

Climate, Culture, and Mothers: The Effects of Relocation on Isle de Jean Charles's Choctaw Nation

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Abstract: As climate change worsens, most Americans heed the headlines about scorching summers and unprecedented storms. However, some people in the United States experience rapid climate change with flooded houses and government relocation. In Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, the Indigenous Choctaw Nation is the first group to receive government funding for a climate-induced relocation in the United States. In 2016, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development gave the community \$48.3 million to move away from Isle de Jean Charles to land above sea waters in Louisiana. As disagreements about the best method for relocation arise, the preservation of Choctaw culture in Louisiana is at stake. How can Choctaw mothers pass Choctaw tradition to their children during a cultural and physical schism within the Indigenous nation? As the Choctaw suffer from last-minute government responses that fall short of their societal needs, the people of Isle de Jean Charles are a primary example of how climate change will continue to disrupt communities and devastate cultures worldwide.

The End of the World

The end of the world is closer than you think. In fact, you can drive there by exiting I-90 West and heading south to Island Road—the only path to Isle de Jean Charles, a narrow land ridge in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. Be sure to check the area's conditions before making your journey. On a bad day, intense winds or flooding could close the single-lane highway, ending your trip in a U-turn. When you arrive, the fresh greenery immersed in the blue depths will take your breath away, but the exposed land is what will leave your jaw dropped. Stretching like a tree branch into the water, the slender strip of land on which you stand reaches into an endless sea, a vast unknown. Only a few locals remain among floating houses and sunken boats, a testament to their love for the disappearing land (See Appendix A). Glancing between the ever-expanding mass of water and the nearly deserted community, you wonder how this once prosperous land could be left to ruin in the richest country in the world.

Raising Walls Against Rising Waters

In 2016, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) gave Isle de Jean Charles \$48.3 million for the first climate-induced relocation project in the U.S. (Loginova and Cassel 2022). The reality of rising sea levels is becoming a more apparent and common phenomenon. When ocean levels augment, land that was once located at sea level is suddenly at a negative altitude, surrendering these vulnerable lands to the ocean. In Isle de Jean Charles, only 2% of the land present in 1955 remains today (Loginova and Cassel 2022). Where hundreds once lived,

only about 60 people remain on the Isle today (Van Houten 2016). The people of Isle de Jean Charles are the first in the United States to receive federally funded climate relocation funds, making them the first official “climate refugees” in the country (Boyd 2019, n.p.).

Louisiana is essential to the Mississippi River’s health because it is situated in the Mississippi Basin. However, this position leaves the area at risk. Flowing through numerous states and collecting sediments along the way, the Mississippi River deposits 550 million metric tons of sediments into southern Louisiana each year (Earth Observatory 2001). When the Mississippi River floods, the water deposits these sediments, strengthening and growing Louisiana’s land (Restore the Mississippi River Delta n.d.). However, the levee system¹ that began construction in the nineteenth century, intended to shield populations in flood zones, prevents the Mississippi River from this routine flooding (Restore the Mississippi River Delta n.d.) (See Appendix C). While flooding protection is crucial for Louisiana citizens’ safety, the levee system acts as a flimsy band-aid on a complex wound. The obstruction to flooding diverts the coastline-building sediment to the river’s end in the Gulf of Mexico, interrupting the systems that replenish land in southern Louisiana (Restore the Mississippi River Delta n.d.). By protecting citizens from flooding today, the levee system presents a greater danger in the future as land sinks into the water below (See Appendix D). Furthermore, the communities built outside of the levee walls do not receive the levee system’s temporary protection (Loginova and Cassel 2022). Among those left to fend for themselves in the short term are the people of the Choctaw Nation in Isle de Jean Charles (Loginova and Cassel 2022).

While exclusion from the levee system affects the entire Choctaw Nation, Indigenous women bear the cultural responsibilities that coincide with the negative impacts of climate-induced relocation. Within their communities, Indigenous women often take the position of “custodians and teachers of local ecological knowledge” as well as “convenors of political movements” (Whyte 2014, 600). Choctaw women specifically attend to the tribe’s agriculture, sowing the seeds and reaping the harvest; however, climate change alters ecological conditions and therefore Indigenous women’s roles (Akers 1997). During climate-induced relocation, Choctaw women must reevaluate and completely modify their interactions with nature as changing climate conditions and landscapes alter what type of agriculture is successful in a region.

Rising sea levels and changing climates are only a portion of the issues that Indigenous women face amidst a climate emergency. Climate-induced relocation affects a community’s health, politics, society, and environment. With over 68,000 miles of gas pipelines and hundreds of oil and gas wells, southern Louisiana is increasingly vulnerable to health risks related to fossil fuel extraction and the impacts of soil erosion that result from digging for gas and oil (The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration 2022) (See Appendix B). In regions where fossil fuel pollution is great, there are higher rates of “premature births, decreased birth weights, birth defects and high-risk pregnancies” (Lake and Charles 2021, n.p.). Indisputably, fossil-fuel-driven climate change impacts Choctaw women who are responsible for giving birth and child rearing the most. Indigenous people face the brunt of climate change’s impacts. In general, climate change affects women more than men, and BIPOC women are the most vulnerable (Lake and Charles 2021). Situated among a sea of oil infrastructure, Isle de Jean Charles suffers the consequences of being a frontline community.² Areas with a plethora of oil rigs and pipelines, such as Isle de Jean Charles, are persistently victims of

¹ The levee system in Louisiana is a structured conglomeration of walls built parallel to the Mississippi River and around its waterways to reduce the risk of flooding and destruction during Category 3 storms (Loginova and Cassel 2022).

² Frontline communities suffer the most intense and immediate impacts from climate change due to their location in vulnerable areas exploited by fossil fuel industries. Frontline communities are historically majority-minority and low-income (Gundry 2021).

heightened greenhouse gas emissions, land loss, water and soil contamination, and violations of Indigenous treaties (Mall 2021). Many industrial pollutants from facilities contribute to health issues that primarily concern women, such as breast cancer and ovarian diseases (Lake and Charles 2021). Given Isle de Jean Charles's location in a mass array of pipelines and rigs, the women of the Choctaw Nation in the area are victims of the fossil fuel industries' vicious rigging and the consequential pollution that "bring death to our cultures and our children" (Lake and Charles 2021, n.p.).

