the researchers' primary location, current operational status as active, access to historical artifacts, and willingness of community leaders to collaborate with the team. The coastal Louisiana town of Ironton was selected based on our outlined criteria. We sent a letter to Ironton's community leaders describing our project and interest in collaborating with residents.

Ironton's leaders welcomed the research team to the community and invited us to a face-to-face meeting in January 2024. In this space, we asked the residents to speak about their relationship to Ironton, their thoughts on what the future holds, and the extent to which climate-induced disasters have disrupted the community. We also collected visual artifacts from our visit to Ironton to assess the extent of cultural resilience and defiance. The images were depictions of residents, historical structures, housing spaces, community gathering locations, faith-based structures, and other items deemed relevant. Some of these visual artifacts are included in this report.

Third investigatory practice: Conceptual framework

Lastly, the team compiled data from the literature review, archival information from Freedmen's Towns, informal conversations with residents of a Freedmen's Town, and visual artifacts to construct a conceptual framework for a *just recovery.*

Findings

This section of the report is grounded by the following key finding: "recovery" in the face of climate-induced disaster can be *just* or *unjust.* This finding is illuminated in multiple ways across our research and is triangulated among scholarly literature, applied research, and personal testimony of Ironton residents. In this trifecta of literature, research, and experience, we found mutually reinforcing points that comprise the conceptual frameworks we delineate in Figures 2 and 3. According to Luft et al. (2022), conceptual frameworks help to explain a phenomenon that is being investigated and may provide data that is not yet grounded in the literature.

> "Recovery" in the face of climate-induced disaster can be *just* or *unjust.*

Conceptual framework

For Freedmen's Towns, or other historically marginalized communities, the approach to receiving post-disaster aid that would benefit well-supported communities would not yield similar results. Instead, a traditional approach that includes relocation would lead to an *unjust recovery.* Figure 2 illustrates why this is the case. Without attention to the systems of erasure and the extant community cultural wealth, relocation would sever residents from the connections, shared history, and the strengths that they have built together. Relocation, in these instances, would not lead to what the community itself would count as a *just recovery*. Instead, relocation without attention to building access to historically denied services would result in further dissolution and loss. In this instance, communities are offered relocation without regard to the cultural resilience that they have built.

Figure 2. Unjust recovery

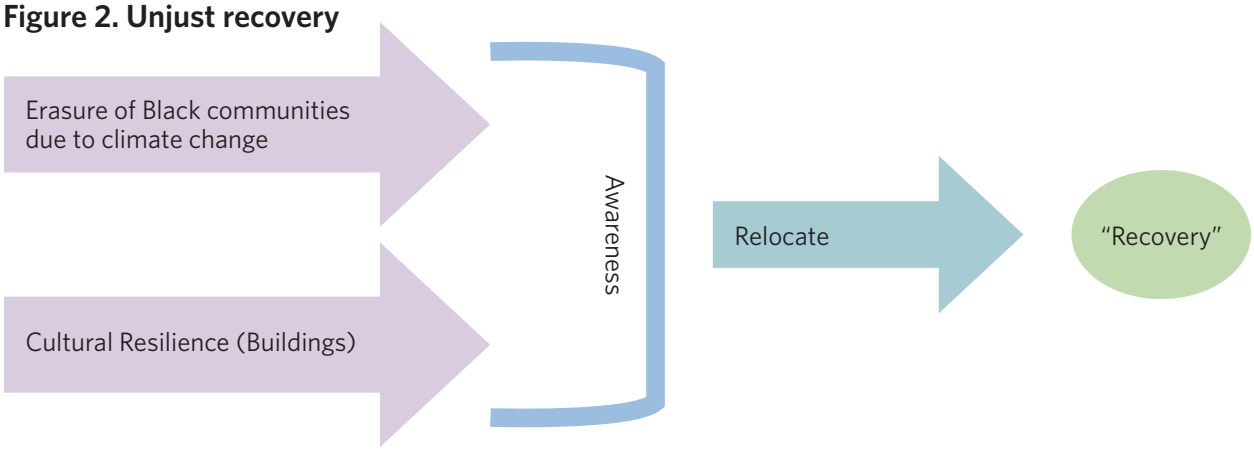


Figure 3 illustrates the key ingredients for a *just recovery* for historically marginalized communities. In this schema, the federal government would approach aid efforts with an **acknowledgement and appreciation of the cultural resilience of historically marginalized communities and awareness of the ongoing erasure of Black communities due to racism and disasters.** Armed with this knowledge, the federal government's recovery efforts might focus on disruption of these historic harms through investment; that investment should be "right sized" and account for the preceding decades and centuries of underinvestment. This investment would allow marginalized populations, for the first time, to live and thrive in well-supported communities, and it would account for and repair the centuries of underinvestment. For instance, this recovery could mean that communities would have access to fresh air and clean water, functioning infrastructure, resources such as schools and houses of worship, and economic opportunities. These communities would be places where residents could determine their fate by either remaining or relocating, but the ultimate result would be to thrive.

