



# talking to the dead

RELIGION, MUSIC, AND LIVED MEMORY  
AMONG GULLAH/GEECHEE WOMEN

LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant

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GULLAH/GEECHEE WOMEN

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TO JAMES

Who inspires me daily

Who supports me absolutely

And who loves me unconditionally



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Lastly, to those who believe in communicating with the dead, keep talking.



South Carolina.

## PROLOGUE

### Talking to the Dead

“Gyal, Ah tulk to de dead all de time!” one of my informants impatiently exclaimed when I recounted my experience of nearly fainting in Charleston’s City Market during a middle-school field trip. In preparation for the trip, we received information about the numerous historic homes and museums that make up a part of Charleston’s rich heritage. Upon arrival, we went to the Battery on Charleston Harbor, the place where Charleston residents witnessed the first shots of the Civil War at nearby Fort Sumter. It was not my first time visiting downtown Charleston, but I was fascinated by the cobblestone streets and captivated by the feeling that I had stepped back in time. That sense of being a part of history remained with me for the duration of the excursion.

The experience of recognizing my own place in historical time became an especially distinct reality, however, when we visited the City Market. Built between 1804 and the 1830s, the City Market had always been utilized as a space for the public selling and trading of goods. Comprising three buildings located between four cross-streets, the City Market continues to be a tourist hotspot in the downtown area today, and is open 365 days a year. Each corner within the City Market contains more than one hundred open-air sheds filled with clothing, jewelry, antiques, toys, souvenirs, food items, paintings, and crafts of all kinds for sale. For those without a vendor’s permit for space inside the City Market proper, stands also take up considerable space between the A, B, and C Buildings. In addition to being close to historic hotels like the Andrew Pinckney Inn and the Planters Inn, as well as such contemporary lodging as

the Charleston Place Hotel and the Doubletree Suites, the City Market is in near proximity (within two blocks) of at least twelve restaurants and eateries. It is also currently and conveniently located across the street from The Shops and Charleston Place, a high-end shopping venue that features such stores as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and St. John. When visiting the City Market today, one is likely to cross paths with tourists and visitors from all over the world, as well as local residents. The City Market, as you can imagine, is a very busy place. Any visitor will immediately encounter a wide variety of goods crammed into a fairly restricted space yet will be simultaneously struck by the ease with which the space is navigated by hundreds of people at a time.

Designed much like a flea market, the City Market was thriving in its original purpose during the late 1980s when my class took our field trip. I saw vendors selling T-shirts, jewelry, and other handcrafted items including sweetgrass baskets. I was excited by the hustle and bustle surrounding the space and looked forward to a full tour of the area. Upon entering the City Market from East Bay Street, however, the cool dampness of the space overtook me and left me with the distinct sense that I was no longer in the place that was before me. I became overwhelmed by the most intense sense of agony, anguish, and pain that I had ever felt or imagined. People—black people—were reaching for me and silently crying out to me, some so horrified that their mouths were agape, and no sound emitted.<sup>1</sup> Though I was not afraid of the women and men, the experience startled me. It felt so real that I stumbled to the ground and had to be helped up and out of the space. My teacher simply thought I had become overheated and needed some air. I did not reenter the City Market, but waited outside for the class to return from the tour.

This was the experience I shared with my informant who exclaimed, “Gyal, Ah tulk to de dead all de time!” during a 2004 visit to her home on James Island. The impatient manner in which she uttered those words suggested that she saw nothing new or strange about what had happened to me. After recovering from my initial shock at her comment, I asked her to explain what she meant, and she described the rich connection she shared with her ancestors who “been long gone but is still yeh with me”—that they were not simply a part of the past but have remained with her in the present. Something about what she described resonated within me. It reminded me of my connection with those who had gone before me, whose presence I had rationalized as exceptional. I had not previously thought of any connection with the dead or spirits as something distinctive about lowcountry

