Islands Are Not Isolated: Reconsidering the Roots of Gullah Distinctiveness

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In the explanation of the enduring Africanness of Gullah/Geechee culture along the South Atlantic coast, perhaps no word arises more often than "isolation." In his classic 1949 study of African retentions in Gullah speech, linguist Lorenzo Turner wrote, "the African speech habits of the earliest Gullahs were being constantly strengthened throughout the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth by contact with the speech of native Africans who were coming direct from Africa and who were sharing with the older Gullahs the isolation of the Sea Islands." Echoing Turner, as well as the famous studies conducted on the Sea Islands in the 1920s and 1930s by researchers from the University of North Carolina and current promotions sponsored by the giant retailer Wal-Mart, the most comprehensive study of Gullah/Geechee culture to date also makes the most comprehensive and absolute claim: "The isolation of sea island communities from outsiders," declare the authors of the National Park Service Special Resource Study (2005), "was vital to the survival of Gullah/Geechee community cultures."

The term "isolation" summarizes geographical realities and historical developments. The distance of the Sea Islanders from the mainland, the flight of colonial-era planters during the season of mosquito-borne diseases, the year-round paucity of whites, until recently, and legal segregation are understood to have created a major obstacle to the Euro-American influence that would otherwise, it is assumed, have wiped out African-inspired culture in the Lowcountry. African culture and the creolized forms in which it is most evident are thus represented as products of conservatism and as inherently less appealing or powerful than the Europeanized cultural forms that—had they been highly visible to the ancestors of the Gullah/Geechees—would have replaced their African-inspired culture.

Fig. 10.1
The argument that isolation contributes to linguistic distinction seems intuitively strong, but various real-world comparisons undermine it. Around the globe, it is common for dialects to diversify and proliferate at their small but densely populated origins. For example, England hosts a vastly greater number of accents and dialects than does the larger and less densely populated United States. Linguistic difference does not depend upon isolation. Moreover, creole languages such as Haitian Kreyol, Jamaican Patois, and Cape Verdean Kriolu thrive in poor black neighborhoods of the eastern United States, where they are transformed from symbols of poverty and low status in the homeland into symbols of national pride in the diaspora and of superiority to the immigrants' more racially stigmatized African-American neighbors. In such cases, interaction with people of other languages and cultures, rather than separation from them, has fortified African-influenced creole languages.

Furthermore, rather than impede communication, the creeks and rivers that supposedly cut off the islands from each other and from the larger world are the very “roads” that once facilitated the traffic of huge crops of rice, indigo, and long staple cotton from outlying plantations to port cities and markets across the sea (fig. 10.1). Through antebellum South Carolina’s early provisioning of ships and Caribbean sugar plantations, its heavy dependence on the Atlantic slave trade, and the exportation of its staple crops, this region was more actively engaged with the global economy than most other British North American colonies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, far from being unvisited and left to itself, the area received major shipments of people and ideas from diverse ports of western and west-central Africa, as well as from the English-speaking Caribbean and Haiti, as islanders of all colors fled the Saint Domingue Revolution between 1791 and 1804. During and after the American Civil War and into contemporary times, a steady flow of curious outsiders has poked and prodded “the Gullah people of the Georgia and South Carolina coast,” making them “among the most studied populations in the United States.”

“Isolation,” therefore, is a causal principle in serious need of revision. It does not reflect the best of what we know concerning history, the nature of culture, and the formation of ethnic identity. It mistakes common sense for cross-culturally observable patterns and, most unfortunately, it embodies an unspoken prejudice about the relative appeal and power of African-inspired and European-inspired cultures. In fact, a more accurate scenario is that it has been the Gullah/Geechees’ history of interactions with black and white “persons of all sorts” from all parts of Europe and Africa that has produced a proudly distinctive, African-inspired, and modern identity.

Just who are the Gullah/Geechees? Where do they live and what is distinctive about their way of life?

