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Seeking the Living among the Dead: African American Burial Practices in Surry County, Virginia

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SEEKING THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD
African American Burial Practices in Surry County, Virginia

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by
Déanda Marie Johnson
2004
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Déanda Marie Johnson

Approved by the Committee, April 2004

Grey Gundaker, Chair

Michael L. Blakey

Barbara Carson
To all those who patiently waited for me to finish and to those who helped me, but are no longer with us.
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ABSTRACT

The burial practices of African Americans have received lots of attention from archaeologists and others interested in researching African-American material culture. Interest in these practices stem from the fact that they are believed to be the most durable aspects of African-American culture and can still be observed among the descendant community. However, interpretations of these practices have focused primarily on the material objects paying little attention to present-day practices and practitioners. This emphasis only tells part of the story and is sometimes to the detriment of research as it alienates the descendant community and potentially creates an acrimonious relationship between the investigator and the community.

This thesis uses the author’s experiences with a descendant community in Surry County, Virginia, to examine how knowledge and understanding of African American discourse within a particular community can be used to bolster interpretations of burial practices. Particular attention is paid to the strategies used to simultaneously hold and convey knowledge of these practices and the categories that practitioners use to explain them.
SEEKING THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD: AFRICAN-AMERICAN BURIAL PRACTICES IN SURRY COUNTY, VIRGINIA
INTRODUCTION

WHY SEEK YE THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD

African-American burial practices are well documented, having garnered the attention of various observers, including anthropologists, archaeologists, and folklorists. The earliest descriptions of African-American burial practices date to the nineteenth century. These descriptions often focus on surface decorations, as they are “the most commonly recognized African American material culture indicator of cemetery sites.”  

These “objects include oyster-shells, white pebbles, fragments of crockery of every description, glass bottles, and non-descript bric-a-brac of a cheap sort, —all more or less broken and useless.”

The observers who wrote such descriptions were unable to camouflage their own Eurocentric biases and were condescending in their renderings of African-American culture. H. Carrington Bolton, the author of the above description, viewed the existence of these practices as proof of persisting savagery among African Americans. Since the enslaved were often prohibited from reading and writing, there is little written documentation of these practices in the words of the practitioners themselves. In order to mitigate the inherent biases in the

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documentation, the goal of African-American material cultural studies is to give
"voice to the voiceless" by allowing the material objects, which are believed
to represent "the beliefs—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a
particular community or society at a given time,"3 to "speak for themselves."

THE PROBLEM

Under the assumption that the objects "speak for themselves," researchers
often impose meaning on the objects, failing to utilize a valuable resource right
under their noses—the descendant community. Meanings behind burial practices
continue to be passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth.
Frequently, talking to people is the only way to uncover the specific identities of
the deceased and/or the locations of burials. Furthermore, since burial practices
are among the more conservative aspects of a culture, present day practices
should prove useful to infer information about slave burial practices.4

The excavation of the New York African Burial Ground in 1991, the
impetus for my own interest in archaeology, was a highly visible case that brought
to light the importance of including the descendant community in archaeological
research. The excavation forced archaeologists to take notice of the fact that their
research deals not only with the dead, but also the living. This is because the past
and present have a dialectical relationship, in which the past reveals the present.

(Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), xxi.
and vice-versa, thus making history not just a simple rendering of the facts, but intensely political.

The politicized nature of the African-American past is exacerbated by the fact that “any examination of black culture in America is necessarily an examination of the relationship between black and white America.” Archaeologists, therefore, have to be particularly aware of this relationship, since it is one that involves tension and injustices that remain unresolved. As a point of contention, it can play itself out during the course of an archaeological investigation, resulting in animosity between the archaeologist(s) and the descendant community.

Realizing this, archaeologists have seriously considered various ways to mitigate the potentially antagonistic relationship between the descendant community and themselves. One way is to include interviews with the descendants as part of the research and interpretative process. The usefulness of these inquiries lies not only in their ability to diffuse a potentially volatile situation, but also under the assumption, “The dead, the living, and [even] the unborn become linked through the transmission of a cultural system that gives meaning to persons, objects, and things.” However, if these verbal inquiries are

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6 For more discussion on archaeologists and the African-American descendant community, see Carol McDavid and David W. Babson, eds. “In the Realm of Politics: Prospects for Public Participation in African-American and Plantation Archaeology in Historical Archaeology,” *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (1997).
to be more than just mere political gestures and truly useful for the interpretation of artifacts, it is necessary for researchers to have a working knowledge of "the communicative norms and speech forms used in a [particular] community." This is because "language serves to insulate a group and protect it from outsiders." The failure of investigators to understand this fact can lead to misinterpretations, especially as a result of researchers' inability to realize that when working with native English speakers of a different ethnicity or social class there is another set of discourse rules that apply. Briggs writes, "The hiatus between the communicative norms of the interviewer and researcher can greatly hinder research, and the problems it engenders have sometimes abruptly terminated the investigation."

In what follows, I use my own fieldwork experiences to examine the communicative norms used in a particular African-American descendant community and how these norms shape the information that can be orally collected about their burial practices, hence the title of this work, *Seeking the Living Among the Dead*. When attempting to review the data, I arrived at a conundrum. I realized I could not develop a deep understanding of the practices without comprehending how and why the practitioners discussed them in the ways they did. At the same time, I could not understand the discussions without having

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some sense of the actual practices. Therefore, along with my emphasis on how burial practices are discussed, I also focus on the objects used in the practices.

"AFRICANISMS"

In historical archaeology and material culture studies of African Americans, allowing the objects to "speak for themselves" has often involved looking toward Africa. Scholarly interpretations of African-American culture in general have used African cultural practices as an interpretive framework. Thus, these studies tend to focus on the similarities between Africa and African America as continuities between the two continents, using them as proof of the strength of African traditions to survive the experience of enslavement. In the search for African continuities, the African-American cemetery has often been the focal point. Vlach, in his study of African-American decorative practices, wrote: it is in the African American cemetery that the "strongest material of African inspired memories" are found.\footnote{Vlach, \textit{Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts}, 139.} According to him, "Afro-American graves are often indistinguishable from African graves."\footnote{Vlach, \textit{Afro-American Tradition}, 147.} Thompson expressed this same view, pinpointing a specific African cultural group: "Nowhere is Kongo-Angola influence on the New World more pronounced, more profound, than in black traditional cemeteries throughout the South of the United States."\footnote{Robert Farris Thompson, \textit{Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy} (New York: Vintage Press, 1983). 132.}
The search for African continuities began with Melville Herskovitz, an anthropologist whose influential career spanned the 1920s through the 1950s. In an effort to rebut claims by Gunnar Myrdal and other sociologists that African Americans had no culture of their own, but merely a pathological or failed imitation of Whites' culture, Herskovitz undertook comparative research in West Africa and the Caribbean. Finding many similarities, he argued that African culture had survived the Middle Passage and subsequent enslavement and had heavily influenced African-American culture and, indeed, many aspects of American culture. These survivals, which he referred to as “Africanisms,” occurred because even though the trade enslaved captives from a variety of ethnic groups, they shared a generalized West African heritage.15

In the 1960s and 1970s Black Power and Pan-African movements intensified the search for connections between Africa and the United States. As blacks became increasingly interested in looking to Africa to provide them with a sense of identity, so did scholars studying African-American history and culture. While blacks sought to reclaim a past they believed had been taken from them, scholars set out to prove an African past was already embodied in African-American culture.

In the past, scholars looking for African retentions have often had a static view of culture and thus only looked for those cultural forms that remained unchanged. This view, though, reduces the complexity and dynamism of African-American culture. More recent studies have tried to incorporate a more dynamic

view of African-American culture. These studies maintain the resilience of a culture is not determined by its ability to survive change, "which indeed may be a sign of the stagnation and not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation."

These studies suggest that even the use of mass-produced items does not necessarily mean the abandonment of traditional practices. Scholars argue that these items are being used in the same way or in accordance with the same ideology, so new objects do not represent a break with the past, but continuity with the past. For example, the motif of breakage, which is believed to be an African cultural retention, is still very prevalent in African-American cemeteries, albeit somewhat changed. Grey Gundaker expressed this sentiment when looking at color preferences. She writes:

[W]hiteness—the color associated with the spirit world among numerous African peoples—constitute many of the most durable components of African American grave plot landscaping. Mentioned by nineteenth-century observers, these components remain in use, although the silvered light bulbs that mourners might have placed on graves fifty years ago have now largely given way to silvered mylar balloons.

These discussions of African retentions are prefaced by the notion that while these practices may have survived in form, they have not persisted in meaning. Fenn in her discussion of the Kongo roots of African-American funerary customs, argues that to make such a supposition "is not to say that present-day practitioners still

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see the world in Kongo terms. Traditions such as these take on new (often Christian) meanings, or they may survive as aesthetic values alone." Despite the acknowledgement that a practice with an African antecedent has evolved and taken on new meanings, few studies delve into the present significance(s) of the behavior. While "any discussion of the African-Americans, or Black people of African descent throughout the diaspora for that matter, must necessarily begin with some understanding and appreciation of African culture," it should not end there.\(^{19}\)

If researchers only focus on how burial customs reflect an African past, they are only dealing with the potential origin of the practice, possibly ignoring its value. It is possible earlier practitioners, because of the stigmatized images of Africa in the dominant society, dropped the African origin of the practice; however, to ignore later generations' continued omission of Africa is dangerous. Lynwood Montell writes, "To observe only the outward form of any activity is to negate its function in the eyes of the participants and render fieldwork meaningless."\(^{20}\) Furthermore, cultural memory is not encoded into the actual objects, but in the role the objects play in cultural performance.

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THE RESEARCH AREA

To focus on how communicative norms shape African-American burial practices, I selected Surry County, Virginia as the research area (not to be confused with the town of Surry, which is only one town within the county's limits). The county is located in southeastern Virginia in an area referred to as the lower tidewater (Fig.1). The county has a total population of 6,829. I selected Surry for the purposes of this project for several reasons.

First of all, practices traditionally associated with African Americans were readily apparent. Indeed, I was somewhat surprised by the range of traditional practices that I observed because studies that focus on these usually concentrate on areas further south, such as South Carolina, where there is believed to be a more enduring African connection.21

The appearance of these practices is most likely connected to the fact that Surry County is a rural county, which brings me to my second reason for deciding on it as the research area. African-American traditional mortuary customs supposedly have persisted longer in rural areas. Ross W. Jamieson even argues, “Only in rural African American communities have practices related to an African past continued into the modern era.”22

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22 Jamieson, “Material Culture and Social Death,” 52.
Fig. 1 Map of Virginia. Surry County is located near the bottom right hand corner.\textsuperscript{21}

Thirdly, Surry has a well-established descendant community. The county is predominately African-American and has been so for most of its history. The majority of African-American families who reside in the county have long histories dating back to the enslavement of their ancestors. Despite considerable outmigration as a result of limited employment opportunities, many people continue to reside there, choosing instead to commute. This is because they “prefer to live on the land in communities where their parents and grandparents worked the soil.” Even among those people who have left, many have returned to retire.

Finally, Surry County is located close to Williamsburg, a thirty-minute ferry ride across the James River, in fact. Its proximity to Williamsburg was important, as I was doing my graduate work at the College of William and Mary. I wanted to make sure there would be no geographical impediments preventing me from doing the necessary fieldwork to gain a deeper understanding of these practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

I have spent more than two years researching African-American burial practices in Surry. My research into these customs began by visiting different cemeteries in the county, observing and recording the different burial customs.

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23 According to the 2000 Census, the population is approximately fifty-two percent African-American.
During the course of my investigation, I visited fifteen cemeteries, both Black and White, to see if burial practices could actually be distinguished on the basis of race. Even though some overlap existed, there remained important differences between the two, which will be discussed below. The cemeteries were either connected to churches in the county or were family graveyards. Most certainly, there are many more cemeteries in the area; however, because they are located on private land, often no longer in the control of the descendants, it was difficult to gain access to them.

Using the observations I made at the cemeteries as a point of reference, I then attempted to talk to various members of the community. While locating African-American burial practices was not difficult, finding people willing to talk about the practices was another matter. While I approached over thirty people, only ten people were willing to talk to me at any length. I met potential informants in a variety of ways: at the cemeteries, at church, through the local historical society, through Poole’s Funeral Home (the only African-American funeral home in the county), randomly on the street, by knocking on doors, or through recommendation.

My conversations with people were usually informal and undirected, as earlier more formal interviews did not elicit much useful information. If I came

25 The names used for informants are pseudonyms. I have decided to keep the identity of my informants confidential for two reasons. First, while informants were made fully aware of the purpose of my research, given the informality of many of my conversations, I did not want to change the dynamic of these conversations with the formality of getting signed permission to use their names. Second, this research does not so much focus on individuals, as it does the underlying conventions of talking about burial practices.
with a prepared list of questions, respondents would only give terse, few word
answers, usually consisting of “I don’t know,” and then direct me to speak to
someone else, usually an elderly person. It became clear that I gained the most
insight by permitting the informant to guide the conversation. Often the person
would meander around the topic of burial practices, sharing much of their life
history, but in the course of the conversation they would usually talk about
someone who had died, getting to the topic of burial practices.

As a result of trial and error during these interviews, the importance of
understanding communicative norms of African Americans in Surry became
clear. For instance, I could have easily ignored the life stories as tangents, but as it
turns out, they most likely were a means to discuss burial practices. Geneva
Smitherman, an African-American sociolinguist, refers to this as narrative
sequencing. She writes, “The story element is so strong in black communicative
dynamics that it pervades general everyday conversation. An ordinary inquiry is
likely to elicit an extended narrative response where the abstract point or general
message will be couched in concrete story form.”