A Morbid History: The United States and Indigenous Tribes

The history behind the United States removing the Choctaws from tribal land reflects an ongoing indifference to the preservation of Indigenous culture. In 1539, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto arrived in modern-day Tampa Bay with 600 men in search of wealth (Akers 1997). De Soto and his men did not simply conquer Indigenous tribes—they horrifically pillaged, plundered, and committed arson in Indigenous settlements while raping and murdering Indigenous people (Akers 1997). However, the Choctaw Nation retaliated and proved to be a worthy opponent for De Soto and his men, conducting surprise attacks on the Europeans at night (Akers 1997). After De Soto died of a fever in 1542, the Choctaws successfully drove out the Europeans from the area (Akers 1997). Subsequent European interactions with the Choctaws stopped for hundreds of years.

European invaders did not return to the region until the eighteenth century when Euro-Americans established stable settlements in the New World (Akers 1997). The interactions between the Choctaw Nation and Euro-American people during this era differed. The French were the Choctaws' primary European ally, allowing for the establishment of trading relationships and political dialogues (Akers 1997). However, the British caused great turmoil in the Choctaw region. British settlers incited wars between the Choctaws and other Indigenous communities to capture and enslave individuals (Akers 1997). During the late 1700s, British settlers introduced their worldviews, including perceptions of nature, ownership, and gender roles, to Indigenous counterparts. As the British encroached further into Choctaw lands, they brought new potent weapons, such as guns, liquor, and disease, that altered Choctaw society physically and culturally (Akers 1997). Before British interference, women in the Choctaw Nation held substantial power in their society. Choctaw women participated in wars, served as diplomatic agents, and traded with settlers. The decentralized political authority of Choctaw society benefitted Choctaw women, providing them with political, societal, and economic independence (Carson 2003). However, women's heightened power made them vulnerable to a loss of status as Euro-American ideals encroached on the decentralized Choctaw society. Along with the British settlers came British patriarchal ideals, technologies, and vices that reduced Indigenous women's roles (Pesantubbee 2005).

When the United States government was formed after the American Revolution, Indigenous and settler relations only worsened. The U.S. government forced Indigenous nations, including the Choctaw Nation, to sign treaties that diminished their sovereignty, creating a legal precedent for the subjection of Indigenous tribes. Once the Jackson administration noted the value of Indigenous lands in the eastern United States, the process of Indigenous removal began. General George Strothers traveled to Choctaw territory in 1830 to gauge the land's economic value and natural resources (Akers 1997). To create the illusion that relocating Indigenous peoples was a beneficial and voluntary process for tribes, white Euro-Americans manipulated Indigenous people. To make Indigenous tribes think their ancestral land was deficient and inferior compared to the new Indian Territory, the United States government falsely claimed that other Indigenous populations had asked to resettle to lands on the other side of the Mississippi River. The federal government hoped their lie would inspire other Indigenous nations to follow suit and voluntarily relocate (Akers 1997). If not done voluntarily, the

federal government used physical manipulation and brute force during relocation. Many Choctaw people moved west due to the slow encroachments throughout the 1700s; whoever remained in 1830 was forced to move west of the Mississippi River after a series of deceptive negotiations known as the Indian Removal Act (Akers 1997) (See Appendix E). The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek solidified the Choctaw's removal in 1830, forcing 20,000 Choctaws on the deadly Trail of Tears to Oklahoma (Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes n.d.) Today, most Choctaw people remain in Oklahoma, but a few bands of the Choctaw Nation dispersed to other areas in the southern United States, including Isle de Jean Charles.

The Choctaw Nation and Culture through the Lens of Climate Change

Today, Isle de Jean Charles is home to a tribe of the Indigenous Choctaw Nation and has been for centuries since their arrival to the region in the 1830s (Boyd 2019). Throughout these years, the Choctaw Nation abided by a pact with the land to create a mutually beneficial way of life. In Choctaw culture, land assumes the role of provider, offering sustenance to all living things (Akers 1997). Humans are a small fraction of a grand collectivity of living things; humanity relies upon animals, ancestors, and harmony within nature to ensure welfare for all. Arriving in the Indian Territory situated on the Mississippi River, the Choctaw Nation had to adapt to the new region to maintain its symbiotic relationship with nature (Akers 1997). According to Choctaw legend, the Choctaw people referred to the Mississippi River as the “Big Liar” because of the fickle nature of the river's flooding. Every seven years, the river's flooding patterns changed, leaving Choctaw settlements incredibly vulnerable (Squint and Verdin 2018, n.p.). Regardless of the river's erratic nature, the Choctaw culture's belief in coexisting with the land, as opposed to exploitation, allowed them to find ways to respect their surrounding environment and live in the unpredictable region.

Another essential principle of Choctaw culture is the association of land with mothers, or sacred beings that create life (Akers 1997). Like the earth, human and non-human mothers birth new life and supply sustenance in the form of food (Akers 1997; Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma 2017). The maternal nature of Choctaw society granted women many rights and privileges, and family lines followed the female side. Women served as the supporters of life and community in many ways—women owned most property and spoke on many diplomatic matters (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma 2017). While maintaining various political and economic roles, women's primary role in Choctaw society was agriculture. Women planted seeds and harvested crops throughout the year to provide enough food to nourish the entire tribe (Akers 1997). Without women's role as agriculturists, the Choctaws could not thrive.

The origin story of the Choctaw Nation reveals the importance of land, mothers, and the powers they possess. The Choctaw people were originally worshipers of the sun, the Great Spirit that vivified all life. According to some versions of Choctaw legend, the Great Spirit led the migrating Choctaws in their search for land to call home. After a day of wandering, the Choctaw's prophet planted a pole in the ground each night. When they awoke the following day, the direction the pole was leaning marked where the Choctaws were supposed to journey next. One day, they reached a large mound, planting the pole at its base for the night. The next day, the pole stood erect, an omen that they finally found their land to settle (Halbert 2014). While some Choctaw people dispute the validity of this story, Choctaws generally regard the mound as the birthplace of all Choctaw people (Halbert 2014). Choctaw legend states that this pyramidal mound, known as Nanih Waiya or “the Great Mother,” conjured the first Choctaws (Akers 1997, 51). Today, Nanih Waiya is still considered the most sacred place for all Choctaw people. The earthly “mother” of the Choctaw Nation further exemplifies the significance of mothers in Choctaw culture.

