Footsteps
African American History
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Black Immigration
To the United States
The Gullah and the Black Atlantic

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For years, scholars have studied the Gullah people of South Carolina's Sea Islands in search of what remains culturally African about black North Americans.

The fact that many Gullahs live on islands long isolated from the United States mainland has kept their speech and lifestyle distinctive. Students of the rich local creole language, known as "Gullah" or "Geechee," have identified a great number of African characteristics in the Sea Islanders' vocabulary and their famous basket-making tradition.

Between 1750 and 1800, the rice farmers of the Sea Islands drew many of their workers from the rice-growing regions of West Africa's Sierra Leone and Liberia. Thus, according to some, the term "Gullah" is derived from the name of Sierra Leone's Gola people. Yet African captives had come to these islands from many other regions as well. So, according to others, the word "Angola" (a country on the southwest coast of Africa) is the more likely source of the term "Gullah."

As African Americans have become more willing to embrace Africa as a cultural model and as a symbol of their identity, interest in using and preserving the Gullah language and Gullah craft techniques has increased. Indeed, the "Africaness" of Gullah basketry has become its major selling point and a means of livelihood for
craftswomen in coastal South Carolina.

However, it was Joseph Opala, an anthropologist and former member of the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, who most actively promoted the idea that Sierra Leone was the primary source of the islanders' Africanness. Partly as a consequence of his efforts, Sierra Leone's president Joseph Momo visited the Sea Islands in 1986. He encouraged the islanders to visit their "ancestral homeland," and a group of them did so in 1989. President Momo continued the American tradition of attributing the distinctive features of the islanders' language to its African roots. As proof, he offered the similarities between the Gullah language and the Sierra Leonean creole language called "Krio."

In fact, the vocabulary of both languages is mainly English, since Krio is the result of interaction between African American returnees, various British-educated captives (former slaves rescued directly from slave ships), and British administrators, as well as English, German, and African American missionaries in Freetown. Hence, the two languages share features primarily on account of the parallel circumstances of their origin, making these features highly ambiguous evidence of the Gullah people's Sierra Leonian or African roots.

This dynamic interplay of people, places, and ideas illustrates the forces shaping the "black Atlantic" world generally. Black Atlantic history charts the politics, economics, ideas, and above all the will of various groups of people around the Atlantic perimeter to communicate and shape each others' lives. It was not simply the fact of black America's historical links to Africa, but the efforts of thinking, breathing, and traveling people that made modern Sierra Leone and the Gullahs of South Carolina link hands across the sea. Africa is a valued part of African American lives in ways far more complex than was once imagined.
Voluntary migration and immigration have played a major role in the shaping of "race" in the present-day United States. After the passage of the Hart-Cellar immigration reforms of 1965, millions of non-Europeans immigrated to the United States.

The result was an increase in the number and size of black ethnic groups. These peoples have quietly reshaped African American identity. They, as well as the people of African descent whose roots in the United States go back to the slave trade, have transformed the genealogy and the identity of those we now call African Americans.

The greatest influx of voluntary black immigrants into the United States occurred during the 1910s and 1920s and then from 1965 onward. In the years that followed each of these periods, there was a greater emphasis on Africa as a symbol of unity among people of African descent in the United States. In fact, after 1965, many of these people began calling themselves "Africans" and "African Americans."

According to the 1990 census, there were 1,938,348 Caribbean-born and 363,819 African-born residents of the United States, and many more who report ancestry from a Caribbean or African country.

The largest among the black or African ethnic groups were the Jamaicans, Haitians,
self-described black Puerto Ricans, Nigerians, Egyptians, Trinidadians and Tobagonians, black Cubans, and Ethiopians. These were followed in size by the Ghanaian descent group, the Moroccan, and the Kenyan. The official counts, however, were probably far lower than the actual number. Smaller groups of the “other African Americans” included the Grenadians, Virgin Islanders, Afro-Guyanese, black Dominicans, Afro-Panamanians, black Mexicans, Somalis, and white South Africans.

Yet, beyond these self-declared black, predominantly black, Caribbean, or African-origin immigrant groups, black North America hosts a rich diversity of ethnic groups that acknowledge their mixed ancestry. Examples are the Louisiana Creoles of color, the Charleston people of color, the Melungeons of North Carolina and Tennessee, and the numerous Native American groups cast of the Mississippi with visibly African ancestry.

The “other African Americans” have played a key role in redefining African American politics and culture in the 20th century. Indeed, the “Africa” in “African American” is not simply a place, but an idea that has taken form amid the rich ethnic diversity of black North America.