OVERVIEW

This work seeks to demonstrate through my own experiences how the
descendant community in question accounts in words for the uses and
significances of the material objects found on the cemetery landscape. The first

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chapter explores the reasons for the withholding of certain information, looking specifically at factors that shape communicative norms. In particular, it focuses on secrecy as the basis for African-American communicative norms and on the taboos associated with talking about death. The remaining three chapters explore the variations in the ways people account for the different burial practices. Despite the different meanings accorded to practices, the significance(s) ascribed to them generally fit into one of three categories: religion, economics, and tradition. Attention has also been paid, where appropriate, to how these categories simultaneously work to reveal and conceal information about burial practices.
CHAPTER I

A MAN OF UNDERSTANDING HOLDS HIS TONGUE

In order to understand how Africans Americans communicate information about burial practices it is not so much what is said, but what is not said, that has to be taken into account. Death is a sensitive subject for inquiry; thus, discussing death results in silences. While talking to people has been central to this research, it also has been the most difficult part of this research because of people’s reluctance to discuss death and burial. When potential informants found out about the subject of my inquiries, many replied that they did not know much about the subject and that I would be better off talking to someone else. Even those people who were willing to speak with me expressed an uncertainty or indifference when responding to questions about burial practices.

At first, I attributed this reluctance to a lack of knowledge, so I began asking people questions that attempted to elicit information which specifically pertained to them. These questions, which included plans they had made for their own funerals or those of their loved ones, but these questions, too, were answered with the same uncertainty and indifference.1 This did not initially make sense make any sense to me; surely people had to have some idea of what they wanted in the event of their own demise.

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1 Kalish and Reynolds received the same sort of responses from African Americans in their study of death and ethnicity, but they attributed these types of responses to the desire for African-Americans to present a “cool” self-image, masking any vulnerability that a show of emotion might betray. See Richard A. Kalish and David A. Reynolds, Death and Ethnicity: A Psychocultural Study (Farmingdale, N.Y: Baywood Publishing, Co., 1981), 105.
A LANGUAGE OF CONCEALMENT

The difficulty I experienced during these interviews is not unique. Many researchers using interviewing as part of their methodology have noted that people are not necessarily open and honest even when directly questioned. People’s reluctance to verbally share cultural information goes perhaps to the very definition of language itself. Tallyrand argued that language exists to “hide one’s thoughts.” Otto Jespersen took exception to this statement, arguing the purpose of language was not necessarily to hide thoughts, but language did have the ability “at least of hiding the communication of them, so that it is not understood by those who hear the words unless they are initiated.” He referred to languages whose main motive was to hide thoughts as “languages of concealment.”

African Americans’ expressive language can be viewed as the result of the historical force of Blacks’ enslavement. The daily lives of the enslaved, subject to surveillance, necessitated the development of “languages of concealment.” The rituals surrounding death were particularly vulnerable to surveillance. Eugene D. Genovese writes, “as part of the white attempt to control black religion, the slaveholder’s regime tried to supervise slave funerals and feared their providing the occasion for insurrectionary plots.” Yet, in spite of restrictions, practices continued because in order to ensure their continuity, slaves enshrouded them in secrecy.

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Secrecy simultaneously minimized and maximized "the range and content of certain communications." One of the primary modes of secrecy in the slave community was language use. Secrecy minimized communications, as information could not be shared openly. However, to overcome this constraint, the enslaved strategically broadened the range, form, content, and meaning of the dominant discourse. Thus,

The slaves, in effect, learned to communicate with each other in the presence of whites with some measure of safety, and the studied ambiguity of their speech, reinforced by reliance upon tone and gesture, helped immeasurably to prevent informers from having too much to convey to the masters beyond impressions and suspicions.

These verbal strategies, which served as the basis for slave language, facilitated the dual purpose of withholding and conveying. Oral communication could be easily adjusted to context so as to avoid detection. Language transmitted orally also allows a certain amount of anonymity because of its impermanence; it does not exist apart from its performance, allowing the speaker "to retain control over the manner of its dissemination." However, the communications are never totally anonymous, as it is difficult for the speaker to disguise his or her identity during the original speech act.

The enslaved overcame this disadvantage of oral communication by using various discourse strategies that made their communications appear less

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ominous to the slave owners, and therefore lessened the need to conceal personal identity during communicative events. Also, they developed a specialized vocabulary by manipulating the English language, changing the intended meanings of words using “ambiguity and double entendre.” This revision meant that while the language had the same “semantic content,” the meanings of the words could be reversed, depending on the way in which they were pronounced, the gestures that accompanied them, and the context in which they appeared.

One of the most widely referenced examples of this strategy is use of the word bad, which means “good” when the vowel sound is elongated “ba-ad.”

Indirection was another important rhetorical strategy used by Blacks. Indirection allows “the speaker to say one thing and mean that, but also mean something else.” Therefore, “it is left to the listener to decipher and explicate the totality of the meaning.” In Maya Angelou’s autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), she explains how the strategy is used. She writes:

If an unaware person is told part of the truth (it is imperative that the answer embody the truth), he is satisfied that his query has been answered. If an unaware person (one who himself uses the stratagem) is given an answer, which is truthful but bears only slightly on the question, he knows that the information he seeks is of a private nature and will not be handed to him willingly. Thus direct lying and the revelation of personal affairs is avoided.

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8 Briggs, *Learning How to Ask*, 46.
Angelou writes about how her grandmother’s reliance on the strategy prevented Angelou from ever really getting to know her. Angelou writes, “Knowing Momma I knew that I never knew Momma. Her African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken.” So one can only imagine if the use of indirection as a discourse strategy negotiated that much distance between loved ones, how much distance it negotiated between Whites and Blacks. Indirection also had the capability of concealing information through circumlocution. Circumlocution allowed information to be conveyed using a circular progression that may start with a point, but not necessarily end with one, as opposed to a logical “straight, linear, point-by-point progression.”

The use of various discourse strategies allowed for multiple interpretations, which had the potential of being simultaneously relevant. This meant, despite the seeming familiarity of the language, it was virtually impenetrable to cultural outsiders. As a result, even with understanding, there was misunderstanding. Language thus served as a perfect medium through which the enslaved could negotiate their existence and enabled them to construct alternate views of realities, one for themselves and one for the slave masters.

This language did not disappear with emancipation. Its strategies continued to prove useful, as African Americans negotiated their existence in a

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13 Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 194
14 Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 98.
world still unwilling to accept their full citizenship. One has only to look at the fact that oral proficiency remains one of the prerequisites for leadership in the African-American community to see its persisting value.

**REPRESENTATION**

Language enables humans to represent and misrepresent themselves and the world in which they live.\(^\text{16}\) Part of people's reluctance to communicate information about burial practices is connected to the issue of representation. Briggs writes, "interviewees are particularly sensitive to the social and political implications of providing the desired information."\(^\text{17}\) John R. Searle argues that the intention to represent takes precedence over the intention to communicate. Therefore, it is the intention to represent that "determines the force and content of the speech act," and subsequently its meaning.\(^\text{18}\)

The issue of representation seemed to figure quite prominently into Mr. Thom's concern that I would make "something out of nothing." He did not feel there was any difference between the burial practices of Blacks and Whites that could not be attributed to factors, such as economics, which he believed had nothing to do with race.\(^\text{19}\) Mr. Thom’s apprehension about discussing these practices for fear that I would make “something out of nothing” is probably

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\(^{17}\) Briggs, *Learning How to Ask*, 45.


\(^{19}\) Mr. Thom, personal interview, April 2003.
indicative of his awareness that certain practices, such as those associated with burial, are thought to be based on superstition. In the past, superstition among African Americans was used to reinforce stereotypes of Blacks as ignorant and backward. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to this type of awareness as double-consciousness. He describes double-consciousness as a

[s]ense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In the merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost....He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.\(^{20}\)

Blacks’ desire to maintain a dual identity has fostered self-conscious representation that minimizes the differences between White and Black America, often at the expense of the Black identity. Historically, African Americans have been viewed as morally and culturally inferior and, as such, the attainment of Black freedom has been predicated upon the representation of a self consistent with the socio-cultural norms of the dominant society. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the purpose of collecting and recording information about African-American practices had a civilizing mission and was often used to bolster claims of Black inferiority and thus justify Blacks’ second-class citizenship. Some researchers claimed that in order to mitigate this sort of

bias, fieldwork among African Americans could only be successfully done by African Americans. This type of thinking is premised on the assumption that "interviewer-induced bias can reduce the validity and reliability of the findings." However, so can interviewee-induced bias in which the interviewee consciously or unconsciously misrepresents himself or herself. This misrepresentation is facilitated by the fact that "one's identity and social reality are neither static nor constant, but pliable, having a plasticity that allows one to form certain personae for public consumption." 

To avoid interviewee-induced bias in their 1970s study on death and ethnicity, Kalish and Reynolds required the interviewer to be "visibly of the same ethnicity as the interviewee." Kalish and Reynolds argued that if the interviewer was of a different ethnicity, the interviewee’s fear of scrutiny might make responses “more guarded, more sparse, more socially acceptable.” In Zora Neale Hurston’s book on African-American folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), she describes this bias:

The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which their soul lives by. And the Negro in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing.

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23 Kalish and Reynolds, *Death and Ethnicity*, 12.
However, this emphasis on race often ignores the diversity of African Americans, who despite a shared history of racial oppression, are not a monolithic group and are divided along lines of class, color, and region. While race often takes precedence, the dichotomy between native and stranger seems to be just as salient. Even during slavery, “slaves would refer to others from the same plantation as ‘same family to we,’ but would often more readily include their own white folks than they would blacks from other plantations,” whom they met with “suspicion or indifference.”

Hurston’s own nativity status would be very important to establishing her authority. To collect the information for her book, Hurston returned to her “native village” of Eatonville, Florida. In Eatonville, she would just be known as “Lucy Hurston’s daughter, Zora” and everybody would help her. Hurston acknowledges that she would have faced difficulties if she had been among strangers. When Hurston did begin conducting fieldwork away from Eatonville in New Orleans, she became a Voodoo initiate in order to mitigate her “outsider” status. Her participation in the culture allowed her to gain a unique insight into its practices. Before Hurston, there was Newbell Niles Puckett, a white man from Mississippi. Puckett was able to collect material of encyclopedic proportions for his dissertation and what would later become the book, The Magic and Folk Beliefs of...
the Southern Negro (1926). Puckett, like Hurston, conducted much of his fieldwork in his hometown of Columbus, Mississippi. Puckett claimed in his preface to have “twenty years or more of close association with the Negro, an honorary membership in ‘[the] Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church’ and several years’ experience as an amateur ‘hoodoo-doctor.’”

My own race and nativity status seemed to figure quite prominently into my interactions with interviewees and consequently affected how they confided in me. Like Hurston, I am an African American, but unlike Hurston or Puckett, I had no close association with the area where I had decided to do my fieldwork. Therefore, I was a stranger. Part of people’s reluctance to talk to me stemmed from the notion that because of my status, I might not share the same beliefs or practices. Charlotte Linde writes, “The most complex type of negotiation occurs when there is uncertainty about whether values are shared, and about what values should be held in an ambiguous situation.”

Many people before answering any of my questions wanted to know my background. One of the first questions I was often asked was “Who’s your mama?” I answered knowing that the answer would not mean anything to them. The first question would be followed by a host of others, such as: Where are you from? Do you have relatives around here? How long have you been in Virginia? All of the answers to these questions established me as an outsider. Interestingly,

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some would try to make some sort of connection with me, saying that I looked like a member of one local family or another, or I looked like one of their own relatives. One woman even had answered the door to let me in because she thought I was her granddaughter because I looked so much like her. It is probably no coincidence that this woman would end up sharing the most information with me.

Despite my ability to forge connections both real and imagined, I could not completely absolve myself of my outsider status and because of the sensitive nature of my inquiries this resulted in silences. Often people when I first began questioning them about burial practices would deny any knowledge on the subject by replying, “I don’t know.” This type of response was often an attempt to disguise competence. In later conversations, though, after they had gotten a chance to become acquainted with me they would discuss practices of which they had previously denied having knowledge. This meant that the person with whom I was speaking did not feel our relationship was at a point where they could comfortably discuss the subject. Therefore, “I don’t know,” in some cases, did not indicate a lack of knowledge but a lack of intimacy.

The intimacy that developed between informants and myself was not necessarily permanent. If much time elapsed between interviews, the silence which had characterized initial conversations about burial practices re-emerged. One day, after several months of not being in contact, I decided to call Mrs.

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Thomas, an elderly woman, who had been instrumental in my research and also had become a good friend. While I did have some further questions, I wanted to check and see how she was doing because two of my other informants had recently “passed away.” I did not want her to think my research was the sole reason for my call, so I decided it was best to save these follow-up questions for another time. As we reminisced about how we had become acquainted, Mrs. Thomas indirectly brought up my research, never making specific mention of my research topic. “You wanted to find out things you didn’t know nothing about,” she said. I could tell by what she said, she probably would not be receptive to questions on the subject of burial, so instead we talked of the mundane. A few days later, I decided to go by and visit her in person. She began our conversation by announcing that one of her daughters who I had not met in my other visits wanted to know how well her mother knew me because “you can’t be too careful these days.” Mrs. Thomas told her daughter, “I think I know her well enough.” Yet, I found it curious that her son who had lived in another house on the property and had never sat in on any other of my visits, sat in on this day. After spending several hours getting reacquainted, she again was the one to bring up my research. This time though, Mrs. Thomas made specific reference to it and was even willing to answer some questions on the subject, so was her son. It seems the familiarity we once shared returned and she once again felt comfortable discussing burial practices with me.

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30 Mrs. Thomas, telephone conversation, November 2003.
"I don’t know" was sometimes followed by a qualifying statement such as, "That’s just the way it’s always been done." A statement such as this normalizes the behavior or the practice and makes it appear natural. Another way in which practices are normalized is by informants’ insistence that certain practices are based on common sense. Linde defines common sense as “assumptions and beliefs that everyone can be assumed to share.” Often people I interviewed responded to questions as if I should have already had some knowledge of the answer. In some cases, people would simply respond to questions with some derivative of the phrase, “you know.” However, since I could not assume to know the answer, I would often have to ask the person to expand upon his or her answer. My request for further clarification, though, indicated I lacked common sense, further substantiating my outsider status, and resulted in even more silences.

