

# The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/ Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas

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The Gullah/Geechee people are the locus classicus for the study of “African survivals” in North American culture. As such, they have been saddled with the duty to generate universal principles for the explanation of Africans’ acculturation, adaptation, and cultural resistance in the Western hemisphere, and they provide the main North American test case for explanatory principles generated elsewhere in the Americas. Yet, the well-studied Gullah/Geechee case, like the Afro-Atlantic world generally, holds untapped lessons about the historical genesis of cultures and ethnic identities worldwide. Is isolation the normal precondition and conservator of cultural and ethnic distinctiveness? And do the enslaved and their descendants choose their ancestors’ ways and identities mainly when and where isolation from the oppressor has made the oppressor’s cultural alternatives unavailable? The existing literature on the Gullah/Geechee people of the southeastern U.S. coast and islands says “yes” to these questions, which also stand at the heart of both black Atlantic and global cultural history.

Students of so-called “globalization” and its precedents have increasingly recognized the long-distance flows of people, ideas, and resources that, far from eliminating socio-cultural difference, have enhanced and transformed it (see Matory 2005: 73–114). For example, the Yoruba revivalist kingdom of Oyotunji, in Beaufort County, South Carolina, has created a new African-American subculture based on a deft blend of symbolic practices by Cuban priests of Ocha, Africanist anthropologists, African-American political nationalists, and tourists of all colors. Northerners will be more conversant with the case of Italian-Americans, who, like the new American Yorubas, have constructed new but Old-World-inspired cultures and identities in the midst of intensive commercial, political, and educational interaction with other ethnic

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groups. An ethnic identity consolidating the diverse regional populations of the Italian peninsula was, arguably, not a mere survival of Old-World conditions but a creature of immigration and of the multicultural American condition (e.g., Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976).

Similarly, I argue that Gullah/Geechee culture is an evolving product of interaction rather than of primordial isolation. Like many past interactions with non-Gullah/Geechees, the lapse of isolation that experts allege has occurred since the 1950s has threatened some aspects of Gullah/Geechee cultural reproduction but vastly enhanced others. Moreover, my sense is that this so-called lapse of isolation was actually one of multiple historical changes in the terms of Gullah/Geechee interaction with others. The critical feature of this latest change might not be the loss of *isolation* as such but the *loss of land and of access to maritime resources*, which are not and should not be necessary results of increased interaction. I will consider the uncertain evidence that the recent dispersion and out-migration of some Gullah/Geechees threatens the endurance of their creole language. However, I will also consider evidence that out-migration and subsequent return, along with tourism, have precipitated an unprecedented degree of cultural self-awareness, canonization of tradition, and pride, as well as profit, in Gullah/Geechee speech, foodways, handicrafts, and history. “Gullah/Geechee culture” as such is a product of *interaction and return*, and, far from dying out, “Gullah/Geechee culture” has become a potent weapon in the struggle to maintain landownership and access to resources.

The following revision of Gullah/Geechee cultural history challenges a central explanatory principle in the literature—that isolation is the cause of Gullah/Geechee ethnic distinctiveness and the necessary precondition of African cultural “survival” in the United States. This revision arises from the inconsistent evidence found within that literature, as well as the comparative example of multiple black Atlantic cases, in which the colonized and the enslaved have created distinctive African-inspired cultures and identities amid daily dealings with non-Africans and in full knowledge of non-African alternatives.

For example, the West African Yoruba identity came about in the mid-nineteenth century not as a result of the isolation of the Yoruba’s ancestors from other peoples but as a direct result of their encounters with Hausa people (who coined the name “Yoruba” specifically for the Oyo kingdom), slave traders (who classified the captives who embarked at Lagos as though they belonged to a single peoplehood), the British Royal Navy (which rescued thousands of Oyo, Ekiti, Egba, Ijebu, and other “recaptives” and settled them together in Freetown), and African returnees from Cuba and Brazil (who settled and virtually built the core of Lagos, the cultural capital of the emergent Yoruba identity). In fact, even the regions of today’s Yorubaland that are most isolated from European influence have, for many centuries, been crossroads of mutual influence and intercourse with the ancestors of the Nupe, the Hausa, and the other peoples of the Islamic world (Matory 1999).

The foremost symbol of Yoruba ethnic identity, which did not exist before the mid-1800s, has been the reduction of the diverse and sometimes mutually unintelligible Ọyọ, Ijẹbu, Ekiti, Egbado, Egba, Sierra Leonean Aku, Cuban Lucumí, and Brazilian Nagô language varieties to a single, hybrid language written in Roman script. The Bible written in this language by bilingual, Anglophile black missionaries, and the cultural nationalist literature of the Lagosian Cultural Renaissance, written in response to a rising tide of British racism in the 1890s, were charters of Yoruba culture and identity as we have known them in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Cross-culturally, Bible translations have often been canonical, establishing the linguistic standards of previously amorphous ranges of language variety and thus defining the boundaries of nations and ethnic groups (Matory 1999).

Equally surprising is the case of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion. Often identified as the most powerful manifestation of African culture in the Americas, Candomblé is as much indebted to an ongoing dialogue among priests, trans-Atlantic merchants, Lagosian cultural nationalists, Brazilian nationalists, and American feminists as it is to the alleged memory of a pristine and isolated African past (Matory 2005).

Such classical forms of black Atlantic culture exemplify two cross-cultural facts of life. First, the units of collective action and meaning-making that we call “cultures” are unique intersections, interpretations, and adaptations of translocal flows. They are not “islands” of *sui generis* distinction and internal homogeneity awaiting subsequent discovery by outsiders. Second, the consciousness and endogamous enforcement of heredity difference—or ethnicity—becomes a named reality only when and where one population and a co-present population share a desire to distinguish themselves from each other intergenerationally. Isolation is therefore neither the norm of culture-formation nor even a possible condition of ethnic identity-formation. Much less is it the normal condition of cultural or ethnic endurance.

The people who today embrace the “Gullah/Geechee” designation perhaps provide the most surprising example of this phenomenon. According to historian Dale Rosengarten, this term, which implies that the Gullahs and the Geechees are essentially the same people or are simply geographical variants of the same African-descended ethnic group, is a recent coinage. In the past, some local people have actually used the term “Gullah” to contrast the local black population with the local white one, which the same local people call “Geechees.” Moreover, the use of “Gullah” and “Geechee” as self-ascribed identities came about only in the past thirty years. In 1970, for example, when a program produced by South Carolina Educational Television described the local tradition of artistic basketry as “Gullah,” most of the basket-sewers vehemently objected. They took the term as an insult referring to their despised rural social status. However, long before the 1970s—perhaps even since the 1890s—local white populations have regarded the referent population as

possessing a distinctive lifeway and folklore worthy of a distinct name and worthy of study (Dale Rosengarten, personal communication, 2 May 2007). In the early nineteenth century, “Gullah” was used to describe someone from Angola. For example, “Gullah Jack” was 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 “intangible traits, such as motor habits, modes of behavior, and social institutions” (Bascom 1941: 48–49). Hence, as in the Yoruba case, outsiders were the first to identify this population as a single culture and ethnic group. Insiders’ self-conception as such followed decades of interaction with these outsiders and nowadays frequently cites as exemplary the forms of cultural conduct first canonized by these outsiders.

#### THE EXEMPLARY AFRICANNESS OF THE GULLAH/GEECHEE CULTURE

According to Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson, and Klein (1999), 165,429 enslaved Africans disembarked in the Carolinas or Georgia between the late 1600s and 1866. Among their descendants are the approximately 500,000 people who speak the distinctive Gullah/Geechee language today in the Sea Islands, the southeastern coast, and their diaspora in other parts of the United States (Pollitzer 2005b: D7; Hargrove 2005: F11). The Gullah/Geechee people descend from the enslaved Africans who built and sustained the lucrative rice plantations of the marshy coastlands and inland estuaries between the Cape Fear River in North Carolina and the St. John’s River near Jacksonville, Florida—collectively called the “Lowcountry”—as well as the people who built and sustained the indigo and long-staple cotton farms of the seventy-nine off-shore barrier islands of Georgia and South Carolina. Though these islands are generally represented as the heartland of the Gullah/Geechees’ distinctive culture, the Gullah/Geechee people represent a significant proportion of the African-American population in the thirty-mile-wide coastal strip of the mainland from southern North Carolina to northern Georgia (it is the Georgians who call them “Geechees”). Gullah/Geechee-speakers are most concentrated in the rural areas and small towns of South Carolina, such as Sandy Island, Planterville and McClellanville. However, major populations are found also in Georgetown and Charleston in South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, as well as northern Florida, Oklahoma, and New York City (National Park Service 2005; Opala n.d.; Dale Rosengarten, personal communication, 26 Mar. 2007).