In addition to proving the importance of mothers, Nanih Waiya also demonstrates the cultural value of ancestral land to the Choctaw Nation. Many Choctaws understood Nanih Waiya to be the mother and birthplace from which all Choctaws originated. Leaving Nanih Waiya and their ancestral lands seemed impossible to many Choctaws because it was the integral founding place for the tribe (Akers 1997). When an Indigenous tribe leaves their land, they must evaluate complex choices that most white Europeans would not need to consider. Documentarian and member of Louisiana's Houma tribe Monique Verdin explores the implications for tribes leaving ancestral lands:

What are you gonna do about your ancestors? What are you gonna do about their bones? Are you taking them with you? Are you having ceremonies when you leave, and are you gonna have ceremonies when you arrive at the place where your people are moving to? (Squint and Verdin 2018, n.p.).

When Euro-Americans leave their land, the departure is often a simple economic transaction of one land for another: the white man views land as a business commodity (Akers 1997). Indigenous people view land as a cultural entity. When Indigenous nations leave their land, they leave behind the ancestors, customs, and history connected to that place. Despite imperative ties to the land, the Choctaw Nation in Isle de Jean Charles must leave their land again because the U.S. government failed to protect its people.

Patterns of Exclusion

In the early 2000s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expanded the levee system with the 98-mile-long Morganza-to-the-Gulf Hurricane Protection System. In their design of the project, they decided to exclude Isle de Jean Charles from the expansion, despite research suggesting the exclusion would lead to worse floods and storm surges on the Isle (Loginova and Cassel 2022) (See Appendix F). When citing the reason for the exclusion, the Army Corps of Engineers stated the oceanography surrounding Isle de Jean Charles was not strong enough to support a levee (Wright 2020). Upon further analysis, the Army Corps of Engineers did not sufficiently search the area, nor listen to the Tribe's information about the land, revealing a lack of desire to include Isle de Jean Charles in the project (Wright 2020). In doing so, the federal government indicated that the land did not deserve to be protected, pushing the Isle towards intense subsidence. Isle de Jean Charles inhabitant Chris knows that "if they really wanted to save the island, they would have included it in the ... protection plan" (Rush 2018, 30-1). Residents of Isle de Jean Charles recognize the decision in the context of greater trends of exclusion. Chris's nephew Dalton affirms that "No one is surprised that we weren't among those who were saved... We are Indians after all" (Rush 2018, 31). The U.S. government sacrificed already disadvantaged rural communities to protect the privileged urban population, reflecting past histories of injustice.

Exclusion from the Morganza-to-the-Gulf Hurricane Protection System of levees had immediately noticeable consequences as sea levels continued to rise uncontrollably. Throughout the past 70 years, rising water levels have consumed nearly all the ancestral land that was once Isle de Jean Charles (Loginova and Cassel 2022) (See Appendix G). What was once a 22,400-acre bountiful landscape is now a sliver of land less than 320 acres (Van Houten 2016). Inevitably, some members of the Choctaw Nation were forced to leave years ago, given the constantly shrinking amount of land. Chief Albert Naquin of the Isle de Jean Charles Choctaw people started advocating for their relocation as early as 2002, stating "We hate to let the island go, but we have to" (Loginova and Cassel 2022; Van Houten 2016, n.p.). Despite persistent advocacy, the state and national government

ignored years of aid demands, proving the United States' indifference to Indigenous communities. The United States waited to act until ignoring the situation was no longer feasible. In 2016, Chief Naquin succeeded in his demands when the HUD awarded Isle de Jean Charles nearly \$50 million to move 40 miles to higher land in Terrebonne Parish (Horn 2021; Loginova and Cassel 2022) (See Appendix H). The fight for justice was far from over.

Chief Naquin saw the potential to create a plan that would solve two of the tribe's problems at once. He hoped to not only move the people remaining on the isle but also reunite previously displaced tribal members who had begrudgingly left in previous years (Dermansky 2019a). Despite these efforts, the Louisiana Office of Community Development (OCD)³ stated that only those who were living on the Isle in August 2012 would be included in the funding and have the potential to move to the New Isle⁴ (Loginova and Cassel 2022). Given the exclusive requirements of the program, Chief Naquin is one of many ineligible for the funding because he independently relocated from the Isle before OCD's 2012 cutoff (Loginova and Cassel 2022). To negotiate the relocation plan's focus back to reunification, Chief Naquin called on the HUD to revoke the money in 2018 and form a new relocation plan (Loginova and Cassel 2022). Ignoring his plea, the HUD forced the funding upon the Choctaw Nation under the citation of the Fair Housing Act (Loginova and Cassel 2022). The Fair Housing Act of 1968 protects against three different types of discriminatory housing practices, one of which being "administrative complaints to the HUD filed by aggrieved persons" (Schwemm 1988, 375-6). After the Choctaw Nation successfully won the attention of the HUD, the government must now provide the funding despite the changing wishes of the tribe. As a result, HUD and OCD are coercing the people of Isle de Jean Charles to comply with their inadequate approach to relocation. Appallingly akin to the atrocities of 1830, the United States government is once again forcing an Indigenous tribe to leave its land and start anew. If the government included Isle de Jean Charles in the levee project in the early 2000s, the Choctaw Nation would not face such a pressing climate emergency today.

Throughout discussions about the future of the Choctaw Nation on Isle de Jean Charles, Indigenous women were rarely consulted. Largely, deliberation occurred between the male director of the Louisiana OCD Pat Forbes, and male Choctaw Chief Naquin (Loginova and Cassel 2022). While the exclusion of women from the conversation is not surprising, it is disappointing. Given Choctaw women's knowledge of the tribe's relations to nature, women are the leading experts on climate change and how to mitigate its impacts. Choctaw culture affirms that women hold special powers of fertility, making them especially capable of growing crops and maintaining luscious land, even during times of crisis (Akers 1997). Indigenous women are attuned to ecological change because of their intimate interactions with the land; their understanding of key adaptation strategies can preserve cultural practices (Whyte 2014).