**LIFE AND DEATH IN THE POWER OF THE TONGUE**

Further complicating people’s reluctance to speak with me about burial practices is the notion that talking about death is an evocation of death. Jesperson referred to belief in the power of words to cause events as the “mysticism of language.” He likened the phenomenon to the “[human] tendency to ‘reify’ the name, that is, to regard it as part of the real thing itself, instead of something

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32 Linde, *Life Stories*, 18. For more discussion on common sense and normality, see 195-196.
extraneous and arbitrarily attached to it."33 This tendency, which all cultures share, is evident in verbal taboos, especially those concerning death, which prohibit the usage of the word itself.34

Among African Americans there is the belief that "to call someone or something is to draw them or it to oneself" seems to have a direct effect on the information that is communicated.35 For example, in a narrative collected in the 1930s, Emma Cooke, a woman in her nineties from Augusta, Georgia, expressed fear of talking about haunts or ghosts. From the beginning, she informs the interviewer that she hates talking about ghosts "'cause dey come to see you at night if you talk 'bout dem in de daytime."36 The woman seems to be truly anxious about this because she repeats this sentiment later in the narrative again saying, "If you talk 'bout 'em you'll see 'em tonight sho." Puckett, working in the 1920s made a similar observation concerning the avoidance of the name of the deceased. He writes, "a person should not be so foolhardy as to name a child for one who is dead—if he does so the child will die."37

Scholars discussing this phenomenon among African Americans have often traced it to the Africa, and therefore, have talked about "the mysticism of language" from an African perspective. According to John Bolling, "In certain

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33 Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual*, 152. Here I have substituted *human* for *childish*. This is because recent scholars have realized that adult humans share the tendency to reify words, which are only symbols that refer to tangible objects. See Eber and Neale, "Memory, Constructed Reality, and Artistic Truth," 4.
34 Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual*, 149.
35 Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 68.
African cultures, the traditional approach to death is not to discuss death openly or call it by that name, especially concerning certain persons....In some cultures, the living cannot speak the names of the dead."\(^{38}\) Smitherman equated it with the African concept of “Nommo,” which holds that words have the “magic power” to “actualize life and give man mastery over things.” She states, “All activities of men, and all the movements in nature, rest on the power of the word....The force, responsibility, and commitment of the word, and the awareness that the word alone alters the world.”\(^{39}\)

In my own fieldwork, the connection between talking about death and its occurrence was made when I first began searching for people to interview. A woman warned me that it might be difficult to get people to talk about burial practices because there had recently been a lot of deaths in the area. In some instances, this line of questioning was completely off-limits. When talking with Mr. Barry about the preparations people make for their own death, I asked him if his ninety-something year-old mother had burial insurance. Despite the fact that he had talked about his desires and plans for his own funeral, the subject of his mother’s death, particularly the plans that had been made for her death, was not an appropriate topic of conversation. He made this quite clear with his reply, “That is private.” Perhaps, while he could deal with his own death, he could not


\(^{39}\) Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 78.
deal with that of his mother, especially if he felt that he had somehow caused her death by discussing it.\textsuperscript{40}

The idea that the simple act of talking about death could result in death might explain the disparity between the high percentage of African Americans who have burial insurance and the relatively low percentage of those who have made specific arrangements for their death, either formally or informally.

According to Poole’s Funeral Home, which handles a large portion of African-American funerals in Surry, while the majority of their clients have burial insurance, only between fifteen and twenty-five percent of these clients pre-arrange their services.\textsuperscript{41}

In lieu of direct avoidance, African Americans usually talk about death using metaphor. Metaphor, like indirection, allows a person “to avoid making explicit what should not be spoken of.”\textsuperscript{42} For instance, saying that someone died is avoided by instead saying that they “passed on” or are “going home.” The use of metaphor puts death in a non-threatening “context in which some discussion and preparation can, and often does, take place between the dying person and the

\textsuperscript{40} Mr. Barry, telephone conversation, February 2003. Mr. Barry serves as proof that such beliefs are not just held by those from the rural south or the uneducated. While Mr. Barry’s maternal relatives were from Surry he had been born in upstate New York; however, over the years he had still spent a lot of time in Surry. Furthermore, Mr. Barry was college educated man and had taught at Virginia State University before retiring to Surry to take care of his ailing mother.

\textsuperscript{41} Poole’s Funeral Home is the only African American owned and operated funeral home in Surry County.

Furthermore, the use of metaphor also allows African Americans to avoid explicitly divulging cultural attitudes toward death that may diverge from those held by the dominant culture. Metaphors, like those used above, do not emphasize the finality of death. Instead, they emphasize that death is a transition; in other words, death is a continuum of life, not its end.44

Verbal taboos extend beyond death to also include subjects like conjuring.45 The “magic power” of words is more explicit when it comes to conjuring, though, since its effectiveness usually depends on the accompanying words. For example, the power of a charm usually depends on the accompanying words. It is usually necessary for a person’s name to be spoken along with “the desired outcome.”46 When seeking the assistance of the dead, the name of the deceased usually has to be spoken.

When the subject of conjuring is raised during conversations, people become uncomfortable and people often have fears of talking about “such things.” In a story involving a witch doctor, which will be discussed at greater length below, Mrs. Thomas abruptly ceased speaking, fearing that the witch doctor would come and “get her.”47 Mrs. Thomas was convinced that merely talking about the witch doctor could actualize the witch doctor’s power against her. Mrs. Thomas’s admission of fear contradicted a statement she had made earlier in which she stated that she did not believe in the power of the witch doctor.

44 Sullivan, “May the Circle Be Unbroken” (see note 32), 162.
45 Snow, Walkin’ Over Medicine, 53.
46 Long, Spiritual Merchants, 56.
47 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2001.
Despite the discontinuity in her statements, Mrs. Thomas makes no attempt to manage the coherence of her narrative. This seems to suggest that for her, this discontinuity is unproblematic. Fear of the witch doctor's power was once quite pervasive among African Americans. In the late nineteenth century, students from Hampton University (then called the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute), collecting information on African-American folklore, found fear of witch doctors was fairly universal. Regardless of whether a person believed or was skeptical of the power of witch doctors, the person seemed to have some fear of them.\textsuperscript{48} These fears partly stem from the belief that the witch doctor can cause the death of a person, merely by saying that person is going to die.\textsuperscript{49}

The pervasiveness of fear of witch doctors among Blacks was often seen as proof of their ideological resistance to Christianity. However, the importance of Christianity to the lives of the enslaved and their descendants cannot be underestimated. Christianity was and continues to be an important force in the lives of African Americans.

\textsuperscript{48} Long, \textit{Spiritual Merchants}, 78-79.
\textsuperscript{49} I use the word \textit{partly} here because the witch doctor has many other methods at his or her disposal to inflict death.
CHAPTER II

BUT AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD

One of the underlying goals of any narrative is to establish the narrator’s morality. According to Charlotte Linde, “people want to present a good self, and a self perceived as good by others.” Since evaluation is an intrinsic part of narration, it is the perfect medium through which to create, negotiate, and display a moral self that is consistent with socio-cultural norms. Historically, for African Americans, presenting a moral self has been synonymous with presenting a Christian self. The character of this (re)presentation has had implications not only for the individual, but also for the race as a whole.

Christianity has been an important agent of socio-political reform movements that sought to ameliorate the second-class status of African Americans. Donald H. Matthews writes, “The quest for black political rights often has been linked with the black community’s willingness or ability to conform to the standards of a Christianity that embodied European norms of civilization.”

Consider the centrality of Christianity to the abolitionist cause against slavery. Abolitionist slave narratives used Christian doctrine to arouse public interest in the institution of slavery and to popularize the anti-slavery movement. Since African Americans’ acceptance into mainstream society has been predicated upon their acceptance of evangelical Christianity, “it is often not

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appropriate to emphasize religious beliefs or experiences that [are] intimate, sustaining, or controversial." As such, talking about practices that fit into one or more of the aforementioned categories cannot be done without the employment of various narrative strategies.

To establish their morality, in the course of talking about physical death, people I interviewed would often allude to their own spiritual "death," meaning their conversion to Christianity. "Dying" in conversion narratives "represented the cessation of old ways and ideas, a denial of self in order to be ['born again' and thus] awakened to God's laws and to...moral and spiritual expectations." People with whom I spoke alluded to their conversion by prefacing what might be considered "un-Christian" behavior with the phrase "when I was in the world." This phrase refers to the period in a person's life before they joined the Church, signifying their rejection of the physical world, in favor of the spiritual world. "When I was in the world" is similar to the term "getting religion," which was used in slave narratives in much the same way to denote giving up an "un-Christian" way of life. The use of these terms to denote a conversion to Christianity creates a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, permitting the person to admit to "un-Christian" behaviors as being part of his or her past, but firmly establishes Christianity as part of his or her present. Thus, negative

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5 "Saved" is also another term used to denote conversion to Christianity. Behaviors associated with a "worldly" life include, but are not limited to, drinking, dancing, and gambling.
indictments cannot be brought against the speaker as the acknowledgment of his or her past behavior as being inappropriate reveals an "understanding of and allegiance to socio-cultural norms."6 Another way people show the understanding of and allegiance to these norms is to report on the actions of others, thus creating distance.

Consider a story Mrs. Thomas told me about her daughter-in-law. "I am a Christian, so I don’t believe in such matters," she began her story. "But when [my daughter-in-law] was sick, her family came and took her away to North Carolina to see a witch doctor." Now, I thought there would be more to the story, but she abruptly ended her tale and refused to answer any more questions on the matter, except to say that this had somehow spelled the end of her son’s marriage. As I mentioned above, Mrs. Thomas feared that if she continued to discuss the subject, the witch doctor would come and "get her."7

In this story, Mrs. Thomas uses the rhetorical device of indirection to create distance in a variety of ways. First, the story Mrs. Thomas tells does not relate to her life experiences, but those of her son’s now ex-wife. Mrs. Thomas has no real personal connection to the story and this is reinforced when she indicates they are no longer related, since the woman is no longer her daughter-in-law. Thus, Mrs. Thomas is able to "stand apart," showing that unlike her former

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6 Linde, Life Stories, 124.
7 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2001.
daughter-in-law, she “knows better.” Intriguingly, Mrs. Thomas’s story also expresses sympathy toward her ex-daughter-in-law by providing excuses for her then daughter-in-law’s visit to the witch doctor. Mrs. Thomas suggests that the daughter-in-law was vulnerable on account of her illness. She also implies that the visit was not her daughter-in-law’s choice, as her family “took her away to see the witch doctor.” Mrs. Thomas makes this point more explicit when discussing the break-up of her son’s marriage, stating that she did not think it was her son’s wife’s decision to leave, but rather her family’s.

Secondly, Mrs. Thomas also uses the story to create an ideological distance between herself and the subject. From the outset, Mrs. Thomas makes it clear this story could not be about her because she is a Christian, and therefore, does not believe in the witch doctor. Her insistence that it is her Christianity which precludes her from believing in the witch doctor’s powers creates an ideological distance between Christianity and folk beliefs. Long had a similar experience when she brought up the subject of conjuring “while serving on a mostly black female jury in Washington D.C.” She writes:

One middle-aged woman was obviously uncomfortable with this conversation and busied herself reading her Bible. She took me aside at lunch to tell me that her family didn’t believe in such things. ‘My father taught me that God made the African slaves suffer so terribly because they worshipped idols and believed in Voodoo.’

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10 Mrs. Thomas even suggests that the break-up of the marriage, too, was the fault of the daughter-in-law’s family. All this seems to suggest there was much more to this story, especially to explain its connection to the ending of her son’s marriage, but I was not made privy to this information.
The notion that the two religious systems are diametrically opposed is not one traditionally held by many African Americans. It was not uncommon for African Americans to hold on to folk beliefs even after accepting Christianity; in reality this type of syncretism has been characteristic of Black religion. The parallels between Christianity and African-rooted folk beliefs even may have facilitated Blacks’ conversion to Christianity. Genovese writes:

Folk belief, including the belief in magic, constituted a vital element in the making of slaves’ own version of Christianity, and does not appear to have introduced any greater disorientation into a supposedly pure Christianity than did those folk beliefs of ancient, medieval, or even modern Europe which steadily helped shape the formation of a high religion.\(^\text{12}\)

This view of Black folk beliefs as uncorrupting to Christianity has never been widely held by those in the dominant culture. The retention of these beliefs was often criticized first by Whites as proof of Black inferiority and then by some in the Black community, who in an attempt to “uplift the race” undermined folk beliefs by associating them with the devil and sin. Despite attempts made by Black churches to rid the race of “superstition,” “they could not easily convince conjurers or their supporters of any un-Christian doing, nor could they avoid shaping their own doctrine in such a way as to answer the questions that the resort to magic posed.”\(^\text{13}\) In fact, many witch doctors and other practitioners of conjuring insisted they were devout Christians. Ed Murphy, one of Puckett’s primary informants for his study of folk beliefs, in addition to being a conjure

\(^{13}\) Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 280.
doctor was also a revivalist preacher.\textsuperscript{14} Not everyone, though, has been able to reconcile themselves to the compatibility of Christianity and folk beliefs, and as such, adherence to folk beliefs has a stigma that often leads people to fear and deny any belief in such practices.