The shared premise of much scholarship on the Gullah/Geechee people—and the major reason they receive so much attention—is that they are the most culturally and genetically African among the descendants of U.S.-born (as opposed to Caribbean-born) slaves (National Park Service 2005: 13, 100; Pollitzer 2005a). Indeed, scholars have traced the terms “Gullah” and

“Geechee” to various origins among the peoples of West and West-Central Africa. On the one hand, the term “Geechee” has been linked to the Ogeechee River in coastal Georgia (Sengova 2006: 214; Hargrove 2005: F4) and to the “Kissi” (pronounced GEE-see) people of Liberia (Turner 1973 [1949]: 194). On the other hand, “Gullah” might derive from the “Gola” people of what is now Liberia, one sub-region of the West African rice belt from which South Carolinian rice planters actively sought to acquire skilled rice-growers, or from “Galo,” the Sierra Leonean Mende people’s term for the Vai people (Turner 1973: 194; Creel 1988: 17–18; Opala n.d.). Both the Vai and the Mende now live in the rice-growing lands of Sierra Leone. Alternatively, “Gullah” might derive from “Ngola”—the source of the term “Angola” and the title of the ruler of the Mbundu people in what is now Angola, who may have grown even more rice than did their more famously rice-growing West African contemporaries (Wood 1974: 59). The European and Euro-American slave-traffickers attached the label “Angola” to the largest ethnically named category of people forcibly brought through the port of Charleston (Creel 1988: 15, 30–31, 37; Wood 1974: 59, 302, 333–41; Joyner 1985: 14, 205–6). Yet, for reasons that I will discuss below, this ethnic grouping and its name are systematically underrepresented in current discussions of the African roots of Gullah/Geechee culture. In sum, the social connections and research venues of non-Gullah/Geechee researchers have introduced a new and selective focus to the Gullah/Geechees’ own sense of their historical roots and of their contemporary African kinship networks.

Melville J. Herskovits (1958 [1941]) established the principle that African-American cultural distinctiveness might be traced to a distinctively African cultural legacy—rather than merely to their intellectually deficient or socially encumbered learning of the Euro-American standard. Since then, linguist Lorenzo Turner (1973), anthropologists William Bascom (1941) and Joseph Opala (n.d.), historians Peter Wood (1974), Daniel C. Littlefield (1991 [1981]), and Dale Rosengarten (1987), geographer Judith A. Carney (2001), art historian John Michael Vlach (1990), and others have mobilized copious evidence that not only the language of the Gullah/Geechees but also their eighteenth-century ancestors’ rice-growing skills, their manufacture and use of baskets, mortars and pestles in rice-processing, their methods of animal husbandry, their fishing tools and techniques, their sacred music and rituals of burial and worship, their folktales, their magical practices, and their devotion to their kin are deeply indebted to West and West-Central African origins.

For example, the ancestors of the Gullah/Geechees are identified as the original bearers of the skills in free-range cattle-keeping, which proved more adaptive to the Lowcountry landscape than did the time-honored English methods, and the skills in rice growing and processing that made that industry possible (Wood 1974: 30–31). The Gullah/Geechees’ apparently distinctive beliefs

about affliction and death, as well as the medical and ritual practices they have employed in their management, are also widely assumed to derive from African sources (Bascom 1941: 49; Creel 1988; Opala n.d.: "Gullah Customs and Traditions," p. 2; Pollitzer 2005b: D31–D33; Hargrove 2005: F25; Joyner 1985: 138, 142–43, 150–55), though some scholars have documented important European and Euro-American models for African-looking Gullah/Geechee practices and important Euro-American suppliers of its raw materials. Equally evident is the American-born *creativity* of Gullah/Geechee healing practice (Long 2001: esp. 122, 150–51, 95–96, 249; Chireau 2003: 215–16).

Yet, Gullah/Geechee people are most famous in the scholarly literature for their distinctive language variety—Gullah, or Sea Island Creole—which, despite its largely English-derived lexicon, is difficult for most English-speaking Americans to understand. Scholars recognize the Gullah language as a creole deeply influenced by West African phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, naming practices, and narrative forms (Turner 1973; Mufwene and Gilman 1987; *The Language You Cry In* 1998; National Park Service 2005: 55–58; Pollitzer 2005b: D20–D28; Hargrove 2005: F6–F11; Sengova 2006; Joyner 1985: 209–10).

While some scholars emphasize the qualitative distinctiveness of Gullah/Geechee language and culture from the language and culture of other black North Americans (Hargrove 2005: F3, F6, F7; Sengova 2006), Herskovits established the comparative framework within which the Gullah/Geechees' cultural history is usually assessed. Assuming that the cultures of the West African Fon, Yoruba, and Ashanti (as reconstructed in the "ethnographic present") represent the extant "base line," or starting point, of African-American cultural history, Herskovits' "ethnohistorical" method, or "social laboratory," posits that less-aculturated African-diaspora groups, such as Afro-Bahians and Surinamese Maroons, reveal the stages and intermediate forms through which African cultural traditions had been "transmuted" into their counterparts among more highly acculturated African-diaspora groups, such as the African Americans of the United States. Thus, as one such intermediate form, spirit possession in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion could be taken to demonstrate the African derivation of "shouting," or the behavior of those "filled with the Holy Spirit," in Gullah/Geechee and other black North American churches (Herskovits 1958: 220–21). Dozens of scholars have usefully employed similar reasoning in the study of African-American cultural reproduction. With reference to the degree of African Americans' abandonment of African culture and "acculturation" to Euro-American norms, Herskovits hypothesized—on his "scale of intensity of Africanisms"—not only that black North Americans were a step ahead of various less acculturated Caribbean and Latin American populations of African descent, but also that, with respect to their "acculturation," the black Americans of the South—prominently including the Gullah/Geechees—were a step behind those in the cities of the northern United States (Matory 2005: 11).

Since Gullah/Geechee ways appear to be the most conspicuously African of African-American lifeways, scholars of African-American culture tend to look to Gullah/Geechee culture for the classical forms of African-American language, religious practice, sacred music, dance, and cuisine in general. For example, since the mid-nineteenth century, travelers and northern teachers among the Gullah/Geechees have described an African-looking ritual called the “ring shout.” Following the normal church, or “praise house,” service, fully ordained members of the praise house often engaged in an accelerating circular dance, accompanied by singing and clapping. The ring shout culminated in the ecstatic descent of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Creel 1988: 297–301; Southern 1983 [1971]: 169–71; National Park Service 2005: 69–70; Hargrove 2005: F12–F13). Generations of African-Americanist scholars have represented the ring shout, along with the call-and-response pattern of Gullah/Geechee spirituals, as the classical forms of African-American religious practice, musical performance, and even political community-building (e.g., Sobel 1988 [1979]: 140–48; Stuckey 1987; Creel 1988; Gomez 1998; Long 2005: 103).<sup>1</sup>

Herskovits and his generation of anthropologists were interested in the conditions that caused some colonized or formerly enslaved populations to assimilate European culture faster or slower than others. Why did the Gullah/Geechees and their ancestors “retain” so much African culture, in contrast to other African-American groups? Researchers have offered multiple explanations. First, the South Carolina landscape is said to resemble that of the West African Rice Coast, allowing the African captives to adapt their own African methods of exploiting the coastal salt marshes to their own and their masters’ needs (e.g., *Family across the Sea* 1991).

Second, the Lowcountry hosted a range of tropical diseases to which Africans were more resistant than whites, keeping the local white population seasonally itinerant and generally low (e.g., Creel 1988: 34; Pollitzer 2005b: D3–D4, D9; Wood 1974: 63–91). Moreover, the demands of rice production created plantations with some of the largest numbers of enslaved people in North America. Therefore, the colonial and antebellum Lowcountry had the highest concentration of black people in mainland North America, facilitating the “survival” of African culture. At the time of the American War of Independence, half of all South Carolinians were of African descent (Wood 1974: xvi; Joyner 1985: 205), and these were concentrated on the Lowcountry coast and neighboring islands.

The third reason commonly given for the intensity of Africanisms (and for the relative purity of African ancestry) among the Gullah/Geechees is that

<sup>1</sup> For example, whereas historian Margaret Creel (1988) sees “possession-trance” as the telltale sign of an African “survival” in the ring shout, historian Sterling Stuckey (1987) sees its *circularity* as its main African feature.