Even before the funding came from HUD, Choctaw culture was fading alongside the land as traditions and heritage diminished with an increasingly scattered tribe. The tribe has not held a powwow since before Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when the catastrophic results of the disaster forced tribal members to disperse (Boyd 2019). During a powwow, Indigenous tribes unite with tribal food, songs, and dances to honor the tribe's ancestors; powwows are an essential expression of Indigenous identity and provide an opportunity for the tribe to unite and transmit customs (Browner 2023). The loss of culturally significant celebrations such as the powwow is a direct consequence of the HUD's poor relocation planning because the plan isolates the Choctaw tribe. The dispersion of the Choctaw

³ The OCD works with the HUD during the relocation process, but on a more intimate state level.

⁴ The New Isle is the official term for the state's resettlement land located about 40 miles north of Isle de Jean Charles (Loginova and Cassel 2022).

people minimizes the opportunity for the tribe to gather and celebrate rituals. The effects of such cultural loss often impact the women of Indigenous nations first. For some Indigenous nations, this means that they “now live in a hurry and daughters do not cook as grandmothers” because daily customs must step aside during climate relocation (Asian Indigenous Women’s Network 2011, 2). During climate-induced relocation, the already-dispersed Choctaw people spend their time negotiating with the American government and planning relocation, diminishing the potential for cultural transmission. Now that the relocation project is worsening the conditions of culture loss, Choctaw members feel that “the State has no respect for our culture” (Dermansky 2019b, n.p.). Yet again, the United States government refuses to honor an Indigenous tribe and its ancestral land, creating an eerie reflection of the Indian Removal Act that placed the Choctaw Nation in southern Louisiana in the 1800s (Boyd 2019). Faced with removal in the twenty-first century, the Choctaws encounter an important crossroads: Should the tribe take the funding from the HUD and move to higher ground despite the exclusion of tribal members and consequent cultural loss? Should the tribe continue to fight for unification to preserve Choctaw traditions, despite the rigidity of the government, the exhausting nature of negotiation, and the knowledge that nothing may come of it? Should the tribe remain on Isle de Jean Charles to fight for what is left of the ancestral land, despite there being little left to save?

After being displaced in 1830, the Choctaw Nation had no choice but to alter its lifestyle and establish a new society to thrive in its foreign territory (Akers 1997). Naturally, climate-induced land loss will result in the same modification of Choctaw civilization again. The reliance of Choctaw people on their land means that the Choctaw lose a pertinent piece of their culture when leaving their land. To thrive, the Choctaws must alter their interactions with nature to adapt to the new land. Given that Choctaw women—specifically, mothers and direct caregivers—and land are so interconnected, the effects of land loss on Choctaw mothers are immense. As the caretakers of land and agriculture, Choctaw women must change their lifestyles. Consequently, change in agricultural practices diminishes Choctaw mothers’ autonomy because agriculture is their main form of economic gain and therefore their source of self-determination (Carson 2003). In the past, when Choctaw women faced resettlement at the hands of Euro-Americans, Choctaw women experienced a loss of independence. Again, relocation and the heavy reliance on the HUD and OCD could seriously impact Choctaw women’s status.

Realistic Opportunities for Relocation: What Are the Options?

According to the *American Indian Law Review* (2017) and the history of climate-induced relocation, the government and affected communities can follow three realistic routes to navigating the relocation process: do nothing, collocate,⁵ or voluntarily relocate. The first route, doing nothing, occurs until collocation or voluntary relocation is organized. Inaction often leads to the government purchasing the endangered land. This only disperses the community because the monetary value of vulnerable Indigenous lands is far too low to financially support a coherent relocation (Keene 2017). When the government does not purchase the land, their inaction assumes that a natural disaster will occur, and that ensuing disaster relief will rescue the citizens. However, disaster relief is not a coherent federal body, leaving much of the rescue protocols in the shaky hands of state governments (Keene 2017).

The next option is collocation: to move the at-risk community to another adjacent community and combine the two. The cost of collocation in financial terms is much cheaper than voluntary

⁵ Collocation is the resettlement of an entire established community into another established community (Keene 2017).

relocation as it only requires expanding current infrastructure rather than constructing new communities. However, the cost of collocation in other terms is far greater. Forcing two communities to conjoin when their only common feature is physical proximity “destroy[s] the...community identity” of both cultures, but particularly the at-risk community (Keene 2017, 271). In the case of Isle de Jean Charles, collocating the Choctaw people with a neighboring group would be catastrophic to Indigenous rituals. If the Choctaw people collocated with an adjacent Indigenous tribe, such as the Houma tribe, the historic rivalry between the two tribes would make cohabitation offensive and problematic (Dermansky 2019a). Demanding two Indigenous communities to integrate into one in a country with a dark history of mistreating Indigenous tribes hastens the cultural desecration of two societies with clashing values. For this reason, the U.S. government has ultimately eliminated collocation as a viable option for climate-induced relocation projects because it can result in cultural genocide⁶ (Keene 2017).

The final option, voluntary relocation, has the greatest potential for success but simultaneously the biggest risks to consider. If executed carefully and thoughtfully, climate-induced voluntary relocation can resolve a multi-layered problem as well as provide a fresh start for the community. Frequently, communities undergoing climate relocation are already marginalized, impoverished, or in some other way disadvantaged given their status as frontline communities. When voluntary relocation occurs with attention to the community’s intricate culture and requests, relocation can serve as a revitalization of the community’s traditions, livelihoods, and heritage (Keene 2017). Pertinent logistics for successful voluntary relocation include location, proximity, jobs, infrastructure, access to vital resources, psychological impacts, and identity crises (Keene 2017). Given that women provide life to the Choctaw people, the responsibilities of women are exasperated during times of instability. If voluntary relocation that considers previous lifestyles and climate is conducted, women can sustain their cultural transmission roles and transfer their traditional knowledge to future generations. Relocated generations will have the opportunity to participate in cultural traditions because the knowledge will persist in the new location. For example, when considering the proximity to old land, food, and jobs, the people of Isle de Jean Charles should inhabit nearby land conducive to fishing, a typical livelihood and food production method for the Choctaws (Keene 2017). If the new location mirrors the old, women can also transmit “knowledge on traditional forest management, sustainable agriculture, pastoralism, disaster preparedness and rehabilitation” to future generations (Asian Indigenous Women’s Network 2011, 6). Voluntary relocation is always complicated, but attention to detail can help mitigate negative impacts on the group’s cultural well-being.