Thirdly, Mrs. Thomas’s story creates further distance by positing a geographical distance between beliefs in conjuring and the place where she resides. In the story, her daughter-in-law leaves not only Surry County, but also the state of Virginia, and goes all the way to North Carolina to seek the aid of a witch doctor. One could reasonably infer from this story that these practices do not exist anywhere near Surry County. However, such an inference would be a mistake. While folk beliefs may not be as prevalent as they once were, they are still alive and well, as evidenced by the woman’s own fear that the witch doctor would come and “get her.” Beliefs in African-American folk practices are not just relegated to the rural or backwoods areas of this country or to the elder generations.\textsuperscript{15} In various conversations I have had while in Virginia, although they never referred to it as such, young men have talked about women using conjuring to obtain their affection. This was such a concern of one man, he refused to eat certain foods prepared by women. Others, while admitting to knowledge of the subject, similar to the statement made by Mrs. Thomas to preface her story, said, “While I don’t believe, I have heard…”

\textsuperscript{14} Long, \textit{Spiritual Merchants}, 84.
\textsuperscript{15} For more discussion on the persistence of folk beliefs among African Americans, see Snow, \textit{Walkin’ Over Medicine} and Long, \textit{Spiritual Merchants}. 
Finally, the story creates distance by appearing irrelevant to the topic of burial practices. While nowhere in the story does the woman make an explicit connection between the witch doctor and burial practices, the fact that the woman brought up this story while talking about burial practices seems to suggest the two things are probably not mutually exclusive. Further research revealed, indeed, they are not. Witch doctors are believed to be intimately associated with death. This is because they have a close connection with the spirit world and act as intermediaries between the living and the dead. Furthermore, not only are witch doctors believed to have the power to cause death, but also much of the efficacy of their power is derived from death. When Hyatt did his study, *Hoodoo-Conjuration-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, most of “his informants considered the power of the dead to be the most important element” of conjuring.¹⁶ Many of the witch doctor’s rituals incorporate visits to the cemetery and/or the use of graveyard dirt, as “the grave itself is a charm, or powerful force, that controls events in the spirit and living worlds. The power of the grave can be activated by the objects which are placed on it, as well as rituals at the grave.”¹⁷

**Christianity and Material Culture**

By saying the presentation of a Christian self is part of a well-established rhetorical strategy, I do not mean to insinuate that people who employ the strategy are not truly Christians. Christianity not only shapes how the people speak of

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¹⁶ Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 90.
¹⁷ Nichols, “Last Miles of the Way,” in *Last Miles* (see Introduction, note 18), 10. Also see Puckett, *Magic and Folk Beliefs*. 
burial practices, but also the actual performance of rituals surrounding death. Even if a person in Surry County does not attend church regularly, most have some affiliation with a church (usually Baptist, since the majority of churches are of this denomination), which they commonly refer to as their “church home.” This “church home” is particularly important in the event of a person’s death, since it is likely to be the place where his or her funeral will be held. According to Hylan Lewis, “an essential feature of religion and church membership is the expectation of a church funeral. Among the first questions asked after death is ‘To which church did the deceased belong?’”18

Church funerals are the norm among African Americans in the county. It is virtually unheard of to have a graveside funeral or funeral service that is not presided over by at least one member of the clergy. Church affiliation can also be a determining factor in where a person is buried. Certain cemeteries in the area have restrictions based on church membership that determine who can and who cannot be buried there, although allowances can be made under special circumstances. For example, in order to be buried at Wereneck Cemetery, which is connected to Lebanon Baptist Church, it is necessary to be a member of the church or have a relative who is a member of the church. Even the meetings of the local burial society, which commence with prayer and a hymn, have religious overtones.

Christianity is also prevalent in the landscape of the cemetery. The presence of “open Bibles” (usually Styrofoam, however, in one case the “open Bible” was etched into the concrete marker) are reminiscent of a folk practice in which a Bible was left “open at night so that the power of religious words would protect a family against nighttime evil” (Figs. 2-3).\(^{19}\) Nichols discusses this practice as being a Christian reincarnation of the belief that written words, because of their “irregular patterns,” confused spirits, which traveled in straight lines, thus preventing them from doing harm.\(^{20}\) However, no one I spoke with made any such connection believing that the Christian symbolism was rather obvious. Now, this could be indicative of loss of cultural meaning or deliberate concealment; nonetheless, the fact that the meaning was replaced with a Christian one signifies the pervasiveness of Christianity.

The efficacy with which these African practices have been able to take on Christian meanings does not necessarily represent a conscious or unconscious attempt by African Americans to conceal African based ideology, but rather the fluidity of African traditions. According to Raboteau, African religions survived in the New World “not because they were preserved in a ‘pure form’ orthodoxy but because they were transformed. Adaptability based upon respect for spiritual power wherever it originated accounted for the openness of African

\(^{19}\) Nichols, “Last Miles of the Way,” 16. In one of the Bibles, though most of the writing had disappeared, the words “beside still waters” were still visible. Probably meaning, the Bible had been opened to Psalm 23.

\(^{20}\) Nichols, “Last Miles of the Way,” 16.
Fig. 2 Styrofoam open Bible- Poplar Lawn Cemetery, November 2003. (Photo by author)

Fig. 3 Open Bible surrounded by three crosses etched into an concrete headstone- Wereneck Cemetery, November 2003. (Photo by author)
religions to syncretism with other religious traditions.”21 The parallels between African-rooted folk beliefs and Christianity undoubtedly served as the starting point for this respect.

Ross W. Jamieson, an archaeologist, argues, “the orientation of the burial appears to have been one of the first practices to become standardized.”22 Despite the variation of grave orientation in Africa, it is hard to ignore the African preference for east-west orientation associated with not burying the deceased in the “crossways of the world.” This tradition would have melded well with the Christian preference for the same orientation. Thus, it would have been this orientation because of its dominance in the new environment as well as its presence in the old that probably would have led to it becoming widely accepted. Present day practitioners, however, refer only to the Christian significance of the practice. As Mr. Hudson explained, the graves were dug so the deceased will be able to “meet Jesus.”23 Christians believe Jesus will appear in the east when he returns on Judgment Day; organizing graves on an east-west axis (with the head to the west) ensures that the deceased will already be facing in that direction upon Jesus’ return.

Christianity also reinforced African cultural symbols. Even the motif of breakage, often regarded as exemplary of the African influence on African-American mortuary behavior, seems to be prevalent within Christianity. To

22 Jamieson, “Material Culture and Social Death,” 52.
23 Mr. Hudson, personal interview, September 2001.
explain the practice, H. Carrington Bolton in 1891 explained, “The negroes . . . are
simply following the customs of their savage ancestors, and are unwittingly
perpetuating the fetishism so deeply impressed.” While Bolton quickly
dismissed the motif of breakage as un-Christian, he may have been incorrect.
One year later, in response to what Bolton wrote, Ingersoll recalled his own
observations of African-American grave decorative practices. According to
Ingersoll, the most prevalent decorative items were large water pitchers that had
been cracked. In trying to account for the practice, Ingersoll writes, “Can it have
any allusion to the proverb that the pitcher that goes often to the well shall at last
be broken? Or better the memory of the prophet’s line, ‘and the golden bowl shall
be broken’?” The proverb to which Ingersoll is referring, is a Biblical passage
found in Ecclesiastes, in which images of a broken golden bowl, broken pitcher,
and a broken wheel all serve as metaphors for death. In addition to the broken
pitcher, the broken wheel is also very prominent in African-American grave
decorations. In Lay Down the Body (1996), Hughes and Wright explain how “in
earlier times a broken wooden wagon wheel was placed on the grave.”
According to the authors, the practice persists in the use of floral arrangements
designed to resemble a broken wheel. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the
appearance of two of the three symbols referred to in the aforementioned Biblical
passage is coincidental.

26 Hughes and Wright, Lay Down the Body, 42.
The motif of breakage as a symbol of death may have been familiar in the nineteenth century, extending beyond the African-American cemetery in the South to other cemeteries in the United States. In an 1852 guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery, a cemetery for Philadelphia’s white elite, a reference was made to a monument of a broken pitcher and fountain. The monument was remarked about in the guide because of its “obvious” Christian symbolism. The basis for this claim was Ecclesiastes 12:6-7, the same biblical passage to which Ingersoll alludes in his description of African-American grave decorations. Biblical imagery was very popular among the enslaved as spirituals indicate, so it is not surprising that this imagery extended to other aspects of African-American culture, such as burial practices.

Fig. 4 Wooden Cross Gravemarkers- Howell Family Cemetery, September 2001. (Photo by author)

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28 For more discussion on spirituals, see Levine, *Black Consciousness*. 
The cross is another Christian symbol the enslaved would have recognized, as it bears a striking similarity to the Bakongo cosmogram (Fig. 4). The cosmogram represents the African belief that death is not an end, but the transition to another beginning. This worldview is also inherent in the Christian cross. As a symbol of Christ's crucifixion, it is also a symbol of the everlasting life Christians believe his death made possible. This everlasting life is believed to be the inheritance of both believers and non-believers. Christians hold that on "Judgment Day" those who have been granted salvation (believers) will go to join God in heaven, while those who are "sinners" (unbelievers) will join Satan, suffering eternally in hell for their transgressions. However, the two worldviews diverged on an essential point. While the Christian concept of everlasting life is linear, the African one is cyclical, holding that human existence is a never-ending continuum and death is just one point on the continuum. Hence, the use of the term "passed on" not to denote death, but the transition from one plane of existence to the next. Therefore, even though Christianity provided an adequate substitution for much of the African worldview, it lacked this essential nuance, which was the basis for the continued relationship between the living, the dead, and the yet unborn (homage to the ancestors). As a result, there are more overt forms of African traditions in burial practices, which are manifestations of this type of veneration. Nevertheless, even within these retentions, there was room for Christianity.

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29 Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 108. See also Thompson and Cornet, Four Moments of the Sun. For the different representations of the cosmogram, see Nichols, "Last Miles," 14 (plate 4).
According to Joseph Roach, substitution or *surrogation*, as he refers to it, is the process by which "culture reproduces and re-creates itself."\(^{30}\) For this reason, substitution not only helps clarify how practices that once had African meanings, now have Christian meanings, it also explains how African Americans overcame and continue to overcome the material constraints of their existence.

CHAPTER III
MERE TALK LEADS ONLY TO POVERTY

Economics, not cultural practice, is the reason my respondents gave for the persistence of many of the mortuary practices regarded as “traditional” in the literature on African-American burial practices. According to many scholars, continued generations of poverty coupled with racism caused many of these practices to persist. For example, Richard E. Meyer cautioned “the tendency for members of an ethnic group to opt out for use of non-standard materials may be owing more to the necessity and matters of economy than to preference and cultural retention.” As a “case in point,” he made reference to “the frequent use of home-fabricated concrete markers amongst southern rural” African Americans.¹

Ronald K. Barrett, a psychologist looking at contemporary African American funerary practices, writes, “an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and values—including those regarding death, dying, and funeral rites—are significantly influenced by the intimate environment of his or her formative years and are sensitive to considerations related to socioeconomic status.”² Many of my respondents expressed the same sentiment, attributing those burial practices that

do not conform to white middle class standards to poverty. Poverty indeed has been a fact of life for many of Surry’s African-American residents, especially those born before World War II. Despite the fact that Surry County had the highest percentage of black land ownership in the lower tidewater region, until World War II “the majority of black people in the region were laborers or tenants on white owned farms and were caught in a cycle of poverty, poor education, substandard housing, and political disenfranchisement.”

“MAKING DO”

Repeatedly, in the course of conversations, people reminded me, “Our people didn’t have a lot, so they had to make do with what they had.” The impoverished conditions in which Blacks lived as a result of their enslavement and persisting after its end, forced them to “make do.” Making do meant that when a certain object was lacking, another object could be substituted in its place. In light of African Americans’ limited material resources, without the ability to make do or improvise, practices, such as those associated with burial, would have never survived.

In Surry, as well as other areas where African-American burial practices have been observed, making do usually involves the use of easy accessible items in creative ways. The usefulness of these items stems from the fact that they do

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not need to be purchased and, even if they are store-brought, they are relatively inexpensive. Furthermore, concrete, bricks, wood, and other materials used for markers are often already in people’s possession. One of my informants explained the presence of a large pile of concrete on the edges of Wereneck Cemetery with the concept of making do. Mr. Hudson, the caretaker, explained that he had salvaged the concrete from a construction site and intended to use it to delineate the boundaries of the cemetery (Fig. 5).

Making do also explains the variety of different objects used to mark graves in lieu of headstones. Many graves, especially older ones, if marked at all, are marked with naturally occurring objects, such as wood, vegetation, and mounds of dirt. Gravemarkers made of wood usually take the shape of planks or crosses, but there were some cases in which white fence posts were used (Fig. 6).\(^5\)

\(^{5}\) One of the rare instances where an impermanent marker designated the identity of the deceased.
It is rare to find the name of the deceased on any of these types of markers. The name of the deceased is not necessary because the only people (family and friends) who need to know the identity of the deceased—already possess this information.

A variety of indigenous vegetation is also used to mark graves, including crepe myrtles, yucca, wild roses, azaleas, and cedar trees, which are the most popular. Vegetation is usually placed over the head and/or foot and sometimes over the middle of the grave. Researchers, looking at plant use in Black cemeteries, often explore their symbolic meaning. Thompson points out African antecedents for plant use from the Kongo, in which the tree was "a sign of the spirit, on its way to the spirit world." In the United States, this tradition persisted with the use of evergreen trees (e.g., cedar trees). Thompson quotes, "These trees are identified with the departed, and if the tree flourishes, all is well with the soul." Gundaker writes, "To this day, trees, especially cedars, at the head of black graves doubly testify to ancestral roots and to the soul's movement to heaven."

More permanent objects, both natural and manmade, including rocks, bricks, and cinder blocks, are also used as gravemarkers. Making do is especially appropriate when talking about the use of these items because they all

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6 Qtd. in Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 139.
7 Qtd. in Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 139.
9 Bricks are sometimes used to enclose individual grave plots. For more discussion on grave enclosures as forms of gravemarkers, see Little, "Afro-American Gravemarkers," 127.
have multiple functions. These objects not only serve as gravemarkers, they also have a utilitarian purpose, serving as anchors for grave decorations so that the decorations stay in place on the correct grave, instead of blowing around the cemetery. These items are usually positioned at the bases of decorations to hold them in place. However, in the case of cinderblocks, the decorations are often placed within the spaces of the block (Fig. 7).