The term “Gullah” has long been used to describe the creole language spoken, at its height, by approximately half a million people of African descent on the Sea Islands and in the tidewater region of the South Atlantic coast. Its origins have been alternately attributed to a corruption of “Angola,” a major source of Africans brought to South Carolina, or to the Gola, a group of people from the area now known as Liberia. According to anthropologist William Bascom, the Gola were identified with “the Gula negroes of the southern states” by an American Baptist missionary, T. J. Bowen, who visited Liberia in 1850. But despite Bowen’s categorical attribution, Bascom insisted that “the question still remains open.” Assumed to derive from the Ogeechee River, “Geechee” applies to Gullah-speakers who live along the Georgia coast.

In the early nineteenth century, “Gullah” was used to describe someone from Angola—for example, “Gullah Jack,” who was named as a co-conspirator with Denmark Vesey in the 1822 slave insurrection in Charleston. Researchers in the twentieth century applied “Gullah” not only to the distinctive coastal language but also to a whole range of customs and beliefs related to religion, cuisine, domestic architecture, basketry and other crafts, as well as

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“intangible traits, such as motor habits, modes of behavior, and social institutions.” At the urging of anthropologist Melville Herskovits and following in the footsteps of Work Projects Administration researcher Mary Granger, Bascom spent two months in 1939 searching for “Africanisms” on the Georgia Sea Islands. Among the local cultural traits that he identified were “the formality of friendship, the functions of clubs and societies, matrilinealism, an emphasis on special circumstances of birth, naming practices, interpretation of dreams, burial rites, beliefs in multiple souls and the intercession of ghosts,” all of which, in his view, recalled African precedents more than they did European.

Outside the academic community, the terms “Gullah” and more so “Geechee” have had pejorative associations, with implications of backwardness, poverty, and illiteracy. Thus, in 1971, when South Carolina Educational Television interviewer approached basket makers along Highway 17 for a film entitled Gullah Baskets, some sewers resented the term. “I’m no Gullah,” protested one woman, while another, who had crafted baskets for forty years, denied ever having heard them called “Gullah baskets.”

Since the early 1990s, however, “Gullah” and “Geechee” have gained acceptance among the people so described. They may not use the terms in the sense of ethnic identity, but coastal people of African descent understand that when others use the words they are talking about them. In 2006, Congress officially designated the southeastern coast and its islands as a cultural and ecological preservation zone to be known as the “Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor” and established a commission for its management. The stated purpose of the Corridor, steered through Congress by the current Majority Whip, S.C. Representative James E. Clyburn—who as a young man narrated the film Gullah Baskets—is to “preserve and
interpret [the] unique language, arts and crafts, religious beliefs, folklore, rituals and foods ... of the Gullah/Geechee people.15 The assumption that even relative isolation—and, by extension, ignorance about non-African alternatives—is the normal condition for the “retention” of African culture in the Americas belies not only the particulars of Gullah/Geechee history, including Gullah/Geechee rice technology and commerce, but also overall historical patterns in the Black Atlantic world. The eighteenth-century incubator of Gullah/Geechee culture hosted the bearers of a vast array of African traditions, as well as settlers from the British Isles and German states, French Huguenots and English Quakers, Swiss, Dutchmen, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Bahamians, Barbadians, and Creek and Cherokee Indians.16 The proximity of the Spanish in Florida, where runaways could find safe haven, was well known to the ancestors of the Gullah/Geechees.17 Among the Africans could be found fluent speakers of English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, and Chickasaw.18 For example, one 1763 runaway slave advertisement describes “a Negro man named LUKE ... [who] has been used to the seas [and] speaks English, French, Spanish and Dutch.”19

Furthermore, the enslaved were mobile. Few slaves belonged from birth to death to one master; therefore any given captive might know, influence, and be influenced by several plantation sub-cultures.20 Captives sometimes moved long distances—as a condition of their service to their masters, as a function of their social lives, and sometimes in temporary or permanent flight from slavery.21 In the eighteenth century, mariners constituted an astonishing nine percent of South Carolina’s skilled slaves, and they greatly facilitated the mobility of black non-sailors as well.22