Figure 3. Just recovery

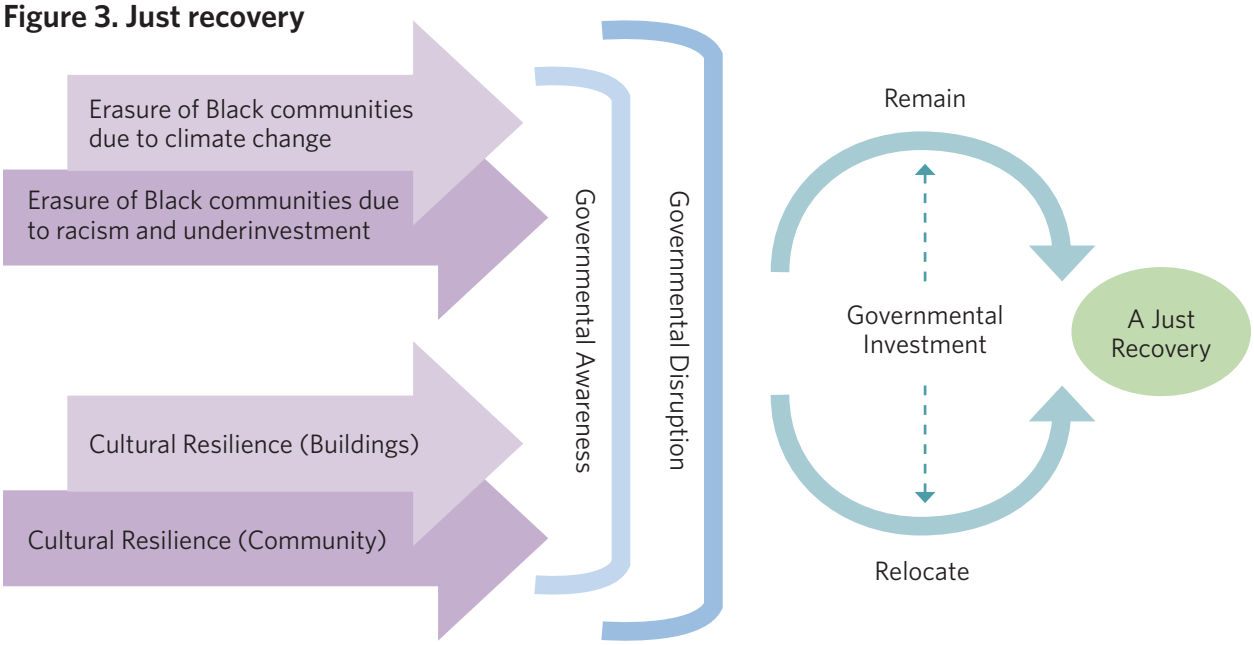


Table 1 helps to explain the framework by detailing each dimension from Figure 3. This table provides the foundation for the remainder of this report. Each of the key dimensions named in the far left column (erasure via injustice, or finding resilience in community, etc.) is supported by the findings of the scoping literature review and by the history and contemporary realities of Ironton. We detail these synergies below.