Pipes, according to Mr. Sewell, age thirty-two (my youngest informant), also had this dual function. Mr. Sewell’s assertion of the pipes’ utilitarian function was quite different from the function that researchers have emphasized in their writings. According to Thompson, pipes were conduits for the spirits to travel back and forth between the natural world and the spirit world. Despite Mr. Sewell’s explanation, there was not widespread evidence for pipes being used to hold grave decorations in place. In fact, I observed only one instance at St.

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11 Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 139.
Paul's Cemetery, where Mr. Sewell showed me a pipe that had the “barely-there” remnants of a decoration. The decoration appeared to have been attached to the pipe with the use of wires, but the decoration was in such a state of deterioration that it was unidentifiable; thus I was not convinced. Usually, the pipes I encountered were just single metal or sometimes PVC pipes (generally used in plumbing), positioned so that they stuck straight into the ground right above the head of the grave (Fig. 8). There was one case in which a pipe had several metal wires stuck into its top opening, resembling antennae (Fig. 9). Yet, I could not find anyone who could suggest any other explanation than whoever had put it there, was merely using what they had.

The earliest headstones at many cemeteries are not made of stone, but of concrete and are “usually tablet forms inscribed with pertinent information, often
in a rough, uneven hand” (Fig. 10). Mr. Hudson, the caretaker at Wereneck Cemetery, informed me the concrete markers had been made earlier in the twentieth century by a local African-American craftsman. In lieu of a headstone, many graves only have the funeral marker as identification. Some graves are also designated by inscriptions or plaques placed on top of the vault cover, which is above ground, with the name of the deceased as well the dates of his or her birth (if known) and death. The practice of having vaults partially above ground is reminiscent of the grave mound and makes a headstone an unnecessary expenditure.

Many of the makeshift markers are eventually replaced with commercially produced gravemarkers. The fact that these makeshift gravemarkers are replaced

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reinforces the idea that the use of certain objects arises from economic constraints. Even on graves where headstones have not yet been placed, families express the intent to replace the markers when their finances permit. Not uncommonly, families replace markers for deceased loved ones even decades after their death. For example, the marker with the Bible inscribed in the concrete appears to have been made more recently than 1963, which is the year the deceased “passed away” (Fig. 3). Sadly, though, family members pass away without ever having the opportunity to replace the headstone and that of the more recently deceased assumes priority among the surviving family members. In one case, the lack of a headstone on the grave of the woman who had donated the land for the cemetery seemed to bewilder the caretaker of the cemetery, Mr. Hudson. Instead of a headstone, two simple wooden planks marked the head and foot of her grave. Mr. Hudson was perplexed because he assumed, since she had the means to donate land, she had the means to purchase a headstone and thus attributed her lack of a headstone to relatives who cared more about their own inheritance than ensuring the proper burial of the deceased. One man had already eliminated this potential by purchasing a double headstone for himself and his wife.

Many of the objects described above can also be used in combination with each other, which blurs the distinction between gravemarkers and grave decorations. The simultaneous use of these objects in conjunction with other ornamentation typifies the concept of making do and is what Hurston referred
Fig. 11 Fish tank grave decoration, probably used to hold flowers-Wereneck Cemetery, September 2001. (Photo by author)

Fig. 12 Refrigerator Bin Being Used as Planter on Grave-Wereneck Cemetery, September 2001. (Photo by author)
to as the "will or urge to adorn."\textsuperscript{13} Hurston believed this "will" or "urge" was characteristic of African-American cultural expression.\textsuperscript{14} The strength of this will seems to be strong among African Americans in Surry County, but it can only be practiced within the prescribed limits of their generally poor socio-economic conditions. Consequently, the objects used to decorate graves are usually recycled household items and include metal cans, food jars, water bottles, and dishes. Some of the more interesting recycled items to serve as grave decorations were a fish bowl and a refrigerator bin (Fig. 11-12). All of these items had likely been used as containers for flowers, usually artificial, which are the dominant grave decoration at any cemetery.

Even though practitioners insist that they are simply making do, the objects selected for use are not chosen completely at random. Consistent with the literature there indeed does appear to be a preference for objects that are white, shiny or reflective, or have crisscrossed or circular patterns. Researchers have remarked that these preferences represent African retentions and are generally noted for their connection with the spirit world. Commonly, objects, including pipes, rocks, and vault covers, are deliberately painted white. This color is usually associated with the spirit-realm, as white was "symbolic of goodness, purity, and holiness."\textsuperscript{15} This symbolism is reflected in the visions of African-American Christian converts by the color white. Historian Mechal Sobel writes, "in most

\textsuperscript{13} Hurston, "Characteristics," 59.
\textsuperscript{14} Hurston, "Characteristics," 56.
\textsuperscript{15} Mechal Sobel, Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979) 115.
visions, pure whiteness dominates God and all the surroundings." In these conversion narratives, the convert's spiritual death and subsequent rebirth is signified by their own white appearance. In the realm of the living, the use of this shade in burial practices is a symbol that honors the spirit world and in turn, the continued presence of the deceased.

Shiny or reflective surfaces take many forms ranging from silver painted vaults to the tin foil covered vessels that hold floral arrangements. These properties are reminiscent of water, which is described in written sources as separating the realm of the dead from that of the living. Furthermore, according to the historian Elizabeth A. Fenn, many people in the South believe shiny or reflective objects capture the spirit of the deceased, thus confining it to the object. This folklore explains why reflective surfaces, such as mirrors, were usually covered before the body of the deceased was removed from the home.

Crisscrossed or circular patterns commonly appeared in the designs of gravemarkers (Fig. 13-14). Some scholars relate these patterns to the Bakongo cosmogram. According to Thompson, the intersecting lines of crisscrossed

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17 Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 134-138. It is also common for those attending funeral services or "homegoings," as they are commonly referred to, to wear white.
18 Elizabeth A. Fenn, "Honoring the Ancestors: Kongo-American Graves in the American South," in *Last Miles*, ed. Nichols, 48. For more discussion on silver, see Puckett, *Magic and Folk Beliefs*, 81, 289. He discusses how silver bullets were believed to kill ghosts and silver coffin screws were used in coffins to prevent the deceased from "haunting the living." He also makes mention of silver spades being used to dig graves. According to him, silver was "a fetish metal...no doubt the unusual shiny appearance of the metal is the peculiarity which first gave it this fetish quality." Also see Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 117-118, and Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: 1981).
19 See discussion of crosses in p. 46-47. Also see Nichols, "Last Miles," 14 (Plate 4).
Fig. 13 Concrete Gravemarker with Crisscross Pattern - Wereneck Cemetery, November 2003. (Photo by author)

Fig. 14 Rock gravemarker with crisscross quartz veins - Gravel Hill Cemetery, November 2003. (Photo by author)
patterns represent the crossroads, which are "the point of intersection between the ancestors and the living." The literature also suggests that both patterns have protective functions, since they have the ability to confuse spirits, which travel in straight lines.

These propensities often go unnoticed because of the seeming ordinariness of the objects, thus rendering these tangible objects unintelligible to all not initiated within the culture. Furthermore, the objects are also made invisible by virtue of the fact that they are usually recycled items. As such, these objects are disguised, and are often deemed as "junk" by the uninitiated observer. For instance, Mrs. Thomas explained she had simply found the "stone" object (it is not for certain the object is stone) marking her mother’s grave in the woods (Fig.

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21 Nichols, "Last Miles," 16, 41.
Yet, the object’s whiteness, with its interesting pattern reminiscent of tree bark or roots, together with the fact that she discovered the item in the woods, seems to suggest there was more to her choice of this particular object than she cared to reveal or was aware of at the time. Furthermore, things have a way of looking “right” to people whether or not they can reconstruct the reasons why.

The fact that these objects are mass-produced or are found in White cemeteries also contributes to their invisibility. The appropriation of these objects by African Americans has often been misunderstood. The objects were mistakenly interpreted as having the same meanings to African Americans as the objects had within the dominant culture. However, just as the language used to talk about objects used in burial practices is subject to multiple interpretations, so are the actual objects. Robert Plant Armstrong, an anthropologist, wrote, “In all cultures certain things exist which, though they may appear to be but ordinary objects, yet are treated in ways quite different from the ways in which objects are usually treated.”

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23 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2003.
24 In conversion narratives the woods are seen as a spiritual place where a person goes to “seek” God and commune with the spirits. For more discussion, see Johnson, “Pray’s House Spirit,” 22-23. See also Ras Michael Brown, “Walk in Fenda: West-Central Africans and the Forest in South Carolina-Georgia Low Country,” in Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora, ed. Linda Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 289-318.
OVERLAP BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK CEMETERIES

White and Black cemeteries in the County have various similarities. Economics is usually cited for the crossover between White and Black cemeteries. The use of similar objects by whites and blacks in Southern rural areas is not unusual. Jordan, who studied burial practices in Texas, concluded that the practices of southern Whites and Blacks represented a "single cemetery culture."²⁷ At White cemeteries, like at Black cemeteries, it is not uncommon to find bricks and rocks serving as gravemarkers. Those with whom I spoke attributed this to the fact Surry did not have any stone quarries of its own; therefore, acquiring the necessary stone to make such markers could not be done without incurring significant costs for Blacks and Whites, alike. Commercially made stone markers usually date to the twentieth century not only as their availability increased significantly, but also as the result of the improving economic situation of many of the county’s residents.

Mrs. Wilder, a White woman, explained gravemarkers were rare for members of her family interred at Claremont Cemetery. Mrs. Wilder’s ancestors had moved to Claremont, Virginia from Pennsylvania “sometime after the mid-1880s and before 1892.”²⁸ Following the Civil War, the economically devastated South became attractive to many northerners because of the availability of inexpensive land. This available land was the result of many southerners being

²⁸ Mrs. Wilder, e-mail message, March 2003.
unable to pay the property taxes on their land. Mrs. Wilder had no idea whether any Blacks were interred in the cemetery, but she explained it was also rare for members of her own family to have headstones. Even the graves of two of her family members who had died in the twentieth century lacked headstones. Only one of her family member’s graves possessed a headstone and this was only because he had received his from the United States government for service in the Union Army during the Civil War.\textsuperscript{29} The graves of those relatives without headstones had been marked over the years by Mrs. Wilder’s grandmother and great aunts “with large rocks and what looks like fireplace bricks.”\textsuperscript{30} However, her family was currently in the process of creating a memorial to those family members who were buried in the cemetery.

The overlap between Black and White gravemarkers and decorative practices did lead to some confusion over the racial make-up of Claremont Cemetery. As a result of a misprint in a book, I was led to believe Claremont Cemetery was predominately African-American. However, after reading a book on Claremont by one of Claremont’s White residents wherein he clearly designated Claremont Cemetery as a White cemetery, it became more likely than not that the other publication’s designation of the cemetery’s population as predominately Black had been a mistake.\textsuperscript{31} Yet, if even one Black person was

\textsuperscript{29} The presence of commercially made headstones on the graves of African American males in the county can be attributed to their military service. I was told any veteran was eligible to receive a headstone free of charge, after the proper paperwork is completed.

\textsuperscript{30} Mrs. Wilder, e-mail message, March 2003. The identity of those family members whose graves had no headstones had been passed down through word of mouth to Mrs. Wilder through her grandmother.

\textsuperscript{31} Marion Sims Baird, Jr., \textit{Claremont on the James: Its Beginnings and Early Years Circa 1880-}
buried at the cemetery that would make the cemetery racially mixed and hence unique, since most of the cemeteries in the county are segregated.

A racially mixed cemetery seemed somewhat unusual, but after reading how Northerners settled the town of Claremont after the Civil War, the prospect of a racially mixed cemetery did not seem as curious. Even after making my own observations, the cemetery’s racial make-up remained ambiguous. The landscape seemed to be more consistent with that of White cemeteries, particularly because the majority of vaults were completely buried underground. The placement of vegetation also seemed to reinforce the idea. The trees were associated with the overall landscape of the cemetery and not with individual gravesites, which is normally not the case in Black cemeteries. This means that in White cemeteries, “It is not always possible to distinguish between trees specifically planted and those allowed to remain on a site that was cleaned.” Furthermore, the photos on some of the headstones seemed to reinforce that the cemetery’s population was White.

Yet, some of the graves were decorated with shells and ceramics, a practice normally associated with African-American cemeteries, although this ritual behavior has also been observed among southern Whites (Fig. 16-17).

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32 The cemetery contained a monument to Union soldiers who had been buried in the cemetery. One of the soldiers listed on the monument belonged to a regiment of colored troops. However, it seems he was a white officer of an African-American regiment, since his rank as an officer precludes him from being African-American.


34 See Jordan, Texas Graveyards, and Jeane, “The Upland Folk Cemetery Complex.”
Shared characteristics between White and Black cemeteries, such as the appearance of shells, has led to some debate over the origins of certain burial practices. For instance, when some scholars, like Jordan, explain the overlap, they argue that it is the result of one culture adopting the material expressions of the other. Scholars making this argument often qualify such a statement by saying

\[\text{\textsuperscript{35}} \text{ See Jordan, } \textit{Texas Graveyards}.\]
that shared material expressions did not necessarily represent shared ideology. Other scholars trying to locate origins, like D. Gregory Jeane, posit that the similarities stem from similar antecedents in the respective cultures, which independently led to the presence of the practices. Therefore, despite the similarities in material expressions, the practices of the two cultures remained distinct. Jeane states,

[T]he decorative practices of the two cultures may indeed share some common traits, but the rationale for the practice represents two very different traditions. What may be just as significant as attempts to interpret or define the cultural context of these acts is the realization that, for the Europeans at least, perpetuation of the tradition became more important than the rationale behind the practice.36

The reasoning for this claim is the persistence of spirit worship among African Americans, which Euro-Americans are not believed to practice. Jeane’s argument is somewhat troubling, as it seems Jeane is determined to find European antecedents for every practice, thus separating the cultures of southern Whites and Blacks, in ways that probably were not so absolute or distinct. This type of argument ignores the rich interaction of European and African cultures, and for that matter, Native American, that resulted in the uniqueness of southern culture, which was shared across racial lines. If scholars are willing to admit that African antecedents facilitated the adoption of certain aspects of European culture by Blacks, they should be equally as willing to acknowledge that European antecedents facilitated the acceptance of features of African culture by Whites.