Swept up in the currents of the day, Gullah/Geechees participated actively in a circum-Caribbean maritime flow of people and revolutionary ideas.23 Denmark Vesey, for example, was reported to be “familiar with the Haitian slave revolt and kept in touch with black leaders there.” He is alleged to have “recruited a band of between 6,600 and 9,000 Negro men during the four years of planning. They met in secrecy at a farm which could be reached by water so that they could avoid the slave patrols.”24

Enslaved and free people could not be kept from moving about and navigating the numerous waterways that drain the Lowcountry. Indeed, the local economy depended on their

Fig. 10.4
Ben Brown and two companions come to Penn School by boat from Palwana Island, South Carolina, ca. 1909.
Photo: Leigh Richmond Miner. Penn School Collection/ Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
mobility. The rivers, bays, and salt and fresh water creeks of what would become Gullah/Geechee country afforded its inhabitants considerable freedom of movement among the Sea Islands and between the islands and the mainland ports. African-American cultural historian Richard A. Long describes the Charleston Market, for example, as a "geographical extension and high profile site" of "the Gullah world." A coastal people whose homeland encompasses a major port and is traversed by highly navigable creeks and rivers can hardly be considered isolated relative to, say, people in the inland mountains, forests, and prairies where other black settlements are found. Navigable water does not isolate islands, and islands are not really insular (fig. 10.4). Like the Mississippi River, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Niger River, and even the Sahara Desert, the tidewaters of the Lowcountry facilitate commerce and exchange.

Most writers who specify a time period suggest that the Sea Islanders and their coastal kin experienced their deepest separation from national life after the Civil War, when time apparently stood still, not to start up again until the construction of bridges between the Sea Islands and the mainland in the 1950s. This period of self-containment was reputedly ended by a boom in resort development and suburban expansion, resulting in the Gullah/Geechees' displacement from self-employment as fishermen and farmers to wage employment in low-paying industries.

Yet throughout the long epoch of the Gullah/Geechees' alleged isolation, non-Gullah/Geechee clients from distant states sought out root doctors in their island redoubts. Root doctors employed herbs and performed rituals to heal their clients physically, to protect them from harm, and to harm their own and their clients' enemies. The most famous Gullah/Geechee "root doctors" are said to have possessed imported African ritual objects, which fact suggests contact and commerce with people far "abroad"—to use the local word for the world beyond the islands. Gullah/Geechee magic was amplified as well by European and Euro-American spell books, such as The Great Book of Magical Art, Hindu Magic, and East Indian Occultism (1902) by Lauren William DeLaurence, and The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses (1910), which had likely arrived in the mail from Chicago.

Still, the appearance of remoteness and exotic origin is a nearly universal element of credible magic—no less among Gullah/Geechee root doctors than among West African Yoruba healers. Despite his mystique of isolation, Dr. Buzzard (Mr. Stepheney Robinson), the famous Gullah/Geechee root doctor profiled by Roger Pinckney in Blue Roots: African-American Folk Magic of the Gullah People, specialized in resolving court cases and possessed a sophisticated knowledge of how to circumvent the state's efforts to restrict his practice. Dr. Buzzard's colleague and contemporary Dr. Bug (Mr. Peter Murray), however, was caught supplying "roots" to cause his clients heart palpitations. Of this case, Pinckney writes: "After the arrest and incarceration of Dr. Bug for helping Gullah draftees fail their physicals for induction into the military, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of young men went to root doctors in an effort to foreshorten World War II before their inductions. It is commonly believed that the atomic bomb was the result." Thus, Gullah/Geechee root work, in the twentieth century at least, thrived in the context and consciousness of international politics, history, and business.

During and after the Civil War, the Gullah/Geechees experienced a more intensive engagement with northern military officials, administrators, missionaries, and teachers—through the famous Port Royal Experiment—than virtually any other southerners. No African-American population has participated in the social, scientific, musical, and literary projects of a more diverse array of partisan outsiders. Starting with the occupying Union troops, the strangers spoke varieties of mainstream English, and brought with them books and the promise of literacy. The collapse of Reconstruction led to other sorts of movement in and out of the Gullah/Geechee zone—by nostalgic southern whites (such as Ambrose Gonzales, DuBose Heyward, and Julia Peterkin), by Afro-Philadelphian teacher and writer
Charlotte Forten, by University of North Carolina folklorists and social scientists, by Afro-North Carolinian linguist Lorenzo Turner, by basket wholesalers and retailers, and by the Gullah/Geechee purveyors of Sea Island produce and seafood, who sold their merchandise in Charleston.