A major downfall to the voluntary relocation option is that the cost greatly exceeds that of the other options, and securing funding for these projects is a long, difficult venture. Given the marginalized nature of climate refugees, the communities often lack the funding to relocate themselves and must turn to outside sources. For a community of about 60 people, Isle de Jean Charles received over \$48 million—about \$800,000 per resident—and the state of Louisiana is still unsure whether these costs are adequate (Keene 2017). Furthermore, these numbers exclude the Choctaw Nation members who evacuated Isle de Jean Charles’ rising waters earlier than 2012. Rendering such individuals ineligible for funding also removes the main advantage of voluntary relocation: the preservation of cultural identity. Therefore, voluntary relocation is only successful when the community’s wishes are the driving factor behind relocation plans. Choctaw way of life

⁶ Cultural genocide is the tactical and systematic obliteration of a group of peoples’ culture (including, but not limited to, traditions, values, practices, language, beliefs, art, social norms, and religion) (Novic 2016).

and coinciding women's responsibilities must be recognized as invaluable commodities.

The Right to Practice Culture and the Right to a Safe Climate

While culture shapes most communities, its dynamic nature makes it difficult for the law to define. At the international level, the United Nations (UN) has attempted to cement the protection of cultural practices through international norms on human rights. The UN General Assembly on December 10th, 1948 adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR establishes and protects fundamental human rights across the globe (United Nations General Assembly 1948). Article 27 of the UDHR states, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (United Nations General Assembly 1948, n.p.). Under this law, current or future climate migrants arguably have a right to engage in the cultural traditions of their original land and their new habitable area, regardless of their citizenship status (Wewerinke-Singh 2018). However, the declaration provides no further description of what constitutes culture, nor any explanation of what cultures are included. Smaller cultural groups within larger cultural groups have the right to preservation and practice as well. Given the lack of precision, one could argue that ancestral land is integral to cultural life and therefore cannot be legally taken from tribal groups. For the Choctaw Nation, government inaction to save the Isle essentially denied the tribe's right to cultural preservation.

As the last viable option for Isle de Jean Charles, climate-induced relocation is a problematic short-term result of climate change. Climate change overwhelmingly impedes cultural practices for Indigenous tribes with close relationships to land, like the Choctaw Nation (Wewerinke-Singh 2018). The threat to cultural identity is often so great that many Indigenous peoples deem migration an unthinkable solution to climate change (Wewerinke-Singh 2018). Choctaw values land as an integral provider of life; the relationship between Isle de Jean Charles and the tribe is far more than that of "interchangeable real estate, but instead...a foundation of national, cultural, and personal identity and spirit" (Wewerinke-Singh 2018, 199). Indigenous women note that climate change directly impacts their capacity to teach and transmit their beliefs to future generations as Indigenous "living, nonliving, and spiritual" responsibilities in the community shift greatly (Whyte 2014, 604-9).

The United States government does not currently guarantee the right to a safe climate, but the precedent for such legal protection is starting to surface. The Netherlands, Colombia, and Pakistan have passed legislation that guarantees a healthy environment for citizens, and the United States could join the list soon (Shuen 2021). In *Juliana v. United States* (2015), Our Children's Trust, an organization supporting environmental policy, argued that a stable climate is a fundamental right protected under the Constitution (Adams-Schoen 2022). The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ultimately decided that only the Environmental Protection Agency has jurisdiction over this topic, but as climate change becomes more dire, this domestic precedent is starting to shift (Shuen 2021). The United States District Court Judge Ann Aiken noted that she has "no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society," expressing hope for future legislation that protects this right (Shuen 2021, 402).

Indigenous women are another beacon of hope in the fight for the right to cultural protection across the world. The Mandaluyong Declaration of the Global Conference on Indigenous Women, Climate Change, and REDD Plus in 2010 created a coalition of 80 Indigenous women from almost 30 countries worldwide. At the conference, Indigenous women wrote a founding document expressing the unique impacts of climate change on their identity group, describing how the climate crisis severely alters their cultural responsibilities (Asian Indigenous Women's Network 2011). The

declaration acknowledges that while Indigenous women contribute the least to climate change, they suffer the most physically, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally. Finally, the authors outline steps to move forward both in individual communities and on a greater networked basis. Nonetheless, despite such efforts, Indigenous Choctaw women remain on the sidelines of the Isle de Jean Charles relocation effort.

Determining the Fate of Isle de Jean Charles

After examining the history of Choctaw culture, U.S.-Indigenous histories, and the reality of climate-induced relocation, the fate of the Isle is in jeopardy. Unfortunately, staying on the Isle is a very unlikely solution. The next hurricane in the area may very likely strip away the small amount of remaining land (Van Houten 2016). Though reuniting the tribe on the culturally integral Isle would be an ideal solution, doing so would be unsafe and virtually impossible. The federal government waited too long to act in Isle de Jean Charles to preserve the island, and moving away is now the best hope.

Whether to demand unity before the tribe's exodus is a far more complex decision. If the people of Isle de Jean Charles comply with the OCD's relocation plan, about 60 tribe members will reunite on safer land, but hundreds will lose this opportunity (Loginova and Cassel 2022). The individuals included in the project would secure a safer climate and healthier living conditions—especially for women and children. This group could have a promising future and potentially rebuild a faction of Choctaws while learning to interact with the new land. However, heavy cultural loss is inevitable in this route. While the Choctaws in the New Isle could rebuild from the ground up, much of Choctaw culture would be dispersed along with the tribe members.