Africans continued arriving in South Carolina until an unusually late date by North American standards—1858 (e.g., Creel 1988: 193; National Park Service 2005: 51). Hence, in the Lowcountry, African culture was repeatedly renewed from its source until the eve of the Civil War.

Fourth, the unusual conditions of slave labor in the Lowcountry are said to have contributed to the retention of African culture. In most of the South, enslaved people worked in gangs, in which no field slave's duties were finished until the workday of the entire gang had ended. On the Lowcountry rice plantations, by contrast, each worker was assigned a "task," or a specific amount of work. If the enslaved person completed it quickly and efficiently, he or she could use the surplus time to assist others, cultivate his or her private plot, or engage in leisure activities that embodied his or her own African cultural preferences, rather than the master's European ones (e.g., National Park Service 2005: 37–41; Joyner 1985: 127–34). Carney (2001) believes that the "task" system itself originated in Africa.

#### ISOLATION?

This multi-factor explanation of Gullah/Geechee cultural history leaves hardly a base uncovered and has a great deal of truth to recommend it. Yet it is usually marred by a misleading summary and refrain—a shibboleth so common in the literature that scholars have overlooked its inconsistency with, for example, the well-publicized facts of the maritime rice trade and of the century-old boom in commercial basketry for homemakers, tourists, and museums. This is the concept of "isolation." In explanations for the endurance and intensity of Africanness in the culture of the Geechee/Gullahs, hardly any word arises more often.<sup>2</sup> For example, Turner writes, "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—a condition which obviously made easier the retention of Africanisms in that area than in places where Negroes had less direct contact with Africa and lived less *isolated* lives (1973: 5, my emphasis). Writes David DeCamp, "Gullah remained a relatively pure creole because its speakers were so geographically and socioeconomically *isolated*" (in Turner 1973: ix, my emphasis).

Other authors have extended the principle that isolation preserves creole languages to their reasoning about the creation and survival of Gullah/

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Pollitzer 2005a: 3, 12; Turner 1973: ix, 5, 42, 240; DeCamp in Turner 1973: ix; Creel 1988: 3, 15, 97, 99, 100, 197, 240; Pinckney 2003: 2, 3, 7; National Park Service 2005: 13, 21, 39, 51–52, 70, 74, 79, 84; Pollitzer in National Park Service 2005: D1, D2, D4, D9, D10, D15, D20; Hargrove 2005: F5, F8–F9, F22, F23, F33, F37; Bascom 1941: 43, 47; Joyner 1985: 6, 9; Sengova 2006: 241; Curry 2001.

Geechee culture generally. Thus, William Pollitzer writes, “Their isolation on the Sea Islands permitted development of their unique culture” (Pollitzer 2005b: D9). Indeed, the authors of the most comprehensive study of Gullah/Geechee culture to date also make the most comprehensive and absolute claim: “The isolation of sea island communities from outsiders was *vital* to the survival of Gullah/Geechee community cultures” (National Park Service 2005: 13, my emphasis).

The term “isolation” summarizes the geographical 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, on the Sea Islands, and legal segregation. Such isolation is understood to be the major obstacle to the forms of cultural change that would otherwise 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 European cultural forms that—had they been highly visible to the ancestors of the Gullah/Geechees—would have replaced their African-inspired culture.

The case for the principle that isolation contributes to linguistic distinction seems, intuitively, stronger than the case for its role in other forms of cultural distinction, but various real-world cases undermine even the linguistic principle. For example, it is well known that dialects diversify and proliferate the most within the often small and demographically concentrated confines of their geographical origin. Moreover, creole languages like Haitian Kreyòl, Jamaican Patois, and Cape Verdean Kriolu thrive in the poor black neighborhoods of the eastern United States, where they are transformed from the symbols of poverty and low status that they had been in their respective homelands into symbols of national pride in the diaspora and of superiority to the immigrants’ even more stigmatized African-American neighbors. In such cases, the effort to manage *interaction* with the people of other languages and cultures, rather than the fact of *isolation* from them, has kept African-influenced creole languages alive.<sup>3</sup>

It is even less obvious that the isolation of African-diaspora cultures generally has resulted in conservatism. Indeed, research suggests that the similar isolation of rural Haitians and of the Surinamese Maroons, though more intense than that of Gullah/Geechees, has inspired enormous cultural dynamism and inventiveness, perhaps even more than at the cultural and commercial crossroads that are black Cuba and Bahia, Brazil (e.g., Price and Price 1999; Métraux 1972 [1959]; Bastide 1971; Matory 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For an example from another part of the world, within language zones on the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands, when people of different dialects interact they often accentuate or exaggerate their dialectical differences in order to highlight their identities (David Akin, personal communication, 2008).

Yet, in the study of Gullah language and Gullah/Geechee culture generally, most authors invoke “isolation” as a preeminent cause of Gullah/Geechee linguistic and cultural Africanness. On the contrary, it seems to me that it is not isolation but the distinctive terms of the Gullah/Geechees’ interaction—as land-owners, merchants, pupils, subjects of a philanthropic “experiment” in social uplift, symbols in the folkloric self-fashioning of other populations, and lobbyists for their own distinctive role in the marketplace—that have produced a proudly distinctive, African-inspired, and modern identity. Hence, in this essay, I both question the degree to which the Gullah/Geechees and their ancestors have been isolated, and propose that the Africanness of their lifeway and of their ethnic identity are indebted more to this population’s cosmopolitanism and dynamism than to its isolation.

This essay challenges the premise—hitherto adduced even more confidently in the Gullah/Geechee case than in the equally dubious cases of Cuban Ocha, Brazilian Candomblé, Louisiana Creole culture, and Nigerian Yoruba identity—that isolation is the chief factor preserving African-inspired culture and producing distinctive ethnic identities generally in a post-Columbian world. The assumption that even *relative* isolation and, by extension, ignorance about non-African alternatives are the normal conditions for the “retention” of African culture in the Americas belies not only the particulars of Gullah/Geechee history—including the cosmopolitan history of Gullah/Geechee rice technology and commerce—but also the overall historical patterns of the black Atlantic world.<sup>4</sup>

For example, colonial and antebellum South Carolina was more actively engaged with the world economy than most other British North American colonies and their successor states, through its early provisioning of ships and of Caribbean sugar plantations, the slave trade, and the trade in rice, indigo, and highly-prized long-staple cotton (Littlefield 1991: 2). Far from isolated, this region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries received major transshipments of people and ideas not only from diverse ports of West and West-Central Africa but also from the Anglophone Caribbean, and at the turn of the nineteenth century from Haiti, as islanders of all colors fled the Haitian Revolution (Wood 1974: 6; National Park Service 2005: 21; Long 2001: 89; Joyner 1985: 205, 207). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, South

<sup>4</sup> For good reason, the students of Gullah/Geechee rice culture are among the few Gullah/Geechee specialists to abandon the discourse of “isolation” (e.g., Wood 1974; Littlefield 1991; Rosengarten 1987; Carney 2001). Yet, it has never been recognized, before the present publication, that the argument for the African origins of American rice culture actually contradicts this foremost causal principle in the wider literature. The analysis of Chireau, too, is unusual and revealing: “The transmission of indigenous African traditions to first- and second-generation American blacks would have been *hindered* by the isolation and dispersal of these ‘saltwater’ [i.e., newly arrived] Africans . . .” (2003: 53, my emphasis). Her hypothesis diametrically contradicts the prevailing hypothesis but is just as intuitively persuasive.

Carolina was not one of the least-connected but one of the best-connected British colonies and U.S. states.

Far from being isolated, the eighteenth-century incubator of Gullah/Geechee culture hosted not only the bearers of a vast array of African cultures but also French Huguenots and English Quakers, Scots, Irish, Swiss, Dutchmen, Sephardic Jews, Bahamians and Barbadians, and Creek and Cherokee Indians (Joyner 1985: 207; Meinig 1986: 176–90; Pollitzer 2005a [1999]: 7). The Gullah/Geechees' ancestors were also well aware of the proximity of the Spanish in Florida, among whom runaways knew they could find safe haven (National Park Service 2005: 23–26). Among the Africans, there were excellent speakers of English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Dutch, and Chickasaw (Littlefield 1991: 132–34). 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” (Dutarque 1983: 231).

