INTRODUCTION

Gullah/Geechee Women

In the film *Daughters of the Dust*,[1] 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."[2] 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.[3] 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[4]—this book takes the reader through a "figurative journey"[5] 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[6]—the coastal lowlands of South Carolina—who, while not inhabitants of a barrier island, bear the imprints of coastal culture.[7] 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.[8] Although "Gullah" is now generally accepted as a combination of the abbreviated form of Angola and the Gola tribe of the Windward Coast,[9] in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sources labeled all blacks who spoke the unique patois[10] 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.[11] 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.[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] Efforts to pinpoint African cultural continuities have dominated discussions of lowcountry culture since the 1930s. Lorenzo Dow Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*[20] was the first text[21] 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.[22]

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.[23]

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."[24] 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.[25] 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.[26]

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.[27] 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.[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] These women represent different perspectives from multiple communities throughout the lowcountry. All profess to be Christians.[31] 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.[32] I stayed at their homes and attended church and Bible study with them. I also went with them to the grocery store, helped

them wash vegetables from gardens and market stands, ate and cooked with them, and spent months driving between their churches, residences, and jobs. I sat with them while they worked, rested, and praised God, spent time with their families, and examined their daily lives. While observing, I asked questions about their identities as Gullah/Geechee women, as black women in the South, and about their understandings of their roles in their communities' histories and religious practices. I strove to create spaces where the women felt comfortable and open, and always invited them to candidly describe their personal beliefs and religious experiences. Since my fieldwork was completed, Faye Terry has passed away, but too-infrequent visits and phone calls keep me in touch with the remaining six.[33]

From my time with these women, I acquired some knowledge of their lives. I recognize that my knowledge was merely a glimpse into their daily existence. Hence, what I did not understand or could not interpret, I asked them to clarify, and what I thought I knew or understood, I asked them to confirm. By spending time with these women and observing them in various settings, I utilized the technique Clifford Geertz called "thick description," which entails gathering data by selecting, observing, and interviewing informants, but also by describing to the best of one's ability the variety, depth, breadth, and texture of their life-worlds with special attention to what is significant to them.[34] I believe that there is great cultural value in having these women's experiences documented, in part because of the general exclusion of the narratives of Gullah/Geechee women in textual representations of lowcountry religion.[35] When applicable, I utilize the women's original wording and dialect or offer translations that are closest to its original meaning and structure, despite the controversy over Lorenzo Turner's reading of the origins of Gullah/Geechee patois. This is a part of my ethnohistorical approach; I consider those representations to be as important as published materials and thus reproduce these black women's experiences using their own words and expressions. Most significantly, I contend that documenting their experiences is valuable because of what it reveals about individual appropriations of religious practice, theological interpretation, and the spirituality of black women, which potentially show larger patterns for understanding black American religious experience specifically and American religious experience broadly.

My ethnographic approach is distinct in two ways: First, it employs a comparative analysis of published and unpublished historical sources and treats those sources as active, informing "voices" rather than the typically utilized contextual "voice." Second, my ethnographic method utilizes black femi-

nist and womanist theory as an analytical framework for approaching and interpreting the information collected through ethnographic means. Ethnography allows us to understand what we can learn when black women's voices are viewed as authoritative. This study therefore privileges the ideas, experiences, and narratives of African American women and builds upon the womanist tradition espoused by Alice Walker, who defined a womanist as, among other things, "a black feminist or feminist of color."[36] It relies upon approaches set forth by black feminist anthropologists[37] and womanist theologians.[38] While womanist scholars have intentionally taken up the significance of religion for black women, black feminist anthropologists have not consistently explored religion as a dominant or viable lens through which to interpret black women's experiences.[39] At the same time, womanist scholarship has been limited by its commitment to theology, ethics, and biblical hermeneutics, features that are only addressed in this project insofar as they naturally evolve from the written, oral, and experiential narratives provided from the sources utilized in this work.[40] This study is therefore centrally located at the intersections of womanist and black feminist thought because it critically engages the implications of black women's unique location at the junction of race, sex, and class—a fundamental characteristic of black feminism—and the impact of religion alongside these intersectional effects upon black women, a prominent feature of womanism.