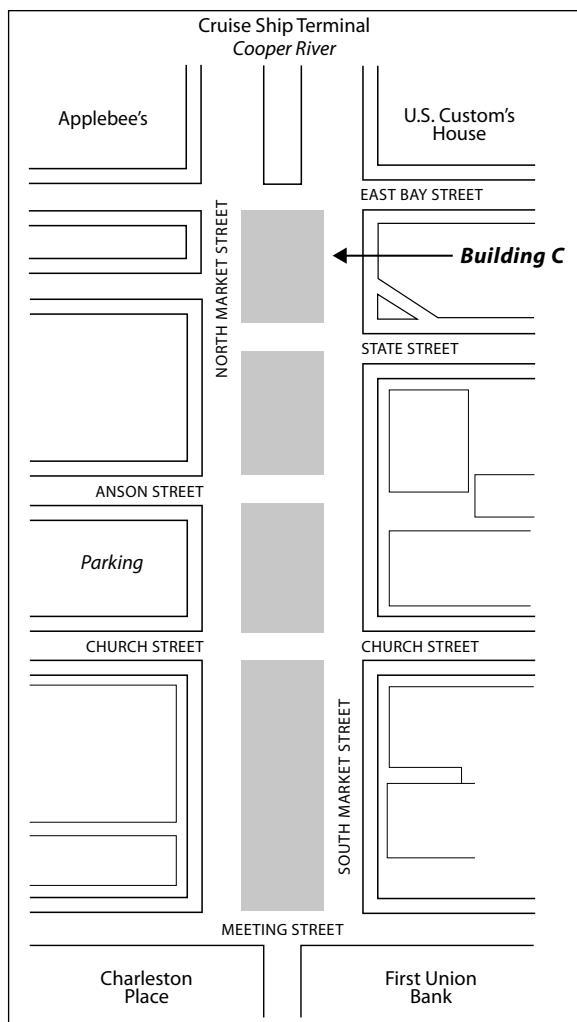


Fig.Prologue.1. Charleston City Market. Art by Pearl Delaine.

culture, so I began to ask other women. And from their responses, I discovered that it resonated with them too, although in different ways and for different reasons.

After the incident in the City Market, I continued to feel surrounded by the presence of forces that were not physically “real” but would visit me and were often visually apparent to me. At the age of twelve, I awoke in the middle of the night and went to tell my grandmother that a woman from our church had come to me in a dream. Moments after I relayed my dream to her, the phone rang—it was another member of the church calling to tell



my grandmother that the woman in my dream had passed away. Growing up, there were numerous occasions when I would tell my mother and grandmother about people I had seen and spoken to, all of whom were long-since dead. This happened too many times to recall. Initially diagnosed as nightmares, these occurrences became conflated by my family as symptoms of “the hag,” a communal interpretation of a bewitching spirit-woman who would possess, torment, and literally “ride” her victims, paralyzing them so they could not move, speak, or scream. By the time I was fifteen, my family simply attributed these visions and dreams to the “third eye,” which to many blacks throughout the rural south and the Caribbean means that one possesses the ability to see things that average humans cannot see—or will not allow themselves to see.

These experiences have continued into adulthood, although they occur with less frequency. My “third eye,” which I now consider to be a gift, has given me the uncanny ability to “know things” about complete strangers that I should not know and to have an advanced awareness of events, such as the death of a family member and the pregnancy of a friend. Despite reconciling these experiences, I still have difficulty entering the City Market. I even struggle to walk past the Old Slave Mart on Chalmers Street, the official location where the slaves who entered the port of Charleston were kept until they were sold.<sup>2</sup> The images, smells, and sounds that come to me are still too much to bear.

While conducting interviews for this project, I asked my informants to talk about their connections with their history, which always evolved into a discussion of music and ancestral presences—mothers, grandmothers, siblings, church elders—who continued to be present even though they had passed on. Each of the women in this study related experiences of having an ongoing connection with the dead. When I described my experience in the City Market to Yenenga, Lucille, and Beatrice, they each nodded in agreement. Yenenga and Lucille intentionally avoid the City Market because of their own (or their family’s) experiences of a kind of “haunting” in the space. Beatrice, who has a sweetgrass stand located a few blocks away from the City Market, has described that she chose not to have her booth in the market on purpose because of the fees, but also because “the spirits talk too much there.” I have no doubt that my own ability to talk to the dead was instrumental in alerting me to the continued significance of the practice—a custom that has been well documented in the generations of scholarship on Gullah/Geechee culture.

