

SERMON GEOGRAPHIES: BLACK PEOPLE AS SPIRITUAL CARTOGRAPHERS IN
SOUTH CAROLINA

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Dedication

To My Beloved Parents – Lizzie Mae and Reverend Gregory B. Cunningham

Your luminous spirits and love hold up the sky

In Loving Tribute to my Guiding Light – Reverend Charles Rice

Acknowledgments

To the source of all that's lovely and just, goes by many names and none, I give thanks to G-d for sustaining and carrying me through troubled waters and turbulent winds. Shortly after excitedly accepting the offer to commence doctoral studies in geography at The University of Tennessee, my beloved godfather, Reverend Charles Rice, died suddenly and unexpectedly. Mysterious birds followed me on the concrete jungle streets of midtown Manhattan the morning after sobbing all night. Little did I know, this peculiar species would become an abiding comfort accompanying me as I later was asked to preach his eulogy. In the spirit of James Baldwin, this same type of bird has become my flying witness, emerging amidst cross-coastal travels during major triumphs and heartbreaks.

Since 2017, I have become ever grateful for breath while grieving 34 deaths in the family and three dear colleagues; my parents' house burned down, but they survived, then spent over a year and a half displaced; my big brother, Dr. Timothy Cunningham, became an eerie national headline, went missing, and then his dead body was pulled out of a river; not to mention, the litany of dead Black bodies, and others, who have become hashtags and rallying cries for those of us yet remaining.

Understanding that life is always lived on at least two scales, the macro and micro, I am grateful for the incomparable, irreplaceable, irresistible living heirlooms to whom I owe my lineage and of whom I have my being – Lizzie Mae and Gregory Benjamin Cunningham – I truly struck the lottery as your oldest child. The flavor of genius each of you graciously gives to all in your orbit kindles a flame of sweetness, heart, excellence, gut-busting laughter, festive merriment, good food, and a home full of unconditional love. Mom, you embody and effuse enchantment in every sense of the term, and I marvel at your meticulous capacity to note and notice the stitching imprints of human personality and situations. I think I sense why you enjoy

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To all my amazing aunties and uncles on both sides of the family, I cannot thank each one of you enough for your love and support. I always felt as if I was granted my own familial “Justice

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Abstract

This paper explores the multi-faceted and complex ways that Black people, particularly Black women, engage with and encounter sermons. I'm curious about the emotional landscapes evoked amid the sound, cadence, and content of the sermonic moment and thereafter. This dissertation explores the work of sermons and the ways in which certain “earmarks” (Spillers 1974) proffer hope and sustenance, or not, in the midst of an unexplored micro-geography and the attendant “spirited landscapes” (Miles 2019) of listeners and co-explorers. Utilizing a creative visual method I constructed and implemented in the summer of 2020 for pandemic fieldwork, called sermon maps, this project investigates the co-constitutive place-making and world-making practices that unfold in response to sermons, which function as portals to complex black geographic sensibilities and interiority. This project explicates and explores “a black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011) rooted in the spirituality and meaning-making that, at its best, sustains and propels *theo-geographic (re)formulations* of American space.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

During a YouTube interview, a scholar of African American preaching, Dr. Frank Thomas, lamented, “too much genius is in the grave.” In that interview, he issued an urgent plea for more scholars of Black sacred rhetoric and preaching. Against the calamitous backdrop of slavery, segregation, mass incarceration, and dehumanization, religion became a vehicle by which “freedom dreams” (Kelley 2002) and theological ideals, such as life amidst death, took flight and planted roots in a people despised as “the wretched of the earth” (Fanon 1961). Propelled by a “revolutionary love ethic” (hooks 1993), which insists upon universal ontological dignity, Black preachers and congregations co-create new worlds. Notably, Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied this phenomenon in his “I Have a Dream” speech, lifting key phrases from Rev. Prathia Hall, a Black woman, resulting in a speech-sermon that ignited a nation to imagine and act upon what I consider a theo-geographic reconceptualization of American space.

To be clear, for the sake of this study, a sermon is a public oration whereby an interlocutor transmits value-laden exhortations concerning the nature of existence. Typically, within Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian contexts, the sermon is formulated around themes from a sacred text or scripture, such as the Qur’ān or Bible. Focusing on the latter, a process known as exegesis guides the complex, intricate task of interpretation of these ancient texts. Analogous to the axioms for interpreting a physical landscape (Mitchell 2008), geographers increasingly are analyzing embodied and emotional landscapes and moving beyond ocular supremacy toward the ephemeral and ineffable (Wilford 2015). To that end, historical accounts of various forms of “slave religion” (Raboteau 1979) view the conjuring of spirit(s) through the prisms of dancing, singing, and guttural moans, emphasizing the salience of that which defies tidy algorithms and categorization. Within this context, the sermon emerges as the premiere focal point in mainline

African American Baptist and Methodist churches. Henry Mitchell, a scholar of Black preaching, declares, “there is a radical difference between listening to an essay designed to enlighten and listening to a Word desperately needed to sustain life” (Mitchell 1990).

Sermons quite literally construct new worlds and more emancipatory, expansive, and equitable futures. In so doing, I contend that sermons perform the work of cultural geographic production and circulation while attending to longstanding themes within political geography surrounding belonging, power, and notions of home and displacement through the prism of religion and spirituality. The sermon is, therefore, a unique and unexplored micro-geography warranting an ethnographic investigation. To that end, this study seeks to unearth, explore, and investigate sentiments and emotions within the interior lives of Black women as incited, in part, through sermons. Building upon the affective turn in geography (Kong 2001; Shumer-Smith 2002; Cresswell 2015) and the spatial turn within the study of religion (Hackett 2016), this project intervenes in sonic and emotional geographies, critical race theory, and womanist theology. In a real sense, Black churches imbue the Southern landscape (Schein 1997) as radical and healing spaces of fellowship, kinship, organizing, advocacy, culture and arts, and a sense of belonging. Yet, for many, the Black church is fraught with subjugation, discrimination, and spiritual violence; that is, theology that denigrates and does harm (McKenzie 1996; Griffin 2006). Doctrines, dogmas, and unspoken moral codes persist privileging racial solidarity, on the one hand, while upholding patriarchal, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist tenets. Presently, for queer persons across race, this remains a contested and ongoing battle, as evidenced by the recently proposed split of the third-largest Protestant denomination,¹ the United Methodist Church (Zauzmer 2020). In addition, the Southern Baptist Convention, among others,

¹ The implications of this schism and ongoing debate continue to reverberate across the globe as the United Methodist Church has churches and mission-oriented operations and followers internationally.

has waged an all-out affront against teaching elements of critical race theory (CRT), framing the matter as an issue of life or death, blasphemy, and heresy while promulgating particular strands of evangelicalism steeped in bigotry, fear of “the other,” and hypocritical moralizing. The fact that such squabbles and hotly debated theological and pastoral issues remain concerning LGBTQ+ persons, race and ethnicity, and the role of women as certain denominations still do not ordain nor endorse women as elders, pastors, or bishops in ministry—even though other leadership roles are permitted. This supports the fertile ground I am attempting to fill by investigating the experiences of people on the ground and in the (virtual) pews rather than institutional leanings and official stances.

Recognizing that spirituality takes place and spatial realities are always socially constituted and contested with power dynamics (Massey 1992), both in material and metaphorical ways (Knott 2005, this study will begin within the institution of the church, examining encounters with sermons, yet will move beyond it, recognizing the African and indigenous heritage of Black women’s spirituality, which posits that “everything is inhabited by Spirit” (Walker 1973). Given the role of religiosity, particularly the role of mainline Protestant Black churches, this project takes Zora Neale Hurston’s lament to heart by centering on the banal, quotidian negotiations and “beautiful experiments” (Hartman 2019) of Black women as they navigate toxic landscapes and atmospheres of death and decay.

Within the burgeoning subfield of sound studies, soundscapes (Schafer 1978), and acoustic ecologies (Smith 2013), this paper respects the genius and expert knowledge of female actors within Southern Black churches (Bobo 1995). This study seeks to unearth, explore, and navigate sentiments and emotions of shyness, anxiety, sadness, peace, grace, and love within the interior lives of Black women. Far too often, Blackness and Black culture have been rendered as

expressive, loud, and public, as both an “act and a location” and constantly in a posture of “resistance” with political aims (Quashie 2012). Scholar Kevin Quashie posits “the Sovereignty of Quiet” as a lens to shift focus to the complexity of interiority and deep spirituality, survival, and liberation necessarily occupy many Black women’s thoughts. Nonetheless, this project intentionally centers on moments of interiority, the pensive and perplexing emotions alongside self and communal empowerment.