From the first days of European and African settlement, Gullah/Geechee workers themselves repeatedly left and returned to the region. Since the Civil Rights Movement, some have left and returned as the most vociferous spokespersons of Gullah/Geechee cultural nationalism. Nor has the flow of ideas into the Lowcountry been an enemy. Schooling at missionary-sponsored institutions, such as Penn, Avery, Laing, and Mather, as well as at universities far away, has done more to staff the leadership of revival movements than to encourage the abandonment of distinctive Gullah/Geechee ways. The current acceleration of communication, transportation, and migration, which is blamed or credited for reducing Gullah/Geechee isolation and therefore endangering the people's cultural survival, actually has inspired an increase in the Africanness of Gullah/Geechee basketry. Basket sewers of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, now model some of their baskets on forms seen in books about Africa or on crafts brought from Africa by Gullah/Geechee travelers. Indeed, the recent proliferation of lobbying organizations devoted to the rescue of Gullah/Geechee culture is less evidence that the culture is in danger than a manifestation of the enduring cosmopolitanism and growing political strength of an ethnic group ever more comfortable with its distinctiveness.

**SHARED SPACES AND SEPARATE IDENTITIES**

Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, some scholars of the African diaspora have described the "retention" of African culture in the Americas as exceptional and reflexively attribute cultural persistence to isolation. Roger Bastide, for example, describes Bahia as atypical in being a large city that retained its African religion with relative purity. Herskovits recognizes Paramaribo, Port-au-Prince, and Bahia as similarly special, and Newbell Niles Puckett represents New Orleans as exceptional. Rather than "exceptions," these numerous urban cases might better be seen as disproving any simple rule.

The persistence of the isolation thesis is based in part on a misjudgment about African culture: that people choose African ways of doing things only when they are unaware of non-African alternatives. Two generations of scholarship on the importance of African technology in South Carolina—by Peter H. Wood, John Michael Vlach, Daniel C. Littlefield, Judith A. Carney, and others—ought, by now, to have eliminated this notion from the intellectual toolkit of African diaspora scholarship.

Moreover, the emphasis on isolation in the genesis of Gullah/Geechee identity places the cart before the horse in explaining how ethnic identities come about in the first place. The isolation model posits that people recognize their difference from others primarily when and where those others are absent. In fact, one population tends to recognize and classify its difference from another only when the first group interacts and competes or cooperates enough with the second for the imagined differences to matter—that is, when the populations are close enough to each other to need and value the same things, and yet different enough in resources, specialties, or political status to become rivals or allies in pursuit of them. Ethnicity emerges, by its very nature, in shared spaces, while cultural distinctions are often invented or reinforced in order to legitimize novel claims of privilege.

It might be argued that cultural difference typically arises from the differential use of overlapping knowledge and resources. William Bascom observes that the most prolific retentions of African culture among the Gullahs and other African diaspora populations show up not in practices and beliefs that distinguish Africans from Europeans but in areas of overlap.
"There were a number of institutions common to both regions [Africa and Europe],” writes Bascom; “including a complex economic system based on money, markets, and middlemen, as well as . . . a common stock of folklore and a common emphasis on moralizing elements and proverbs.”

African-inspired culture in the Americas often draws strength from its similarity to European-inspired culture and/or, as in the case of rice cultivation, its superiority in the service of Euro-American needs—in short, from its proximity to, rather than distance from, non-African overlords, neighbors, and clients. Various authors even argue that conversion to Christianity facilitated, rather than impeded, the spread of African-inspired magico-religious practices. In many settings, African-inspired medical care has been regarded as more effective and more trustworthy than Euro-American alternatives. Whites who live alongside Gullah/Geechees frequently have embraced African-inspired beliefs, behaviors, and expressive genres. The Euro-American appropriation of the banjo, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop are parallel and widely discussed examples.

