

## 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

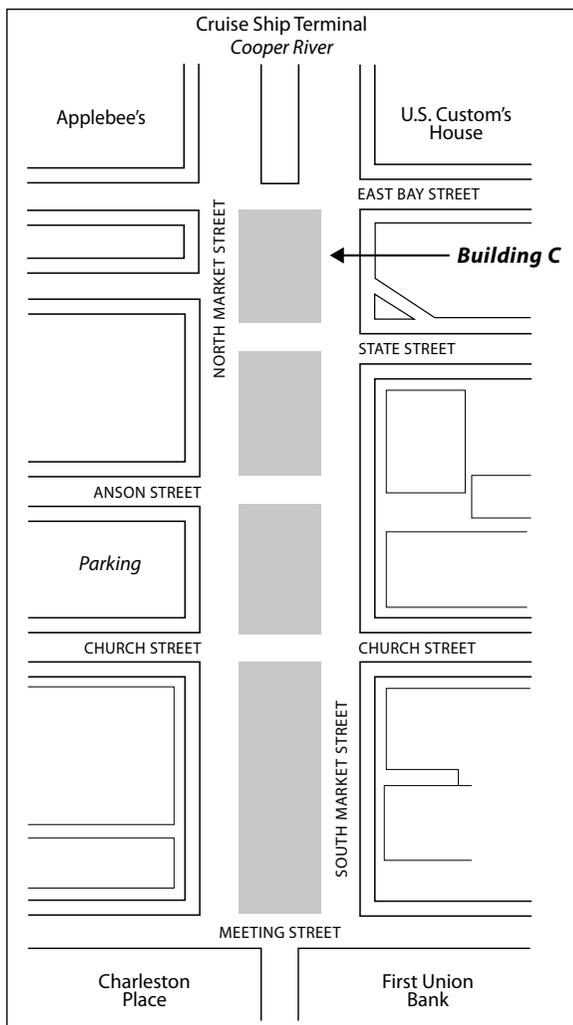


Fig. Prologue. I. Charleston City Market. Art by Pearl Delaine.

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.