Resisting the government's relocation plan and demanding unity requires dedication to a greater fight. If the plight was guaranteed to end in eventual success, this route would be the obvious one. However, with years of negotiations already passed, the Louisiana OCD and Choctaw Nation are not making progress toward finding an agreement (Dermansky 2019a). Now, failure to unite the tribe and achieve cultural preservation is possible. As the Choctaws continue to find issues with the state's vision of relocation, the OCD proceeds with plans that are contradictory to the Tribe's wishes. HUD officials have not answered numerous complaints and requests sent by Chief Naquin (Loginova and Cassel 2022). On December 21, 2023, EarthRights International successfully filed a complaint against the OCD on behalf of the people of Isle de Jean Charles (EarthRights International 2023). The complaint urges an investigation into the relocation project, claiming the project violates the Choctaw Nation's cultural rights under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (EarthRights International 2023). While the results of the complaint and investigation are uncertain, the proposal demonstrates that the Choctaw Nation will continue to fight for its reunification. Resisting the government's relocation plan and demanding unity is no simple task; it requires determination, organization, time, and energy. For the tribe, these efforts take time away from their jobs, families, spiritual lives, and other important cultural entities. Choctaw mothers lose the opportunity to teach children about their culture while fighting to try to save it.

Mothers are greatly responsible for the preservation of culture. As life-givers, sustenance providers, and leaders of the household, the human mother is the source of all. The absence of mothers from the relocation planning process, alongside other many hardships, contributed to the project's failure to preserve Choctaw culture. The disappearance of mothers' leadership roles throughout relocation signifies the fading Choctaw cultural value of women's relationship with the Earth. Now, Choctaw women face the daunting task of finding ways to transmit Choctaw culture while simultaneously losing autonomy. Any child in the Choctaw nation born after Hurricane Katrina

has never even experienced a powwow. If Choctaw women's capacity to preserve Choctaw tradition continues to diminish, these children will likely not experience a powwow after relocation either. The relocation project has failed to achieve its main purpose: the preservation of an Indigenous community. The exclusion of tribal members from funding, the absence of mothers in planning, and the rapid climate change that the government ignored for decades are collectively responsible for the diminishing Choctaw culture.

Goodbye to Isle de Jean Charles ... And Where Else?

Climate-induced relocation should never happen, but America has only begun to experience it. The Choctaw Nation in Isle de Jean Charles is the first so-called "climate refugee" group in the United States, but some argue that given the multifaceted character of the issue, they are "America's first subsidence/levees/oil and gas drilling/fault lines/climate change refugees" (Squint and Verdin 2018, n.p.). Furthermore, America's first "cultural" refugees are Choctaw women. Although they are the first, they will certainly not be the last. Authors John R. Wennersten and Denise Robbins of *Rising Tides* estimate that hundreds of millions of people worldwide will be forced to leave their land because of climate change by 2050 (Wiegel 2017). In the United States alone, an estimated 13 million people may experience climate-induced relocation by the end of the century (Loginova and Cassel 2022). Even if dramatic action against climate change takes place today, other marginalized groups in the United States, such as the Quinault Indian Reservation in Washington, will be forced to leave their land and relocate to a new area (Keene 2017).

It is too late for many to save their homelands, but it is not too late for everyone. While it is difficult to say who will be next, the current trajectory of hastened climate change promises that Isle de Jean Charles is not an isolated case. If government policies continue to inadequately handle situations long after proactive mitigation tactics are possible, many other communities will suffer the same fate. The American government sacrificed Isle de Jean Charles in exchange for their costly reliance on fossil fuels. If the United States proceeds with its prioritization of wealth over humankind and nature, the government will eventually sacrifice every community.

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Appendix A: Photographs from the area (Stankard 2023a; Stankard 2023b)

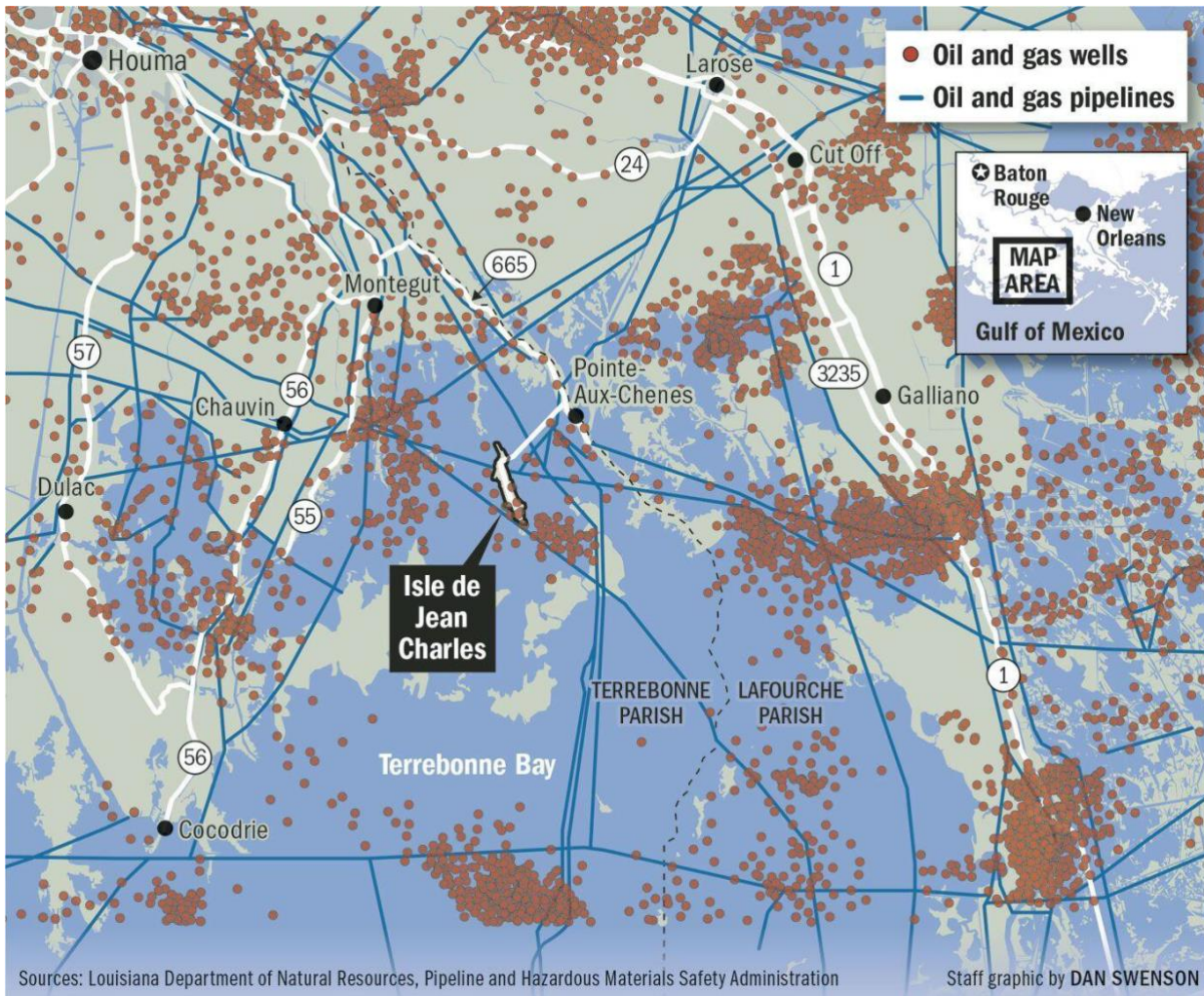
A1: A Boat Sinks with the Land on the Other Side of Island Road, across from Isle de Jean Charles in Pointe-au-Chien, Louisiana.