The historical aspect of this approach involved analysis of source materials that reference the Gullah/Geechee and, in particular, Gullah religion. This included the systematic analysis of nonfiction, published materials on the Gullah from 1863 to 2010; exploration of published documentation and unpublished, archival materials from the South Carolina Historical Society; and the incorporation, when possible, of materials housed in local churches and the homes of lowcountry residents. Gullah/Geechee historiography has been significantly expanded by the work of social historians, linguists, and anthropologists, who have produced more than a century of scholarship on Gullah/Geechee culture. What is of central importance to this project, however, is the treatment of Gullah/Geechee religion within this genealogy.

Descriptions of Gullah/Geechee religion within the first generation, 1863–1950, fall into three categories, the first including unpublished, nonfiction, first-person accounts that were not devoted exclusively or predominantly to documenting religion, but which reveal significant features of religion. The extensive archival documentation of John Bennett[41] and Jane Heyward exemplify this category.[42] A second subset of materials includes published articles between 1863 and 1910 that were thematic in scope and

focus, such as essays published by Charlotte Forten and Charles Raymond.[43] The third genre includes published and unpublished monographs that detailed Gullah/Geechee life and practice. Significant contributions within this category include Guion Johnson's *A Social History of the Sea Islands, with Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (1930),[44] Mason Crum's *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (1940),[45] and the diaries of Laura Towne and Charlotte Forten, which were published nearly one hundred years after they were penned. Samuel Miller Lawton's unpublished dissertation, "The Religious Life of South Carolina Coastal and Sea Island Negroes" (1939) is significant because it was the first work devoted exclusively to the study of lowcountry religion.[46] An important additional contribution to this first generation is Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Although Turner did not focus predominantly on religion and his analysis has since been contested, his research transformed how subsequent scholars focused on Africa as a means of understanding the life, dialect, and culture of lowcountry blacks.

Many of the articles and unpublished materials from this first generation offer a sympathetic perspective on Gullah/Geechee life. For example, lowcountry native Jane Heyward, a white, middle-class woman whose father owned slaves, toured the Southeast offering recitals of Gullah folk stories. Heyward, a self-professed "Gullah dialect recitalist" prefaced a presentation to her dialect recitals with, "Close contact of the races, brought a love with reverence blent [*sic*]."[47] Like many early sources on Gullah/Geechee culture, Heyward noted the uniqueness of Gullah communities—their dialect, their ways of thinking, and their practices—and in her own way attempted to document the "peculiarities" she observed within Gullah culture. What also links several of these writers are the ways that accepted racist notions of intellectual superiority influenced their conclusions and observations about Gullah culture. During an introduction to one of her Gullah dialect recital programs, Heyward stated: "What I want to give my audience by these true stories, I will tell, is an understanding of the love which existed in the old Plantation days between the White folks in 'The Big House' and the Black folks in the Quarters. And something of the loyalty which survived for long years after the [N]egro had been told he was 'Free.' We of the South feel such a responsibility to help the simple ignorant ones, that really sometimes it becomes quite a burden."[48] I have approached documents like these with caution, care, and criticism. That these authors meant well and tried to give the most accurate descriptions in their representations of blacks of the lowcountry is not in question; however, genuine attempts to depict the life, reli-

gion, and culture of South Carolina's African Americans should not obscure and does not excuse the racism and paternalism prevalent throughout many of these works.

Engaging antebellum-era and reconstruction-era sources that document "romantic racialist conceptions" of black life has proven particularly challenging over the course of this project.[49] This is especially so because I begin this project by writing about marginalized African Americans in a period when they did not document their own experiences because they could not write, were not allowed to write, or only minimally recorded their experiences through writing. Before blacks became increasingly literate beginning in the 1900s, it was almost exclusively white writers who provided descriptions of African American culture. This is the case with South Carolina's Gullah/Geechee communities, who—with little exception—had their experiences, customs, and practices recorded by white Americans. This feature has proven particularly challenging in uncovering the experiences of the Gullah—a struggle reconciled by directly confronting how the uncritical use of these historical sources is indicative of a larger negation of black thought. In other words, to continually rely upon these sources as accurate representations without interrogating their paternalist and racist ideologies is to perpetuate the limited perspectives they articulated.[50] Therefore, I use in-depth historical analysis to demonstrate how these sources have led to continuous negative characterizations of Gullah/Geechee religious practices.