The enslaved were also mobile. Few of them belonged from birth to death to one master; thus, any given captive might know, influence, and be influenced by several plantation subcultures (Wood 1974: 253). 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 (e.g., Littlefield 1991: 133). In the eighteenth century, *mariners* constituted 9 percent of South Carolina's skilled slaves, and they greatly facilitated the mobility of black non-sailors as well (Bolster 1997: 21–23, 155–56).

Contrary to the supposition that nineteenth-century antebellum Gullah/Geechees were isolated, they appear to have participated actively in a circum-Caribbean maritime flow of people and revolutionary ideas (see Gaspar and Geggus 1997). For example, the National Park Service reports: “One of the best-known rebellions was attempted in 1821. Denmark Vesey, a literate and charismatic free Negro who lived in Charleston, planned the insurrection. *He was familiar with the Haitian slave revolt and kept in touch with black leaders there.* Vesey 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” (National Park Service 2005: 26, my emphasis). A setting in which Denmark Vesey and his prominent co-conspirator “Gullah Jack” could communicate with the leaders of the Haitian Revolution and coordinate the convergence of thousands of men by boat would be difficult to describe as “isolated.” Not until after the defeat of Vesey's conspiracy were the black seamen who disembarked in Charleston imprisoned to prevent their movement about the city (National Park Service 2005: 26–27).

However, locally enslaved and free people could not be kept from moving about and crisscrossing the numerous local waterways. Indeed, the local economy depended on their mobility. The barrier island-protected creeks, salt flats, and rivers of what would become Gullah/Geechee country afforded its inhabitants considerable mobility among the islands and between the islands

and the cosmopolitan cities of the mainland. The enslaved and their free descendants long used these waterways to move about and to conduct barter and sell their farm and maritime produce, as well as their basketry, all across the region (e.g., National Park Service 2005: 38, 45; Hargrove 2005: F23; Rosengarten 1987: 22–25). Consequently, Richard Long describes the Charleston Market as a “geographical extension and high profile site” of “the Gullah world” (2005: 103). It strikes me as odd, in principle, that a coastal people, whose homeland neighbors a major port and is crisscrossed by highly navigable marshes and rivers, would be considered isolated relative to, say, residents of the inland mountains, forests, and prairies where some black North American settlements are found. Navigable water does not isolate islands, and islands are not really insular. Like the Mississippi River, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the River Niger, and even the Sahara Desert, the navigable tidewaters of the Lowcountry facilitate long-distance connection.

Moreover, even the most African-looking of Gullah/Geechee cultural projects have flourished amid long-distance, commercial contact with a far-flung clientele of non-Gullah/Geechees. For example, the most famous Gullah/Geechee “root doctors” are said to have possessed imported African ritual objects (Pinckney 2003: 50, 92), which fact suggests anything but isolation (pace Pinckney 2003: 7). 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. Even at the postbellum height of the Gullah/Geechee’s putative isolation, highways and ferries brought cars full of non-Gullah/Geechee clients from distant states to consult root doctors in their supposedly isolated island redoubts (Pinckney 2003: 94, also 93, 104; Long 2001: 94), and their Gullah/Geechee magic was well amplified 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) (Long 2001: 14–16; 121–22). The U.S. Postal Service severely limited Gullah/Geechee isolation, making books available in the Lowcountry and making Lowcountry magic available all across the country (Pinckney 2003: 93–94; Long 2001: 150–51).<sup>5</sup>

The *appearance* of remoteness and exotic origin is an extremely common element of credible magic—no less among Gullah/Geechee root doctors than among West African Yoruba healers. Despite this mystique of isolation, the most famous Gullah/Geechee root doctor, Dr. Buzzard (Mr. Steponey Robinson), specialized in the resolution of court cases, and he possessed

<sup>5</sup> This is not to imply that most Gullah/Geechees were reading or writing such books but that influential local experts of the Gullah/Geechees’ most emblematically African or African-looking practices were, through their literacy and their use of the U.S. Postal Service, in touch with a multi-cultural smorgasbord of ritual options.

a sophisticated knowledge of how to circumvent the state's efforts to restrict his practice (Pinckney 2003: 93, 99). On the other hand, Dr. Buzzard's colleague and contemporary Dr. Bug (Mr. Peter Murray) was caught supplying "roots" to cause his clients heart palpitations. Of his 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" (Pinckney 2003: 58). Thus, Gullah/Geechee root work thrived not in isolation but—like much else in Gullah/Geechee cultural history—in the context and consciousness of international politics, history, and business.

During and after the Civil War, the Gullah/Geechees experienced an earlier and more intensive engagement with northern military officials, administrators, missionaries, and teachers (through the famous "Port Royal Experiment") than virtually any other southern population. No African-American population has participated in the social scientific, musical, and literary projects of a more diverse array of partisan outsiders than have the Gullah/Geechees. These outsiders have included, over time, officials of the "Freedmen's Bureau," nostalgic southern white folklorists, fiction-writers, curio merchants, commercial gallery owners, northern white philanthropists, schoolteachers and social scientists, ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, museum staff, Broadway musicians and composers, and non-Gullah/Geechee African-American scholars (National Park Service 2005: 71, 82, 102; Hargrove 2005: F32). Their only rivals of similarly small demographic size are the Louisiana Creoles of color, who illustrate the similarly axiom-breaking combination of a highly African-influenced culture and a long history of maritime commerce, early occupation by the Union Army, intensive study by outsider artists, folklorists, teachers, and social scientists, and a strong sense of ethnic identity amid vast interaction with ethnic others.

Conventional explanations of the postbellum "preservation" of the Gullah/Geechees' distinctive and African-inspired culture similarly overlook evidence of geographical mobility and extra-racial social dynamics in the culture. While at least one widely-cited author dates Gullah/Geechee "isolation" from the eighteenth century (Pollitzer 2005b: D20), most authors who specify a time period suggest that it was from the end of the Civil War that the Gullah/Geechees' ancestors experienced the most intense "isolation," featuring a stability of population, practice, and belief disrupted only by the construction of bridges between the Sea Islands and the mainland in the 1950s. This period of alleged isolation was reportedly ended by a boom in resort development, suburban expansion, and the Gullah/Geechees' displacement from self-employment in the fishing industry to wage-employment in better-capitalized companies (e.g., National Park Service 2005: 82; Hargrove 2005: F5, F36–F40; Pollitzer 2005b: D49).

Far from creating or restoring Gullah/Geechee isolation, 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 Afro-North Carolinian linguist Lorenzo Turner, by basket wholesalers and retailers, and by the Gullah/Geechee merchants of Sea Island produce and seafood, who sold their merchandise from a range of venues in Charleston. Such movement was the raw material of much shame and pride, of exploitation and opportunity, of offensive stereotyping and retrospective canonization among generations of Gullah/Geechees. Gullah/Geechee culture has emerged from dynamic crosscurrents, not a still backwater.

Since the colonial period, Gullah/Geechee labor migrants—slave and free—have 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 (National Park Service 2005: 52, 84, 95–96). Nor has the educational flow of ideas into the Lowcountry necessarily been an enemy to the distinctive and African ways of the Gullah/Geechees. Schooling, at institutions like the Penn School and at universities far away, has done as much to staff the leadership of a revival movement as to encourage the abandonment of distinctive Gullah/Geechee ways (e.g., Rosengarten 1987: 25–27, 29; National Park Service 2005: 118).<sup>6</sup>

Further, the recent acceleration of communication, transportation and migration, which have often been blamed for reducing Gullah/Geechee isolation and therefore endangering this people's cultural survival, has actually inspired an increase in the Africanness of Gullah/Geechee basketry forms. The 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 (Rosengarten 1987: 43). Indeed, the recent proliferation of grassroots lobbying organizations devoted to the rescue of Gullah/Geechee culture is less evidence that Gullah/Geechee culture is in danger than a manifestation of the enduring cosmopolitanism and growing strength of an ethnic group ever more comfortable with its distinctiveness and at home in the global cultural "ecumene," or smorgasbord of cultural symbols (Hannerz 1996).

#### A COMPARISON

The assumption that isolation explains the "retention" of African culture in the Americas finds little support in the study of the Caribbean and South America,

<sup>6</sup> Dale Rosengarten believes that Penn School and its missionary founders played some role in defending the landownership of the Gullah/Geechees' ancestors (personal communication, 3 May 2007), thus guaranteeing their relative freedom to dictate the terms of their commercial and symbolic interaction with non-Gullah/Geechee-speakers.

though scholars of the African diaspora have seldom questioned this assumption. For example, Roger Bastide (1983: 242–43) describes Bahia as exceptional in being a large city that retained its African religion with relative purity. Herskovits recognizes Paramaribo, Port-au-Prince, and Bahia as similarly exceptional (1958: 115–16, 120, 124). And Newbell Niles Puckett (1969 [1926]: 10–11) represents New Orleans as exceptional. Rather than “exceptions,” these numerous urban cases might better be seen as disproving any simple rule (Matory 2000: 36, 41, n. 5).