A2: House Remains Struggle to Stay Standing in a Mostly Deserted Isle de Jean Charles.



Appendix B: A map of Louisiana that highlights Isle de Jean Charles amidst a massive expanse of oil and gas wells and pipelines (Swenson 2022)



Appendix C: Workers fortifying a levee in southern Louisiana (Semansky 2011)



Appendix D: An excerpt from National Geographic in December 1897 (Corthell 1897, n.p.)

In the December 1897 issue of National Geographic, E. L. Corthell writes about the construction of the levee system and how the current economic promise justifies the future subsidence issues that future generations will have to solve. An excerpt from the article reads:

...No doubt the great benefit to the present and two or three following generations accruing from a complete system of absolutely protective levees... ...far outweighs the disadvantages to future generations from the subsidence of the Gulf delta lands below the level of the sea and their gradual abandonment due to this cause. While it would be generally conceded that the present generation should not be selfish, yet it is safe to say that the development of the delta country during the twentieth century by a fully protective levee system, at whatever cost... ...will be so remarkable that the people of the whole United States can well afford, when the time comes, to build a protective levee against the Gulf waters.

Appendix E: An excerpt from the Indian Removal Act approved by the United States Congress on May 28, 1830 (Indian Removal Act 1830, n.p.)

Chap. CXLVIII. – An Act to provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the state or territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi.

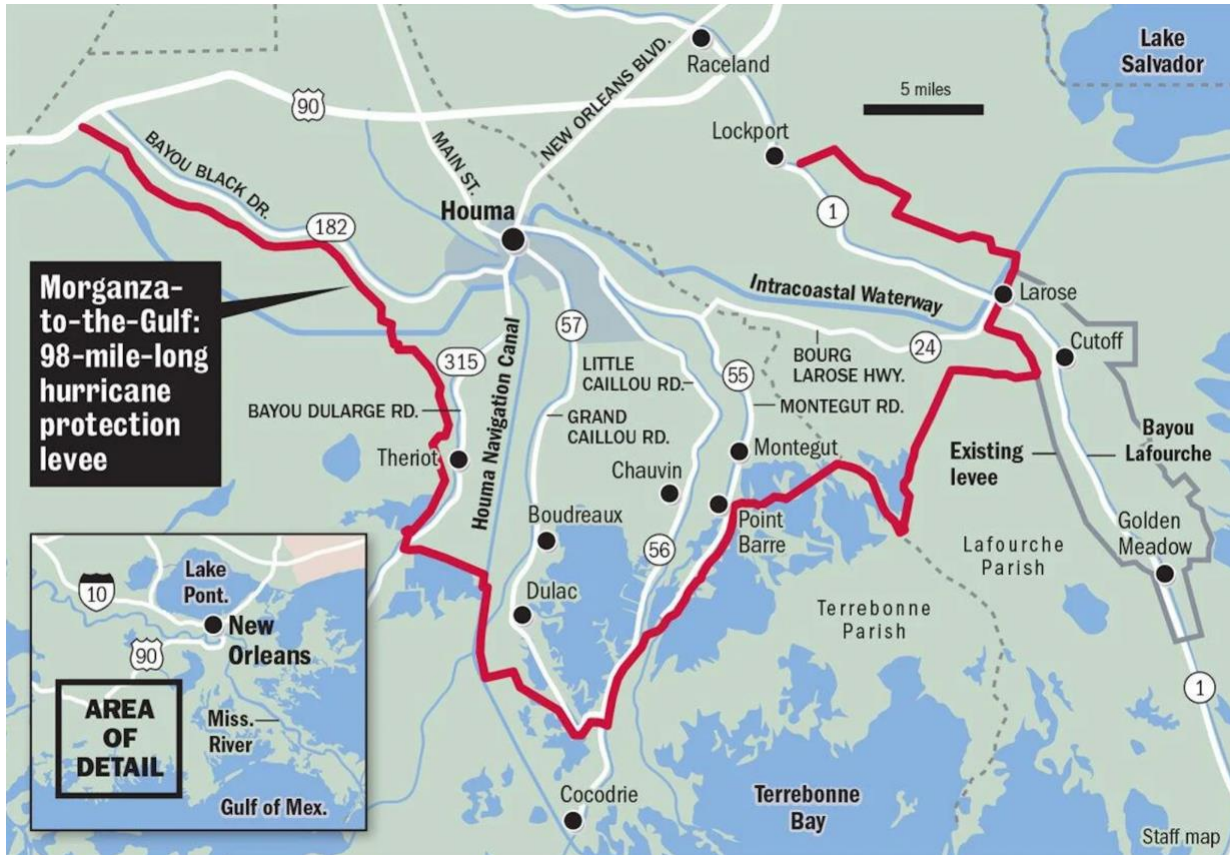
Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That it shall and may be lawful for the President of the United States to cause so much of any territory belonging to the United States, west of the river Mississippi, not included in any states or organized territory, and to which the Indian title has been extinguished, as he may judge necessary, to be divided into a suitable number of districts, for the reception of such tribes or nations of Indians as may choose to exchange the lands where they now reside, and remove there; and to cause each of said districts to be so described by natural or artificial marks, as to be easily distinguished from every other.