Historically, women—especially rural, Southern Black women, made the Civil Rights Movement *move* – from the Montgomery Bus boycott to Freedom summer in Mississippi to the decentralized base of student activists in SNCC (Zeisler-Vralsted 2019). This is why geographer Ruth Gilmore says, “in the case of justice work, I find that women take the lead in everyday struggles against toxicities.” She goes on to say, “they join forces, not only as petitioners to the state in the name of injuries sustained, but also...as petitioners to communities of similar people in the name of reconstructing places...” (Gilmore 2002). Scholars of Black and womanist theology, such as James Cone, Katie Cannon, and M. Shawn Copeland (Cone 1975; Cannon, 1995; Copeland 2010) have argued that one cannot fathom nor begin to appreciate the heart of the Black Freedom Struggle, and the Civil Rights Movement, without a sophisticated and complex understanding of spirituality and religion as the sustaining life force and *ethos* toward liberation. Propelled by democratic visions of equality, justice, and a better world, they fashioned a more emancipatory place for themselves as they sought ‘home’ and a sense of belonging. Both kinship and organizing emerged from the church (Cone 1975; Cannon 1995). Since women still fill the pews in Black Protestant congregations, with 59% active participation (Pew Forum 2014), this project will examine the trajectory of Black women’s place-making capacities during and after the sermon. I am interested in exploring the emotional landscapes that unfold while

listening to a sermon. In doing so, I want to understand what kinds of personal and social memory, sometimes laced with the wounds of a place (Till 2008), is invoked during sermons and thereafter. This study will address the following research questions:

RQ1. In what ways does the sermon point beyond the moment of proclamation toward spirited landscapes of horror, healing, and holiness?

RQ2. How do southern Black women *conjure* new worlds and function as spiritual cartographers in response to the sermon?

- a. Through the prism of sound and silence, what affective or emotional landmarks are evoked in aural/oral dimensions, speaking to ancestors, joy, and (re)making of place?
- b. What types of emotional journeys do sermons prompt or facilitate?
- c. How does the soundscape of sermons shape Black women's visions to transform local landscapes?

To examine these research questions, this dissertation used a mix of qualitative methods. These guiding questions have been addressed through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a new method I designed called 'sermon maps.' During this short, digitized summer project, focus groups were utilized to address the research question (hereafter **RQ1**) to capture themes, resonances, and symbolic and vernacular landscapes of the participants' reactions to sermons and their various locales. Semi-structured interviews with Black congregants and clergy (age 18 and up) from churches, civic organizations, and country corner stores in the greater Columbia, South Carolina area were actively recruited for participation to address **RQ1**. **RQ2** focuses on the affective and embodied discursive and political strategies that undergird Black women's cartographic proclivities. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, I analyze and "read the texts" of

the sermon snippet(s) alongside identifying key themes from small focus groups and interviews. I gathered opinions through interviews and focus groups, but also through participant observation and notes.

COVID-19 Recalibration

Due to the pandemic, my proposed methodological approaches had to be quickly recalibrated and adjusted. Initially envisioned as an undertaking that would encompass approximately 50 interviews engaged in mobile methodologies of literally walking through various landscapes and chronicling the ways in which participants/co-explorers carry sermons with them through their day-to-day lives. In addition, focus groups would have been designed with more emphasis on the sonic dimensions and aurality of sermons. Instead, I shall outline and quickly summarize the research direction I had in mind versus the redesigned emphases that ensued. While much scholarship and attention within geography focuses on urban and livable city movements, far less research has examined the lives of Black women in rural areas and small towns. Building upon insightful work exploring the arts, basket-making, and artifacts in the South Carolina Lowcountry, along with a special edition of the *Southeastern Geographer* on Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston (Halfacre et al. 2010; Eaves 2016), this project had intended to explore Clarendon County, a location seemingly “under the radar” but which fundamentally reshaped American history.

In the annals of legal history and the arc of justice in the U.S., the first legal case of five that would cumulatively be known as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) began with the case of concerned and weary Black elders requesting bus transportation for Black children walking 16 miles to school and became *Briggs v. Elliot* (1952). This case was based in Summerton, which is adjacent to Manning, both in Clarendon County. Sixty-eight years removed, this project shall

return to the people and spirited landscapes that ushered in a “more perfect union.” Given the record that two local ministers used their pulpits to galvanize people through critical sermons designed to elicit righteous indignation, and strategy among Black women, such as Modjeska Simpkins, this study focused on Liberty Hill AME Church and Biggers AME Church in Manning, where Black women virtually refashioned democracy. To some degree, initial contacts were already in motion, and two substantive weekend trips were made to begin making inroads. I attended a Sunday morning service at Liberty Hill AME Church during the holiday break and met with the director of the Clarendon County Archives, who eagerly offered support and even suggested that she was working on projects to highlight and commemorate the rich legacy of Civil Rights History.

To exhume the genius in living monuments and oral histories, I intended to conduct this ethnography in Clarendon County; however, COVID-19 upended that plan as shelter-in-place ordinances took hold. Public health was in a precarious position, and disclaimers were listed on the University of Tennessee Knoxville Institutional Review Board website delineating the types of projects that would take priority during such unprecedented times. Hence, it was deemed necessary to recalibrate my on-the-ground proposed project, including roving focus groups and soundwalks. Considerably disillusioned, after conversing with my newly sanctioned advisor, I nevertheless retooled the project to focus on my home church in Columbia, South Carolina, and refocused all my energies on a successful IRB application.

I received an unexpected compliment from the University of Tennessee review board chair on the work of Howard Thurman when she told me that she intended to read *Luminous Darkness* based on my proposal. Afterward, I excitedly conferred with the pastor of Progressive Believers Baptist Church in Columbia, South Carolina—who happens to be my father—and

hurriedly set things in motion. While grateful that the requisite pivot received IRB approval, I made an internal vow to return to the project I initially envisioned in rural pockets of Manning because “Black rural lives matter” (Louis 2017), and a story remains that must be told with an inclined “geography of the heart” (Johnson 1997) rooted in the strategy of backwoods fields, churches, backyards, and kitchen tables of everyday rural folk (Sernett 1999; Cobb 2014).

The following sections delve into revamped methodological approaches, including how utilizing digital platforms, telephone, email, and old-fashioned postal mail yielded powerful and eye-opening results and included findings that highlight experiences in the “nooks and crannies of everyday life” (Ford 2000), including backyards, abandoned buildings, junk yards, gazebos, and well-trodden dirt roads. By utilizing an anchor congregation for the study, I sought to build accountability and credibility and lend the project an initial focus and locus of study, imagining that participants might broach the topic of sermons with a helpful, local exemplar and pastor of note within the greater Columbia vicinity and region (Figure 1).

Study Location and Context: South Carolina

Before sketching pandemic-related adjustments, I hasten to highlight and illuminate the paramount importance of South Carolina to the study of Black life, black studies, and African American history. The single largest slave port was Charleston, South Carolina, with more than “40% of those who were forced from Africa to the shores of North America arrived in Charleston” (Carrier 2021). Moving inland to the state capital of Columbia, situated in Richland County, which serves as the seat of political and legislative power alongside the flagship campus of The University of South Carolina and two historically black colleges and universities, Benedict College and Allen University. “Whether advocating for the abolition of slavery, the need for integration and fundamental civil rights, or value of education, black South Carolinians

have steadily gone out into the world ready to crusade for the causes of the poor and neglected and to live the hopes and dreams of their communities” (Thomas and Ashton 2014, p. 3). Figure 1 shows a map of the study area.

As vestiges of the confederacy continue to dot the landscape with monuments, Confederate flags, and toponyms named after segregationists, at the same time, a storied and radically imaginative tradition of Black South Carolinians effuses its histories and genealogies in Columbia. Historic markers designate and reverence the legacy of Modjeska Simkins, for instance, with her home listed as part of the Historic Columbia tour. Such forms of commemoration and public memory signal the fervor and tenacity that yet remain among many within the Black community across the state, as evidenced in a relatively recent compilation:

“What this collection seeks to address is the singularly narrow way in which South Carolina character has been defined in the popular imagination, for an equally important tradition parallels the one just mentioned—that of national prominence and influence of black thinkers, educators, journalists, and policy analysts from South Carolina who have used their experiences in the state to shape their own thinking about the state of the nation. Individuals such as Francis Grimke, Daniel Payne, Mary McLeod Bethune, Benjamin Mays, Kelly Miller, Septima Clark, Eugene Robinson, Marian Wright Edelman, and Jesse Jackson have changed this nation for the better with their questions, challenges, and persistence—all in the proudest South Carolinian tradition.” (Thomas and Ashton 2014, p. 2)

Such context is critical because the spatial imaginaries and proclivities espoused by the majority of participants, even those who may not consider themselves actively engaged in social justice, bears the markings of this region’s history as contested battlegrounds for the soul of a nation *and* landscapes of conjuring whereby daily machinations reverberate joy sublime. In the summer of 2020, making the shift to root the study in a church-based in Columbia seemed ripe with fecund possibilities.