The second generation of materials on Gullah/Geechee culture (1974–1999)[51] took Lorenzo Turner's lead and made explicit efforts to identify African cultural continuities in lowcountry culture, including religion.[52] Key texts within this generation include *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984), by Charles Joyner; the 1977 dissertation "'Catch Sense': The Meaning of Plantation Membership on St. Helena Island S.C.," by Patricia Guthrie, which later became *Catching Sense: African American Communities on a South Carolina Sea Island* (1996); *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (1987), by the late Patricia Jones-Jackson; the seminal work on lowcountry religion, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (1988), by Margaret Creel; and *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (1999), by William Pollitzer.[53] Also included within this generation are the anthologies *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia* (1991), by Mary Twining and Keith Baird; *The Crucible of Carolina: Essays in the Development of Gullah Language and Culture* (1994), by Michael Montgomery; and *The Legacy of Igbo Landing: Gullah Roots of African American Culture* (1998), by Marquetta Goodwine. These works represent a resur-

gence of academic inquiry about the Gullah, and are characterized by serious consideration of religion as a central aspect of lowcountry culture. This shift in part resulted from two critical interventions: (1) movements within social history where scholars treated the exploration of African American culture as a viable area of critical inquiry—due in part to responses to Melville Herskovits; and (2) queries by academics of religion who argued that it was a fundamental means for understanding African American history and culture.

The most significant transition in this discourse was the discussion of the *positive* impact of African cultures on lowcountry religious practices. As a result, scholars no longer treated religion and the widespread practice of African and folk traditions as a reflection of the "heathenism" of lowcountry blacks. Instead, scholars viewed Gullah/Geechee culture and religious practices as an example of religious and cultural "syncretism." Hence, perspectives that actively explored the pervasiveness of living African gods and vibrant African culture as a means of understanding Gullah/Geechee religion emerged. This shift did not fully come to the fore in the literature on lowcountry religion until the late 1970s. Pivotal to this shift was Albert Raboteau's landmark study, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978), which treated African American religion in the South as an ongoing process of formation between Christian, Muslim, and practices from African and African-derived traditions. Raboteau's assessment of the fluid and integrated quality of black religion in the South transformed the way that black religion was understood.

> It is important to realize, however, that in the Americas the religions of Africa have not been merely preserved as static "Africanisms" or as archaic "retentions." The fact is that they have continued to develop as living traditions putting down new roots in new soil, bearing new fruit as unique hybrids of American origin. African styles of worship, forms of ritual systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were preserved in "pure" orthodoxy but because they were transformed. Adaptability, based on respect for spiritual power wherever it originated, accounted for the openness of African religions to syncretism with other religious traditions and for the continuity of a distinctively African religious consciousness.[54]

Raboteau's work was the direct result of the movement to uncover examples of African cultural retentions. It had a profound impact on how African

American religion has been understood broadly and on how investigators of Gullah/Geechee religion have analyzed lowcountry religious practices.

Scholarship since the year 2000 makes up the third generation of research on Gullah/Geechee religion and culture. Trends in this generation—eight doctoral dissertations and three monographs—include (1) the continuation of efforts to identify specifically "African" identities of the Gullah, with an emphasis on scientific testing; (2) an expansion of scholarship that emphasizes the cultural impacts of commodification upon Gullah/Geechee culture, of which conversations of cultural survivals are a part; (3) the broadening of linguistic studies of Gullah/Geechee, with a focus on literary contributions; and (4) the central placement of religion as a vital means of exploring Gullah/Geechee culture.[55] The monographs salient to this project include *The Abundant Life Prevails: Religious Traditions of St. Helena Island* (2000) by Michael C. Wolfe and Jason Young's *Rituals of Resistance* (2007). It is noteworthy that two of the three recently published monographs on lowcountry culture have focused on religion as the primary lens through which to examine the Gullah/Geechee. This trend within the latest generation indicates the recognition of religion as an understudied area within Gullah/Geechee studies and signals the value placed on the critical exploration of religion as a means of understanding numerous aspects of culture.