Table 1. Systemic racism: At the nexus of literature and the Ironton community

Dimension	Connecting Theme	Literature	Ironton
One: Erasure of Black communities due to climate change	Frequency of climate-induced disasters	Climate-induced disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity and causing devastation in marginalized communities.	The following hurricanes created major damage to Ironton: Ida (2021), Isaac (2012), Katrina (2005), Rita (2005), and Ivan (2004).
	Few protections from climate-induced disasters	Evidence shows that governmental assistance in the form of levee development consistently excludes lower and more rural parts of Louisiana.	The lack of a levee in Ironton has resulted in physical erasure of homes and places of worship, while other structures are damaged from flooding. Hurricane Ida destroyed nearly 80% of homes in Ironton.
	Minimal support after climate-induced storms	Inefficient planning and a lack of coordination have resulted in delayed recovery assistance, loss of community cohesion, and long-term erasure.	Ironton residents were denied sufficient local and state government financial support to rebuild their homes, places of worship, and convenience stores.
Two: Erasure of Black communities due to racism and underinvestment	Basic infrastructure	Freedmen's Towns have a longstanding history of underinvestment and denial of infrastructure funds to assist in meeting basic needs.	Residents were denied an effective levee system to protect from flooding. Ironton received access to running water in the 1980s, nearly a century after its inception.
	Location of sites	Historically marginalized communities tend to be located in environmentally harmful areas.	Ironton is located between oil refineries, and residents complain of breathing toxic emissions from nearby plants.
	Black cemeteries	Louisiana's historical Black cemeteries are more likely to be located near industrial facilities as compared to White cemeteries.	Ironton residents are unable to identify and visit graves of ancestors due to relocation and environmental harms. These challenges threaten to deteriorate connections between generations.
	Political representation	Freedmen's Towns tend to be unincorporated communities where residents are not able to participate in discussions about the future of their towns due to a lack of political representation.	As an unincorporated town, Ironton does not have any local political representation.

Three: Cultural resilience (Buildings)	Definition of cultural resilience	Cultural resilience is defined as the process of restoring historical buildings decimated by hazards.	Recent floods have made buildings inaccessible for the community. Since Hurricane Ida in 2021, Ironton's only church (Saint Paul Missionary Baptist) remains unrecognizable, as the storm destroyed the structure.
	Black sites are more at risk	As seen in Savannah, Georgia, historically Black sites tend to be more at risk for hazard-related devastation.	In addition to the repeated hazards, Saint Paul Missionary Baptist also faces threats of destruction from outside agencies. Recently, there have been efforts to tear down the structure.
	Strong ties to the community	Institutional structures such as places of worship are embedded in the community, serving as a site of cultural heritage and social memory.	Saint Paul Missionary Baptist church has served as a historical site and keystone for community members.
Four: Cultural resilience (Community)	Definition of cultural resilience	We redefine cultural resilience as preservation of the physical (e.g., houses of worship) and non-physical (e.g., customs) elements of a community surviving in adverse environmental and contemporaneous conditions. Non-physical elements may be classified as cultural capital, resistance, and defiance.	Residents demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the policies that are geared to their erasure. They also shared examples of how hurricanes and flooding have impacted Ironton through their artwork, poetry, and documentation.
	Acts of resistance	Literature has shown that resistance has originated within the family context, as communities fight against the physical and cultural erasure of their ancestors' land and stories.	Ironton's residents created a non-profit organization and met in a community center to strategize against erasure techniques.
	Black feminism	Black feminism has played a crucial role in guiding these efforts, many of which have grown into powerful movements that influence legislation.	Black women play a crucial role in Ironton's efforts, as these women lead and maintain the community center. They ostentatiously show evidence of their capital, resistance, and defiance toward policies and actors that actively attempt to erase their culture.

Dimension one: Erasure of Freedmen's Towns by storms

Since 2000, Howell and Elliot (2019) revealed that hazards have caused substantial property damage in most U.S. counties (roughly 99.7 percent). Over the years, scientists have warned that extreme events and climate change will be more likely to occur in the future and thus create significant challenges for historically marginalized groups (Crosweller & Tschakert, 2020).

Ironton is without exception. Devastating hurricanes have repeatedly hit this Black community over the past two decades. These storms include Hurricanes Ida (2021), Isaac (2012), Katrina (2005), Rita (2005), and Ivan (2004). Despite these repeated climate-induced disasters, residents of the town are still fighting for better flood protection, including the development of effective levee systems and protection for their homes (Barra, 2021). To illustrate the gravity of the destruction faced by this community, the pace, rate, and scale of wetland loss they have experienced is similar to losing the equivalent of one football field of wetlands per hour on average since 1932 (Couvillion et al., 2011). Governmental assistance in the form of levee development has been authorized after several major disaster events, but projects have routinely excluded the lower and rural sections of the parish where Ironton is located.

Image 2 (below) shows a convenience store located in Ironton that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Nearly 20 years later, the store remains in dilapidated condition and serves as a memory of the devastating event that halted residents' ability to conveniently purchase food and supplies within their community.