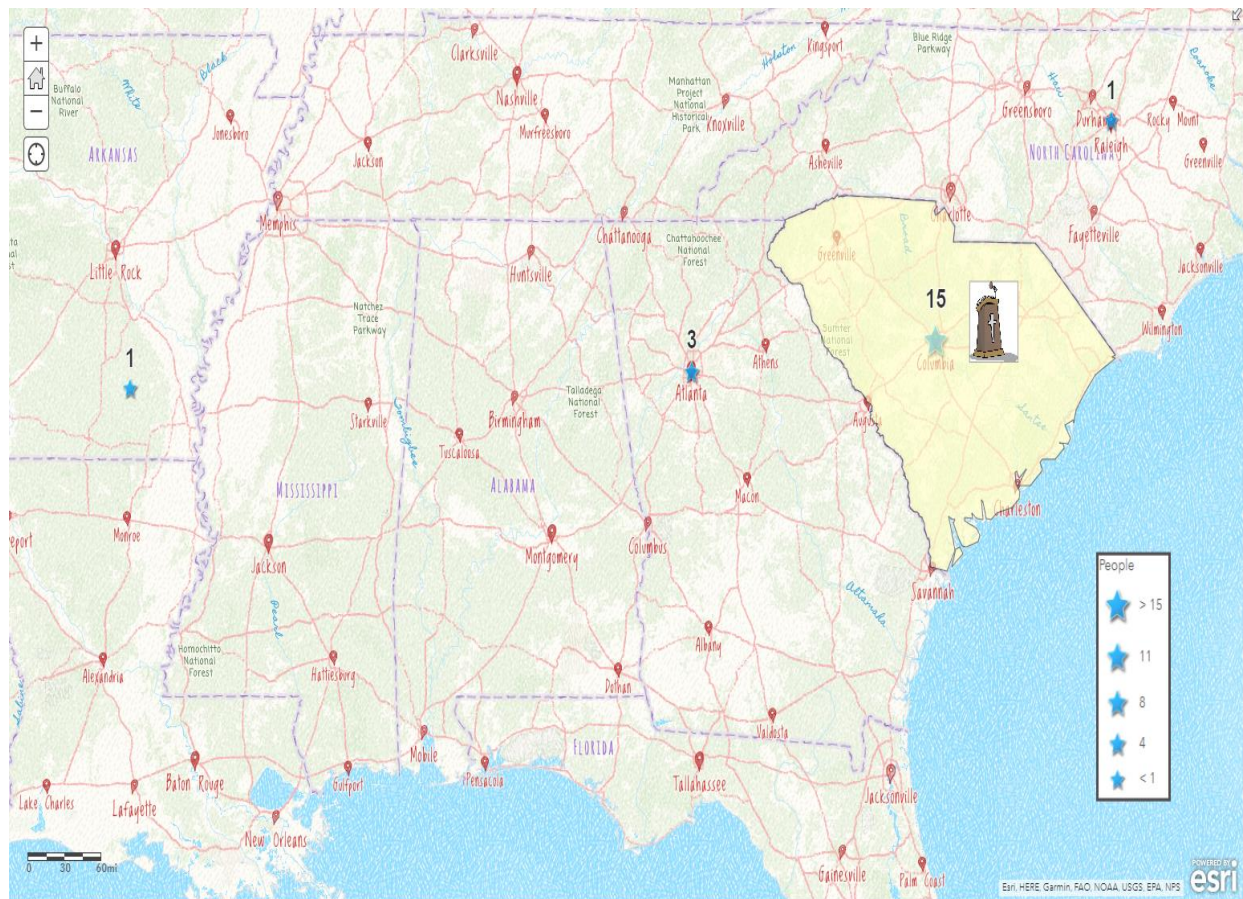


Figure 1: Map of Study Area & Zoom Co-Explorer Locations. Created by author and classmate, Jimmy Feng.

Additionally, this move toward a congregation in Columbia ensured access to resources to conduct the study without delay, particularly as the novel coronavirus was still rampant in the summer of 2020. In lieu of this global pandemic, I adjusted and recalibrated my study location, approach, and methodology to account for public safety concerns. Following the guidance of the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention (CDC), I adjusted my proposal and made meticulous edits to my second IRB submission, and then received the green light to do my research. I recruited via Facebook, word of mouth, and the church's website, and the project became an entirely digital study, utilizing telephone and Zoom calls for semi-structured interviews, Zoom focus groups, and a creative method I designed called sermon maps. Rather than in-person gatherings, I became a participant-observer from afar as weekly, streamlined church services were broadcast via Facebook Live on a member's cell phone in the pastor's home until they later began streaming via a makeshift worship zone at the church manse or parsonage, which is still operational and functioning as the weekly broadcast portal.

In a sense, this summer research study, while approached remotely, as I lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, nonetheless emerges from a total of almost 20 years of collective historical memory of people and places. As I would later discover, in some ways, this became an asset given the openness, trust, and candor participants offered as they perceived an insider among them (DeLyser 2001). The sense of euphoria and energy generated from the topic and advertisement came through with several email inquiries, Facebook private messages, phone calls, and persons who mentioned that they did not want to participate but proceeded to spend anywhere from five minutes to an hour sharing their thoughts on sermons – the good, the bad, the long-winded, the boring, the ignorant, the shame-inducing, the liberatory, the cathartic, the inspirational, and the seminal moments of certain sermons in which traces, imagery, themes, and

symbols still come to mind by “(re)memory” as Toni Morrison called it, and which circulate within their life-worlds.

Dissertation Format Rationale

This dissertation uses a standard monograph approach to address my guiding research questions. After weighing the options concerning the three-article journal approach, I opted to forgo that option in favor of crafting a narrative arc that builds from the first word until the end with layers, dimensions, allegorical asides, and illustrative windows not unlike the phenomena under study. While I still intend to re-work a chapter or two for submission to peer-reviewed journals, my sincere aim has always been to write a standard monograph with the hope of utilizing critiques, feedback, and suggestions from my doctoral committee to expand and rework the final draft into my first book. I was guided, in part, by the final submission of peers and former classmates in the program who wrote standard monographs. I find purchase and cerebral moorings in this style and format as the best mechanism for exploring and honoring a topic that resides within a space and plane that’s so intimate and innate to my being that it’s almost like oxygen. I dream about sermons, arise from slumber thinking about figures of speech, notice phraseology and syncopated rhythms in everyday parlance, vernacular expressions, mundane yet sublime communion, routines, and so much more.

Positionality Statement

I conducted this research project in part utilizing the resources and access granted to me as an affiliated minister and daughter of the pastor of a church in Columbia, South Carolina. I happen to be an ordained Baptist reverend with a twist, including certifications in Reiki, transdisciplinary chaplaincy, holistic care, and over a decade of experience in hospital, entrepreneurial, movement, philanthropic, and collegiate chaplaincy contexts. I disclose this

background as it informed and guided my preparation of IRB materials and the flow and rhythm of online Zoom sessions, interviews, and interactions with participants.

I am a Black, middle-class queer woman who grew up as a military kid. South Carolina, however, remains home base, as both sides of my family have deep roots in the soil and fields now known as Manning, Kingstree, and Andrews, South Carolina. To protect the privacy and autonomy of participants, given the nature of a relatively small sample of co-explorers who journeyed alongside me on this sermon map journey, I decided not to disclose the name of the church that functioned as a launching site. I took great care and performed due diligence planning and refining the data collection protocols and instruments, attempting to recruit a wide swath of participants given my positionality.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter honors the tenor and flow of a finely tuned sermon by setting the stage for the substance of this academic inquiry with context and background. The epistemological framework guiding this literature review—and its attendant placement at the onset—mirrors the style, rhythm, and order of the subject of inquiry. In black churches—and frankly any church, for that matter—the preacher often utilizes a “hook,” such as an anecdote, story, joke, historical or cultural reference, or fable to titillate the aural and oral sensory dimensions of the congregation or crowd, drawing the audience into a dialectical co-constitutive place-making process (Wong 2004). Soon after effectively and functionally whetting the appetite for the exploration to follow, the very first pivot made by a seasoned preacher involves a thoughtful and meticulous scaffolding of the sacred text(s)—most often, but not exclusively, the Bible, guiding the proclamation by proffering relevant context, background on the genre, linguistic and hermeneutic concerns, purpose and aim of the biblical writer(s) of certain books within the sixty-six canonical and often the non-canonical, as well.

In that vein, this chapter reviews literature in Black geographies, geographies of religion, and critical cartography to introduce the sermon as a spiritual map. This chapter commences with an overview of pertinent ideas and themes that have been explored and examined as “a Black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011) while responding, in particular, to McKittrick’s clarion call for studies that center on “Black geographic *life*” (ibid. 953). Quintessentially, participants affirmed that sermons, at their best, are life-giving (explored fully in Chapter 5), containing multitudes of spatial dimensions at various scales, ranging from private dreams to the body and one’s personhood to physical landscapes as well as ephemera; therefore, to situate the work of

sermons, it becomes prescient to remember the backdrop within a U.S. context for an oppressed people who navigated myriad terrains:

“The conditions of bondage did not foreclose Black geographies but rather incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were/are produced outside the official tenets of cartography: fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps were assembled alongside ‘real’ maps (those produced by Black cartographers and explorers who document landmasses, roads, routes, boundaries, and so forth).” (McKittrick 2011, p. 949)

This review commences a conceptual call and response explicating the definition and work of sermons, among other things, as an “alternative mapping practice” that operates and circulates beyond sanctioned sites of cartographic knowledge production and sanctioned sites of sacred encounters (Kong 2010). It is my contention that a kind of Black counter public unfolds in the production, consumption, and dispersion of a sermon’s afterlife, not unlike Sadiya Hartman (2008).