This ethnohistorical study is simultaneously *constructivist* and *collaborative*[56] and utilizes five approaches to data collection: archival research, review and analysis of published source materials, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, and audio recording. This method integrates the materials by placing what lowcountry women say about themselves in dialogue with what writers have theorized about them, and noting similarities and differences between the interpretations. The project thus engages Gullah/Geechee women's ideas and experiences of race, gender, religion, and identity with writers who in their descriptions of lowcountry life addressed the same topics. This allows us to learn what contemporary women view as most important in their everyday lives, preventing written texts from being interpreted as the main voices of authority in descriptions of human experience. This approach promotes written works as *supplemental* rather than *primary* sources. I do not uphold written over "live" sources (or vice versa), nor do I categorize sources as "primary" or "secondary." As Patricia Hill Collins eloquently states, "The ability to rank scholarship into categories of primary, secondary and tertiary importance reflects the power of those who classify."[57] Instead, in an effort to challenge Western hegemonic classification processes, I combine ethnographic and historical

approaches as a means of placing the living and the dead in conversation.[58] This metaphor of navigating between the past and the present influences the lived experiences of Gullah/Geechee women and my attempts to capture their meaning. It is especially apt given that talking to the dead is a practice with which these seven Gullah/Geechee women identify.

Talking to the Dead—A Critical Approach

I use the phrase talking to the dead to connote three different features of the practice: first, actual lived experiences that lowcountry residents have with the dead that they interpret as real, even as the presence of an apparition likely does not exist (which is exemplified in my own experience in Charleston's City Market); and second, engagement in what I call religio-cultural activities (singing, storytelling, sweetgrass basketry, prayer, and dreaming) that calls one's forebearers to mind—often through a performance or (re)enactment—and can sometimes lead to the experience of connecting with the dead. These two manifestations of the practice are the main ways in which I employ the phrase. A third category of talking to the dead refers to the communal belief in the act of "living memory" or remembering. Talking to the dead is one of several ways that the women see themselves as remembering their pasts and living out their memories. This third category is the most difficult to describe because it also includes practices that can invoke talking to the dead (storytelling, prayer, the performance of music that has been passed on generationally, etc.), as well as ancestral communication. As a result, the first two features become subsumed under the third, which makes talking to the dead a general reference to the act of remembering.[59]

I could certainly categorize these three configurations in other terms. For example, I might call the act of speaking to a deceased ancestor "direct encounter," and connecting with the dead through certain acts "practice-mediated, indirect encounter," and give an entirely new name to the act of lived memory. However, as much as it might prove easier to a reader outside of these communities to categorize these "forms" of talking to the dead, the challenge of making these distinctions is that they do not represent how these women experience, identify, and understand what talking to the dead means. There is no categorical distinction for Roberta when she has a conversation with her dead sister in a dream, for how Lucinda talks to her dead mother when she sings "Sendin' Up My Timbah," or for how Beatrice talks to her dead grandmother while she is making sweetgrass baskets. Although the means by which they "encounter" the dead may be different, their inter-

pretation of the meaning of the experience—that their deceased relatives are communicating with them—is exactly the same. My use of talking to the dead emphasizes the importance of lived memory among the women individually and in their communities, and places this project within subsequent conversations in memory studies that question how the use of memory can enhance and complicate ethnographic research.[60]

In *Black Magic*, Yvonne Chireau raises the question, "Is there an intermediate category in which to place ideas of the ways that humans have engaged in a reality beyond their own, a reality delineated by the presence of divine beings, forces and other invisible entities?"[61] I believe that talking to the dead as experienced and expressed among these seven women gestures to that category, which harkens to McKoy's interpretation of "limbo time":

> Tradition bonds African culture across space and time to the extent that the living are responsible for answering to their ancestors for their behavior. In essence, tradition binds Diaspora cultures to their African roots across space and time in that the ancestor—the mythical and spiritual embodiment of another time—maintains a constant relationship with the living. In effect, there exists a living transcendental pact that is grounded in another temporal space. Not only does tradition provide kinship ties, but tradition determines progress in the sense that both scenes of culture and the events derived from them can be replicated and depended upon through time. Perfection resides, not in the surpassing of groundwork laid by the ancestors, but in the value placed on the perfect replication of such cultural moments.[62]

The mediation between space, time, and invisible entities that McKoy and Chireau gesture toward are ever-important considerations in black diasporic culture, and especially in the case of the Gullah/Geechee. For Lucinda, Roberta, Faye, Ruth, Yenenga, Lucille, and Beatrice, talking to the dead is the manifestation of the liminal space between the living and the dead *and* the past and the present.