36 Jeane, “The Upland South,” 122.
However, in the case of Claremont Cemetery, it seems the cemetery had been incorrectly designated as a Black cemetery not as a result of shared characteristics. Instead, it had occurred because the names of Claremont’s White and Black cemeteries are almost identical, “Black” being the only word to distinguish the two cemeteries’ names from each other.

**THE NUMBER 2 BURIAL SOCIETY**

Despite economic constraints, there are ways to mitigate costs and ensure a “proper” funeral. To this end, the majority of African Americans in Surry have some sort of burial insurance. The Number 2 Burial Society has helped African Americans afford funeral and burial costs for over one hundred years (Fig.18).
The Number 2 Burial Society is the only one of its kind that still exists in Surry.\textsuperscript{37} James W. Brown (1850-1926) organized the burial society sometime around 1883 and would be the first to be buried by the society in 1926.\textsuperscript{38} Brown, a farmer, was appalled by the terrible conditions in which blacks were being laid to rest. At that time, not only could few blacks afford funeral costs, but they also were the victims of discriminatory practices, including substandard body preparations and cheap coffins. It was even believed that coffins were reused from one burial to the next.\textsuperscript{39} In these early days of the society, membership dues were ten cents a month and fifty cents every time a member of the society died. Membership insured that a person would receive two burial plots in the society’s Mt. Moriah Cemetery and a decent coffin.\textsuperscript{40} A member is able to use his or her burial plots as they please. However, if upon death a member does not use his or her plots, ownership of the plots reverts to the society.

Today, there are approximately one hundred members in the society and over the more than hundred years of its existence, the society has buried

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37 Rumor has it that the burial society has the moniker Number 2 because Smithfield had an earlier society that no longer exists.
38 Brown’s grave does not have a headstone. His grave was originally marked by a cedar tree that fell down and now only the stump of the tree remains. Mr. Odom, personal interview, November 2003.
39 Mr. Barry, personal interview, December 2002. Mr. Barry is the grandson of Mr. Brown who founded the burial society. According to him, the substandard coffins included false bottom coffins, which could be reused from one burial to the next. According to Holloway, this is a persistent myth in the African-American community since these types of coffins were not manufactured in this country. Yet, she writes, “[R]ental and reusable caskets were not unheard of in the modern funeral industry.” See Karla F. C. Holloway, \textit{Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 49.
40 The society’s cemetery, Mt. Moriah bears the same name as the oldest established African-American church in Surry, which it is located right next to.
approximately a thousand people. The only requirement for membership in the society is that a person must be between the ages of 18-50. Membership dues continue to remain affordable. Members 18-35 pay $35 in annual dues, while members over the age of 35 pay $50. Members also pay three dollars when a member of the society dies. Those members of the society who fail to pay dues for three months lose their membership, but it is possible to be reinstated.41

Today, members are no longer guaranteed a coffin. In the 1960s, funeral homes, distressed that they were losing money as a result of the society’s ability to obtain coffins at wholesale prices, banded together and threatened to take their own business elsewhere if the wholesaler continued to do business with the burial society.42 Now, upon a member’s death, his or her family receives a check for one hundred twenty-five dollars to apply to the cost of a funeral. This is a nominal amount of money considering that the average cost of a funeral today is between $5,000 and $5,700 and the average cost of a casket is $1,500.43

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

In the past, Blacks’ seeming prioritization of the funeral to the detriment of other necessities often met with criticism. Whites disapproved of Black funerals as an excessive and inappropriate expenditure, given Blacks’ poor economic status. Puckett equated Southern Blacks’ “intense passion for burials”

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41 Mr. Odom, telephone conversation, November 2003.
42 In the 1960’s, funeral homes sold coffins for $400, while the society through wholesale was able to obtain coffins for $75.
43 Representative from Poole’s Funeral Home, e-mail message, March 2003.
with that of Africans who would “[pawn themselves] and [their] children into slavery if need be to give [their] relations a proper funeral.” According to him, “The Southern Negro has much the same notion, paying dues to a lodge all his life or going head over heels into debt to see that [they] or [their] relations are laid away in style.”44 Puckett’s statement echoed that of the dominant society, which considered Black funerals inconsistent with their relative economic status. Consequently, it seems elaborate funerals were in fact a reaction to the poverty and served to negate the economic and social oppression that was imposed upon African Americans by the dominant society. Karla F. C. Holloway writes, “Indeed, as if in defiance of those trends, the opportunity to bury and funeralize someone with some measure of pomp and circumstance spoke to the ways in which those lives were racially constructed.”45 Kalish and Reynolds write:

> When a society treats a people as objects, accords them only minimal respect, and simultaneously blocks the channels by which respect can be achieved, the result is predictably, a people who desperately seek ways to confirm some sense of self-worth and positive self-identity. Success must be achieved within the limits set by the dominant culture, so that, for example, economic success can be achieved only to a point before it becomes threatening to some member(s) of the larger society and it is curbed...avenues unpatrolled by “the Man”...become means by which esteem and honor can be constructed....A dead person isn’t particularly threatening to anyone (unless he is a symbol of martyrdom or a carrier of disease). A man can retrieve posthumously some of the esteem he was not permitted to garner in life.46

Interestingly, African Americans are not the only group to use the rituals surrounding death to reverse the effects of marginalization. Scholars have noticed

44 Puckett, *Magic and Folk Beliefs*, 87.
46 Kalish and Reynolds, *Death and Ethnicity*, 111.
many groups that have been economically marginalized tend to have a predilection for extravagant funerals. Prothero discusses poor Whites who, in the Victorian Age, received criticism because they adhered to the trend of extravagant funerals popular at the time. According to Prothero, the rich “who could afford the costly trappings typically did not indulge in them.” Instead it was more likely for the poor, “who had just lost their breadwinners to spend the family fortune and go into debt in order to pay for a ‘proper’ funeral.”

Contrary to the idea that blacks desire elaborate funerals, the people who were willing to talk with me about their wishes regarding their own funerals expressed that they wanted things kept simple. Mrs. Thomas kept reiterating that she did not want people to make a whole lot of fuss over her. She wanted to be buried in a vault and claimed she did not even need a coffin. Mrs. Thomas also

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did not want many flowers decorating her grave and was critical of those who did (Fig. 19).\textsuperscript{48}

While Mrs. Thomas’s expressed desires could have been a self-conscious attempt to represent herself in accordance with mainstream America’s preference for simple funerals, she seemed truly preoccupied with minimizing the cost of her funeral. All of her wishes, including her willingness to forgo a coffin, which is the most expensive item associated with funeral cost, were an attempt to minimize the cost of her funeral. Mrs. Thomas did not want to be a burden on her family and would rather that they used the money for something else. Even though many informants emphasized economics, finances do not always serve as an adequate explanation for the preference of certain practices, such as burial over cremation.

**CREMATION**

The only reason given in any of my interviews for the preference of burial over cremation was tradition.\textsuperscript{49} Tradition figures quite prominently in Stephen Prothero’s distinction between burial and cremation. He argues, “The American way of burial orients practitioners to the past, sustaining in them a reverence for tradition, family, and community,” as opposed to cremation, which emphasizes progress by “orient[ing] practitioners to the present and future.”\textsuperscript{50} Even though cremation is significantly less expensive than ground burial, it remains largely unpopular, bordering on being considered taboo, as a result of its negation of

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\textsuperscript{48} Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2001.
\textsuperscript{49} Representative from Poole’s Funeral Home, e-mail message, April 2003.
\textsuperscript{50} Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 4.
“tradition, family, and community,” which, coincidentally, are the basis of African-American mortuary customs. Mr. Barry said he wanted to be cremated when the time came. However, when he expressed his desire to his family they were against it, especially his ninety-something-year-old mother. She informed him he would be cremated over her dead body. In the same interview, Mr. Odom expressed the same desire, but his wife was against the idea. When I asked these men, “What was the matter with cremation,” they did not offer any explanations.51

The unpopularity of cremation was confirmed by the fact that cremation only makes up five percent of Poole’s Funeral Home’s business.52 The unpopularity of cremation is not limited to African Americans in Surry. Despite the fact that cremation seems to be increasing among Blacks, it remains hugely unpopular. This is mainly due to the influence of Christianity. Historically, many Christians believed that the body and soul were indivisible, and as such, both are essential for resurrection. Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead was seen as proof of this notion. When Jesus was buried and rose from the dead, it was not only his soul, but also his body that was missing from the tomb. This seemed to confirm that the body was crucial for resurrection. Therefore, cremation was seen as incompatible with Christian beliefs as it involves the destruction of the body.53 Also, the equation of cremation with hell, as they both pertain to the burning of

51 Mr. Barry and Mr. Odom, personal interview, February 2003.
52 Representative of Poole’s Funeral Home, e-mail message, March 2003.
53 Now, it is generally held, this resurrection is a spiritual one, rather than a bodily one.
the body, is not lost on many African Americans. Furthermore, cremation was associated with non-Western religions and as argued above, African Americans could not afford to align themselves with any practice which might be considered un-Christian.

As with many other aspects of African-American culture, the preference for burial over cremation has also been shaped by the racism against African Americans, which extends to the grave. In many localities, Jim Crow laws prohibited the cremation of African Americans. Opponents of cremation cited the potential for mixing the ashes of Whites with those of Blacks as a deterrent to Whites engaging in the practice. Furthermore, Prothero states, cremation was considered an “‘Aryan’ activity....And the logic of cremation, which aligned Blacks with dirt, the body, and superstition did little to win African Americans to the cause.”

The role of violence in shaping African-American burial practices might also explain the preference for burial over cremation. According to Kalish and Reynolds, “The attitudes and behaviors of Black Americans in regard to death cannot be adequately understood without reference to the accompanying persistent historical presence of violent death.” Cremation likely has negative connotations among African Americans because lynching, which was a defining

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55 Kalish and Reynolds, *Death and Ethnicity*, 94. For more discussion on African Americans and violent death, see Holloway, *Passed On*. Holloway uses the backdrop of her son’s own violent death to examine black mortuary practices.
characteristic of the racial violence of the Jim Crow South, often culminated with the burning of the victim’s body. This connection between cremation and lynching probably made it more difficult for African Americans to associate cremation with a peaceful afterlife.

Lack of interest in cremation may also stem from the fact that in addition to being associated with secularism and racism, it is deemed “too simple.” Cremation is often associated with a lack of ceremony and ceremony is a very important part of African-American funerals in Surry County. Death is an important rite of passage among African Americans and is, therefore, a social event that demands a certain amount of ceremony. The average Black funeral in Surry includes a one-day viewing, a wake service the night prior to the funeral, a church service lasting one to two hours, and burial or entombment. Cremation would make rituals, such as viewings, wakes, and open-casket funerals obsolete. Cremation might even put an end to church funerals, since according to a 1990 study by Notre Dame, “people who chose cremation were less likely than people choosing burial to have a service in a funeral home or church.”

On August 18, 2003, approximately six months after Mr. Barry expressed to me his wishes to be cremated, he passed away. His passing was rather unexpected and was explained as a result of complications from knee surgery. Despite the fact that his desire to be cremated represented a departure from

56 Representative from Poole’s Funeral Home, e-mail message, April 2003.
cultural norms and his mother did not think much of his wishes, he was cremated.\textsuperscript{58} Honoring the final wishes of the deceased takes precedence.

Puckett illustrates this in a story about a failed attempt to override the last wishes of the deceased. Puckett writes:

[An] informant tells me of a man who asked to be buried in his own back yard. Two, four, then six horses were hitched to the hearse but they couldn’t budge it towards the cemetery. Then two horses were hitched to the rear and easily pulled it back to the backyard where the man was buried.\textsuperscript{59}

Although Mr. Barry’s wishes were honored, in keeping with tradition, Mr. Barry’s cremated remains were buried beside his father’s in Mount Moriah cemetery. This tension between cremation and burial, as demonstrated by the circumstances that surrounded Mr. Barry’s death, constantly plays itself out in the burial practices of African Americans and the way that these practices are discussed. Some scholars have seen this tension as one between “cultural retention and assimilation,”\textsuperscript{60} but it is more likely a tension inherent to the notion of tradition, which is predicated upon both continuity and change.

\textsuperscript{58} Mr. Odom, personal interview, November 2003.
\textsuperscript{59} Puckett, \textit{Magic and Folk Beliefs}, 124.
\textsuperscript{60} Meyer, “Strangers,” 4.
CHAPTER IV
REMEMBER THE DAYS OF OLD; CONSIDER THE GENERATIONS OF LONG PAST

The traditions associated with death are some of the most visibly recognized aspects of African-American material culture. These rituals are important, since African Americans “use rituals and their predictable repetition as vehicles through which to negotiate identity within a particular context.”

Holloway claims, “[N]o culture bases so much of its identity on the persistent rehearsal of commemorative conduct as does African America.” What Holloway asserts makes sense given the fact that African-American mortality rates have historically been and continue to be higher than other racial and ethic groups, and “death can initiate deeply intense desires to remember.”

Despite the fact that visits to cemeteries do not occur with any great regularity, cemeteries continue to be important, allowing “the living [to] maintain a tangible ... link to their ancestors and the memories about them.”

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2 Holloway, Passed On, 6-7.
3 Green, “Ancestral Dreams,” 49. Higher mortality rates among African Americans are often seen as the result of racism and are higher even when controlled for both economic class and sex.
THE “OLD FOLKS”

When accounting for the existence of a particular burial practice, those with whom I spoke simply responded, “It is something the old folks used to do.” Scholars have often assumed when an informant accounted for a practice by attributing it to the “old folks,” the meaning of the practice had been forgotten. This assumption is incorrect; in fact, the significance of the practice is contained in those very words. Usage of the term “old folks” shows the importance of tradition and pays homage to the ancestors. In the African-American community, the ability to transmit a practice from one generation to the next very likely held special significance, given the precariousness of familial ties. Enslaved families could be separated at any time, since slave owners had the prerogative to sell family members at will. Whether or not, and to what extent, slave owners separated families is of minimal importance because the fact remains that it was within their power to do so.