SEC. 2. And be it further enacted, That it shall and may be lawful for the President to exchange any or all of such districts, so to be laid off and described, with any tribe or nation of Indians now residing within the limits of any of the states or territories, and with which the United States have existing treaties, for the whole or any part or portion of the territory claimed and occupied by such tribe or nation, within the bounds of any one or more of the states or territories, where they land claimed and occupied by the Indians, is owned by the United States, or the United States are bound to the state within which it lies to extinguish the Indian claim thereto.

SEC. 3. And be it further enacted, That in the making of any such exchange or exchanges, it shall and may be lawful for the President solemnly to assure the tribe or nation with which the exchange is made, that the United States will forever secure and guaranty to them, and their heirs or successors, the country so exchanged with them; and if they prefer it, that the United States will cause a patent or grant to be made and executed to them for the same: Provided always, that such lands shall revert to the United States, if the Indians become extinct, or abandon the same.

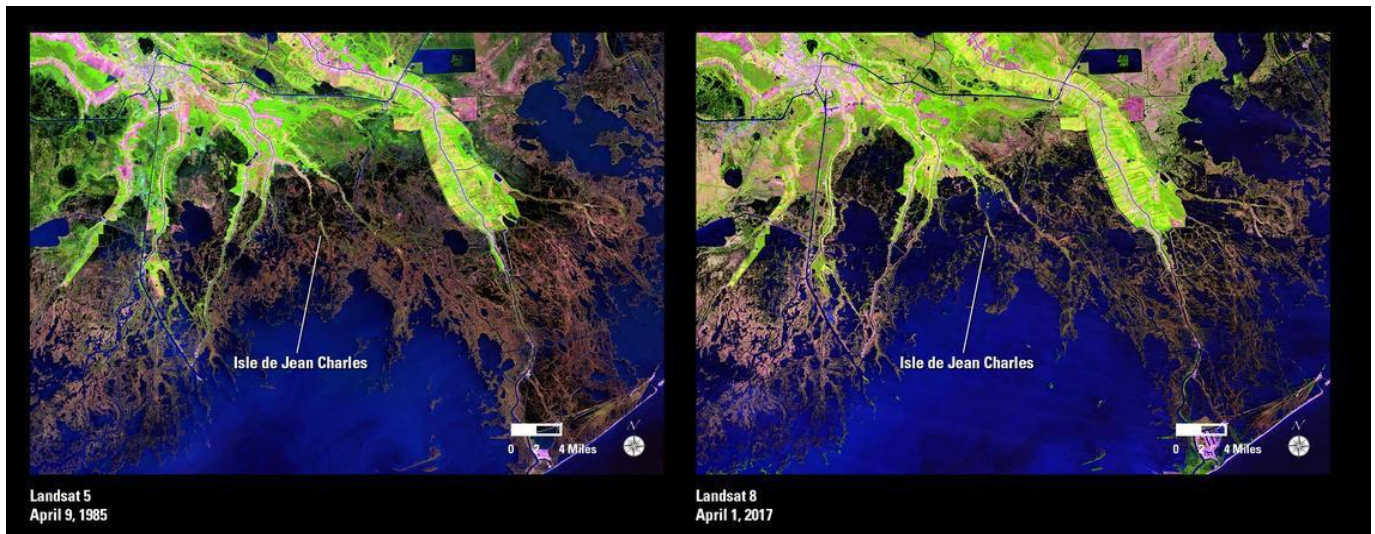
Appendix F: Map of the levee systems in Louisiana (The Times-Picayune 2021)

Isle de Jean Charles is in Terrebonne Parish, just east of Point Barre and outside the red line that depicts the Morganza-to-the-Gulf hurricane protection levee system.



Appendix G: Map of Louisiana’s Land Loss (Global Atlas of Environmental Justice 2019)

On the left is a map of southern Louisiana on April 9, 1985, and on the right is a map of southern Louisiana on April 1, 2017 (the image has been modified from the source for clarity). Isle de Jean Charles in the center of the map. Comparing the two maps reveals the encroaching sea waters in just over 30 years, leaving Isle de Jean Charles increasingly vulnerable.



Appendix H: Map showing the relocation of the Choctaw Nation from Isle de Jean Charles to the New Isle in northern Terrebonne Parish (Horn 2021)

Louisiana Island Disappears into the Gulf

As the waters of the Gulf continue to rise around Isle de Jean Charles, the island's native population has been offered a chance at relocation—the first federal deal of its kind—to a “New Isle” 40 miles inland.



SOURCE: State of Louisiana

PAUL HORN / Inside Climate News

Appendix I: Teaching Note

Many of the lessons we have learned from past climate-induced relocation projects are the same lessons we draw from Isle de Jean Charles. It is known that collocation is a poor response, while relocation is the costliest and most elaborate. The culture of Indigenous communities changed when relocation took place in the past, and the Choctaw Nation already experienced this cultural adaptation in the 1800s. We know that women face the brunt of climate change and continue to do so without mitigating these effects. We know that the United States government has treated Indigenous populations poorly in the past and continues to do so now, ignoring tribes' wants, needs, and rights to culture. In addition to taking legal action to address these issues and giving tribes the autonomy that they deserve when faced with pressing climate-induced relocation, the United States can propose two main questions about the relocation of Isle de Jean Charles.

How can we guarantee a safe climate for all? The people of Isle de Jean Charles could have received the funding for their project years earlier. Access to funding earlier would have allowed more people to be included in the project, more time for negotiation, or possibly a climate-induced preservation project instead of a climate-induced relocation. The establishment of a healthy environment as a fundamental right protected in the constitution would probably guarantee that future potential "climate refugees" have the time, funds, and liberty to relocate or ensure they never become refugees at all.

How can women be placed at the forefront of climate relocation? Women have been the force behind climate activism for decades yet have been put in the background of creating legislation and finding solutions. Given that women are impacted the most, especially Indigenous women, it can be fairly argued if Choctaw women were the masterminds behind the relocation project that culture, unity, and tribal autonomy would have been the most pertinent matters in consideration. Under current gender norms and expectations, this advancement may not be feasible but is essential.