The Sermon as a Portal

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” (Roy 2020)

Roughly a month after the novel coronavirus disrupted life as we know it, Arundhati Roy chronicled the carnage and particularities of the pandemic with respect to India and beyond with veracity. She offered a warning alongside a liberatory invitation that the pandemic could be approached and seen as a portal (Roy 2020) to entirely new ways of being and relating to one another and the earth. With an analogous thread, this chapter seeks to delineate and situate sermons as a kind of spiritual geographic portal, with coordinates and legends lodged within the exposition of this speech act. Indeed, sermons provide a means by which our current lot and

predicament become a canvas of exploration through moments of proclamation as well as beyond it. Not only does the sermon operate from the vantage point of the speaker or preacher, moving outward toward another; it also functions through interiority as word pictures, images, memories, and recollections kindle within the listener and co-explorer in ways that effuse kinetic and visceral geographies (Hayes-Conroy 2010).

The Work of Sermons

Sermons embody and convey life-worlds. To listen to a sermon is to be teleported to a domain all its own. In each sermon, in traditional contexts, that is, when one primary speaker—or, on rare occasions, two, in the case of tag-team preaching—shares with an audience of at least two or three gathered (Matthew 18:20) together with intention, an encounter with spirit unfolds. Preaching in many contexts, particularly African American and Protestant mainline traditions, becomes the main event of the liturgy and church service. A sort of liturgical hierarchy undergirds the ebbs and flows of a church service, or less harshly, akin to a symphony, the opening prayers, songs, testifying, litanies, and readings, all crescendo at the sermon as the main event.

In part, this choreography of weekly respite, worship, and collective spiritual fellowship erupts, as scholar Henry Mitchell (1990) purports, because “the preacher provides an opportunity for the congregation to grieve, rejoice, think, and share. The preacher, according to Richard Ward, is a prism” (Fry Brown 2008, p. 72). Functioning as a prism, the preacher elucidates a message that becomes a portal by which each person, and the collective group, enter a new land, a new space, a heretofore nonexistent plane that had to be called into being by this oral and aural “hapticality” (Harney and Moton 2013, p. 105) or exchange. A preeminent scholar of preaching, Teresa Fry Brown, posits that “oral competence is grounded in the intentions of the speaker and

the receptivity of the listener...” (Fry Brown 2008, p. 3). Hence, to judge the efficacy or impact of a particular sermon, a duality or dialectic exists, always creating the context and environment by which a sermon is deemed worthwhile, impactful, boring, or ineffective. Several colloquial expressions designed to affirm the valence and import often accompany a particularly riveting and soul-stirring sermon, such as that was “a Word!” or “didn’t our hearts burn?” Conversely, when a sermon did not quite land or meet the mark, it is not uncommon, in certain congregations and settings, for an audible “Lord help!” to usher forth. Revisiting classic definitions of the rhetoric, preeminent scholar of preaching, Teresa Fry Brown, emphasizes that rhetoric is “the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively. Sermons are basically an arrangement of sounds, words, movements, and even silence used to communicate faith claims” (Fry Brown, 2008, p. 2-3). The utility, finesse, and impact of sermons, to some degree, mirror principles of rhetoric and the arts of persuasion a la Cicero. The phrase “they have the learnin’, and the burnin’” becomes a signifier of affirmation and potency, uttered when the preacher or orator blends the best of seminary training or scholarship with prophetic verve that flickers into a flame of “fire shut up in my bones” as the biblical prophet Jeremiah attests.

An oft-quoted and cited definition of the phenomenon of preaching comes from a heralded and eminent preacher, Phillips Brooks, who made infamous the pithy expression that preaching is “truth through personality” (Brooks 1989, p. 25) and emphasized the predominant understanding of preaching as “the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching” (ibid.). This definition echoes across race, class, gender, and social location in seminaries and other spaces committed to the study of sermons. While Brooks happened to have been a White

clergyman, his eloquence and indomitable sermons are read and taught along with the lecture through which we glean this definition.

Add to this formula an emphasis on liberation as well as lamentation, a prism emerges by which “the concept of ‘making a way out of no way’ best describes the ways that womanist theologians articulate salvation” (Coleman 2008, p. 33). In essence, when it comes to Black preaching, a sense of the preacher’s authenticity alongside the depths of honesty and attunement to both the plight of African Americans and the African diaspora alongside the nuances of cultural, economic, political, and aesthetic dimensions in everyday life, writ large, encompass the rubric of effective preaching. Therefore, Monica Coleman states that a womanist theologian may espouse varied ideas around the person and life of Jesus, yet they “assert that Jesus changed the world and that salvation occurs when people work for the transformation of the world by imitating Christ. For womanist theologians, salvation is always social” (Coleman 2008, p. 32).

To further elucidate, it becomes imperative to weave a bit of tapestry around key motifs that undergird and delineate the work of sermons, specifically in Black contexts. Paraphrasing Arthur Schopenhauer, who once suggested that all music has work to do—to inspire, to seduce, to mourn, to frighten, to celebrate, and so forth—in a similar vein, each sermon has *work* to do, an assignment of sorts. One message traverses several emotions, sometimes concomitantly, whereby evocations become layered atop one another like data on a map. For instance, a sermon by trailblazing biblical scholar Reverend Dr. Renita Weems, titled “Living With a Limp; Helped By Hope” (Weems 2021), immediately brings to the fore so many images, memories, expectations, and anticipation about the meaning and essence of the sermon. Yet, until one takes a sermonic trip and listens to the message to deduce her thesis, along with the co-explorer/listener’s key takeaways, then the “work” or assignment(s) of the sermon can only be

partially fulfilled. In other words, the colorful and complex journeys that a sermon proffers only reach their zenith in tandem with an individual's interior life-world coordinates.

Despite a rather top-down, hierarchical perception in popular parlance, film, and art – indeed, I contend the true power of sermons resides in their grassroots and democratized meaning-making, which envelop each person in orbit of the speech-act, from the newborn baby crying to the elder with hearing aids. To this end, beneath the surface, despite, perhaps, a machismo preacher with harmful theologies, nonetheless, a subtle egalitarian apparatus and assemblage persist among the co-explorers/listeners of sermons. Scholar of preaching, Hubbard supports this claim, stating, “the preacher and the community build a world (the inspiring congregational dynamic) both to affirm their being made in the image of God and to confront those who challenge their humanity” (Hubbard 1994, p. 15). Such co-constitutive world-building constructs terrains, legends, coordinates, and projections all within the *work* of the sermon.

So much so that the people can and do reject sermons when the indescribable yet kinetic energies collide in such a way that renders the message insufficient, underdeveloped, lacking veracity, overly didactic, pragmatically hollow, flat-out boring, or any number of inhibitors to an effective sermon. “To say that the “preacher can’t preach” means that he [sic] does not make the transition between biblical understanding and human conduct (to preach and not to teach)” (Hubbard 1994, p. 16) and suggests that the preacher misunderstood the assignment. This means, if the moment, whether socially in the world or contextually within the life of the people, called for a moment of lamentation, for instance, and the sermon does not sufficiently render space for the *gravitas* of solemnity, even if the preacher subverts that as the prominent emotion, many may walk away from the sermon and state “that was nice but it missed the mark and fell flat.” In essence, to state that a sermon “missed the mark” is not unlike the kind of dots on a map that

chart flight patterns – that is, the sermon did not usher the people along with an honest or vivid co-constructed world. Honesty is key. Back to Brooks' (1989) sermon definition of “truth through personality,” people will give the benefit of the doubt to novice preachers, nervous preachers, and preachers with unsteady pacing and mechanics; yet, arguably the most egregious offense is vacuity. To dare to preach is to subconsciously assent to an underlying social contract, not unlike Charles Mills in a philosophical context, that is, to proclaim a word, the *logos* means it cannot return void (Isaiah 55:11). An empty sermon often reflects a dishonest vessel.