When I asked Mrs. Thomas who these “old folks” were, she replied, “The people that used to be slaves.” The ambiguity of the term “old folks” allows Mrs. Thomas’s to avoid overtly discussing the enslavement of her ancestors. Mrs. Thomas’s reluctance to discuss this history traces to the idea of double-consciousness, which reflects the duality of African Americans’ collective

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5 See Ingersoll, “The Decoration of Negro Graves,” 69-70. Also see Puckett, Magic and Folk Beliefs, 106. In Puckett’s study the informants themselves claimed “that the practice is simply an old-time custom, the meaning of which they do not know.”

6 “Old Folks” is just one of many terms that have been used to refer to ancestors by African-Americans. Others include “slaverytime people,” “people back then,” “the people,” and “oldtime folks.” See Gundaker, “At Home on the Other Side,” 47.

7 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2001.
memory of their enslaved past. Because "ties to kinship and one's ancestral history provide a foundation with which to construct identity," there is a desire to both forget and remember the enslavement of "our" ancestors.\textsuperscript{8} This desire to forget is based on the persisting legacy of "oppression and degradation experienced by so many under the yoke of slavery" that manifest in feelings of shame and embarrassment in the descendant population.\textsuperscript{9} Yet, there is also a desire to remember this past on account of its association with the ancestors, whose endurance under such horrible conditions is a source of pride. As a testament to the ancestors' sacrifices and ingenuity, they are "recognized as the progenitors of culture and the creators of tradition."\textsuperscript{10}

"Old folks," in addition to alluding to tradition, also makes reference to ancestors both living and dead. African-American folk beliefs held that human relationships, particularly those which centered on the family, did not cease with death. Thus, the grave served as a site of communication between the living and the dead. According to folk beliefs, the living and dead remained linked in a reciprocal relationship based on mutual obligations because of the deceased's protective and punitive powers. The dead ancestors "watched over their descendants" and had the ability to intervene in the lives of the living "either to aid or reprimand them, depending on whether they received proper respect."\textsuperscript{11} Proper respect usually involved grave goods, which functioned "to honor the

\textsuperscript{8} Eber and Neal, \textit{Memory and Representation}, 29.
\textsuperscript{9} Hughes and Wright, \textit{Lay Down the Body}, 2.
\textsuperscript{10} Green, "Ancestral Dreams," 30.
\textsuperscript{11} Coleman, \textit{Tribal Talk}, 35.
ancestors and thereby placated the potential fury of the deceased.” According to Genovese, it was the African-American “vision of being debtors to the ages and accordingly, a sense of responsibility to those who came before” that distinguished them from Euro-Americans.

Not only do the deceased ancestors occupy a special place in the community, but also the elderly, as living ancestors. Given the comparatively shorter life expectancy of African Americans, the ability to live to old age was seen as an achievement within itself and folklore often associates this achievement with the “possessing of extraordinary abilities.” Elderly people, for example, “positioned as they are on the borderline between life and death, already share some of the attributes of the dead,” such as the ability for their spirit to detach itself from their bodies. Possession of supernatural abilities meant that the elderly had to be treated with a certain amount of deference. According to African-American folklore, failure to respect one’s elders had punitive associations. For instance, bad luck was believed to follow those who looked an elderly person in the eyes or “sassed” them.

Respect for the elderly, though, does not just stem from fear of their supernatural abilities. On the plantation, the elderly were leaders in the community, which “included human beings, animals, plants, inanimate objects,

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12 Vlach, *Afro-American Tradition*, 138
14 African Americans continue to have higher mortality rates than other racial and ethnic groups even when controlled for both economic class and sex. These rates are often attributed to the effects of racism. See Holloway, *Passed On*, 6-7.
16 Puckett, *Folk Beliefs*, 343, 394.
and spirits."\textsuperscript{17} They also reinforced the communal aspect of slave life, serving as the primary caregivers for slave children. The elderly were also adept at folk medicine, on which the community often relied.\textsuperscript{18} Even after slavery ended, they continued to be important in these capacities.

In the course of my research, people always directed me to the older members of the community. The elderly are thought to possess knowledge of things others do not. Therefore, the term "old folks" can be a deceptive way for people to downplay that there is any real meaning behind the practice. If only elderly people have knowledge of particular practices, it insinuates that they are no longer practiced or are about to disappear. The people with whom I talked are well aware that in our modern world certain practices are not accepted by mainstream society, and thus they are reluctant to admit to those practices.

According to Loudell F. Snow, who studied traditional medicine among African Americans, "This rather noncommittal presentation of beliefs allows them to be perceived as uncommon and/or idiosyncratic; it does not give to the unknowing listener the idea that they are part of a patterned system. It also means that they may not be taken seriously or simply be ignored."\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{IN REMEMBRANCE}

In the course of an interview, it was not unusual for a person to explain that burial practices are done for the "remembrance of them." This language is

\textsuperscript{17} Coleman, \textit{Tribal Talk}, 35.
\textsuperscript{18} Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll}, 523.
reminiscent of the language used in the Bible and churches for Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a ceremony in which Christian believers symbolically share in the eating and drinking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Thus, participants remember the sacrifice he made by dying on the cross for the propitiation of human transgressions. The Bible explains that the symbolic act not only commemorates the death of Christ, it also acknowledges that Jesus lives and will return. For this reason, use of the phrase “for the remembrance of them” seems to recognize that grave decorations function similarly, signifying that the deceased lives on.

Remembering is two-fold when it comes to grave decorative practices. On one hand, the person engaged in the act is memorializing the deceased whose grave they decorate and on the other hand they are venerating the person who taught them the practice. “By actually performing the ancestors’ actions...the ancestors become increasingly real and tangible for the living.”

While previous generations may have adhered to practices out of necessity, the continuation of the ritual is comforting and reassuring to subsequent generations. “The very fact they were seen as helpful when other alternatives were not available gives them value; they allowed ‘the foreparents’ to survive.”

Ms. Irene Flowers explained this process of remembering when talking about the use of seashells to decorate graves. She had been taught the

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20 Green, “Ancestral Dreams,” 51.
21 Snow, Walkin’ Over Medicine, 34.
22 Ms. Flowers, personal interview, April 2003.
decorative practice by her mother and explained how as a little girl she and her mother would go to the riverbanks of the James to collect shells and then to the cemetery to decorate the graves with them. After her mother’s death, the woman continued decorating graves in remembrance of her mother.

**HOME**

When informants attempted to elicit where I was from, the real purpose of their inquiries was not just to learn where I personally was from, but more importantly, from where “my people” or ancestors came. *Home* is not defined as where one currently lives, but rather where one’s ancestors resided and are buried. According to Rebecca L. Green, this location “provides the tangible basis of one’s identity” and therefore, is a referent on which to base relationships,” not only with the living, but also with the dead.  

Since the home is the center of familial ties, it represents the physical basis for the continued relationship between the living and the dead. Therefore, it is not surprising that the home is also central to burial practices. John D. Combes writes

> It is imperative that the deceased be buried with the spirits of the other members of the family. The penalty for not being interred with the family spirits is, indeed, serious and results in a wandering spirit having no final resting place. There is not one thing more important in one’s life than to insure one’s place in the family cemetery.  

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Even those who leave the area often return, especially for burial. To illustrate the importance of returning home, Mr. Hudson, the caretaker of Wereneck Cemetery, related how the remains of his nephew who died as an infant up north were returned to Surry in order to be funeralized and buried. No headstone had been purchased for the infant, and only a large stone almost completely underground marked the gravesite. Decades following the infant’s death, Mr. Hudson noticed this and, not understanding why his sister (now deceased) had not purchased a headstone for the infant, had taken it upon himself to increase the grave’s visibility by adding a single white artificial flower.

It is not unusual for deceased to be literally buried at home, somewhere on the family property. If the family does not own land they are buried in close proximity to home sometimes near the farm where they or their ancestors resided as sharecroppers or at their “church home.” The rise of cemeteries associated with local churches is the result of declining landownership. There seems to be a direct correlation between church members’ land ownership and the existence of a church cemetery. Meaning, if a church has a high percentage of landowning members, it is unlikely that there will be a church cemetery. For instance, Jerusalem Baptist Church does not have a cemetery, since many of its members still own the land where their family graveyards are located.

The distance between the home and the gravesite is collapsed by allusions to the home in the graveyard and vice-versa. The allusions consist of and are not limited to the use of certain decorative objects and motifs, such as ceramics and

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25 Mr. Addison, personal interview, May 2002.
breakage. The use of these objects seems to extend beyond their convenience. According to folklore, the deceased often need these household items in the afterlife. Placing these objects on the surface of the grave prevented the deceased’s spirit from returning to home, hence permitting the spirit to rest in peace.26

The objects used in yards, like the objects used in cemeteries, “commemorate particular individuals, or they may refer to ancestors and the dead in general.”27 Interestingly, the same silence that surrounds burial practices also enfolds discussions of yard art. Commenting on her fieldwork, Grey Gundaker writes, “None of the makers of dressed yards I have met, whether their work is primarily commemorative or apotropaic protective, treat these subjects as appropriate for direct statements or direct questions, even though many of the most profound contents of the yard are right out front for all to see.”28

The minimization of this distance is not only important from a sacred standpoint, but also from a more secular standpoint:

To display connection to the dead is to display one’s roots in a place and, consequently, one's rights to inhabit and exert influence on the interpersonal, political, and practical activities that affect that homeplace. According to this system, these rights depend in part on living close to the burial places of elders and kin.29

26 See Vlach, Afro-American Tradition, 139-141. Also see Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 134.
27 Gundaker, “Introduction: Home Ground,” 18. For more discussion on the continuities between African-American cemeteries and homes, especially yards, see also Thompson and Garnet, Four Moments of the Sun.
28 Gundaker, “Places of Commemoration,” 42.
PERPETUAL CARE

Maintenance of the cemetery figures quite prominently into people's explanations of folk practices. It is an object's contribution to the maintenance of the cemetery that indicates its value. For instance, recall the utilitarian function attributed to bricks, rocks, cinderblocks, and pipes to keep grave decorations "anchored," so they do not litter the cemetery landscape.

When inquiring into the aesthetic preference for painting graves silver, Mr. Odom explained to me that the preference had to do with keeping the graves looking new (Fig. 20). To make his point, he showed me a rather recent grave with a vault cover that had not been painted silver. "What color is this?" he asked, pointing to the grave. "It's concrete," I replied. "But what color is it?" he asked again. "Gray," I answered. He then took me to a grave, which had been painted
silver and asked me, “What color is this?” “Silver,” I responded. He then proceeded to tell me that there was really no difference between the two colors and that the practice of painting the graves silver is based on an aesthetic preference to keep the graves looking new. Over time the concrete vaults subjected to the elements turn a brown color, loosing their original shade. Usually on or near Memorial Day, surviving members of the deceased paint the graves silver or pay the caretaker to do so, since that is the color most similar to new concrete. This type of maintenance indicates that the site is well kept and thus as a sign of care honors the ancestors. It is also possible that the practice traces to folk beliefs that suggest that by painting the vault covers silver, the spirit of the deceased would be confined to the burial plot, unable to wander about haunting the living.

The placing of seashells on graves is often interpreted by researchers based on the shells’ obvious association with water. Even though this decorative practice was observed at various cemeteries in the county, it was difficult to find someone who was even aware of the practice. I began to believe that these shells were remnants of a decorative practice that had ceased. This thought prevailed until I returned to one cemetery where I had observed the practice and saw that the assemblage had changed. Newer shells had been placed on a

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30 Mr. Odom, personal interview, November 2001.
31 For more discussion on silver, see p. 57-58. There was also one instance in which a grave was painted gold at Gravel Hill Cemetery. However, gold still has the same reflective properties as silver.
particular grave (Figs. 21-22). In order to try to gather information about the practice, I visited Poplar Lawn Baptist Church, which held the same name as the cemetery, but as it turned out the church was not formally connected to the cemetery. Fortunately, despite there being no formal association, many of those interred at the cemetery had been members of the church. After making some inquiries after church service, members directed me to Ms. Flowers, an elderly woman who was a member of the church and now resided in a nursing home in Williamsburg, Virginia. Not only did Ms. Flowers have many family members buried in the cemetery, but also she shared the same last name as the deceased. While she did not seem to remember how the deceased was related to her, she was familiar with the use of shells to decorate graves.

According to Ms. Flowers, shells were used as decoration simply because they were “pretty” and “kept the grass off.” Ms. Flowers was quite specific in the way that the shells should be placed on the grave. She informed me the shells should be placed on the graves with the ridges up and with the larger part of the shell pointed toward the foot of the grave. When I asked her why it must be done this way, she simply replied that’s just the way it must be done.

Jordan noticed the same predilection for keeping the grass off when observing the practice of scraping in Texas. This is a practice in which people go to great lengths to have bare earth landscapes in their cemeteries or graveyards.