Image 2. Ironton's only convenience store, which was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005

Our research also found that the erasure of Black communities continued during the response and recovery period of disasters. Throughout Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, Black communities in New Orleans were dealing with trauma, ranging from the destruction of their community to psychological distress and post-traumatic stress disorder (Waters, 2016). There was a continuation of trauma for displaced residents who lost a shared culture and heritage (Gotham, 2009). Our findings also revealed poor planning and coordination from local government officials (Martin, 2007; Horowitz, 2020). There were multiple examples of delayed recovery assistance, where some residents waited for months and years for relief, while others never received help. Ultimately, Black residents lost their ability to build back their communities due to the long-term erasure mechanisms set in motion by the storm.

Throughout Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, Black communities in New Orleans were dealing with trauma, ranging from the destruction of their community to psychological distress and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dimension two: Erasure of Freedmen's Towns by injustice

Our research shows that many Freedmen settlements were established outside of cities, often on inferior and less-desirable land, such as low-lying areas that are more susceptible to flooding (Mizelle, 2016; Davis et al., 2021). These communities tended to be unincorporated and could not benefit from local or municipal representation. The lack of representation left residents exposed to neglect without elected officials to advocate for them and their needs (Richter, 2018). For instance, residents faced challenges stemming from inadequate infrastructure, including poor water and sanitation systems (Johnson et al., 2024) and an absence of transportation and pedestrian infrastructure (King et al., 2009). Additionally, the communities had limited access to grocery stores (Dutko et al., 2012). This situation has left Black residents of unincorporated

Black residents of unincorporated areas are reliant upon White county-level policymakers and the local government for support, which can result in political marginalization when community needs are not prioritized.

areas reliant upon White county-level policymakers and the local government for support, which itself can result in political marginalization when community needs are not prioritized (Vidal and Gomez, 2021). Given the lack of support even before disasters hit, many Freedmen settlements have been reduced to neighborhood boundaries or have completely disappeared from maps (Sitton, 2022).

Like other Freedmen's Towns, Ironton was denied infrastructure development funds provided to neighboring White communities (Cooper, 2019). This, again, is a prime example of underinvestment—not disinvestment, as the investment was never made in Ironton. For instance, Ironton did not gain access to the parish's running water until the 1980s, almost 100 years after the system's inception (IRAD, 2023). Residents lamented that the lack of financial support from local and state government resulted in not having paved roads or an effective levee system. Instead, Ironton's residents were increasingly surrounded by industrial factories, polluting their air and water and further isolating them from other communities.

While there were multiple examples of attempted erasures throughout Ironton, one instance evoked nostalgia that reminded residents of both the lack of resources and the beauty of their community. Image 3 (below) shows oyster shells in a field near a home in Ironton. Residents recalled running past community matriarchs and attempting to tiptoe on seashells, ultimately failing. Although residents are demanding sidewalks in the present day, the visible deposits of broken seashells throughout the community remind them of their lively past.

Image 3. The dichotomous seashells in Ironton, which represent both the community's lack of infrastructure and nostalgic memories of a past way of life

Image 4. Many ancestors of Ironton's residents are buried in unmarked graves, as shown above.

Louisiana is home to historical Black cemeteries that are at risk for multiple hazards such as frequent hurricanes, annual flooding, and chemical pollutants in areas such as Cancer Alley (Blanks et al., 2021). Black cemeteries in Louisiana are more likely to be situated within a two-mile exposure zone to industrial sites compared to White cemeteries. For instance, of the 28 cemeteries in St. James Parish, 20 are deemed Black while one is identified as White. Seven Black cemeteries have at least one chemical facility within a two-mile exposure zone, while the White cemetery has none.

The release of toxic emissions from chemical facilities can contribute to cancer-causing agents (Bullard, 2009), and the proximity of cemeteries to industrial sites makes it more challenging for descendants to visit their loved ones (Blanks et al., 2021). Reduced cemetery visits may lead to weakened social connections between the past and present generations, while chemicals may accelerate deterioration of the cemetery grounds. The proximity of Black cemeteries to chemical facilities demonstrates that there is disregard for Black life, even in death.

Segregated Black cemeteries represent places where past generations walked and are "living museums where [Black people] can stand face to face with the past—sharing the stories of those who contributed in so many ways to our families, our communities..." (PHG, Unk). While these places provoke memories and connect the present with the past, they are also spaces that can symbolize significant injustice. Unfortunately, most Ironton residents are unaware of where their family members are buried because Hurricane Ida displaced many grave sites, and the deceased were subsequently reburied by an outside company in unmarked graves. Unfortunately, this detrimental act has been repeated across the nation in places such as Florida (Nelson, 2022), North Carolina (Davis, 2024), and Maryland (Dell'orto & Sands, 2024).