Yet this persistent assumption requires especially conscious and critical attention because of what it unreflectively implies 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 agriculture—by Peter H. Wood (1974), John Vlach (1990), Daniel Littlefield (1991), and Judith Carney (2001)—ought, by now, to have eliminated this assumption 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 the general analysis of 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 population *only* when the first population interacts and competes or cooperates enough with the second population for the imaginable differences between the two populations to make a *useful* difference—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 form rival or complementary teams in pursuit of them (e.g., Cohen 1969; Barth 1969; Skinner 1975; Schildkrout 1978; Domínguez 1989; Handler 1988). Ethnicity emerges, by its very nature, in *shared* spaces.

Similarly, it might be argued that cultural difference typically arises from the differential interpretation and use of overlapping knowledge and resources. Indeed, as William Bascom (1941) observes, the most prolific Africanisms—or retentions of African culture—among the Gullahs (and, I might add, other African diaspora populations), are not practices and beliefs that primordially distinguished Africans from Europeans but areas of overlap, or congruence, between African and European cultures. Writes Bascom:

There were a number of institutions common to both regions [African and Europe], including a complex economic system based on money, markets, and middlemen, as well as a large number of crafts among which iron-working was important; a well developed system of government based on kings, and courts of law in which cases were tried by specialists (lawyers) and in which ordeals were employed to decide certain cases; a religious system with a complex hierarchy of priests and deities; a common stock of folklore and a common emphasis on moralizing elements and proverbs. Aside

from writing, the wheel, the plow, and Christianity, most of the distinctive traits of Western civilization seem to have followed the industrial revolution. . . . Since most African traits of a specific nature have disappeared, what is to be found is, for the most part, a series of institutions which differ from the European forms only in their African flavor (1941: 43–44).

For example, Gullah/Geechee beliefs about hags and ghosts highlight parallels between African and European conceptions (Creel 1988: 313–22; Joyner 1985: 142, 150–51, 153; Pinckney 2003; Long 2001: 14–16). Both the British Isles and West Africa offer vivid precedents for the ecstatic experience of the divine presence during worship. For example, the nickname “Quakers” for the Society of Friends was inspired by the reputedly convulsive physical gestures observed among the seventeenth-century members of the sect when visited by the Holy Spirit (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1971, vol. II: 2382). One might find these phenomena in different degrees of frequency among Gullahs/Geechees and their white neighbors, but these relative degrees of frequency have long shifted amid changing religious trends and revival movements. For example, the Quakers no longer “quake.”

In language too, similar phonemes, terms, and syntactical structures from the European and African substrate languages often reinforce each other and even provide pragmatically useful opportunities for creative ambiguity (Reisman 1970; Mufwene and Gilman 1987: 131). For example, the [r]-less word endings of both Gullah and the white brogue of Charleston appear equally indebted to the phonetics of Niger-Congo languages and of the southern English dialects spoken by most early British settlers of South Carolina (Hunt 2007: 145). In a further example, the Gullah/Geechee phrase *dafa fat*, meaning “excessively fat,” has been interpreted etymologically both as “done for fat” (suggesting, in English terms, the medically deleterious character of the condition) and as a cognate of the West African Vai term *dafa* (meaning “mouth full”), added to the English term “fat” (Turner 1973: 14).

African-inspired culture in the Americas often draws strength from its similarity to European-inspired culture and/or, as in the case of rice culture, its superiority in the service of Euro-American needs—in short, from its practitioners’ proximity to, rather than isolation from, non-African overlords, neighbors, and clients. Various authors even argue that conversion to Christianity facilitated, rather than halted, the spread of African-inspired magico-religious practices (e.g., Chireau 2003: 53–54; Pinckney 2003: 73, 111). In many settings, African-inspired medical care has been regarded as more effective and trustworthy than its Euro-American alternatives (e.g., Joyner 1985: 148; Pinckney 2003: 40). Indeed, whites who live alongside Gullah/Geechees have regularly embraced African-inspired beliefs, behaviors, and expressive genres (e.g., Pinckney 2003: 17, 97–109, 111; Long 2001: 150–51, *passim*; Philips 1990). The Euro-American

appropriation of the banjo, rock and roll, and hip-hop are similar but more widely discussed examples.

Likewise, the “survival” of foodways seldom depends on the isolation of the people who invented them. For example, Carney (2001: 116) demonstrates the West African origins of the much-advertised, cross-racial preference for grain separation—as opposed to stickiness—in American rice cuisine. Moreover, ethnic and regional diversity structures the marketing of prepared food in virtually all societies. And recipes travel. For example, thanks to my friend Henrietta Snype, of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, my Cambridge friends and family have recently acquired a powerful penchant for “swimps and gwits,” seasoned to traditional perfection with Lipton Onion Soup Mix. Consequently, they now participate in the propagation of an ethnic identity, a cuisine, and a language that few of us had previously known existed. In multiethnic contexts, distinctive foods and ways of preparing them can also serve as signposts of social separation between social groups—both as a rallying point for in-group unity and as a means of excluding those who eat differently—since it is difficult to befriend or marry people bound by different dietary rules. Thus, cosmopolitan settings spread the knowledge of any given culture and amplify the semantic and social value of diverse culinary conventions.

Even the most intensive genre of Gullah/Geechee Africanisms relies for its meaning and for much of its usefulness 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 SOAS (London’s School of African and Oriental Studies)—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 (Turner 1973: 40). Thus, the semantic meaning and pragmatic function of “basket names” assume and depend on the existence of an outsider audience that insiders have occasion to exclude. Gullah/Geechees are, according to Mufwene and Gilman (1987: 130), “generally bidialectal in various varieties of local or standard English.” Thus, Gullah/Geechee names and language generally are used not for the lack of an alternative but, often, in order deliberately to convey in-group intimacy or to prevent monolingual English-speakers from understanding a private communication (e.g., Pollitzer 2005b: D29; Sengova 2006: 226; Turner 1973: 11–13). Moreover, as an English-speaker chooses between a Latin-origin and an Anglo-Saxon-origin term of similar meaning (“canine” vs. “dog,” for example), a Gullah-speaker may undoubtedly 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 Castillian dominance, Gullah is likely to survive

and remain useful in countless projects of meaning-making and situational community building in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world.<sup>7</sup>

#### AFRICANISMS AND WHITE IDENTITY

I would add the general observation that the most vibrant and populous African-inspired cultures in the Americas are not the ones isolated from mainstream, Euro-American cultures but those that most effectively employed Western communication and transportation technologies to communicate regularly with Old-World Africans (e.g., Matory 1999). And these African-diaspora cultures are often the ones that look so different from metropolitan Western culture that, as emblems of local authenticity, they become useful in the identity politics of local white elites resisting domination or marginalization by more metropolitan whites. In Brazil, for example, the socially white<sup>8</sup> elites of the northeast, such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues, Gilberto Freyre, and Édison Carneiro, championed Afro-Bahian culture as an emblem of their own legitimacy—and that of Brazil as a whole—in resistance to the Europhile pretensions of the economically dominant white elites of São Paulo, and to the presumptively Western culture of the United States. 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, its superiority to the black cultures of São Paulo and the United States, and the northeast's allegedly exemplary embrace of racial hybridity. For proof, they often cited information from and the remarkable professional accomplishments of the African-Brazilian merchants and pilgrims who used steamships to shuttle between Lagos and Bahia in the nineteenth century. They also cited the books published in English by the Yoruba cultural nationalists of Lagos (Matory 1999).

Similarly, in the wake of the 1898 U.S. invasion of Cuba, Fernando Ortiz made Afro-Cuban culture into an icon of Cuban autonomy and dignity. Post-bellum white New Orleanians George Washington Cable, Robert Tallant, and Lyle Saxon, among others, documented and sometimes exaggerated the mystery and sensuality of Creole New Orleans. Subsequent generations of

<sup>7</sup> Unlike many linguists, Mufwene and Gilman (1987) believe that Gullah language is not dying or de-creolizing, and that it is likely to survive as long as some predominantly Gullah-speaking residential communities remain intact. They report that Gullah language is changing and varies across generations, but no more so than most non-Creole languages, and the trajectory of its changes is not toward English.