Inevitably, I too had to come to terms with the ways that my own ties to

the lowcountry and my past connected me with forces that were not completely of this world. While I do not self-identify as Gullah, I cannot deny the Gullah cultural influences that exist in my hometown (Moncks Corner) and in my life. I do not know of anyone in Moncks Corner or the nearby areas of Cross, St. Stephens, and Bonneau who creates sweetgrass baskets, which is one of the many distinctive markers of the Gullah people. Until I began the ethnographic phase of my research, I had never heard of anyone in these areas talk about “seekin’” in order to join a church, nor had I heard anyone refer to him or herself as Gullah or Geechee. Once I learned about the familiarity the women of this study had with talking to the dead as a common practice, however, I reconsidered the ongoing connections. There are many similarities in the speech patterns of the longtime residents of Moncks Corner, the Sea Islands, and the surrounding areas—enough similarities to suggest a common heritage. I have little difficulty understanding the Gullah dialect, but I speak it only minimally. Occasionally, though, I unintentionally draw from the little dialect I know in such a way that only friends and family from the lowcountry can understand my meaning.

My ability to comprehend and speak to the women in their own language, my familiarity with aspects of lowcountry life, and my former existence as a Christian smoothed my entry into the communities of the women included in this book. I did not feel uncomfortable attending worship services, had no difficulty understanding the expressions of faith that emerged in our individual conversations, and was able to adapt to their habits and practices with ease. Although I do not have any shared commitments with the women in a Christocentric, theological sense, I share their experiences of talking to the dead (which is arguably not limited to Christian expression), I recognize the importance of their traditions, and I value lowcountry culture and the ways black women navigate those spaces. The women never questioned my religious identity (and thankfully did not try to proselytize), even when they discovered that in my “normal” life I did not regularly attend church nor have a “church home.” They presumed—rightly so—that for me to have interest in the kinds of questions I raised about their faith meant that I too accepted belief in a “higher power,” and at the very least valued their perspectives.

As a native of Moncks Corner with the surname Manigault (which is quite common in the lowcountry), I gained an advantage while conducting this research: Everyone I spoke with immediately recognized my name and would ask me who “my people” were. All of the women interviewed treated me as a long-lost relative or family member. As a result, I had little difficulty

getting the women to open up and to share their experiences with me, even though initially many were suspicious because they could not understand why I thought documenting their experiences was so important.

My familiarity with the culture, while beneficial in some respects, proved also to be challenging on occasion. Although I made it clear to the women I spoke with that I had only spent my formative years in the lowcountry and had not lived there since 1995, I found that they often made assumptions about what I knew. Moreover, I had to temper my presumptions about the practices and meaning of things, which I did by asking them about everything, even the things I thought I knew. There were times when all of my questioning about things the women thought I should have known, compounded by differences in our ages and disparities in our education, made some of our interactions demanding. With one exception, none of the women had attended college. Because of their unfamiliarity with graduate school requirements, let alone institutional review boards, they had some difficulty understanding the exact purpose of my study. In the beginning stages of my research, the women repeatedly asked me to explain what I was doing and why I was interested in writing about them. On multiple occasions, I had to provide lengthy explanations about why informed consent was so important. Although it was an unintentional result of my inquiries, all of the women in the study were old enough to be my mother, and most treated me as a daughter. While that was usually endearing, there were occasions when their concern for me as a young, and, at that time, unmarried woman proved taxing—especially including the efforts they made to set me up with their family members and their oft-expressed concern about me “travelin’ da roads alone.” All of these features had a direct impact on the types of questions I raised and also on the ways that the women responded to me. Hence, throughout this research I delicately negotiated my roles as both insider and outsider of this culture.