Dimension three: Finding resilience in the buildings

Resilience is defined as the return to a level of functioning that predates a traumatic event (APA, 2018). Cultural resilience is "the capacity of a distinct community or cultural system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain key elements of structure and identity that preserve its distinctness" (Healy, 2006, 12). Moreover, previous literature points to the importance of institutional structures that are embedded in the community, such as churches (Carpenter & Alexander, 2022; Waters 2016). For instance, Carpenter and Alexander (2022) investigated the intersection of disaster resilience and cultural heritage preservation. Their findings revealed that historically Black sites in Savannah, Georgia, were more likely to be at risk for flooding compared to other sites. They stated, "It is important for the city's resilience to bring proper attention to these African American sites. Doing so will strengthen the social memory of Savannah by providing equity to often overlooked parts of history" (p.1).

Scholars have begun to apply the term "cultural resilience" to locations frequently affected by hazards (Wardekker et al., 2023). In these texts, scholars identify local knowledge of previous hazards, communal traditions, and social connections as important components of cultural resilience—all of which help to assess and improve post-hazard recovery. The literature also identifies cultural resilience as a mechanism to understand how people experience hazards, develop adaptive approaches, and access support and aid (Rahmani et al., 2022).

Local knowledge of previous hazards, communal traditions, and social connections are important components of cultural resilience—all of which help to assess and improve post-hazard recovery.

These works often do not consider the importance of non-physical elements of communities in adverse environmental conditions. And yet recent scholarship has connected cultural resilience to communities facing oppression and violence (Wilbur & Gone, 2023). This work focuses on "survivance," a term that aptly combines survival with resistance and comes out of Indigenous scholarship. While resilience speaks to recovering after one isolated event (e.g., a hurricane), survivance addresses the long-term process of prospering, given a marginalized community's complex bond with colonization and historical trauma. In this way, survivance refers to active and liberatory practices of dealing with and resisting oppression. It is thus distinct from some modal descriptions of resilience that project an image of passive resilience rather than active defiance.

Image 5 (below) shows the interior of Ironton's Saint Paul Missionary Baptist Church. This historical site was founded and organized by residents in 1880 and rebuilt in 1957, serving as a keystone for generations of community members. Ironton residents visited this site to worship, engage in political advocacy, and discuss the future of Ironton. A current resident recalled attending the church and listening to their grandmother sing a hymn in front of the congregation. Sadly, the space is nearly unrecognizable now, after being devastated by Hurricane Ida in 2021.

Image 5. Saint Paul Missionary Baptist Church, a central gathering spot for the Ironton community, was devastated by Hurricane Ida in 2021.

Dimension four: Finding resilience in the community

Despite the erasure of many Black communities through disasters and injustice, Ironton and some other Freedmen's Towns have flourished in ways that have supported and fostered interconnected communities, while sustaining rich connections to their history. We redefine cultural resilience as the capacity to preserve the physical elements (e.g., houses of worship) and non-physical elements (e.g., customs) of a community in adverse environmental and contemporaneous conditions. In dimension four, we classify the non-physical elements into three categories: (1) cultural capital, (2) resistance, and (3) defiance.

CULTURAL CAPITAL. Sociologists have studied these often-intangible strengths, which they have labeled a type of "wealth." Pierre Bourdieu (1984) defines cultural capital as the amalgamation of one's knowledge, skills, and behaviors that can have a direct and effective impact on that person's position in the social stratification structure. He distinguishes three forms of cultural capital: embodied cultural capital, or the capital manifested in people's dispositions and behaviors; objectified cultural capital, or material cultural objects; and institutionalized cultural capital, or formalized education credentials.

While Bourdieu argued that cultural capital embodies the value of cultural assets and formalizes the role of cultural phenomena, David Throsby (1999) noted the relationship of cultural value to economic value, while recognizing its role in contributing to development and progress. Throsby stated,

> *Thus, in broad terms something can be said to be of cultural value if it contributes to these shared elements of human experience. For example...a heritage building may embody something of the history or tradition that binds a community or a society together... All these examples suggest that a concept of "culture" carries with it a concomitant notion of 'cultural value.' (p. 6)*

Community cultural wealth (CCW), a term coined by the scholar Tara J. Yosso, brings a strengths-based approach to the concept of cultural capital, taking special consideration of the endemic nature of racism. This model leverages Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the lived experiences of communities of color and produces a multifaceted view of community and various types of capital: aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistant. Yosso encourages us to recommit ourselves to "praxis—action that is theoretically and historically grounded" (Yosso, 2016, p.3). Using CRT as a frame, Yosso was able to identify and name these different types of capital. Yosso's work builds on the work of Black scholars such as Robert Hill (1972), who identified five strengths of Black families: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, high achievement orientation, and religious orientation. Research shows the protective nature of the Black community's cultural assets in the face of racial discrimination (Hill et al., 2023; Iruka et al., 2024, 2022) and has named additional aspects of community cultural wealth, including spiritual wealth. Naming and highlighting CCW is an important move toward resisting deficit frames, biases, and stereotypes that limit access and opportunities.