<sup>8</sup> By the term "socially white," I mean that many such elites in northeastern Brazil are considered "white" (*branco*) on account of their wealth, education, and/or social networks, despite physical evidence of African ancestry. Here I refer to Charles Wagley's concept of "social race" (1963 [1952]). In Brazil, the "one-drop rule"—whereby "one drop" of African "blood" makes one "black"—does not usually apply. São Paulo's elite tended to have fewer African ancestors than did the elites of the northeast. The manner in which elite *paulistas* are considered "white" would be more familiar to most people in the United States.

white New Orleanians have even understood themselves and marketed themselves to tourists as the scions of a sybaritic aristocracy—cosmopolitan, French-inspired, African-seduced, and just too sophisticated to embrace the moral and racial purism of Protestant America. In the face of U.S. domination and racial chauvinism, Mexican indigenism and the Haitian Bureau d'Éthnologie recounted similar allegories, inferring from the distinctive “folk” cultures of their respective nations the dignity of Mexico and Haiti and the rightfulness of their freedom from U.S. imperialism (Matory 2005: 149–87).

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 distinctive and African-inspired “folk” cultures of their dark local subordinates. Generations of postbellum documentation, fictionalization, and performance of Gullah/Geechee culture by nostalgic southern whites—who in turn inspired George Gershwin's “Porgy and Bess” and Disney's “Song of the South”—have canonized Gullah/Geechee culture as a classical emblem of southern white cultural identity and moral goodness, particularly in the face of a perceived assault on the local hierarchy by northern white military force and capital. Many southern whites—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 nostalgia for the past regime to this careful documentation of a distinctly black regional culture (Matory 2005: 296–97; see Pinckney 2003: 55–56).

The most dramatic Lowcountry example is the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals. Made up exclusively of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of slaveholding Carolinian planters, the Society endeavored, from around 1923 until recently, to preserve the nineteenth-century, pre-“concert hall” versions of the Negro spirituals that the Gullah/Geechees themselves had progressively abandoned. Not only did the Society study, record, and transcribe these “authentic” forms of the spiritual, but they also performed them in carefully reproduced Gullah/Geechee language (Matory 2005: 297, 341–42, n. 3).

#### REARRANGING ROOTS

The particular African origins that these superseded white elites tend to attribute to their emblematic local black subordinates seldom correspond to the actual demographic proportions among the African captives taken to the American region these white documentarians and celebrants had once ruled. The African homeland attributed to these populations is usually an African people—such as the Yoruba, the Ashanti, and the Fon kingdoms—that has

been accorded special prestige in the scholarly writings and folkloric musings of cosmopolitan intellectuals. Such selective and sometimes-fictional genealogical choices helped to demonstrate the superiority of the superseded white elite's native region to the native regions of more recent conquerors and imperialists (Matory 2005; 38–72; 1999; Littlefield 1991: 174–75).

The prestigious African forebears of African-diaspora cultures are often identified through writings like those of Herskovits (1958), A. B. Ellis (1964 [1894]), or Joseph Opala (n.d.). All three of these scholars derived their ideas from a dialogue with elite black intellectuals who had their own prior intellectual and political agendas—W.E.B. DuBois and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the case of Herskovits, the Lagosian Cultural Renaissance in the case of Ellis, and in the case of Opala, the Sierra Leone-Gullah Research Committee at Fourah Bay College (Matory 2005; 1999; Sengova 2006: 216). The Lagosian Cultural Renaissance forcefully dignified Yoruba culture in particular and explains a great deal of pale-skinned Latin American elites' knowledge of, pride in, and exaggeration of their regional black subordinates' Yoruba roots (Matory 1999).

White regionalists are not the only people, however, who reproduce selective genealogies. African-American linguist Lorenzo Turner's emphasis (e.g., 1973: 247, 292) on the Yoruba antecedents of Gullah language is probably indebted to Herskovits' disproportionate emphasis on West Africa's most famous kingdoms, as well as to the overrepresentation of certain British-colonized peoples among the scholars at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, where Turner sought help in identifying the African origins of Gullah terms. Intentionally or not, genealogies are often re-made in the light of present-day social relationships and scholarly priorities or misjudgments.

In historical fact, the plurality of the Gullah/Geechees' African ancestors have been identified as "Angola" and "West-Central African," but the scholarly literature dignifying the African origins of South Carolina's rice culture offers little incentive to emphasize or even offer proportionate attention to the Gullah/Geechees' Angolan and West-Central African roots. The best-studied African rice-producing region—between the Senegambia and Liberia—has now become the more prestigious ancestor, and, within that region, Sierra Leone is the place where Euro-American anthropologist and former Peace Corps volunteer Joseph Opala had the social and intellectual ties necessary to activate the resulting social kinship networks. A new and growing kinship between the Gullah/Geechees and the peoples of Sierra Leone has now been made real by multiple official visits between these two communities and by two deeply moving films—*Family across the Sea* (1991), produced under the sponsorship of South Carolina state educational television, and *The Language You Cry In* (1998).

In the light of this selective outcome of Gullah/Geechee cultural history, it is especially striking that Littlefield's inventory of the eighteenth-century African

runaways in South Carolina (1991: 118–23, 129–31)—from which we can infer the overall demography of the captive African population—includes no Yoruba people (though the one “Nego” might be a “Nago” Yoruba), no Gola people (the Sierra Leonean people often 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 tidal rice-growing techniques that made South Carolina prosper—see, e.g., Carney 2001: 19). It is also surprising given the popular interpretation that Gullah/Geechee language derives from Sierra Leonean Krio, that Gullah/Geechee pronunciation and intonation more closely resemble Liberian English than Krio (Sengova 2006: 225; Matory 2006; Matory 2005: 295–98). The similarities among Krio, Gullah, and Liberian English are indebted, not to Gullah’s having its roots in Krio, but rather to the parallel, hybrid circumstances of their genesis, and the migration of African Americans to Sierra Leone and Liberia.

In sum, the activities of outsider scholars and the local appropriation of outsider scholarship has actually turned the course of history—by reshaping the self-understandings, priorities, and community-building efforts of contemporary Gullah/Geechees and other peoples of the African diaspora.

#### DIALOGUE

This late-twentieth-century rearrangement of Gullah roots illustrates the motivated intercultural *dialogue* (Matory 2006) that produces culture and ethnic identity in all real-world cultural fields.

For example, Gullahs and Geechees have not always been conscious of the historically traceable worthiness of their culture or of the importance of their African ancestors’ technological contributions to the region’s agriculture. However, dialogue has changed their minds. Most Gullah and Geechee children have grown up believing that the language of their forebears and, by extension, their own is just an inferior version of American English. Indeed, coastal Georgian Clarence Thomas attributes his own relative silence on the Supreme Court bench to his having attended schools where his Gullah/Geechee language was considered inferior (National Park Service 2005: 56).

Outsider scholarship has played a major role in the recent Gullah/Geechee embrace of Africa and tandem recognition of Gullah/Geechee as a creole language rather than a merely deficient form of English. Perhaps counter-intuitively, such scholarship has done more than any degree of Gullah/Geechee isolation to change Gullah/Geechee lifeways from a low social status into a culture and into a self-ascribed ethnic identity—through processes of formalization, textualization, canonization, and commercialization. Also counter-intuitively, schooling advanced many of these processes. In 1862, a largely white group of northern philanthropists, missionaries, and teachers founded on St. Helena Island the Penn Normal School—predecessor to the

Penn Normal Industrial and Agricultural School and to its successor, Penn Center Inc. The Penn School was founded in order to educate the recently freed people of the region (Hargrove 2005: F32; Rosengarten 1987: 25–30).

The school played a major role in propagating and defining production standards for Gullah/Geechee crafts and folk arts, such as “native island” basketry (e.g., Rosengarten 1987: 25–30; Turner 1973: xv; National Park Service 2005: 118). The Penn School’s efforts to cultivate Gullah/Geechee basketry did not occur in local isolation but coincided with the nationwide Arts-and-Crafts Movement, which, during the Depression years, promoted rural handicrafts (Rosengarten 1987: 27). Such were the cosmopolitan forces that helped to make the coiled basket into today’s preeminent visual symbol of Gullah/Geechee cultural distinctiveness and ethnic identity.