Moncks Corner is not an island, at least not literally, but being there has a special quality. This is certainly because it is a small southern rural town and because spending time in rural towns almost always gives one the sense of stepping back in time. Moncks Corner is now the proud home of a Super Walmart and an Applebees, and recently a cvs and a Brooks Pharmacy. The main grocery store is Piggly Wiggly, most people continue to get their prescriptions filled at the locally owned Delta Pharmacy, and the only “upscale” place to shop is Baron’s Department Store. Being in the lowcountry also feels different because there is something unique about hearing “Ma Beck” (an elderly woman from my community) say, “Gyal you been gone a minute

any?” when I visit after being away for extended periods of time. I have had friends visit my home only to tell me that they felt like they were in the Caribbean because of the thick dialect of the people. Even one of my Jamaican-born friends has described visiting Moncks Corner as giving her a sense of going home.

What makes me most willing to embrace the connections between Moncks Corner, other inland areas, and the Sea Islands is the structure and performative style of the music produced in their churches. Over the years, I have attended numerous services throughout the lowcountry and have been amazed at the overlap in the singing style and rhythmic patterns across denominations. I have also been fascinated by the presence of what I call the “lowcountry clap,” a uniquely synchronistic meter accompanied by an uncannily blended harmonious style of call and response. The lowcountry clap, as demonstrated in the accompanying audio, can alter the tempo, sound, and feeling of a hymn, spiritual, or contemporary gospel song. I do not think it is by accident that these musical styles continue to reverberate from the windows and walls of lowcountry churches. These practices are alive and well in Moncks Corner, which is a mere fifteen minutes east of Cross, thirty minutes north of James Island and Mt. Pleasant, and ninety minutes north of Beaufort—the areas in which the women included in this study reside.

My research for this project has led me to conclude that these factors demonstrate the many ways that cultural influences operate like the tides: The ability or inability of the water to reach certain parts of the shore depends on the location of the sun, moon, and earth, as well as the time of day and the pull of gravity. The rich religious culture of the lowcountry functions in much the same way. Rather than occurring in a vacuum, it is a continuous ebb and flow, a dynamic process of give and take that is influenced by—and influences—the people involved, the practices transmitted, the stories shared, the prayers prayed, and the songs sung. All of these ingredients bring this work together.



## INTRODUCTION

### Gullah/Geechee Women

In the film *Daughters of the Dust*,<sup>1</sup> Julie Dash captures the struggles of the Peazant family, three generations of lowcountry women who, at the turn of the twentieth century, consider whether they should relocate from the Sea Islands of South Carolina to the “mainland.” While elder members of the family are not in favor of relocating, younger members support the move inland. Flashbacks in the film reveal the longstanding importance of ancestral communication, folk traditions, faith, and music within the family. This may sound like a fairly typical rendering of generational differences. However, there is much at stake because the senior family members associate the move with a loss of sacred traditions. The younger members view the elder members’ reliance upon tradition as dated, and consider the change necessary.

*Daughters of the Dust*, according to Yvonne Chireau, is an important source for interpreting religious signifiers in African American culture. In *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003), Chireau emphasizes the film’s concluding scene, where Nana Peazant transfers heirlooms to younger family members. Nana’s gift, coupled with the young women’s departure from the island, signals the merging of religion and magic. Nana’s charm allows the family to collectively remember their past as participants in conjuring and faith traditions while celebrating an unknown future. Chireau suggests that *Daughters of the Dust* “might be read as an allegory of the religious sojourn of blacks in America, with Nana’s charm as a metaphor for the legacy that some have chosen to preserve, and others to reject.”<sup>2</sup> The film’s storyline of preserva-

tion and rejection invokes the question that is central to this project: How do Gullah/Geechee women negotiate traditional practices associated with their cultural identity in the midst of significant historical and generational change?