In some multi-ethnic contexts, distinctive foods and ways of preparing them can separate groups of people from one another, since it is difficult to befriend or marry people bound by different dietary rules. Thus, as in the case of kosher dietary protocols, culinary differences are often part of a people's deliberate strategy to remain a social community apart from even their next-door neighbors. In general, the “survival” of foodways seldom depends on the isolation of the people who invented them. For example, Carney demonstrates the West African origins of the much-advertised, cross-racial preference for grain separation—as opposed to stickiness—in American rice cuisine (see Chapters 3 and 5). Moreover, in virtually all societies, ethnic and regional diversity structures the marketing of prepared food. And recipes travel. Thanks to my friend Henrietta Snye, a basket maker in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, my Massachusetts friends and family have recently acquired a powerful penchant for "swimps and gwits," seasoned to traditional perfection with Lipton Onion Soup Mix. Consequently, we now help propagate an ethnic identity, cuisine, and language that few of us previously knew existed.

Even the meaning and usefulness of Africanisms in the Gullah/Geechee lexicon rely upon the co-presence of whites and other non-Gullah-speakers. By far, the most numerous cognates of African words in Gullah—as identified by Turner and his Niger-Congo-speaking collaborators at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)—are “basket names.” These are Gullah/Geechee personal names known only to family members and other Gullah/Geechees, in contrast to the “English” names that are used with strangers, at school, or in written communications. Thus, the semantic meaning and pragmatic function of “basket names” depend on the existence of a nearby outsider audience that insiders have occasion to exclude. According to Salikoko S. Mufwene and Charles Gilman, Gullah/Geechees are “generally bidialectal in various varieties of local or standard English.” In other words, Gullah/Geechee names and language generally are used not for lack of an alternative but, rather, to convey in-group intimacy or to prevent monolingual English-speakers from understanding a private communication. A Gullah-speaker may use the contrast between Gullah words or phrases and English words or phrases of similar meaning to convey finely nuanced messages about his or her thoughts, social status, and intentions. Just as multiple Iberian dialects have survived centuries of Castilian dominance, Gullah is likely to survive and remain useful in countless projects of meaning-making and community-building in a multi-ethnic and multicultural world.

FOLK CULTURES AND WHITE IDENTITY
The most vibrant and populous African-inspired cultures in the Americas generally are not the ones isolated from mainstream Euro-American cultures but those that have most
effectively employed Western communication and transportation technologies to stay in touch with Old World Africans. Moreover, because these African-diaspora cultures may look very different from urban Western culture, they become available as emblems of a seemingly primordial and authentic local autonomy, often in the service of local white elites who are resisting political and economic domination by more metropolitan whites. In Brazil, for example, members of the socially powerful white elites of the Northeast, such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, Gilberto Freyre, and Edison Carneiro, championed Afro-Brazilian culture as a badge of their own legitimacy—and that of Brazil as a whole—in contrast to the economically dominant white elites of São Paulo, with their European pretensions. The Northeast had once been the economic, political, and cultural center of Brazil. White Northeastern Regionalists answered their own marginalization by proclaiming the unique authenticity of Northeastern black culture and its superiority to the black cultures of São Paulo and the United States. They also often touted the Northeast’s allegedly exemplary embrace of racial hybridity.

Similarly, in the wake of the 1898 United States invasion of Cuba, Fernando Ortiz made Afro-Cuban culture into a symbolic pillar of Cuban autonomy. Postbellum New Orleanians George Washington Cable, Robert Tallant, and Lyle Saxon, among others, documented and purposely exaggerated the mystery and sensuality of creole New Orleans. Subsequent generations of white New Orleanians have marketed themselves to tourists as the scions of a sybaritic aristocracy—French-inspired, African-seduced, and just too sophisticated to embrace the moral and racial purism of Protestant America. In the face of United States domination and racial chauvinism, Mexican indigenerismo and the Haitian Bureau d’Éthnologie recounted similar allegories, inferring from their distinctive “folk” cultures the dignity and autonomy of their nations.