Penn Center also hosted the 1988 visit of Sierra Leone’s President Joseph Momoh, which resulted in the visit of two Gullah/Geechee delegations to Sierra Leone during the 1990s, in the popular impression that Sierra Leonean Krio is the origin of Gullah/Geechee language, in the lobbying efforts of Gullah/Geechees to assist Sierra Leoneans during and after their recent civil war, and even in the recent declaration that the Gullah/Geechees are the “Mende people of South Carolina” (Sengova 2006: 219–32; Matory 2005: 295–96, 341, n. 1). These are the most recent African-inspired products of a trans-oceanic, inter-ethnic dialogue that happened at the very postbellum height of this population’s alleged isolation.

Turner himself was a major agent of this trans-oceanic, inter-ethnic dialogue, since his transformative scholarly work in the 1940s did not begin and end with his research stint in the Sea Islands. As an African American from North Carolina, he famously achieved a level of access to private Gullah practices and parlance that had been denied to previous, white researchers. Yet his unique degree of access demonstrates not that the Gullah/Geechees lived in a world apart from whites, but that they lived in close enough proximity to whites to mistrust them and to have established a convention of excluding them from certain information. The Gullah/Geechees had been engaged in a centuries-old and highly active dialogue with their masters and managers, employers, customers, neighbors, teachers, missionaries, researchers, and so forth. However, their linguistic pragmatics involved a careful differentiation between how they communicated with ethnic insiders and ethnic outsiders. Moreover, far from having “preserved” their African culture through isolation, Gullah/Geechees *discovered* their Africanness, amplified it, and gave it a new social reality in the late twentieth century. Arguably, this *prise de conscience* had its roots in Gullah/Geechee conversations with outsider Lorenzo Turner and in his scholarly dialogue with the bilingual African and Africanist intellectuals he met at London’s School of African and Oriental Studies.

Using the pro-African and pro-black ethnohistorical logic of Herskovits, Turner’s work appropriated and reworked the antecedent efforts of southern

white writers and of northern-supported educators. In turn, the basket-sewers and merchants along the tourist corridor of U.S. Highway 17—in the vicinity of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina—have capitalized on the dignity that Turner’s trans-oceanic, inter-ethnic dialogue gave to their African heritage. This heritage became an advertising point recommending Gullah-Geechee crafts to potential buyers—most of them white. The Africanness and dignity of Gullah/Geechee culture have also become a rallying point for the Gullah/Geechees’ resistance to displacement from their lands and from coastal resources (including the sea grass upon which the basketry depends), as well as the grounds for an increasingly targeted and mutually beneficial alliance with the war-ravaged people of Sierra Leone.

This cosmopolitan dialogue is the root of what might be called a Gullah/Geechee Renaissance, which, like all renaissances and revitalization movements, is as much a novel invention as a rebirth (see also National Park Service 2005: 93–98). Among its most remarkable inventions is that a Gullah returnee from New York has been “enstooled” as “Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation” (National Park Service 2005: 96). In 1996, Marquette 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 (National Park Service 2005: 95–96; Hargrove 2005: F31–F32; Sengova 2006: 235–42).

This renaissance includes a boom in Gullah/Geechee literary and cultural production since the early 1990s (Sengova 2006: 242–43; National Park Service 2005: 59–71). 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 multi-ethnic press, television stations, internet, municipal and county governments, U.S. Congress, the United Nations, public schools, tourism bureaus, and commercial galleries.

In 2006, as a result of cooperation among the National Park Service and organizations such as the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition, a white-dominated and English-speaking U.S. Congress officially designated the southeastern coast and its islands as a cultural and ecological preservation zone known as the “Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor” and established a commission for its management (Joyner 2007). Congress thus funded an effort to coordinate Gullah/Geechee educational institutions, Gullah/Geechee activist groups, and non-Gullah/Geechee institutions that propagate academic

knowledge about this emergent culture (ibid.). The planning for this legislation resulted in the publication and the international, internet-based dissemination of the most comprehensive and democratic documentation of Gullah/Geechee in existence today (National Park Service 2005).

Without minimizing the tragedy of Gullah/Geechee land loss, it might be said that Gullah/Geechee culture and ethnic identity are more alive than ever before, and the source of the Gullah/Geechee Renaissance has been anything but isolation. The success of this national legislation and a range of local legislation demonstrates the growing skill of Gullah/Geechee organizations at educating the multi-ethnic 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 and to raw materials for their basketry. For some Gullah/Geechees, these successes are a further step in the direction of nation building. Thus, the African-inspired culture and ethnic identity of the Gullah/Geechees have emerged not from conservative isolation but from progressive and strategic dialogue.

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 for this culture, *De Nyew Testament* (2005) is written not in Gullah alone but with the King James English version aligned alongside it. 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. As speakers choose a form along this spectrum, they mark the formality or intimacy of the situation (see, e.g., Reisman 1970). What makes the production of *De Nyew Testament* a canonical act is not just that it legitimizes the language and therefore provides a symbolic foundation of a new Gullah/Geechee nationhood but also that it establishes *one* version of the internally heterogeneous Gullah language as a standard worthy of the sacred and of the official. In practice, Gullah varies from island to island, just as the so-called dialects of Yoruba do.

Similarly, the translation of the Bible into Yoruba required an artificial homogenization of these dialects and thus created a previously non-existent and now school-taught standard around which the Ekiti, the Oyo, the Ijebu, the Egba, the Egbado, and so forth can and do now rally as an emblem of collective sameness in the face of rivalry with, for example, Igbo and Hausa people—Nigeria’s other dominant ethnic groups. Standard Yoruba is also used to assert intra-Yoruba class hierarchies. Time will tell which of these cross-cultural patterns will yet flower in the emergent Gullah/Geechee nation or ethnic group.

In sum, what has made the Gullah/Geechee an ethnic group and might yet make it into a credible nation? Their distinctive livelihood—as, preeminently, the enslaved farmers of rice, indigo, and long-staple cotton—was largely a class distinction that made an in-group language as useful as the language of

communication with the oppressor class. After the Civil War, the Gullah/Geechees shared a common status as landed, yeoman farmers under continual threat of land expropriation, as fishermen, and as seafood and produce merchants. This distinctive livelihood and common status, rather than their isolation from whites, preserved the utility of their distinctive crafts, in-group language, and church-based form of self-government. As long as some islands, such as Johns, Wadmalaw, and St. Helena, retain major Gullah-speaking populations, and mainland populations (such as Mt. Pleasant's) continue to profit from the distinctive, tour guide- and road sign-ratified "authenticity" of their African-inspired craft (see National Park Service 2005: 65), there is little danger that even the unscrupulous displacement of some island populations will result in the disappearance of this distinctive culture. The loss of certain islands, as well as the return of émigré cultural nationalists and the emergence of a professional class of Gullah/Geechee cultural educators (choirs, storytellers, and school presenters), is likely to help centralize, standardize, and canonize this culture. Indeed, some Gullah/Geechee organizations have now proposed to regulate the performance and presentation of their culture (Hargrove 2005: F33). If such regulation comes to pass, Gullah/Geechee culture as such will have achieved a degree of reality and authority unprecedented even at the end of a hundred years of alleged isolation.

In the film *The Language You Cry In* (1998), we are shown a group of Gullah/Geechee visitors to Bunce Island, the island off the coast of Sierra Leone where captives from the mainland had trodden for the last time on African soil. There the visitors tearfully receive a lecture from Joseph Opala about the horrors 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 of elite design—is that they are not always daily lived or known by their members but are instead often "discovered" or "revealed" in dialogue with outsiders. Moreover, cultures regularly find their most ardent champions among erstwhile members of the group who have moved far away and returned in the role of spokespersons for an identity with far less previous salience, pride of place, and usefulness among those who had stayed at home.

#### ON THE WORTH OF AFRICAN CULTURE IN THE AMERICAS

As agricultural technicians, forced or free labor migrants, seamen, merchants, rebels, and diplomats, Gullah/Geechees have fashioned a regional culture and gradually articulated an ethno-national identity. They have done so not in isolation from the flow of people and ideas across regions, races, and classes but in the midstream of a black Atlantic crossroads. Contrary to the premise that "Africanisms" depend on isolation, much evidence in the Gullah/Geechee literature suggests that Africans and non-Africans who live and work together

sometimes prefer African ways of doing things to non-African ways. We can no longer be content with the assumption that Africanisms “survive” chiefly in spheres of social life that lack or have outlived a useful material purpose (see Matory 2005: 277), in spheres exempt from white interest, or in the neglected interstices between the larger arrangements that whites did care about (pace, e.g., Mintz and Price 1992: 38–41).