An immediate response to this inquiry is that the seven women of this study talk to the dead. Talking to the dead is a perceived ongoing exchange between living and deceased members of these communities. The practice occurs during traditionally “religious” customs, such as prayer and the singing of Christian sacred songs, but is also facilitated by sociocultural activities, such as storytelling and sweetgrass basketry. Talking to the dead strengthens a sense of unity among members of these communities and gives individuals a way to communicate with deceased relatives. I argue that whether facilitated by customs traditionally interpreted as religious, through the performance of cultural and folk activities, or through the act of remembering, talking to the dead is a longstanding yet underexplored spiritual practice. For Yenenga Wheeler, Faye Terry, Beatrice Dixon, Lucinda Pinckney, Ruth Kelly, Roberta Legare, and Lucille Gaillard, talking to the dead facilitates their relationships to the past, and is relevant to the ways they navigate and live out their faith.<sup>3</sup> This project offers a narrative of a broader community’s negotiation of change by weaving together its memories, folk traditions and mythical practices, sacred worldviews, music, and history. Embracing what Sheila Smith McKoy calls “limbo time”—the fused, contested space that black diasporic cultures negotiate between linear and cyclical time<sup>4</sup>—this book takes the reader through a “figurative journey”<sup>5</sup> that crosses the boundaries of time.

Scholars, journalists, and laypeople alike have taken interest in the Gullah/Geechee and noted their cultural distinctiveness. The Gullah/Geechee are the unique African American inhabitants of the Sea Islands, a 250-mile area of barrier islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. They are also residents of the lowcountry<sup>6</sup>—the coastal lowlands of South Carolina—who, while not inhabitants of a barrier island, bear the imprints of coastal culture.<sup>7</sup> I characterize the Gullah as those who inhabit the Sea Islands, and the Geechee as those who inhabit the lowlands and interior, nonisland dwellings within five to forty minutes from a barrier island.<sup>8</sup> Although “Gullah” is now generally accepted as a combination of the abbreviated form of Angola and the Gola tribe of the Windward Coast,<sup>9</sup> in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sources labeled all blacks who spoke the unique patois<sup>10</sup> of the lowcountry as “Gullah,” and applied this label to African Americans as far inland as Goose Creek, St. Stephens,

Walterboro, and Georgetown. Today, while there is a clearer demarcation between Gullah and Geechee as those who are from the Sea Islands and those who are not, these terms are employed with an understanding that the distinctions between Gullah and Geechee are not historically concise.

The inhabitants of the coastal lowcountry are considered by scholars and local residents to be among the most interesting microcosms of African American culture in the United States. Until the brink of the Civil War, interstate and intrastate trading systems resulted in ongoing transportation of enslaved blacks throughout the lowcountry. Historically, lowcountry culture developed, at least until the mid-twentieth century, in *relative* geographic isolation, as many residents had only marginal contact with people from outside the Sea Islands and accordingly fostered dynamic intercommunal relationships.<sup>11</sup> These factors contribute to the rich cultural viscosity that has always been part of lowcountry life.

This cultural fluidity has become threatened within the past half century by the influx of modernity. Television advertises the wider world and encourages local residents to expand their horizons beyond their roots. Bridges now connect the majority of the islands with the mainland, and the isolation that once helped to maintain cultural distinctiveness has given way to a much more commercialized exchange of culture. Despite efforts by lowcountry residents to preserve their culture, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the unique character of the Sea Islands from that of any other place. The rapid increase in resort development, diminished access to maritime resources, and the migration (forced and unforced) of African American landowning families away from the lowcountry—and most significantly, away from the waterfronts—have dramatically altered the physical, social, and cultural landscapes.

Attitudes have also changed with respect to the religious practice of talking to the dead. Although the custom is alive and well in the lowcountry, contemporary shifts are affecting the practices of such traditions. Some community members believe talking to the dead is an irrelevant, archaic tradition.<sup>12</sup> Others are reluctant to speak of it out of concern that it will be perceived as anti-Christian. Yet an appreciation of the practice has persisted, and increasingly, prototypically “Christian” rituals are utilized as a means of talking to the dead. Many community members—including the women of this study—still draw from the rich repertoire of Gullah/Geechee culture to remember their pasts while celebrating their faith in God. The women who practice talking to the dead in no way view it as antithetical to their Christian identities. Like many communities that have responded to increased tour-



ism and the “sale” of Gullah/Geechee culture by celebrating their cultural heritage, lowcountry religious practitioners have embraced their historical antecedents.