Like the conquered or superseded white elites of southern Louisiana, northeastern Brazil, and Mexico—and even the elite, Francophone blacks and mulattoes of Haiti—the conquered whites of Charleston have avidly documented, celebrated, protected, and at times even subsidized the “folk” cultures of the dark people whom they regarded as their subordinates. Important cultural figures—such as Georgian Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), Mississippian Newbell Niles Puckett (1897–1969), South Carolinian DuBose Heyward (1885–1940), and Charleston’s all-white Society for the Preservation of Spirituals—linked their longing for a mythic ante-bellum civilization to a careful documentation of a distinctly black regional culture (see Chapter 9). Though cast as in some ways inferior to European or metropolitan white
Graham, St. Helena Island, South Carolina, 1909. Photo by Leigh Richmond Miner, Penn School Collection, Norman H. Bement Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Graham, Penn School's first basketry teacher, 19 on a basket. His wife, Susan, sits on the porch of house. To the right of Graham is his grandson and to his side are bundles of bulrush and saw palmetto splints. Used this photo on the "Trademark Tag" attached to the school sold and shipped.

culture, the black subcultures they revered were regarded as traditional, authentic, sincere, and, best of all, characteristic of a noble past.13

REARRANGING ROOTS

Lorenzo Turner's emphasis on the Yoruba antecedents of Gullah language is probably indebted to the overrepresentation of certain British-colonized peoples among the SOAS scholars whom Turner asked for help in identifying the African origins of Gullah terms. In historical fact, while the plurality of the Gullah/Geechees' African ancestors has been identified as "Angolan" and "west-central African," the scholarly literature demonstrating the African origins of South Carolina's rice culture offers little incentive to pay special attention to this demographic fact. The best-studied African rice-producing region—between the Senegambia and Liberia—has, since Turner, become the more prestigious ancestor. In Sierra Leone, anthropologist and former Peace Corps volunteer Joseph Opala has argued that coastal South Carolina and Sierra Leone share a unique family tree. Scholarly emphasis on the "Rice Coast" and on these recently perceived social ties is the basis of a selective but nonetheless powerful idea. The narrative of Gullah/Geechee kinship with the peoples of Sierra Leone has now been reinforced by several official visits between these two communities and by two deeply moving films—Family Across the Sea (1990), produced under the sponsorship of South Carolina Educational Television, and The Language You Cry In (1998).

Considering the West African focus of Melville Herskovits, Peter H. Wood, and Joseph Opala, one might ask why Daniel C. Littlefield's inventory of the eighteenth-century African runaways in South Carolina19 includes no Yoruba people (though the one "Nego" might be a
“Nago” Yoruba, no Gola people (the Sierra Leonians sometimes credited with the origin of the term “Gullah”), no Mende people (the most populous ethnic group in Sierra Leone), and no Baga people (the ethnic group from Guinea–Conakry credited with the most likely precedents for the rice-growing techniques that made South Carolina prosper). One reason might be that these ethnic terms are modern and their meanings today are not what they were to observers who used them in the eighteenth century. Another possibility is that twentieth-century researchers have, for twentieth-century reasons, focused on the most accessible evidence and the most prestigious of the Gullah/Geechees’ likely ancestors. The local appropriation of outsider scholarship (including the works of Turner, Bascom, Wood, Littlefield, Opaha, and Rosengarten) has actually turned the course of history—by re-shaping the self-understandings, priorities, and community-building efforts of contemporary Gullah/Geechees and other peoples of the African diaspora. Moreover, this outside influence has increased, rather than decreased, the Africanness of Gullah/Geechee culture and ethnic identity.

**DIALOGUE**

Both the local language and a lively long-distance “dialogue” with other peoples have created the Gullah/Geechee identity as we know it today. Most Gullah and Geechee children have grown up believing that the language of their forebears and, by extension, their own, is just a substandard version of American English. Indeed, coastal Georgian Clarence Thomas attributes his relative silence on the Supreme Court bench to his having attended schools where his Gullah/Geechee language was considered inferior. Alphonso Brown, owner of Gullah Tours, reports that when he was growing up he thought he was “just speaking bad English.”