So then, part of the fabric of this dissertation recognizes and explores the sermon and the role of preachers through the eyes of co-exploring listeners to explore the space between the gift of the primary sermon orator and the worlds of the co-exploring listeners. Since each sermon is presented by a different person, with various markers of positionality (Crenshaw et al. 1995), certain styles and approaches register or connect based on the identity of the preacher. Additionally, key sermon genres inform and shape the receptivity and lucidness or not of a particular sermon. To bracket or offer a taxonomy of common forms and styles of sermon delivery genres, the following list becomes paradigmatic:

- “1. Topical – truth or importance of a topic or theme; the preacher allows logical points to control the sequence of the sermon.
2. Textual – follows the parts, divisions, pericopes², or sequences of thought in the text
3. Expository – addresses an extended passage of Scripture, centering attention on one emphasis in the passage – a teaching, insight, promise, hope, warning, character, experience, meaning, prophecy, virtue, key word
4. Narrative – basic story elements of character, plot, setting, and movement
5. Dialectical – thesis (what God is doing in text), antithesis (counterpoint of real-life issue), synthesis (juxtaposition of thesis and antithesis)
6. Polar opposites – comparative and contrasting points of view, characters, events
7. Wesley quadrilateral – consideration of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience
8. Rhetorical – convince hearers by application of reasoning, interrogatories
9. Variations – dialogue, drama, news reports, musical, multimedia.” (Fry Brown 2008, p. 65-66)

² A pericope is considered to be an encapsulated unit of analysis or story that formulates a subset within a larger chapter within the biblical chapter.

Based on these nine sermon styles, it quickly becomes apparent that certain approaches resonate and yield greater impact than others, based on personal preferences and co-explorer/listeners' own hermeneutic. In the three focus group meetings, across two separate groups (explored in Chapter 3), I utilized sermonic clips from several genres precisely to offer different oral/aural soundscapes for consideration.

Spiritual Traveler within the Land of the Sermon

Bridging one of the quintessential tools of geography—the map—with the *work* of sermons invites a “Black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011) that unfurls and excavates both emotional geographies and theologies of everyday people. Through the utility of a creative participatory device that I designed in lieu of COVID-19 restrictions, called a sermon map, the listener/co-explorer literally becomes a spiritual traveler within the land of the sermon. This is done, as shall be shown in chapter four, whereby congregants/co-explorers access their quotidian cartographic skills to map the territories of the sermons, examining the phenomena of how sermons *work* beyond the moment of proclamation in their own lifeworlds, imaginations, emotional landscapes, and across time (Jurelle Bruce 2017). This approach emphasizes the innate spatialized praxis of persons who listen to sermons as co-explorers navigating as harbingers of geographic frameworks and genealogies, respectively. In other words, akin to Willie Wright’s analysis, this work centers on the reality that congregants, rally-goers, and (virtual) pulpit spaces co-constitutively create worlds whereby the “public is intellectual” (Wright 2019) and their everyday practices, through the portal of sermons, reveal the lands they traverse.

This methodological approach was developed (explored in Chapter 3) to build upon “the genius of the Black sermon,” which “is that it transforms the discrete aspects of Black expression from a system of signs, songs, and stories to an oral, expressive, unifying document that conveys

a shared value system” (Hubbard 1994, p. 15). The literature suggests that a sermon emerges at the nexus of artistic expression, inner yearnings, strivings, and the “content of Black life” (Hubbard 1994, p. 18). Further, as the late great theologian Katie Cannon denotes, “Sermonic clarification is concerned with using earthly, picturesque language to delineate in dramatic fashion an analogy so that by using every part of the story, hearers can understand the message through their feelings as well as through their thinking” (Cannon 2003, p. 126).

With this elucidation in mind, this project attempted to bridge the focus of emotional geography, which “concerns the social and sensory relations” (Kearney 2009, p. 11), with the map. Doing so unearthed new dimensions of exploration that signified reverberations reaching back in time to “the essence of ante-bellum Black religion...” that placed an “emphasis on the somebodiness of Black slaves. The content of the Black preacher’s message stressed the essential worth of their person” (Cone 1972, p. 6). Stressing ontological dignity and worthiness emerges as a core theme, as Black feminists attest (Collins 1990). Linking together these threads, I shall now turn to the role and rhetoric of maps and mapmaking.

Mapmaking in General

Sermons create and construct maps. That is the fundamental premise of this project. Anytime such sacred speech acts go forth, a bevy of cartographic referents, legends, signs, systems, and codes emerge as well. This is why Götz and Holmén portend that “maps are symbolic representations of spatial features” (Götz and Holmén 2018, p. 157), going on to posit that even the most positivistic outlook and approach to capture the world necessarily utilizes “a mental conversion” (Götz and Holmén 2018, p. 157). At its core, the design rests upon the choices and proclivities, the discriminatory inklings and fascinations, and the modes of inclusion and exclusion, all derived from the mapmaker. Though historically affiliated with colonialist

projects and state-sanctioned operations, robust disciplinary intellectual histories also exist that prioritize the significance and import of “geosophy” (Wright 1947) categorizing the geographical imagination and the geographical knowledges of “non-academic, everyday, folk – fisherman, lorry drivers, farmers, nurses...” (Cresswell 2013, p. 16). Essentially, “geosophy” submits that each person innately functions as a geographer, theorizing and making “sense of the randomness of the world” (ibid.). Hence, no matter if one utilizes GPS, an atlas, highway maps, or coordinates on aircraft – all maps are “mental maps” (Götz and Holmén 2018) with “spatialization of meaning” derived “latently in the minds of individuals or groups of people” (Götz and Holmén 2018, p. 157). To that end, maps reify biases and socio-spatial hierarchies while also proffering portals to imagine relationality and temporality anew.

Similar to the traditional definition of sermons, maps have *work* to do. They are not functionally innocent enterprises that exist in neutral zones without underlying explicit or implicit mandates driving the schemes and layouts. To elucidate further, Wood declares:

“What do maps do when they work? They make present – they represent – the accumulated thought and labor of the past...about the milieu we simultaneously live in and collaborate on being. In doing so they enable the past to become part of our living...now... here. (This is how maps facilitate the reproduction of the culture that brings them into being.) The map’s effectiveness is a consequence of the selectivity with which it brings this past to bear on the present. This selectivity, this focus, this particular attention, this...interest...is what frees the map to be a representation of the past (instead of, say, a time machine, which because it makes the past wholly present eliminates...the present). It is this interest which makes the map a representation. This is to say that maps work...by serving interests.” (Wood 1992, p. 1)

So, maps *work* with a purpose and serve the interests and aims of the mapmaker(s) and do so in ways that evoke and elicit particular meanings. Reflecting on the work of Warren and Bunge, Denis Wood posits that maps are “heavy responsibilities” (Wood 1992) because “without a theme, there is no map—the map is not of some*place* without being of something—and...the map is not somehow innocent with respect to this choice (it is not something forced on the map,

the map comes into being in making it)” (Wood 1992, p. 188). Historian Jan-Erik Lundstrom says that maps operate “via the principle of the white lie, by selecting and excluding” (Lundström, Pierre, and Vejbrink 2002, p. 69). Sometimes what is omitted from a map is what is most revealing – a characteristic the historian of cartography J. B. Harley has called “the map’s silences” (Edney 2005; Edlund 2018, p. 282).

Rhetoric of Maps

Recognizing that cartography has been utilized beyond those deemed official progenitors of the art and science by African Americans navigating the horrors of Jim Crow (Bottone 2020) or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizing in the Mississippi Delta (Inwood and Alderman 2020) along with the powerful usages of sketch maps and qualitative GIS among LGBTQ persons sense of public safety and working poor individuals access to jobs (Boschmann and Cubbon 2014, p. 238-39). In a dated though riveting dissertation, feminist geographer Judith Ann Tyner coined the phrase “persuasive cartography” (Tyner 1974), emphasizing the role of the map as a medium of communication. She states that for clear and effective communication to unfold, the mapmaker becomes the sender, and the message or forms of data become “encoded and transmitted” through the form of maps, which function as “the medium or channel” (Tyner 1974).

The reality that maps can mislead and lie (Mitchell 1996) has been heralded by geographers and cartographers for eons, though often, the reader or interpreter of a map may fundamentally misread the essence of a map, and it is often because “most people accept printed maps as truth, as accuracy par excellence, to the extent that they do not realize maps cannot show everything, that all maps are generalized and simplified” (Tyner 1974, p. 20). As a controversy in the realm of cartography, oftentimes, maps are automatically assumed to be true and accurate

depictions of whatever phenomena are being rendered. To a degree, “map readers tend also to be impressed by attractive, well-drawn maps” (Tyner 1974, p. 23) even if the veracity of the claims and projections are incorrect or dubious at best. According to Wood,

“The map’s ability to do this depends upon the signs it deploys, all of which have...independent histories. These suggest not only how interests are embodied in individual signs, but how the signs themselves are brought into being and reproduced. But with maps revealed as the historically contingent sign systems they in fact are, they cease to appear as miraculous windows through which to snap shots of reality. No longer confused with the world, maps are suddenly capacitated as powerful ways of making statements about the world. Maps are finally enabled to work...for you.” (1992, p. 2)

In that vein, then, the nexus of how maps work in service of interests and offer a means of delivering statements about life and the world correlates with and parallels that of sermons. Maps tell us what they tell us using these interests and symbolic systems to codify spatial coordinates and messages.