Reared thirty minutes from the Sea Islands, I am well aware of the distinctive aspects of Gullah culture, from the soul-stirring harmonies and polyphonic rhythms of its music to the artistry of its sweetgrass baskets. My interests in the culture of the lowcountry thus stem from my roots as a Geechee girl who grew up connected to and intrigued by the extraordinary qualities of life on and around the Sea Islands. They also emerge from a personal commitment to documenting the histories of these communities—which are swiftly changing. The implications of such efforts are potentially far reaching, for they will contribute to larger discourses about religion in American culture, and respond to lapses in an academic canon that has largely omitted the voices of women like those included in this work.<sup>13</sup> What follows is the perspective of a subset of what has been characterized as a unique diaspora culture, where the prominence of folk ancestral practices present in Gullah/Geechee music, faith, and memory speak to the importance of talking to the dead for Gullah/Geechee women.

#### *Women’s Work and African Cultural Retentions*

Gullah/Geechee women are key contributors to African American religion and culture because they have been constant participants (i.e., members and supporters) and leaders of lowcountry faith systems. This includes traditions that can be identified as formally “Christian” and those that are interpreted as “folk.” In the South Carolina lowcountry, women have historically been conjurers, praise-house leaders, worship leaders, and spiritual parents, which were all equally valued in terms of perceived spiritual power. Those writing about lowcountry culture have not always recognized these roles; written representations of Gullah/Geechee religion have omitted or misrepresented the contributions these women have historically made and continue to make. This is in large part due to the fact that women have not held the more prominent, visible role of pastor—the position that has received the most attention in the literature on Gullah/Geechee culture and American religion broadly.

Scholars have focused more on the communal quality of religion than on the individual function of religion to practitioners and believers. This, in my view, continues to be one of the largest omissions within research on Gullah/Geechee culture. Despite efforts to incorporate a more compara-

tive analysis that historicizes religious practices within Gullah/Geechee culture, as in recent works by Michael Wolfe and Jason Young, what is glaringly absent from the historiography of Gullah/Geechee religion are the ways that Gullah/Geechee women have navigated, negotiated, and continued to practice their religiosity within these spaces. Because interest in Gullah/Geechee culture has centered upon their numerous “peculiarities,” the omission of women’s narratives of religion within these communities is striking. *Talking to the Dead* fills a gap in this literature.

Religious experience and spirituality facilitate change and help women in America broadly and black women in particular negotiate class, age, race, sexuality, and power.<sup>14</sup> As recent scholarship by Rosetta Ross, Marla Frederick, Anthea Butler, and Judith Weisenfeld and Richard Newman supports, religion is an especially important lens through which to analyze black women’s experiences because of the role faith plays in women’s activism and survival.<sup>15</sup> The study of religion also bears great significance in the South Carolina lowcountry because of the role religion has played in the historical quest for African cultural retentions. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits famously defined Africanisms as elements of culture in the New World that are traceable to an African origin.<sup>16</sup> Herskovits believed that the religious practices of blacks in the diaspora were the most viable means of identifying cultural retentions. According to Herskovits, if one cannot find African influences in religion, there are no Africanisms to be found.<sup>17</sup> Following Herskovits’s lead, nearly all written materials about Gullah/Geechee culture reference the “African” nature of lowcountry religion.

The question of cultural retentions is therefore significant to any study of lowcountry culture, as one cannot talk about the Gullah/Geechee and ignore the discourse of Africanisms.<sup>18</sup> Many who have heard the unique patois and observed the various artistic and cultural practices of the Gullah argue that they are African in origin, and thus establish connections between the Gullah and various west and central African groups.<sup>19</sup> Efforts to pinpoint African cultural continuities have dominated discussions of lowcountry culture since the 1930s. Lorenzo Dow Turner’s *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*<sup>20</sup> was the first text<sup>21</sup> to explicitly engage the influence of African culture upon lowcountry inhabitants, and it continues to be the among the most highly cited texts about the Gullah.<sup>22</sup>

Efforts to identify Africanisms in lowcountry culture have proven valuable. They have illuminated the meanings of various cultural practices and shaped theories of traditions particular to the lowcountry, which include use of the Gullah dialect, sweetgrass basketry, and music traditions such

as the “lowcountry clap.” The quest for Africanisms has also substantiated claims of the ingenuity of lowcountry blacks, who combined their African and American heritages to form a distinctive culture. Moreover, Margaret Creel, Samuel Lawton, Patricia Guthrie, and others have successfully identified African continuities within religion and expanded the historiography on Gullah/Geechee culture to provide new analytic lenses to engage lowcountry culture.<sup>23</sup>