Outsider scholarship has played a major role in the recent Gullah/Geechee embrace of Africa and the recognition of Gullah/Geechee as a creole language rather than as a deficient form of English. Gullah/Geechee lifeways, for so long linked to poverty and backwardness and to people in need of “uplift,” now garner appreciation as the hallmarks of a valuable culture and self-ascribed ethnic identity. The Penn School, founded on St. Helena in 1862 to educate the islanders when Federal forces occupied the area of Port Royal Sound, was a leader in propagating and defining production standards for Gullah/Geechee crafts and folk arts, such as “native island” basketry, and has been a major player in making St. Helena the capital of an emergent Gullah/Geechee culture (fig. 10.7–10.8).

In 1988, Penn Center, successor to the Penn School, hosted the visit of Sierra Leone’s President Joseph Momo, which established the stateside momentum for the visit of two Gullah/Geechee delegations to West Africa during the 1990s. These transatlantic journeys fostered the popular impression that Sierra Leonean Krio is the origin of Gullah/Geechee language and provided the impetus for the lobbying efforts of Gullah/Geechees to assist Sierra Leonians during their recent civil war, and even for the declaration that the Gullah/Geechees are the “Mende people of South Carolina.” Such examples of a trans-oceanic dialogue have helped solidify the dignity and African rootedness of Gullah/Geechee identity.

Lorenzo Turner himself was a major agent of this dialogue. His transformative scholarly work in the 1930s and 1940s did not begin and end with his research stint on the Sea Islands. As an African American, he achieved a level of access to private Gullah practices and parlando that had been denied to previous white researchers. Yet his unique access demonstrates not that the Gullah/Geechees lived in a world apart from whites, but that they lived close enough to mistrust them and to have established a convention of excluding them from certain information. In their centuries-old and highly active exchange with their masters and managers, employers, customers, neighbors, teachers, missionaries, researchers, and so forth, Gullah/Geechees have learned to communicate one way with ethnic insiders and another with ethnic outsiders. Far from having “preserved” their African culture in isolation, Gullah/Geechees discovered their Africanness, amplified it, and gave it a new social reality as a result of their
conversations with geographical outsiders like Turner.

This discourse is the root of what might be called a Gullah/Geechee Renaissance, which, like all renaissances and revitalization movements, is as much a new fabrication as a rebirth. Among its most remarkable inventions is that a Gullah returnee from New York has been “enstooled” as “Chiefess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation” (fig. 10.9). In 1996, Marquetta L. Goodwine, a native of St. Helena Island, then residing in Brooklyn, founded the Gullah/Geechee Island Coalition, an organization designed to promote and preserve Gullah/Geechee culture through “land re-acquisition and maintenance,” and to celebrate this culture “through artistic and educational means, electronically and via ‘grassroots scholarship.’” Describing the southeastern coast as the “Gullah/Geechee nation,” Ms. Goodwine—also known as “Queen Quet”—took her people’s case before the First International Conference on the Right of Self-Determination and to the United Nations in Geneva in 2000.

The backdrop of this dramatic development is a boom in Gullah/Geechee literary and cultural production since the early 1990s. Often educated and media-savvy, Gullah/Geechee writers, singers, painters, craftspeople, educators, and lobbyists have taken their message of Gullah/Geechee peoplehood and cultural distinctiveness to the press, television stations, Internet, municipal and county governments, Congress, the United Nations, public schools, tourism bureaus, and commercial galleries.

Without minimizing the tragedy of Gullah/Geechee land loss, one might say that Gullah/Geechee culture and ethnic identity are more alive today than ever before. The ability to promulgate and pass national legislation and a range of local laws demonstrates the growing skill of Gullah/Geechee organizations at educating the public, lobbying regional officials to secure Gullah/Geechee land holdings, and pressuring non-Gullah/Geechee landholders and businesses to allow Gullah/Geechee access to ancestral sites to gather raw materials for their basketry. For some individuals, these successes are a step in the direction of nation-building.