It is not coincidence that all seven of the women who talk to the dead have held formal leadership positions within their churches and have been spiritual leaders within their communities. Talking to the dead thus provides a unique means of framing just how important Gullah/Geechee women are to the continuation of lowcountry religious and spiritual practices, a feature missing in the literature, while introducing readers to a distinctive custom within the region. Although the act of talking to the dead may be different in its orientation for each of these women, what they share is that the out-

comes of talking to the dead have direct bearing on their understanding of their faith, their participation in their churches, the way they live their daily lives, and their relationships to their pasts. Talking to the dead is viewed as a sustaining practice among the women because it has significant consequences in the decisions and life choices that many of them have made and will make. Talking to the dead greatly informs how they negotiate changes in their own lives and within their communities as it helps determine their actions and reactions while simultaneously gesturing to the histories and past experiences that inform their present. The relationships these women each share with the dead are very special and reflect a deep spiritual connection that surpasses denominational or formal church affiliation and seamlessly coincides with their Christian identities.

Relating Religion, Methodology, and Structure

When Robert Orsi, Danièl Hervieu-Léger, and David Hall began talking about "lived religion" as an area of analysis within religious studies in the late 1990s, they were responding to what they saw as a significant disparity between how academics (especially theologians) theorized religion and how people of faith lived out their religious identities. They wanted to give religious practitioners a chance to speak on their own terms and without the confines of "armchair theologians," who interpreted systems of belief with limited experiential knowledge. This turn toward focusing on the function of religion for its believers (what is in many camps now called "practical theology") became a counter to theoretical treatments of religion that lacked substantive engagement with the people about whom arguments were being made.

This disparity between what is theorized and what is lived is echoed in studies of the Gullah/Geechee, which have largely grouped these communities in terms of geographic and cultural distinctions without really attending to the nuances of their religious faith from the perspective of individual practitioners. Gullah/Geechee women have been excluded from examinations of the history of lowcountry religion and are not treated as significant contributors to the continuation of Christian faith today. To further efforts to allow individuals to speak about the importance and practice of their faith for themselves, it is important to rely on Gullah/Geechee women's voices to see how they are creative agents in their theological development, how they personally understand their religious practices, and how their experiences make unique theoretical contributions of their own. We must simul-

taneously consider the history of American religion as a collection of particular practices with theological meaning that are connected to specific social contexts.

Central to my analysis is the understanding that religion and religious expression are deeply embedded in our social contexts. One cannot examine religion or religious experience without understanding the powerful social forces that the women of this study find themselves dealing with. My use of these terms emerges both from the perspective of the project's informants as well as from an amalgamation of pivotal texts within religious studies. *Religion* is one aspect of culture and emerges from the complex processes by which humans make sense of their world, their place in the world, and their relation to others. This is often (though not exclusively) expressed in the form of belief, order, judgment, and ritualized practice. *Religious experience* therefore refers to the events and moments that inform how humans make sense of and act in the world. Experience can be characterized as ongoing behaviors and thoughts as well as special, memorable moments that stand out amidst everyday events. Not all experiences are deemed "religious." Yet what sets a religious experience apart is not belief in a divine presence or an increased level of spirituality but the fact that it is specifically interpreted, labeled, and/or acknowledged by the person(s) as a religious experience.[63] This caveat is especially significant to this work because there are several experiential practices that would not typically be identified as spiritual or religious (storytelling, for example). To the women, however, these practices are prototypically experienced as powerful religious events that connect them to their deceased ancestors.