Creative Maps and Sermonic World-Making

Since feminist geographers have argued that the body and the home are both contested sites of power with spatial dynamics attending each (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brown 2022) this project engages creative mapping to access and explore nuanced approaches to scales at which co-explorers/participants internalize and carry sermons with them throughout the week. “We all carry around inner maps of our environs. Even contemporary urban individuals refer to inner maps, and these may often reflect collective values” (Edlund 2018, p. 278). Therefore, what kinds of inner maps are being transported in response to sermons. Simply attend any weekly worship service, across race and ethnicity, but especially in contexts with predominantly Black congregants, and the levels of dynamics and interplays at work are boundless. There have been so many books that theorize on the nature, power dynamics, and theologies (Cone 1969; Grant 1989; Townes 2001; Cannon 2003) leadership styles and approaches (Franklin 2007) of the

black church. Yet none of them have explicitly theorized and investigated the cartographic charters and contours of sermons as maps, inverting and expanding the domain beyond the immediacy and spatial locus of the church, protest, or public square. Inasmuch as sermons are quite literally some of the most enchanting and creative outlets with elements of ‘performative’ flair, though not in a perfunctory way, most of the time, at least – creative mapmaking tenets have been harnessed to elucidate and frame this project. To this end, cartographers Kaiser and Wood suggest, “every map takes a point of view. No map can show everything at once, any more than the two of us could see the same things at the same time at our lunch together” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 12). This project served as an invitation for each participant and co-explorer to share their points of view and to bear witness unashamedly, unapologetically, and authentically to the intricacies of their spiritual realm in ways that might be illuminating and help augment and potentially awaken new dimensions with respect to participant’s (re)making of place. The creative mapping functioned with a distinct purpose, recognizing:

“Maps are descriptions of the way things are, descriptions made to support the human purposes that summon the maps into being. Depending on the purpose, you can make a highly useful map with no more than a pencil and a piece of paper.... There are no rules for making maps. There is no right way, no wrong way. If you are making a map for your own purposes and do not care who else can read it – or do not want anyone else to be able to read it – the map need not be intelligible to others.” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 15-16).

In this same way, each map constructed in the co-constitutive place-making process of listening (Wong 2004) to sermons need not adhere to any rules or systems. Utilizing a pencil and piece of paper sounds quite a lot like the sorts of note-taking that persists on any given Sunday as people pull out notebooks, journals, scratch sheets of paper, or jot sermon notes in the church bulletin if available. With the advent of technology, these sorts of technologies of “plotting the black common” (Roane 2018) demonstrate the powerful and commonplace ways in which unheralded, everyday people function as spiritual cartographers amid their weekly church service. As an

illustration of this, the following sermon map was constructed by an interviewee/co-explorer after our semi-structured interview as she reflected on the role of sermons in her life. While these maps will be explored in-depth in Chapter 5, as the only interviewee to construct a map and to do so based on her overall impressions of the utility and value of sermons in her life, I emphasize and place it in this literature review for the legend it provides in tandem with academic treatments of the subject. In the very first interview of this research, conducted in July 2020, the participant/explorer shared that her mother died in the last two months, and her grief was so consuming that for the second time in life, she “cried warm tears that come out the depth of your soul.” Through sermons, she gained solace and a weekly proxy for her own emotions through the emotive delivery of the preacher, and, in that way, she noted that she felt like she was no longer alone. Figure 2 shows the sermon map function.

In a sense, the sort of mapmaking this project espouses democratizes and expands the boundaries of what constitutes cartographic knowledge production. So much so that a direct link can be traced from the types of sermons emanating from pulpits to the sorts of sermonic world-making practices a large swath of adherents of a particular congregation espouse. In other words, if one wants to better grasp how a moment like January 6, 2021, could erupt, dare I say, engage in some spiritual excavation, and one will largely discover the legends, signs, and symbols of sermon maps. Although, as Kaiser and Wood argue, these maps need not be deemed “legible” to anyone outside certain contexts, they can be satirized as out-of-touch, problematic, yet ultimately docile caricatures on skits during *Saturday Night Live*. All the while, insidious seepages of white supremacy, bigotry, and xenophobia or coded linguistic and theological asides still fancy themselves on nodding terms with “tolerance” while planting seeds of hysteria through sermons and sermon maps nonetheless.

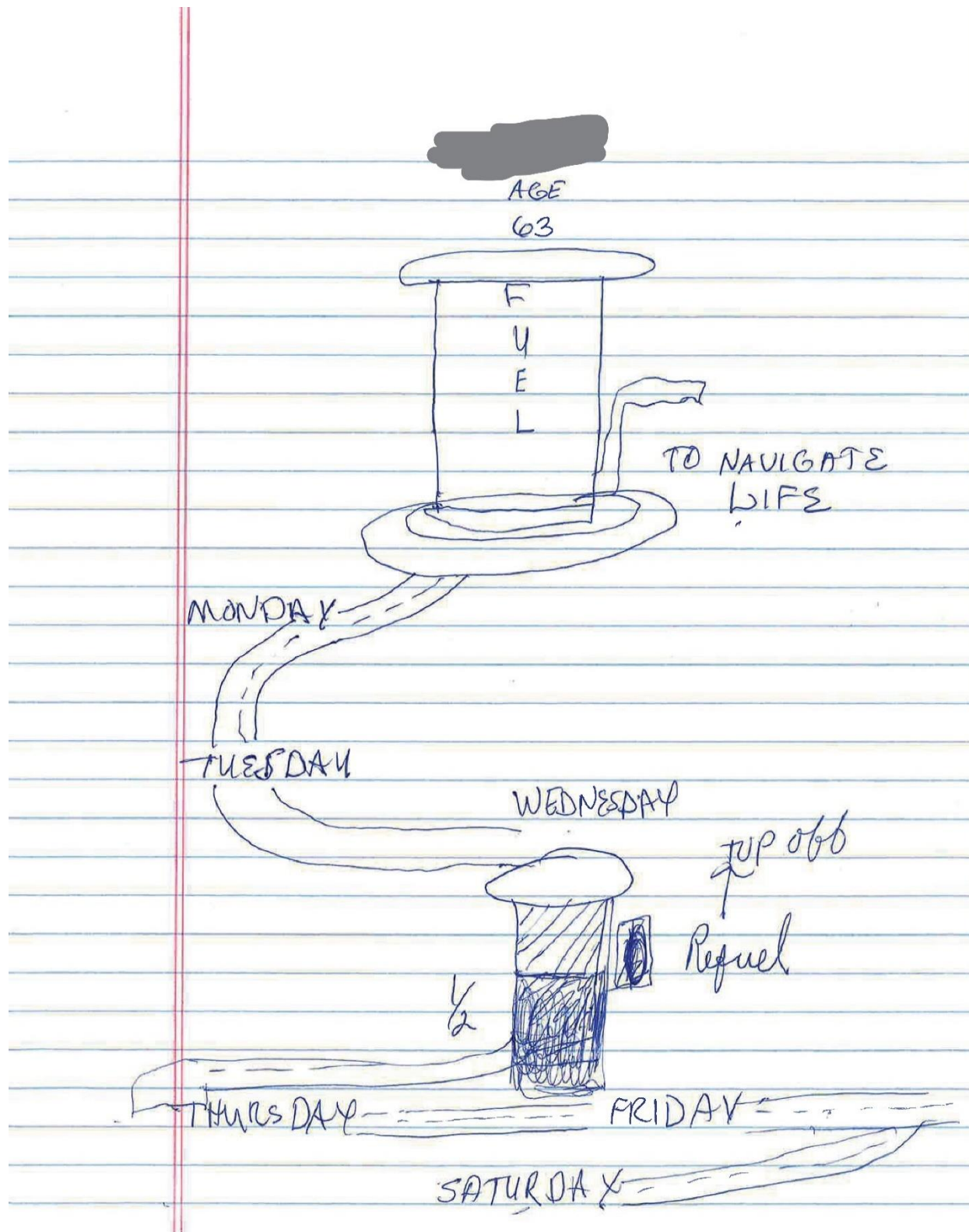


Figure 2: Sermon Map Function

In a primarily Black context, “the preacher’s call to worship is an open invitation for the congregation to participate in an act of creation; their collective construction has as its end result the transformation of reality” (Hubbard 1994, p. 15). Within many Black services, this mandate is driven with the intention to transform reality towards more emancipatory futures and more loving and just perspectives. But even in these congregations, regrettably, the possibility and reality of sermonic harm persist, inevitably, as each person has the capacity to unwittingly inflict harm (hooks 2001; Ray 2003). While these inner maps likely remain invisible to anyone beyond the person carrying them, such contours have profound significance on how a person navigates life, emotions, spirituality, and relations to understanding what constitutes being a true neighbor (Rogers 1968; Tate 2008). At last, communal and individual healing and rekindling, among other sentiments and maps, unfold throughout sermons that crescendo in such a way, no matter the style—whether demonstrative, monotone, storytellers, expositors, or measured—in any approach or delivery, penultimately: “The celebratory dimension of Black preaching is the church acknowledging in unison that the world is now a better place in which to live” (Hubbard 1994, p. 16).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation seeks to explore, unearth, and investigate the sentiments and emotions of Black people as provoked through sermons. To this end, a phenomenological and creative methodological approach was utilized to study sermonic landscapes and the spatializing practices attendant to listeners/co-explorers' sense of spirited landscapes and conjuring, respectively. Amidst the initial onset of the novel coronavirus, with uncertainty, angst, fear, and death in the air, quite literally, in order to sufficiently meet the requirements of the University of Tennessee's Internal Review Board, I made a fundamental pivot away from any in-person, sonically oriented immersions and focused on methods that could be engaged while respecting the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This study utilized three primary methods: focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and sermon maps. Additionally, participant observation informed many of the notes and memos while the study unfolded from July 2020 through October 2020.