Image 6 (below) represents a form of CCW, with a resident sharing pages from their journal about the world surrounding Ironton. Journaling is an example of linguistic wealth that embodies aspirational tones about the past, present, and future.

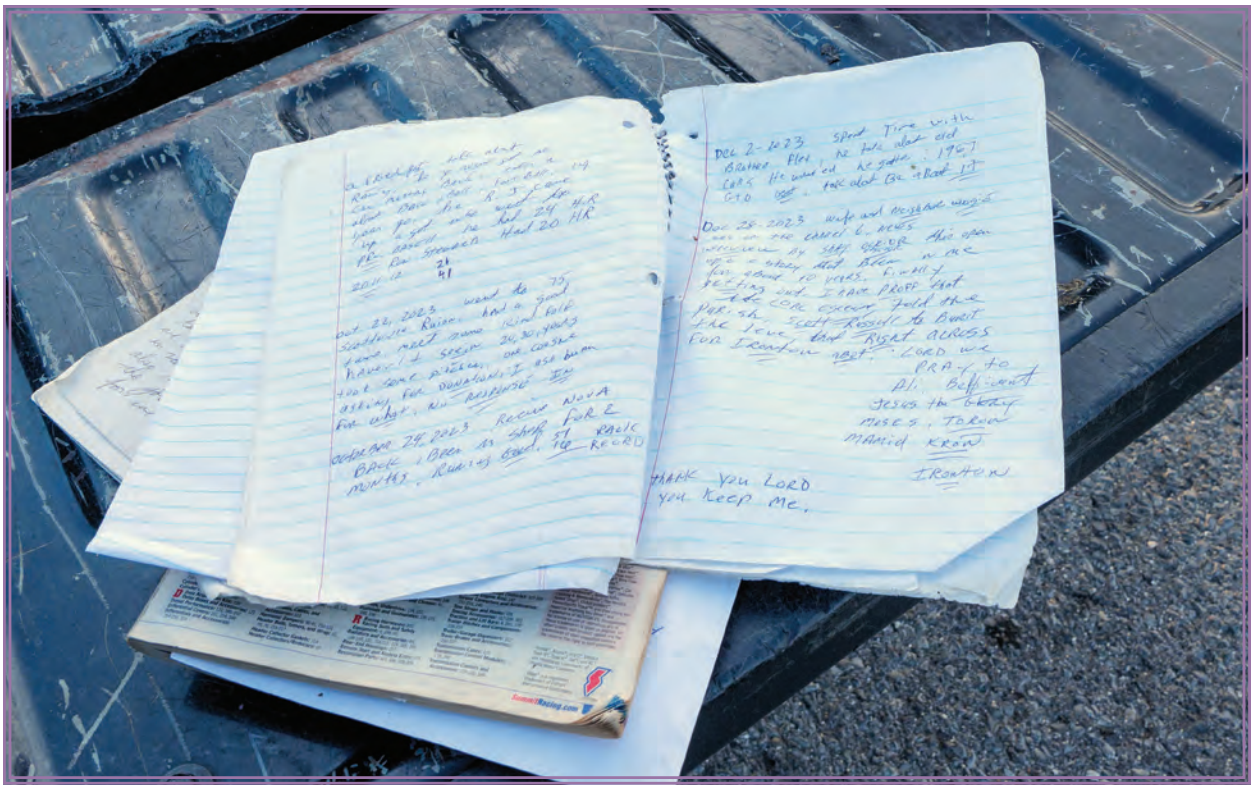


Image 6. The journal of an Ironton resident, shown above, is an example of cultural wealth in the community.

RESISTANCE. Resistance encompasses the ways in which individuals and communities fight against discriminatory practices and persist despite facing substantial adversity (Rogers, 2021). Resistance has taken many forms in historically marginalized communities. In the case of Black families in Freedmen's Towns, we see the exceptional work of protecting culture, family, and community as acts of resistance. These efforts demonstrate resistance to erasure, resistance to isolation, and resistance to marginalization. In this way, a community's past creates pathways for future success.