Gullah/Geechee culture has undergone a further, characteristic moment in the consolidation of ethnic groups and the canonization of their cultures—the publication of a vernacular Bible. Appropriately, De Njew Testament (2005) places the Gullah text alongside the King James English version. Gullah/Geechee culture is, after all, characterized by a bilingual field or creole continuum—that is, a range of forms between the most creolized, or basilectal, and the
most "standard," or acrolectal. What makes the production of De Nyew Testament a canonical act is not just that it legitimizes the language, which until recently took written form only in the works of scholars, folklore collectors, and fiction writers, but also that it establishes a single version of the internally heterogeneous Gullah/Geechee language as a standard worthy of the sacred and of the official. In practice, Gullah varies from island to island, just as in Nigeria the so-called dialects of Yoruba vary from one region to another. Similarly, the translation of the Bible into Yoruba required an artificial homogenization of dialects and thus created a previously non-existent and now school-taught standard around which the Ekiti, the Oyo, the Ijebu, the Egbas, the Yoruba, and so forth can rally collectively in the face of rivalry with, for example, Igbo and Hausa people—Nigeria's other dominant ethnic groups.64

Through 1861, the livelihood of the Gullah/Geechees' ancestors as enslaved farmers of rice and long-staple cotton made an in-group language useful as the medium of communication to exclude the oppressor class. After the Civil War, the freed people's shared status as family farmers under continual threat of land expropriation, and as fishermen and merchants—and not their isolation from whites—preserved the utility of their distinctive crafts, their in-group language, and their church-based form of self-government. As long as some islands, such as Johns, Wadmalaw, Edisto, and St. Helena, retain major Gullah-speaking populations, and the mainland community of Mt. Pleasant continues to profit from its African-inspired basketry (fig. 10.10),67 even the unscrupulous displacement of some island populations is unlikely to result in the disappearance of the Gullah/Geechees. Ironically, the ongoing threat posed by the loss of some islands, such as Daufuskie and Hilton Head, to development pressures may have strengthened Gullah/Geechee culture. Alongside the return of émigré cultural nationalists and the emergence of a professional class of Gullah/Geechee cultural educators (including choirs, storytellers, and school presenters), this threat has inspired Gullah/Geechee leaders to articulate, dignify, centralize, standardize, and canonize a culture that, in the early twentieth century, had not considered itself worthy of the name.

It is in the context of an interracial, interregional, and international dialogue that the recently self-recognized Gullah/Geechee people have transformed the shame born of slavery into cultural capital. Thus, Gullah/Geechee "isolation" is a misnomer, if not a contradiction in terms. Three centuries of deftly managed inter-ethnic struggle, amid highly unequal power relations, has prepared the Sea Islanders and their mainland kin to defend their land and culture against the newest demographic, political, and economic threats.

In the film Family Across the Sea, a Gullah/Geechee cultural delegation visits Bunce Island, off the coast of Sierra Leone, where captives from the mainland had trodden for the last time on African soil (figs. 1.8, 1.9, p. 25). There the visitors tearfully receive a lecture from Joseph Opala about the horrors that their ancestors had experienced on the island. One visitor reports that she has finally discovered her culture, a culture that she had never known about. The irony of "cultures" these days—and perhaps as long as there have been diasporas and cultural canons—is that they are not always daily lived or known by their members but instead are often "discovered" or "revealed" in dialogue with outsiders. Cultures regularly find their most ardent champions among erstwhile members of the group who have moved away and returned in the role of spokespeople for an identity with far less salience, pride of place, and usefulness among those who had stayed at home.

Unlike mountains and forests, islands tend to have points of entry and exit all around, leading to and from every direction. The ancestors of the Gullah/Geechee people did not decide how and when they entered and left Bunce Island, or what they could carry with them. After years of struggle, today's Gullahs and Geechees can decide when and how they enter and leave Bunce or St. Helena. They can also decide what to take with them and what to take away from the experience.
Cat. 120
ESPRESSO CUP AND SAUCER
B. Cousette
South Carolina
2005
H. 6 cm.
Collection of Dale Rosengarten

Cat. 121
TEAPOT
B. Cousette
South Carolina
2006
H. 13 cm.
Collection of Edith Howle and Rick Throckmorton