Research Design – Spatializing Sermons

The utility and resourcefulness of qualitative methods engage a particular context or social milieu with an emphasis on developing holistic and complex understandings rather than positivist or essentializing flat descriptions (Mansvelt and Berg 2005). Acknowledging that “observations are always already theoretical” (ibid., 255), given the reality that theory does not emerge from a vacuum, nor can a researcher delve into the realm of participant experiences unencumbered by positionality and the kinds of “readings” or discourse analyses being undertaken based on our bodies (DeLyser 2001; Barz and Cooley 2008). Even envisioning the writing-up process, I sought intentionality with regard to the mutually constitutive “re-presentation...of the mediated character of the process of writing research” (Mansvelt and Berg

2005, p. 255). Therefore, the chapter unfolds, exploring the methodological tools designed to address my guiding research questions. As a refresher, the questions are the following:

RQ1. In what ways does the sermon point beyond the moment of proclamation toward spirited landscapes of horror, healing, and holiness?

RQ2. How do southern Black women *conjure* new worlds and function as spiritual cartographers in response to the sermon?

- a. Through the prism of sound and silence, what affective or emotional landmarks are evoked in aural/oral dimensions, speaking to ancestors, joy, and (re)making of place?
- b. What types of emotional journeys do sermons prompt or facilitate?
- c. How does the soundscape of sermons shape Black women's visions to transform local landscapes?

A guiding set of heuristic frameworks governed the methodological choices to study and explored these questions. Drawing from the source again, as sermons are often preached with some level of attention toward a scripture or biblical passage's background, this method sought to make three key movements of investigation:

- Explore the world(s) *behind* the text(s)
- Explore the world(s) *of* the text(s)
- Construct the world(s) *before* the text(s)

The principal investigator hastens to add that under this sort of guiding methodological framework, both emotional and physical landscapes constituted the aim of investigation, along with both biblical texts and embodied texts of the participants/co-explorers. Hence, a metanarrative level of gradations and granularity prompted by conceptual frameworks explored

in the literature review, such as critical race theory and fugitivity (Krenshaw et al. 1995; Harney and Moten 2013), informed my deliberate mechanisms for approaching this topic.

The World(s) Behind the Text(s)

Phenomenological Research

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to exploring the interior and emotional landscapes of participants. Deemed as a particular style affiliated with two broad assumptions, mainly “the essential core of a phenomenological approach:

- Person and world as intimately part and parcel;
- Phenomenology as a radical empiricism” (Seamon 2002, p. 159-160).

Building upon Heidegger, who posits that there is an “undissolvable unity” between world and people (Stewart and Mickunas 1990, as cited in Seamon 2002, p. 160) or *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*, which suggests that a person has a semiotic relationship with the world and necessarily cannot tease out whether a person shapes the world or the world shapes a person. More specifically, researchers utilizing phenomenology as a method build on two crucial tenets: “lifeworld and place” (Seamon 2002, p. 160). These concepts helped undergird my rationale for utilizing an approach that considers the “tacit context, tenor, and pace of daily life” (ibid.) and that would offer a methodological framework with enough capaciousness to rigorously attend to “both the routine and the unusual, the mundane and the surprising” (ibid.). Such a method was deemed necessary as the ways in which people navigate “spirited landscapes” and function as conjurers in response to sermons would invoke depth and complex self-reflection that might trouble the waters, so to speak, or reify firmly held notions of self-regard. Lastly, this methodological approach offered space for whimsy, murky waters and the subtleties that any study on spirituality necessarily invokes.

Creative/Arts-Based Methods

The utility of creative methods emerged because of COVID-19, the need to quickly pivot given the inability to gather in-person, and decolonize the written script, as studies show that creative methods enable people to access deeper ways of knowing. To that end, I was keenly aware of the “atmospheric politics” (Alderman and Inwood 2018) involved and took great care and intentionality in designing the protocols, including the data recruitment and collection instruments, to mitigate the possible risk of contracting the virus as well as exacerbating the viruses of vicarious trauma and horror as the George Floyd murder ricocheted across the globe with racial reckonings. A pandemic fieldwork guide was shared via Dr. LaToya Eaves to the University of Tennessee geography student listserv, in which the primary curator, Lupton (2020), cautioned to take extra consideration concerning ethics when adjusting fieldwork intended for face-to-face methods to other contexts because:

“You will also need to consider the ‘affective atmospheres’ of conducting any kind of social research in a pandemic, when normal routines are disrupted and many people are feeling uncertain and worried or are ill or caring for ill family members. People may be living in environments where they are subjected to harassment, violence or surveillance by other family members. Privacy issues are very important to consider in these contexts. On the other hand, with people more confined, feeling bored or restless but in good health, they may welcome the opportunity to be part of a research project. Consider your target participant group very carefully when making decisions about the best way forward.” (Lupton 2020, p. 20)

Such thoughtful references served as a helpful barometer while adjusting the IRB instruments and the rationale behind the methodological adjustments in this study.

The next key factor in deciding to utilize creative and arts-based methods pertained to the literature that supports the need for alternative methods of accessing emotions. To a degree, such methods serve to decolonize the preoccupation and hyper-dependency on written forms, texts, and even language as the medium for expression. Given the reality that “human understanding is

embodied (Finlay 2008, p. 2015) and metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), language is insufficient to explain or describe certain experiences such as pain (Sontag 2003; Scarry 1985), and arts-based approaches can bridge that gap” (Leavy 2015; Denzin 2016, as cited in Lupton 2020). Recognizing the nature and scope of my research questions and prompts, this methodological approach was utilized to offer another foray into deep and immersive emotions and experiences with the aid of a proxy in the utility of designing what I created and called sermon maps. Recognizing that each map tells a story, the logic behind this method foregrounded the omissions and elisions, decisions, and resistance that would necessarily be on display as participants designed their own maps after the sermon.

The World(s) of The Text(s)

Below I chronicle and detail the steps and methods employed to investigate and study the research questions guiding this study. Turning first to the nature and tenor of recruitment of participants, places of advertisement, and the apparatuses utilized in the process of ascertaining means to spread the word about this project, then shifting to the energy and excitement of the “host” church and technical matters that both helped and hindered certain elements of the research design.

Recruitment and COVID-19 Adjustments

After securing all the requisite components for a successful IRB submission, I received an unexpected yet thoughtful compliment from the University of Tennessee review board chair on the work of Howard Thurman and her intent to read *Luminous Darkness* based on my proposal. The recruitment phase lasted approximately two weeks prior to the first focus group meeting; however, semi-structured interviews were scheduled within the first week. Below is the

figure of the data instrument recruitment flyer posted on the church's Facebook page and in their weekly Sunday service PowerPoint slides for announcements. Figure 3 shows the recruitment announcement.

Participants

Given the nature of the topic and sense of urgency given rapidly evolving and shifting public health crises, predetermined qualifiers for participation were deemed by the principal investigator (Merriam 2009) as that of race, age, and geographic proximity or affinity to the American South. Building upon the strength of reputational case selection (Miles et al. 2018) added dimension as the project began to receive a buzz as people sent private messages via Facebook and called directly to learn more and enroll as either a one-time interviewee and/or focus group participant.

Informed Consent

The University of Tennessee Internal Review Board approved my application on July 13, 2020, to conduct research on human subjects (Appendix A). Following the ethical considerations and research protocols, I ensured that each co-explorer received a consent form and reviewed it aloud over the telephone and via Zoom. After explaining the study objectives and aims, each prospective explorer was invited to ask questions and voice any issue or need for clarification. They were also explicitly told that there was no pressure nor any consequence, should they decide, at any time, to withdraw or cease their involvement in the project. After they felt comfortable and clear about the next steps, co-explorers signed the consent form either in my virtual presence or signed at a later time and mailed the form, scanned it, or took a picture and emailed it to the principal investigator granting authority to proceed and move forward with the project (Cresswell 2013).