Many acts of resistance originate in the family context, with several communities resisting the erasure of their ancestors' land and ancestors' stories in the face of the detrimental effects of climate change and environmental racism (Berrey, 2009). Many successful groups have grown from the family unit into grassroots organizations that have significantly affected legislation and post-disaster recovery efforts (Bellamy, 2023). Resistance is inextricably tied to many of the key terms mentioned in the environmental racism literature, as concepts such as resilience and cultural wealth are themselves forms of resistance (Martin-Beltrán, Montoya-Ávila, & Canales, 2018).

It is important to understand the role of intersectionality when parsing the complexities of resistance. Black feminism has largely shaped resistance efforts in Black communities broadly, and despite the multiple facets of discrimination that Black women face, their efforts have accounted for significant progress toward protection for underserved communities (Gilbert, 2017).

Image 7 (below) illustrates a type of resistance, with the juxtaposition of community center signage with a large carrier ship in the background. Ironton's residents gather at the Fresh Breath of Life Community Center to develop strategies for resisting the many attempts of erasure faced by the town. Visible behind the sign is the *Sophia Z,* a bulk carrier that transports goods on the Mississippi River to other parts of the world. Despite close proximity to these types of vessels and to oil refineries, Ironton residents continue to meet at the Fresh Breath of Life Community Center to ensure that their town continues to thrive despite threats posed by external forces.

Image 7. The Fresh Breath of Life Community Center, where Ironton residents gather to develop strategies to resist erasure of their town, is juxtaposed with the Sophia Z, *a bulk carrier on the Mississippi River.*

DEFIANCE. The term "defiance" has long been used in schools and other settings in pejorative ways, focusing disproportionately on racially minoritized students, particularly Black children (Goldin et al., 2023). This term has also been used to justify discipline and withholding access to Black students' learning opportunities using exclusionary policies such as in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension (Gregory, 2005). Previous research has found that Black boys and girls were subject to an over-representation in referrals for being defiant in the classroom and punished more harshly compared to other groups (Smith & Body, 2007; GAO Report GAO-18-258, 2018; Gregory & Skiba, 2019; Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darensbourg, 2011; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). In

these instances, the term "defiance" is used in deficit ways, perpetuating negative stereotypes and promoting harmful labeling.

Building off the new vein of literature that recasts the concept of children's defiance in schools, we turn to the defiant ways that Black communities in Freedmen's Towns have confronted environmental and contemporaneous measures of erasure and pushed to thrive. In these new theoretical conceptions, critical scholarship allows scholars to redefine defiance as important work of self-preservation and survival as "productive and warranted" (Goldin et al., 2023). In this shift, defiance is an asset, not a deficit. It is an example of the enactment of critical consciousness (Freire, 2021), where "critical consciousness represents the analysis and critique of structural inequalities, the motivation and perceived capacity to effect change, and social action to redress inequity" (Diemer et al., 2021, p. 409).

Hurricane Ida destroyed almost 80 percent of the homes in Ironton, and residents sought support from state and federal agencies to assist with recovery. Image 8 (below) shows a temporary FEMA trailer that is still in use two years after the storm. In this instance, the trailer represents a form of defiance by showing residents' determination to remain in Ironton regardless of the circumstances. This cultural resilience exists in response to repeated efforts to relocate residents from their community.

Image 8. This FEMA trailer is still in use by an Ironton resident two years after Hurriane Ida destroyed most of the town's housing.

Summary

The practice of *just recovery* must begin with an appraisal of historical underinvestment and the effects of systemic racism in marginalized communities, as well as contemporaneous damage to the community's built environment. Restoring the built environments of Freedmen's Towns without attending to the longstanding effects of racism—such as polluted air from nearby factories, food deserts, lack of transportation, lack of economic investment, limited employment opportunities, and lack of access to health care—is unjust. Just repair must seek to redress historical underinvestment and systemic racism, not simply to rebuild buildings.

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Additionally, an important hallmark of just repair is the safeguarding of community resilience. Breaking up families and communities that have for generations prayed together, learned together, and thrived together is unjust. This means that the practice of recovery must account for not simply the individual, but the individual as nested within the community.