When I began studying Gullah/Geechee culture, the question of identifying Africanisms was central to my research. I explored literature on the transatlantic slave trade to determine where in Africa lowcountry inhabitants could trace their heritages. I studied religious practices, rituals, myths, and symbols to determine if they could be linked to specific areas or ethnic groups throughout Africa. As my research progressed, however, I discovered that the complex dynamics of the slave trade and the challenges of conveying abstractions, such as experience and memory, made it difficult—if not impossible—to identify an item of culture as exclusively or predominantly “African.” I also realized from my earliest interactions with lowcountry residents that scientific observations of Africanisms collected by Herskovits, Turner, and others obscured the lived experiences of the Gullah—especially Gullah women. I swiftly came to recognize the shortcomings of seeking “isms” to sum up a culture, and that more work needed to be done to address gaping omissions in the literature.

Subsequently, I focused my efforts on three limitations within the scholarship on Gullah/Geechee religion. First, that the earliest generation (1863–1950) inadequately accounted for the dynamism that resulted from the merging of Christian and African-derived religious practices, and simply characterized Gullah/Geechee religion as an example of “primitive heathenism.”<sup>24</sup> Although the treatment of religion improved within later generations of Gullah/Geechee scholarship (1974–1999 and 2000–2010), religion was nonetheless treated as a secondary factor that influenced lowcountry culture; the limited exploration of religion within these discourses was a critical deficiency. Second, most of the literature provides a historical reckoning of Gullah/Geechee culture and does not sufficiently account for the changing meanings of religious practices over time. The third limitation, which is most important to this study, is the striking absence of Gullah/Geechee women, who are largely excluded from examinations of the significance of religion in lowcountry life. Lowcountry women have not been viewed as leaders within Gullah/Geechee communities and are only peripherally included in descriptions of communities as performers of songs,

shouts, and dances. Furthermore, detailed descriptions of the activities and names of women were often only provided insofar as they validated negative ideas about black religion. Scholars of the Gullah/Geechee have allowed the focus on Africanisms to overshadow, oversimplify, and at times misrepresent the meaning of religion to lowcountry women.<sup>25</sup> The quest to identify cultural retentions compounded the silencing of Gullah/Geechee women, whose experiences have on the whole been excluded and whose communal roles have been grossly overlooked.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the focus on African cultural continuities, while inherently valuable, has not emerged without cost. While it is important to acknowledge the continuities of lowcountry tradition with those of specific African communities, it is just as significant—if not more so—to understand *what these practices have historically meant and continue to mean* within lowcountry communities.<sup>27</sup> A search for Africanisms that excludes analysis of the meaning of cultural practices among lowcountry inhabitants, in order to prove the value and significance of black culture and disprove white claims of black inferiority, is no longer sufficient. “Pinpointing Africanisms” creates a rigidity that does not best fit the nature of religion or culture, which is always a fluid, ongoing exchange that does not occur in a vacuum. The goal of contemporary work on Gullah/Geechee communities should not be to identify African retentions or to verify any type of “authentic blackness.” Instead, the objective should be to understand the meaning and impact of religious practices and religio-cultural associations with Africa to lowcountry inhabitants today. This is at the forefront of *Talking to the Dead*.

### Black Atlantic Studies

In *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*, Jason Young calls for analyzing cultural dialogues without getting entrenched in dialectical debates. This challenge is important to consider in a study that explores the religious lives of lowcountry black women. In *Talking to the Dead*, religion is crucial for delving into how black women have navigated the traditions, spaces, and places that have been instrumental in Gullah/Geechee religious culture. This includes explorations of their conversion experiences, their roles in the church and praise house, as well as their positions as “sanctioned” religious leaders and as root-workers and conjurers. This work centers the ways that Yenenga, Ruth, Roberta, Lucille, Lucinda, Beatrice, and Faye live out their faith. Quite noticeably, their present lives and their faith are heavily informed by

the histories that they see themselves as being a part of. This includes how they “seeked” their religion (how they became members of their respective churches); why they sing certain songs; how they were positively influenced by older women (formal and informal spiritual leaders) in their communities; and how they share communal understandings about talking to the dead. The experiences of the women—whether their music practices, their relationship to Africa, or their communications with the dead—are part of a longstanding history, which influences their present realities and helps these women determine what their faith in God means and how to live out that faith.

