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talking to the dead: religion, music, and lived memory among Gullah/Geechee women

LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, 2014, 304pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5663-9, \$89.95 (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-0-8223-5674-5, \$24.95 (Pbk)

Talking to the Dead is an ethnographic study of seven Gullah/Geechee women, and the roles of Gullah/Geechee women historically, in religious and cultural life in the South Carolina lowcountry. As Manigault-Bryant documents, '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' and 'residents of the lowcountry—the coastal lowlands of South Carolina' (p. 2). A nuanced and multifaceted book that includes ten sound recordings hosted by Duke University Press, this study aims to examine and correct the historical record's treatment of Gullah/Geechee women as spiritual leaders within their communities. Manigault-Bryant undertakes this by conducting participant-subject interviews that document ongoing syncretic spiritual practices interweaving 'folk' religious forms with Christianity, and by considering the quandary of preserving such practices in a context of touristic commodification and generational change. In five chapters, she examines Gullah/Geechee women's spirituality through attention to the unique practices of 'seekin', shouting or ecstatic worship, religious music, storytelling, sweetgrass basket weaving, dreams and memory. Appendix B outlines the study's interview format and provides income and population demographics. Throughout, Manigault-Bryant helps readers understand that what appear to be 'folk' practices are central components of Gullah-Geechee spirituality and religious practice, that women have been leaders rather than peripheral to these religious practices, and that talking to the dead is a spiritual experience manifest in both 'customs traditionally interpreted as religious' (seekin', shouting and sacred music) and 'cultural activities that may not be typically understood as religious' (storytelling, basket weaving, memories and dreams) (pp. 104–105). *Talking to the Dead* underwrites all of these practices with its rich meaning, affirming one's spiritual faith, connecting one to the deceased and to the divine realm, connecting the living and the dead, and preserving knowledge of the past as well as religio-cultural traditions and practices. Consequently, the book takes talking to the dead as its title, marks its centrality by titling the third of its five chapters 'Ah Talk to de Dead All de Time', but also threads it through the entire study. Just as Manigault-Bryant presents talking to the dead as a normalised yet essential practice among Gullah/Geechee women, she makes it both an ever-present hum under each chapter's specific focus and central to her study, simultaneously. The importance of practice, in other words, is not only documented but also enacted by *Talking to the Dead*.

Manigault-Bryant offers readers the most detailed explanation I have encountered of the complex religious music that plays a central role in lowcountry worship services, capturing the interactive richness of lead soloist giving way to successive members of the congregation, the congregation's

'intensification' of the song's tempo as the song develops the 'lowcountry clap's' polyrhythmics and the use of instruments to 'push' a song's progressions. She marks nuanced and significant distinctions between what the historical record has documented as 'ring shouts' and the practice of shouting as an entrance of the Spirit in which Gullah—Geechee women were leaders. And her work with these seven women interviewees in their seventies documents a dying form of religious conversion known as 'seekin' in which initiates 'tarry' in their spiritual search until they receive a dream vision that marks their readiness to be assigned to a religious denomination.

Throughout, Manigault-Bryant engages with historical accounts as well as first- and second-generation scholarship on Gullah/Geechee religious folk practices and beliefs. From this, readers learn in greater detail the gap in the historical record that *Talking to the Dead* addresses, in which Gullah/Geechee women are virtually written out of the historical record rather than recognised as the spiritual leaders they continue to be. But Manigault-Bryant also uniquely teaches readers how to glean information from historical sources and studies of lowcountry culture that initially seem to offer only stereotyping; this is invaluable, particularly for general readers and for readers working in other disciplines. She also carefully marks for her readers the specific limitations of extant scholarship and its negative effects for understanding women's roles, including a focus on the communal quality of religion at the expense of its individual function, an emphasis upon Africanisms that homogenises and obscures the lived experiences of women, and an inadequate accounting for spiritual dynamism that has rendered religious syncretism static. Manigault-Bryant's intervention is to employ an 'interdisciplinary methodology that joins religious studies, gender studies, ethnomusicology, history and anthropology' in an ethnohistory (p. 9), and to use 'black feminist and womanist theory as an analytical framework' (pp. 10–11). Far from freezing Gullah—Geechee religious practices as African retentions, she positions them diasporically and explores their changes over time under the transitions wrought by an educated clergy, generational changes in values, and outmigration from coastal towns and islands to cities. Her final chapter explores the double-bind of commodification that can preserve women's religious practices of talking to the dead even as that preservation is driven largely by practitioners' economic survival in a context of white tourist interest and the resort and residential development of coastal land. *Talking to the Dead* is an incredibly rich study, which will reward both a general readership and readers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2015.41