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32 The shells were actually fossilized shells.
33 Ms. Flowers, who passed away a few months after I spoke with her, is now buried right next to the grave of the deceased in question.
34 Ms. Flowers, personal interview, April 2003.
Fig. 21 Shells decorating grave- Poplar Lawn Cemetery, December 2001. (Photo by author)

Fig. 22 Shells decorating grave- Poplar Lawn Cemetery, March 2003.
People he interviewed attributed the practice to tradition, aesthetic preference, and “respect for the dead.” However, Jordan overlooked the important meaning inherent in their responses, as did those scholars who have overlooked the importance of a response attributing a practice to the old folks.\(^{35}\) Jordan states,

> Obviously the interview method was not going to provide the answers. The origin of scraping and most other practices related to the traditional southern cemetery was much too ancient to remain in the memory of present-day practitioners. The reasons had been forgotten countless generations ago in faraway lands.\(^{36}\)

In his search for meaning, based on the distribution of the practice, Jordan looked to Africa where he uncovered several parallels. Jordan surmised that since the cemetery is often considered a continuum of the yard (and vice-versa), the practice “goes hand-in-hand with the typically southern and African swept-earth yard dwellings” where “[g]rass...was an unwelcomed intruder” because of its association with wilderness.\(^{37}\)

Keeping grass off the gravesites seems to be an important aspect of grave maintenance since it increases the visibility of the gravesite, indicating the gravesite has not been abandoned. When Mrs. Thomas was talking about the Parham Family Cemetery, which she is responsible for looking after, she discussed how no grass grows on the site, so I asked her, “Why doesn’t she plant

\(^{35}\) See p. 58.  
\(^{36}\) Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, 14  
some grass?” To which she replied, “I don’t want no grass. If there’s grass, people won’t know what’s there” (Fig.23).  

The growing emphasis on maintaining the cemetery site or perpetual care, as it is called, has been particularly troubling for scholars who see it as threatening to the continued African-American folk presence in cemeteries. Many interpret the growing emphasis on perpetual care as the result of the growing social mobility of many members of the African-American community who have appropriated white middle-class values. In the past (and in the present), many African Americans had to and continue to struggle for day-to-day survival. Therefore, the protection and maintenance of gravesites could not be given

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38 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, November 2003.

39 Nichols makes a similar connection between changes in burial practices and social mobility, writing, “Black funeral and mourning customs became more mainstream in the mid-20th century, particularly during the 1960s. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, Blacks had access to more social, political, and educational opportunities. Greater social mobilization and increased economic and political expectations contributed to changes in funeral and mourning customs. As a result African-American funeral and mourning customs increasingly resembled those of middle class Whites.” See Nichols, “Last Miles of the Way,” 34.
priority. Many residents now commute to better-paying jobs outside the rural community. Frequently, it is the cemeteries of the more affluent members of the County that more closely resemble those cemeteries of middle-class Whites. Also, this change potentially represents the views of a younger generation who, because of the advances and sacrifices of previous generations, have become more assimilated into mainstream society. Mr. Sewell, who as I mentioned before was my youngest informant, generously offered to take me to visit the area’s various cemeteries, and was very excited to show me the cemetery where most of his maternal relatives were buried. He made comments about how it looked well maintained, when compared to other cemeteries.40

The insistence on perpetual care is seen as a departure from the “let it be” ethos, which was previously the basis of African-American cemetery conservation efforts. Letting it be does not necessarily signify neglect, but is done so that the dead will not be disturbed.”41 Mr. Hudson explained, when he took over the job in 1945, the cemetery, which had been established only a few decades earlier was already overgrown and resembled what he called “a jungle.”42

While perpetual care receives greater attention, the “let it be” ethos continues as part of the continued persistence of the taboo against removing objects from graves. In Surry, objects are never removed from a grave, even if these objects would be considered an eyesore by most. At Mount Moriah

40 Mr. Sewell, personal interview, March 2003.
41 Wright and Hughes, Lay Down the Body, 43
42 Mr. Hudson, personal interview, September 2001.
Cemetery, to facilitate the maintenance of the cemetery, the Number 2 Burial Society, which owns the cemetery, passed a new regulation prohibiting the planting of plants and trees on graves as they made maintenance of the cemetery more difficult because of the effort required to keep their growth under control.43 Despite the passing of the regulation, in keeping with the taboo on removing objects from graves, the existing vegetation was not removed, but was “grandfathered” in, guaranteeing its continued presence at the cemetery.44

“Letting it be” even extends to the motif of breakage, which Mr. Hudson did not believe to be a motif at all (Fig. 24). According to him, the broken vessels found on various graves in the cemetery had not intentionally been broken.

43 According to Thompson, there is an intimate connection between the tree and the soul of the deceased. Thompson writes, “trees are identified with the departed, and if the tree flourishes, all is well with the soul.” See Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 139.

44 Mr. Odom, personal interview, November 2001.
Instead, he asserted that their breakage was the result of freezing temperatures.\textsuperscript{45} However, it seems in accordance with the “let it be” ethos, they had not been removed. This is a very different explanation than the one that appears in the literature, suggesting that the possessions of the deceased were broken to free their spirit.\textsuperscript{46}

In the 1920s, Puckett received a similar response, diminishing the ritual significance of the practice. He was told, as a matter of fact, that the practice prevented the objects from being stolen.\textsuperscript{47} This does not seem to serve as an adequate explanation as there seems to be a definite taboo against removing objects. When I inquired why these objects are not removed even after they are broken, Mr. Hudson informed me, “They do not like it when you touch their things.” When I inquired whom “they” were, he replied, “The people who are buried there.”\textsuperscript{48} He then laughed and explained that it is actually the deceased’s loved ones who place the items on the graves who take offense. While Mr. Hudson was quick to laugh off his response and change his story, it was difficult not to believe there was some truth in what he said.\textsuperscript{49} The literature on Black folk beliefs discusses the proscription against removing items placed on graves, as they are offerings meant to assuage the spirit of the deceased. Faulkner noted in \textit{Go Down Moses} that the objects placed on graves were “fatal to touch.”\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Mr. Hudson, personal interview, September 2001.
\item See Vlach, “Afro-American Tradition,” 140.
\item Puckett, \textit{Magic and Folk Beliefs}, 106.
\item Mr. Hudson, personal interview, Sept 2001.
\item Puckett in his study noticed that African Americans tended to use humor when talking about visits from beyond the grave in order to mask their fear. Puckett, \textit{Magic and Folk Beliefs}, 102.
\item Qtd. in Vlach, \textit{Afro-American Tradition}, 138.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
According to Vlach, "there is a complex set of malevolent forces which prevent" the theft of grave goods, including bad luck and the "plat eyes."\textsuperscript{51} Whatever the real reason, only those items that have been blown to the edge of the cemetery and can no longer be associated with a specific grave are subject to removal.

The emphasis on "perpetual care" does not simply represent the appropriation of White middle-class standards, but rather seems to represent a concerted effort by the descendant community to protect the final resting place of their predecessors. The "let it be" ethos no longer provides the cemetery with adequate protection. Often it is the "neglected" appearance of African-American cemeteries, which has led to the obliteration of many African-American burial sites. The growing emphasis on "perpetual care," at the expense of "letting it be," most likely represents the community's reaction against the destruction of burial sites. Many African-American burials are often disturbed because of their relative obscurity and the unfounded notion that the appearance of the graves indicates a lack of care about the deceased.

Mrs. Thomas expressed outrage at the destruction of a cemetery in a nearby county to make room for development. She feared the gravesites of her family, particularly those of her father and grandmother, who were buried on land her family no longer owned, would be plowed over because of the lack of

\textsuperscript{51} Vlach, \textit{Afro-American Tradition}, 141. The "plat eye" is "an antebellum [haunt] associated with the new moon and the form of an animal, usually a dog." See Puckett, \textit{Magic and Folk Beliefs}, 130. See also Fenn, "Honoring the Ancestors," 47. See also DuBose Heyward, \textit{Half-Pint Flask} (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, 1929).
demarcation caused by years of overgrowth coupled with the new owner's ignorance. She hoped that she would be able to talk the owner into letting her do more routine maintenance of the graves and allowing her to put a fence around the graves. She even wanted to "rework" or mound the plots to increase their visibility. Her desire to do this contravenes the belief found among African Americans that it is "bad luck to rework a grave."  

The tension between "letting it be" and "perpetual care" is the same one that presented itself when Mr. Barry was both cremated and buried. This tension exists within tradition, as it "embodies both continuity and discontinuity." Even though repetition is a crucial component of tradition, it still allows space for change. This latitude for invention within tradition is crucial to its very survival. Therefore, despite the fact the discrete rituals composing the African-American burial tradition are being altered, the underlying principle behind the traditions remains paramount. Neither the emphasis on "letting it be," nor on "perpetual care" are the most important, but rather, the protection of the final resting place of the deceased. Protection of the gravesite reflects respect for the dead and indicates the continuum around which relationships between the living and the dead circles.

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52 Mrs. Thomas, personal interview, December 2001.
CONCLUSION

Giving “voice to the voiceless,” has been one of the primary aims of African-American archaeology. However, the frequent assumption that Blacks are unable to tell their own story amounts to the same marginalization archaeologists are allegedly attempting to correct. While those enslaved may have not been able to record their own history and culture, their history and culture resides in the collective memories of the descendant community, as evidenced by the durability of these “living traditions.”

The living, though, are rarely included in the interpretations of these rituals. However, if archaeologists are sincere in their desire to correct this past history, so it is more inclusive and representative of the experiences of African Americans, their inquiries should not be limited solely to the material objects. Objects, like language, are “part of human behavior generally.”\(^1\) Therefore, it is not the object which determines the value of the behavior, but rather, it is the behavior which determines the value of the object. This means “the study of cemeteries...belongs properly within no one area of knowledge but is truly best served through the encouragement of multidisciplinary inquiry.”\(^2\)

Despite the interconnectedness of material and oral culture, researchers have often found information collected orally from the descendant community to

\(^1\) Searle, Consciousness and Language, 148.  
be unsatisfactory. Their dissatisfaction often stems from the fact researchers are generally engaged in a typical (Enlightenment) quest for uniformity of interpretation (and therefore meaning) among "the Southern Negro." This is difficult to come by and leads to misinterpretation. The interviewer fails to perceive that, like any other creative people, African American slaves developed a broad range of interpretations....In fact, the regional context encourages individuality, creativity, and innovation.  

Hence, the investigator's "attempt to fix meaning, is always in part doomed to failure, for it is of the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere." That is, meaning is not derived from repetition, but from its improvement and individualization. This improvisation is the result of a constant dialogue between "collective memory and invention."  

Additionally, researchers are not cognizant of the fact that secrecy, which was the basis of the existence of many burial practices, lends itself to multiple realities and therefore precludes the uniformity of interpretation. In the researcher's quest for a uniformity which does not exist, they often rely on African cultural practices to provide an interpretive framework for African-American cultural practices, such as those surrounding burial. They argue, the traditional rituals of African Americans were suppressed during slavery in the United States, but in moments of personal and social crises we see most clearly

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3 Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, 89.
4 Qtd. in McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 17.
the preservation of the cultural meanings of Africa.”7 However researchers are incorrect in this assumption, since it is “especially in the redressal of crises that the meaning of the past is assessed by reference to the present and, of the present of by reference to the past.”8 Unwilling to acknowledge this process, researchers argue that African Americans’ failure to recognize that they are engaging in African-based cultural practices, should not be a deterrent to researchers relying on them. They see the inability of practitioners to discuss these practices in terms of their African connection as a consequence of previous generations’ forced concealment of such traditions. Researchers believe the various explanations may have begun as a means to mask the practice, but over time these explanations became the widely accepted truth, making it difficult to ascertain what the original meaning might have been. For instance, Matthews writes, “The lack of African cultural awareness reveals how thoroughly African-Americans were deprived of a working knowledge of their own cultural heritage because of the ethnocentric biases in the United States.”9

The emphasis on “Africanisms” ignores the perceptions of practitioners and also prevents researchers and those who read their work from seeing the uniqueness of African-American culture and how the context of its development has had much to do with its character. For instance, while the enslaved came from an oral culture, it was the environment of surveillance that necessitated the proliferation and continuation of an oral culture here in the United States. As

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7 Matthews, Honoring the Ancestors, 44.
8 Qtd. in Green, “Ancestral Dreams,” 37.
9 Matthews, Honoring the Ancestors, 117-118.
such, in order to understand how African Americans are talking about burial practices, particular attention must be paid to the culture in which these practices were developed, if not created.

This criticism of the reliance on African interpretations does not mean studies of African culture as it pertains to African American culture should be abandoned. Undeniably, Africa was an available cultural resource not only for enslaved Blacks, but also for people of European descent. As Roach writes,

> Although Africa in fact plays a hinge role in turning the Mediterranean centered consciousness of European memory into an Atlantic-centered one, the scope of that role largely disappears. Yet it leaves its historic traces amid the incomplete erasures, beneath the superscriptions, and within the layered palimpsests of more or less systematic cultural misrecognition.10

Nonetheless, African interpretations on their own, like material objects, only tell part of the story of African America. This is because “when humans experience new symbols and facts, they tie the information in with collective experiences. In doing so, realities of the new experience are necessarily incorporated with historical experiences that are transmitted from one generation to another.”11 This meant, despite the distinctiveness of the African and European cultures, there were areas where the two cultures converged, such as spiritual and folk beliefs, which facilitated the syncretism that defined both African-American and Euro-American culture. Therefore, neither the Euro-centric perspective, nor the Afro-centric one, are adequate or appropriate to deal with the complexity of the experience of the enslaved and their descendants.

11 Green, “Ancestral Dreams,” 6. Also see Roach, 58.
Instead, research needs to focus on how practices were adapted to the new culture and what about the rituals made them worth retaining. This significantly, can be accomplished by speaking with members of the descendant community. If mortuary behavior is as durable as it has been argued, than the categories within which present day practitioners place these practices are a reflection of previous generations.

However, it must be kept in mind that “the past itself is open to interpretation, resulting in varying traditions being followed within particular regions, generations, families, or individuals.”\textsuperscript{12} Eber and Neale write, “Although the cumulative experiences of a given group of people shape their basic designs for living, it is the individual’s definition of the situation that shapes the immediate course of action he or she is likely to follow.”\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, the continuation of these practices and the way that they are discussed, are telling not only in what they convey about the ancestors’ lives, but also in terms of the descendants’ own lives and experiences. Conversations about burial practices indicate how the lives of generations of African Americans were and are personally, historically, racially, and economically constructed and reflect their struggle to achieve true equality.

\textsuperscript{12} Green, “Ancestral Dreams,” 37.
\textsuperscript{13} Eber and Neale, \textit{Memory and Representation}, 3.
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