My efforts to translate the ways that conceptions of God and faith and the role of ancestors are present in contemporary Gullah/Geechee communities necessitates some exploration of how these worldviews are triangulated between African, Caribbean, and black American diasporas. I also explicitly engage the ways that seven women from different towns, cities, and areas of the lowcountry recognize their symbols, histories, religion, and heritage as African (or not). Because of these features, this investigation continues to be part of a historical discussion about African cultural retentions, while it engages contemporary discourses about transnationalism located in black Atlantic studies. Although I make little effort to pinpoint the “Africanness” of the Gullah/Geechee or to explicitly connect Gullah/Geechee practices to comparable diasporic communities, this work becomes part of conversations emerging in black Atlantic studies, exemplified by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, Bayo Hosley’s *Routes of Remembrance*, Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, J. Lorand Matory’s *Black Atlantic Religion*, and Young’s *Rituals of Resistance*. Unlike these important works, my project does not emphasize transnational dialogues through a comparative analysis of cultures. Rather, it extends these discussions by addressing how self-identification among Gullah/Geechee women reflects an ongoing engagement with modern interpretations of the “image” and memory of Africa in lowcountry religion, the fluidity between past and present that influences how contemporary women enact their faith, and the ancestral practices of talking to the dead.<sup>28</sup> This is a way of including women’s narratives in the histories of the lowcountry, and in the broader discourse on black Atlantic thought, while placing these women’s stories at the forefront of investigations into lowcountry religious life.

My attempt to understand the contemporary meanings of religious practices among these women is one faithful way to bridge gaps between the narratives of scholars and those of lowcountry residents. Another effort is

related to conversations about transnationalism, of which translocalism is a part.<sup>29</sup> Again, because this text grapples with the meaning of customs that are not exclusively African or American, this project is in conversation with these discourses. What makes these discussions important to the present study is the ways they expand our understanding of seemingly “local” customs and utilize comparative data to account for similarities between distinct cultures. Transnational discourses are also contestations of the cultural retention “debate.” Rather than essentializing Gullah/Geechee culture as having any singular “origin,” these conversations free cultural practices from being identified as any single thing, or being reduced to any singular locale. Similarly, these discourses enlarge our perspectives about the bounds of local and national communities. This project focuses on “local” perspectives (as the genre of anthropological ethnography has traditionally done), but by taking the fluidity of the formation of Gullah/Geechee religious culture seriously, it avoids the methodological baggage of translocal exclusion that has historically accompanied anthropological ethnography. The focus on the local certainly provides a means of accessing the translocal, national, transnational, and even transatlantic, for there truly is no way to understand Gullah/Geechee religion and culture without some recognition and awareness of their ongoing and varied cultural, social, and historical influences.

### *An Ethnohistorical Approach*

To better situate Gullah women’s experiences while attending to diverse religious practices in the lowcountry, I employ an interdisciplinary methodology that joins religious studies, gender studies, ethnomusicology, history, and anthropology in a way that is ethnohistorical. The ethnographic portion of this project involved spending time with, interviewing (audio recorded when permitted), observing, and documenting the experiences of seven women of James Island and Mount Pleasant (Charleston County), Cross and Moncks Corner (Berkeley County), and Beaufort (Beaufort County), South Carolina.<sup>30</sup> These women represent different perspectives from multiple communities throughout the lowcountry. All profess to be Christians.<sup>31</sup> As women of deep faith, they vary in their denominational affiliations (Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Disciples of Christ) and in their understandings of what being Christian means.

Between March 2003 and March 2007, I spent a substantial amount of time with these women.<sup>32</sup> I stayed at their homes and attended church and Bible study with them. I also went with them to the grocery store, helped