The key themes that emerged from this research are listed below:

1. **Disaster recovery can be just or unjust.** Our research has found that modal definitions of recovery are unjust when applied to communities of color that are under threat from climate-induced disasters. The term "recovery," which is defined as a return to a standard state of health, attitude, or strength, has embedded in it an assumption that pre-recovery states are ones of health and strength. And yet, our scholarly investigation and on-the-ground research have revealed that, in fact, for towns that have persisted for generations without access to clean water, adequate economic and social infrastructure, and civic health, returning to a pre-recovery state is not a *just recovery.* Instead, this "recovery" represents a return to injustice—to crumbling homes, to food deserts, and to failing education and health care systems.

2. **Climate-induced disasters are contributing to the erasure of Freedmen's Towns.** The literature makes one thing clear: Freedmen's Towns are at risk of and are in the process of erasure. Historically, these communities of color have suffered weather-related devastation at disproportionate rates compared to neighboring White communities. Established on discarded land, the Freedmen's Towns in the United States have suffered through floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes. Forecasters predict that climate change will continue to threaten the existence of Freedmen's Towns. The generations of formerly enslaved Black people who built these Freedmen's Towns have triumphed and persisted; however, climate change is an unstoppable force that could lead to their physical erasure.

3 **Injustice is contributing to the erasure of Freedmen's Towns.** The process of erasure via injustice has evolved in many ways. First, formerly enslaved Black Americans who established towns had to fight to gain access to the often-uninhabitable land that they sought to settle. Once they settled the land, access to infrastructure and opportunity was typically scarce. Residents often had a lack of political representation—a tool that would have helped them secure financial and educational resources. And yet, our research shows that Freedmen's Towns persisted and thrived in intangible yet vital ways, even amid racism and injustice. The resilient aspects of Freedmen's Towns are themselves community cultural wealth but are not valued post-disaster and are often erased. The residents of Ironton, Louisiana, said they believed that, like many Freedmen's Towns around the country, Ironton has resisted erasure through defiance and through maintaining a strong sense of community.

4 **Cultural resilience relies on preserving buildings and the built environment.** When climate-induced disasters hit, they decimate many things, including infrastructure and buildings. The damage and loss of buildings through hazards can be disastrous and profoundly affect residents' safety, shelter, and livelihood. For these reasons, rebuilding structures has been a critical focus in disaster recovery and has assisted in providing a sense of normalcy for impacted residents. Freedmen's Towns possess buildings that can be and are damaged by hazards, and these structures must be repaired post-disaster to help commemorate the physical representations of culture within the community.

5 **Cultural resilience also relies on preserving communities' culture.** Our research and analysis showed that focusing on the resilience of the built environment is necessary but not sufficient. Freedmen's Towns possess another sort of cultural resilience, which is embedded in the centuries-old communities they have built. Although often unacknowledged and unseen, this cultural resilience is embodied in the histories and cultural customs through which these towns have thrived in defiance of systemic racism. Resilience can be found in the systems of community uplift, philanthropy, education, and service that unite Freedmen's Towns in the face of hardship and serve to wrap their citizens in community care. The residents of Ironton, Louisiana, said they believed that the resilience of a community depends on the people and enduring customs that are created and maintained within the town's physical structures.

Next Steps

This research project uses an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. The research team used the first year to explore the data and assess what is present through the literature, to conduct informal conversations with community and content experts, and to collect visual images.

With additional funding in the second year of the project, we will focus on collecting expanded qualitative data. Specifically, the research team will administer interviews and surveys, including asking respondents to complete a photovoice survey (i.e., digital storytelling). The sample will be composed of 20–40 current or former community and family members connected to the Freedmen's Town. The additional qualitative data will be used to assess how residents define cultural resilience and understand how they define justice given climate change realities (e.g., rising water levels, increasing frequency and intensity of hurricanes), historical and communal ties to the land, and histories of underinvestment. We also intend to expand the study to other Freedmen sites and areas with connections to Indigenous communities.

Given that historically marginalized communities are at greater risk of increased climate-induced hazards, our project can ameliorate the impact of disasters by providing greater insight on what it means for those communities to be culturally resilient.

This work will help inform policy recommendations regarding how to listen to and best support marginalized populations through repeated climate hazards. Specifically, we will create a professional development training for federal, state, and local agents who are deployed to historically marginalized communities after a disaster. This training will equip agents with the knowledge and skills they need to be more culturally aware and responsive to the needs of various marginalized groups, especially those who are continually impacted by climate change.

Given that historically marginalized communities are at greater risk of increased climate-induced hazards, our project can ameliorate the impact of disasters by providing greater insight on what it means for those communities to be culturally resilient.

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