I contend that there is something particular about Gullah/Geechee religious experience, which I describe primarily through the lens of talking to the dead. In other faith systems within African diasporic communities, such as Santería in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti, the meeting of African-derived practices with Christianity (in those cases Catholicism) resulted in a distinctive merging of African rituals with traditions and epistemologies of Catholicism to form a new faith system with its own rites. Similarly, when we look at the formation of spiritual churches in a North American locale such as New Orleans (which is highly studied because of the folk practice voodoo), the influences of Spiritualism, Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and Voodoo resulted in a syncretic but distinct faith system with its own rituals and customs. By contrast, in the South Carolina lowcountry, African-derived folk customs such as talking to the dead and conjure do not become conjoined with Christianity, but are maintained as separate yet accepted spiri-

tual practices that do not conflict with Christianity, which functions as the primary faith system. As a result, the symbiotic, fluid relationship between their staunch Protestant faith and their ongoing belief in and support of African-derived practices and African American folk traditions (of which talking to the dead and conjure are a part) makes Gullah/Geechee religious experiences distinctive. More specifically, the women's appropriation of Christianity, music, sweetgrass basketry, storytelling, and belief in conjure, coupled with their ability to use these practices to talk to the dead, without causing any disruption to their theological and epistemological frameworks, exemplifies this fluidity.

The structure of this project coincides with this fluid understanding of religion and religious experience. Chapter 1, "Culture Keepers," introduces Lucille, Roberta, Lucinda, Ruth, Yenenga, Faye, and Beatrice through descriptions of their lives as well as their social, political, and cultural contexts. I use their narratives to contest the ways that lowcountry women were historically treated as peripheral or even negative actors in the perpetuation of black religion and religious expression. I also compare the representation of women in written narratives of lowcountry religion to their lived experiences, using interviews with the women to document the centrality yet fluid appropriation of Christian faith. As Julie Dash's cinematic focus on intergenerational relationships between three Gullah women suggests, there is something very special about women of the lowcountry. This chapter examines the significant role women play in the maintenance and sustenance of a dynamic religious culture within the lowcountry. I characterize Gullah/Geechee women as "culture keepers," persons who have great responsibility in shaping the structures of religious history, as well as their current (Christian) faith and practice.

The unique contributions of Gullah/Geechee women stand out when we examine their influence in folk practices. In chapter 2, "Folk Religion," I discuss the historical pervasiveness of folk traditions such as conjure within Gullah/Geechee communities, as well as the contemporary prevalence of folk traditions among the women. Lucinda's role, in particular, as a local herbalist and perceived conjure woman reflects an ongoing acceptance of folk traditions as symbolized by the merging of folk and Christian practices among the Gullah/Geechee. This chapter documents the numerous elements that make up the diverse features of black religious expression in the lowcountry, and sets the stage for the subsequent discussions of contemporary religious identity and practice, including the continued significance of talking to the dead.

I turn to a fuller exploration of talking to the dead in chapter 3. There, I unpack the religious and religio-cultural manifestations of talking to the dead among the women and integrate additional details about how their religious practices facilitate talking to the dead. Though not an exclusively female custom, it is unclear why women largely maintain it. What is transparent, however, is that women are the keepers of the practice. For the women included in this work, "talking to de dead" represents an ongoing exchange; the process occurs in their daily practices of leading prayer trees and communicating with friends, visiting the sick, telling stories, and weaving sweetgrass baskets. Talking to the dead influences their interpretation of the meaning of religion and the relationship between church membership and individual practice. All of these women communicated with the living dead through their experiences of "seekin'," the process by which each woman joined her local church. During this experience many of the women encountered deceased ancestors during intense periods of fasting and prayer or while dreaming in the midst of the process. Seeking was thus essential to their recognition of the fluid connections between the living and the dead. Communicating with the dead was seen as one of the most prominent folk traditions in the lowcountry. Chapter 3 therefore emphasizes how significant talking to the dead is among these lowcountry women. While some of the activities above may not be considered "religious" in a traditional sense, they are nonetheless central to these women's lives and are tightly interwoven with religious imagery and concepts. By documenting the significance of women in lowcountry religious practice, I demonstrate how women continue to maintain substantial roles within lowcountry communities as the main preservers of Gullah/Geechee religious culture.