African technologies and ways of building community have often been directly useful to both the Gullah/Geechees and their non-Gullah/Geechee contemporaries. For example, the eighteenth-century white planters who self-consciously experimented with rice varieties and ways of cultivating them either knew about or could have researched the relevant Italian, Chinese, Malagasy, Native American, Dutch, or English techniques (Littlefield 1991: 104–5), but they preferred to adopt and elaborate on West African techniques.

Not only free whites but also enslaved and free Africans had choices. The availability of time away from whites would certainly have furnished the conditions for a creativity rooted in African, European, and Native American precedents. Such freedom, though, could hardly be summarized as isolation, since the enslaved still had to learn a great deal about their masters’ language and standards. Moreover, the proceeds of the captives’ creative work—in cooking, song and dance, ritual, private garden cultivation, quilting, and storytelling, for example—were openly observable, openly documented, and frequently mimicked by whites, except when the African captives and their descendants consciously decided to keep secrets. And secrecy, after all, presumes not isolation from a potential observer but the continual threat of his or her presence.

Indeed, as Mufwene (1991: 233) observes, some of the most insistent, or “fanatic,” speakers of basilectal Gullah are not the ones *least* exposed to the acrolectal alternative but the ones *most* exposed—that is, “those who once moved out of the islands and then came back.” He adds, “Some are among those residents reverting back, or holding on, to it because they feel their identity threatened” (1991: 232).<sup>9</sup>

#### A GENERAL THEORY

I propose a dialogical theory of culture and ethnic identity (Matory 2006; 2005). Whatever is culturally distinctive about any population on the Atlantic perimeter or anywhere else in the world has resulted not from isolation but from the local conditions of trans-oceanic and multi-cultural interaction across the centuries. How else did cowry shells from the Maldive Islands, Venetian beads, and Dutch Schnapps become such important symbols in and of West

<sup>9</sup> Mufwene concludes not that isolation is necessary for the endurance of Gullah language, but that there must be some communities where enough Gullah people live together as neighbors that they “might need Gullah as a vernacular for in-group communication” (1991: 232).

African cultures, far exceeding their current importance in the lands of their origin? How else did the banjo, an instrument of African origin, become central to the racial and class identity of hinterland whites in the United States? How else did corn-based polenta in northern Italy and tomato sauce in southern Italy—both made from American cultigens—acquire such defining roles in these European cuisines? Proximate cultures and even those separated by oceans tend to imitate each other extensively. Peoples develop patterns of collective behavior that complement those of the populations they live beside, trade with, govern, or are governed by. If any unit is called “a culture” (thus making cultures *countable*), any given culture is the unit constituted by the complementary and overlapping lifeways of populations and classes that exchange with each other. A dialogic theory posits that cultural differences do not endure simply out of stubbornness, resistance, or natural stasis. They endure and have meaning because they are more useful—as practical tools or as symbolic means of guaranteeing loyalty to a useful collectivity—than are the alternatives modeled by neighbors.

Ethnic groups, for their part, are not the same as cultures. Ethnic groups are seldom internally homogeneous in their lifeways or without major cultural overlaps with neighboring ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are the populations—sometimes occupation- or class-inflected—that are named or choose to name themselves distinctly from proximate populations, despite the significant diversity of lifeways *within* each ethnic group and despite the significant overlap and complementarity between the collective lifeways of neighboring ethnic groups. Hence, ethnicity arises less from isolation than from a distinctive role in the production and exchange system or in the political hierarchy of a system where there is a hereditary division of economic and/or political labor.

Diverse geographical origins and languages are but part of the roots of ethnic difference, because, first, the differences of belief and practice between *groups that are rarely in contact with each other* are not usually recognized by those groups as salient. People articulate ethnic difference, act upon it, and define its criteria only when other groups are close enough for there to be an occasion to exclude members of those other groups from some right or privilege. Second, people who live close together or even interact regularly very quickly learn to act and think in similar ways, unless there is a good, profitable reason not to do so—such as monopolizing certain marital partners, productive resources, areas of commerce, residential privileges, political titles, spheres of authority, and so forth.

Isolation is neither the required nor even the normal precondition of the genesis of distinctive cultures. Not only the Gullah/Geechees but three other cases lead us to the same conclusion: (1) North America’s other signature African-American ethnic group (that is, the Louisiana Creoles of color), (2) Yoruba culture and ethnic identity in nineteenth-century coastal West Africa, and (3) the African-inspired Candomblé religion in Bahia, Brazil. What is

distinctive about the Gullah/Geechees is not isolation from other population groups but their disproportionate ownership, relative to other African Americans, of their own land. As self-employed people and people with a stake in maintaining their collective control over certain land and maritime resources, they could and did make the choice to maintain an in-group language—a means to and a symbol of some people's inclusion in and others' exclusion from their collectivities and collective resources.

Those most committed to the received wisdom about the origins of Gullah/Geechee distinctiveness will concede that this population has indeed always interacted with the outside world. But they will ask me to concede that the Gullah/Geechees were at least *relatively* isolated compared to other Black North American populations and that this *relative* degree of isolation must be the explanation for Gullah/Geechee cultural distinctiveness. Yet I maintain that the need of past writers to exaggerate the isolation of this people's ancestors results from the weakness of this causal model in the first place. In my view, neither absolute nor relative isolation but, instead, a specific and qualitatively important form of cosmopolitanism explains the emergence of this ethnic identity and the African-inspired canonical forms that it has taken.

Rather than emphasizing that the Gullah/Geechees' ancestors were isolated before the bridge-building of the 1950s, I posit that the waterways that structured Gullah/Geechee ancestral lifeways made transportation *easier than in many non-maritime regions of the United States during the same pre-1950s era*. What made the Gullah/Geechees and their postbellum ancestors culturally African has been less their lack of exposure to the outside world than their relative freedom—as landowners and merchants—to choose the occasions of their mobility and the terms of their self-presentation. The loss of land and of access to some economically profitable means of self-representation and livelihood is indeed a threat to Gullah/Geechee prosperity, but that very threat has amplified the incentive to organize, reify, canonize, propagate, and enforce the African-inspired terms of the Gullah/Geechees' local and extraterritorial cultural unity.

In response to this argument, another expert on the Gullah/Geechees was willing to concede that the eighteenth-century, colonial period and the post-World War II era have been influential periods of non-isolation, but he maintains that the antebellum nineteenth century witnessed the racial homogenization of previously diverse African ethnic groups and that the twentieth-century era of segregation blocked Gullah/Geechee access to goods, credit, education, government, power, and status. In my view, the literal meaning of "segregation" suggests isolation but conceals the highly interactive nature of that way of life. Segregation did less to isolate blacks from whites than to fix the hierarchical and complementary terms of their close interaction in the same spaces. Segregation not only allowed for but also assumed and resulted in powerful and sometimes highly intimate forms of mutual influence,

though the material benefits thereof were distributed with deliberate inequality (see, e.g., Hunt 2007).

This article in no way denies the importance of Gullah/Geechee people's efforts to retain their hereditary lands and access to maritime resources. Poverty and proletarianization are neither ennobling nor Africanizing, which fact leads to the main theoretical claims of this essay. First, ethnic identities arise not from isolation but from interaction among populations. The rural peasantry is no more the source of a people's distinctive and "authentic" lifeway than are its urban merchants and lobbyists. Second, there is no reason, in the New World or the Old, to assume that people choose the lifeways of the oppressed chiefly or even normally because they are isolated from the lifeways of the oppressor. In the Gullah case, it is not isolation from Euro-American alternatives but, instead, the people's command of profitably African skills and symbols, their access to the landed and maritime resources, their access to markets and schools, and their ambivalent relationship to local white populations that enabled and, indeed, subsidized a preference for African-inspired culture.

Gullah/Geechee cultural history provides lessons not only about the strategic and situational nature of ethnic identity but also about the complex and dialectical political economy of subaltern cultural reproduction, in which material and cultural power are seldom isomorphic. While money and firepower undoubtedly confer disproportionate power over the selective reproduction of culture, materially strong and materially weak classes often find a shared advantage in propagating the distinctive practices and identities of the weak. Material power facilitates the broadcasting of one's culture, but the African diaspora thoroughly demonstrates the seductive power of exogeneity and of code-switching as low-tech alternatives to the cultural orthodoxies, technical inadequacies, and emotional discontents of the strong. In the contemporary United States, many well-meaning social scientists and policy-makers are still too quick to dismiss the technical, linguistic, and ritual alternatives generated by the weak as deficiencies or as the results of ignorance about the alternatives. On the contrary, African-inspired American subcultures are often a thoughtfully honed and historically crafted wedge, prying open the narrow spaces of agency and authority allotted to the weak.

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