Any meaningful understanding of African American religion must look at the musical traditions associated with it, and in chapter 4, "Sendin' Up My Timbah," I examine the ways in which sacred music traditions have played and continue to play a particularly significant role in the religious lives of lowcountry women and how sacred music becomes a means of expressing their faith as well as facilitating their communication with the deceased. I contend that music in the lowcountry functions as performative memory; that is, musical practices and traditions among Gullah/Geechee women are one way that memories of the past are transmitted and sustained into the present. These traditions become identifiable via bodily performative practices and rituals in addition to written texts. In this way, music functions as its own mode of language and acts as a medium between the living and the dead. The attitudes these women share about the meaning, value, and func-

tion of music demonstrate how music operates as a lived representation of "tulking to de dead." Unlike earlier generations of literature on lowcountry music practices, I center women's participation in music, which helps us understand the spiritual significance of music in Gullah/Geechee culture in general. It is through the shouting, dancing, and singing traditions that these lowcountry women connect to their past and act in their present. Music is the single most important element of Gullah/Geechee culture that ensures its continuation as a distinctive African American community. To these women, music is second in importance only to belief in God. Moreover, music, like the seeking process and active participation in the church, unites the women in this study. I capture the deep meaning and performative ritual aspects of music in the companion website,[64] which documents the women in the study singing, shouting, and demonstrating the significance of sacred music in their lives.

For all seven of these women, remembering is a sacred, spiritual practice that ensures ongoing connections between the living and the dead. In chapter 5, "Lived Memory," I explore how talking to the dead through remembering continues to be important among the women, especially through celebration of the memory of Africa as a shared heritage and sacred home. I examine contemporary meanings of Africa to these women to understand how remembering Africa has been an important part of talking to the dead. My exploration of how these women see and remember Africa reveals important differences among them. Remembering Africa as a way of talking to the dead is changing due to cultural commodification, as culture becomes tied to market forces. Disparities in how the women of this study remember Africa reflect significant fragmentation in Gullah/Geechee culture. I discuss these changes and engage how contemporary efforts to remember Africa by way of "Gullah Festivals," "Gullah Tours," and even the *Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act* (2006) have complicated the ongoing significance of talking to the dead.

I envision this project—in its methodology, content, and scope—as a critical response to an absence in scholarship. In the broader landscape of work on American religion, little about the Gullah/Geechee in the American South exists, and even less addresses the role of women in lowcountry religious practices. Despite contemporary sources that explicitly engage black women's religiosity, the fact remains, as Weisenfeld and Newman noted in the late 1990s, "the religious lives of African-American women loom as a substantial yet largely undiscovered terrain in the study of religion in America."[65] I therefore view my technique of investigating black women's

lived experiences alongside representations and absences in written texts to be a critical intervention. As such, I have made intensive efforts to return to the lowcountry to follow up with the women with whom I spent so much time and to ensure the fairness and accuracy of my descriptions. This is an essential aspect of contemporary ethnography, which I view as a collaborative effort that includes getting feedback from my informants about my representations of their narratives and experiences. My investigation into their lives adds to a limited but growing body of literature about these communities and expands the existing scholarship by engaging how women in the lowcountry interpret their own histories. It is my hope that this project will contribute to an ever-broadening landscape of studies of African American women, of black religion in the South, and of the use of ethnography as a viable approach to religious studies.

In their introduction to *Not Only the Master's Tools*, Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon contend that dismantling the master's house, as Audre Lorde described, is a "misguided project." Instead, scholars of black studies must utilize the imaginative creativities of the enslaved and formerly enslaved to transcend the limitations of Eurocentric, Western-based thought and build houses of their/our own.[66] This project emerges in that spirit. Its goal is not to invalidate historical representations and writings about Gullah/Geechee religion, but to demonstrate how women of the South Carolina lowcountry have utilized, reconfigured, and transcended those representations. I contend that Gullah/Geechee frameworks, specifically from a religio-cultural perspective, offer great insight into the past and present imagination of a population.

When one considers representations of black religion in the lowcountry that have been documented over the past century and a half, it should be apparent that Gullah/Geechee religious expression was both diverse and dynamic. Whether through the presence of black deacons and preachers who were appointed by whites and affirmed by blacks; the significant role of the praise house/church as a meeting space for black community members; or the belief in and presence of conjurers, root-workers, and hoodoo practitioners, it is certain that while they have become predominately Christian over time, religious traditions in the lowcountry have existed alongside, and at times competed with, folk religious customs such as conjure. Embracing this rich religious culture should certainly influence our understanding of religious practice among the Gullah/Geechee in a historical sense, but also should guide our interpretations of the practices of today.