Sermon Research Study

2 Options to Participate

- One-time Interview
- Zoom Focus Group
 - 3 Meetings Total
 - 3 Consecutive Sundays OR Mondays
 - Must be 18+

If interested, please email
Shaundra Cunningham at
scunni22@vols.utk.edu

Focus Groups Begin Next Week

- Group A
 - Sunday, July 26 @ 5 pm
- Group B
 - Sunday, July 26 @ 7 pm
- Group C
 - Monday, July 27 @ 7 pm



Figure 3. Recruitment Announcement

Logistics and Mechanics of the Group

The focus groups were two categorically divergent and different aggregates of participants. In the beginning, all the participants were African American women over the age of 50, many of whom were retired and participated out of sheer curiosity, interest in the topic, and a resounding compulsion to share the role of sermons in their faith journeys and ontological approach. This is akin to Clyde Woods' initial inclinations in his opus, *Development Arrested*, whereby Ruth Wilson Gilmore reveals that his first impetus was to describe the Delta plantation through the prism of a "blues ontology" rather than what we now famously cite as "a blues epistemology." In a sense, many of the women who participated remind me of Anne Moody, whose seminal autobiography gets overlooked, at her bafflement at the March on Washington, listening to Martin Luther King herald a dream while she could viscerally feel and sense the need for less eloquent elocution and more practical material, organizing à la Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses, with an emphasis on helping people survive. To be fair, one is certainly not suggesting nor insinuating that the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others were not fundamentally committed to the same freedom fighting enterprise, though they sometimes had divergent aims and methods; so much so that, in a way, this project attempts to speak to the power differential, spatially entrenched loci of care and nurturance, and proffer an embedded spiritual soundscape vis-à-vis the authority and emotional landscapes of each participant.

Ten women signed up for the 5:00 p.m. Zoom focus group and committed to three consecutive Sunday afternoons for approximately one hour to an hour and a half of engaging the prompts on the "geography of sermons." One additional participant joined for one Sunday only and then failed to return for the third and final installment. An attrition rate of two occurred after one participant suffered unexpected family commitments and another participant with technical

issues said, “my phone got COVID,” while struggling to connect to the Zoom group during the second week. Nonetheless, this group often delved into the depths of public memory while recalling their moments of living through a protest or rebellion or marching along with activists, or assisting in clandestine efforts to safeguard and support their families, kinfolk, community, and spirited landscapes of reprieve. This group came of age in South Carolina and other parts of the South at the height of Jim Crow and Jane Crow de jure and de facto segregation, lynch mobs, and attack dogs on seemingly every corner. Hence, the pretext or backdrop of the intra-group dynamics and chemistry quickly unfolded as a cauldron for reminiscing on the experienced horrors and prejudice during the mid-twentieth century, with alarming alacrity and veracity between the 1940s and 1960s.

The second group was self-selected and happened to be mostly Millennials and Generation Xers, ranging from their twenties to late forties. This Zoom group (Group B) met at 7:00 p.m. on three consecutive Sunday evenings as well. As an engaged researcher, I conducted and facilitated the groups on the same dates in July and August 2020. This group was almost evenly split between those identifying as men and women, with thoughtful, incisive, cultural nuances and, at times, hilariously raucous banter and reflection. Both groups engaged in “powerful vulnerability” (Brown 2012), sharing and disclosing traumas, pain, joys, hopes, and the jubilee. In the results that follow, for the sake of clarity, I have grouped core themes and elements under several rubrics based on the stories, confessions, geographic sensibilities, and holy ghosts bequeathed to me.

Insider/Outsider Dynamics, (Auto)ethnography, and Unexpected Revelations

An unexpected phenomenon emerged while coding and analyzing the data from this project. In the midst of reviewing frequencies and locating distinctions, in addition to recurrent

nodes and thematic foci, I realized that a considerable portion of the project functions as auto-ethnographic. While scholars argue that one can never truly leave notions of self, personality, and identity markers behind (Saldaña 2021), there remains an attendant sheepishness to this finding. While Black feminists have notably submitted that “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1970), it still surprised me just how much my positionality, familial histories and networks, and sense of interiority pokes out of the edges and shadows of my methods. For instance, while interviewing a prominent local pastor and theologian, who happens to pastor a church and teach at a seminary, I was frankly summoned to “out” myself at the conclusion of our interview. The interviewee blatantly requested that we “stop the recording so we can talk;” though a prior history exists between us as fellow clergy, coupled with the interviewee being a guest preacher and revivalist several times at my home church years ago, I nonetheless wrote in my memos and journal that night that I was pleasantly surprised to be affirmed and offered an apology by a pastor that I faintly recall intimating and insinuating more restrictive and theologically anti-LGBTQ rhetoric at the dinner table decades prior. For this minister to switch his tone from cerebral and raucous pontification on sermons as a trained professor of homiletics or preaching and assume a noticeably pastoral and gingerly affect while inquiring, with a sort of protective uncle-vibe: “How are you doing? Do you have a partner? Are you living together? How soon will you finish your degree so you can be together?” In the moment, these questions floored me. Recognizing that one is never just “in the (virtual) field,” I was conscientious concerning the ways in which I was being ‘read,’ encountered, and interpreted by those being studied (Barz and Cooley 2008). This encounter quickly became a moment of confession, as the interviewee shared innuendos about past mistakes and emphasized several preachers, activists, and teachers with

whom they are in alignment and awe, based on impact, style, and other arts of ministry and communal leadership.

In the immediate aftermath, I wrestled with why this person felt compelled to disclose her open and affirming stance to me. It made me briefly wonder if my data collection instrument and questions yielded a suggestive nod toward gender, sexuality, and the so-called sacred landscapes. Now looking back, it is apparent that I left a gaping hole and missed an opportunity to insert a question specifically on responses to LGBTQ, “same-gender loving people” (Flunder 2005). Returning to Audre Lorde and one of her most notable maxims, “your silence will not protect you” (Lorde 2007). In an embodied way, I think this summer intensive portion of fieldwork, which actually emerges from a lifetime of negotiating fragmentary portions and, at times, concealment of queer proclivities reached up and “slapped me in the face” (Lorde 2007) in a way that became a balm of relief and a bridge for communion. In *Sisters of the Yam*, bell hooks notes the sort of intrapersonal dynamics between and among various factions of the Black community. To be summoned in such a way might have felt like a verbal assault without the backdrop of relational history between us, my own disposition as a chaplain accustomed to unexpected pivots and questions, along with the gist or essence of their comments being progressively aspirational toward building and strengthening their support and visible signs of solidarity (Brown 2020).

In addition, another participant in the focus group revealed to me that her granddaughter is gay, and she has taken it upon herself to help launch a local nonprofit to help build a public-facing advocacy and social hub for her support. Again, there were no self-disclosures on my part; yet this participant felt led to share in a private conversation and then sought my counsel on how to access resources and any other tips I might provide. While delighted to hear about such a passion project with much-needed prophetic import, I found myself shying away from ongoing

engagement as soon as the nature of the call tilted toward more salacious and indiscriminate gossip about certain members of her family, who also attend the church, and the larger Columbia community. The tenor and tone took a noticeable shift that made me uncomfortable, and I deemed it necessary to succinctly redirect the conversation back to any questions, concerns, or logistical support needed around sermon maps. This participant also ascribed me with the moniker “coach” and would start emails and phone conversations in this way, sharing that she felt like I was a good life coach. In such instances, I recorded another memo stating my sense of light-hearted appreciation for this label, assuming they felt a sense of kinship during and among the focus groups coupled with a private revelation about not finding support and validation of her experiences outside of her therapist, the group, and me.

On the other hand, I had an uneasy feeling, wondering if this participant would try to use such a moniker to cross boundaries (Beaudry 2008) and invoke my presence in matters that do not concern the interests of this project. Then I wondered, on the page of my memo notebook, if such an attempt is made and tends to a tangential matter of the project, how do I respond? Thankfully, when this participant reached out by phone to seek advice, akin to a therapist, I was able to delicately and diplomatically empathize while also mentioning that such matters were outside the scope of my purview in this setting and recommended resources taken from my IRB-approved supplemental list of resources for distress. These brief episodes left me wondering about the nature of participatory research and wishing I had more grounding in the tenets to better gauge to what extent one can help in times of need. Further, for more reflection, beyond the parameters of this dissertation, such encounters provided powerful interpretive inflection points to envision the depths and expansiveness of this project that could become a model and be

scaled in leading and facilitating such groups as a form of radical spiritual care and movement building.

Methodological Positionality Considerations – Familial (Her)stories and Cartographic Excavation

Additionally, the fact that several family members participated in various aspects of the data gathering process also looms in the background. E. Patrick Johnson beautifully and powerfully theorized his dissertation and later work on the term “quare” based on his Southern grandmother’s use of the term and intonation while using it as a seminal intervention in queer studies, literary theory, performance studies, and Africana Studies, among others (Johnson 2001). In a similar vein, this project has morphed into a form of familial herstories as stories evolved from various family members, began peeling back layers of spiritual cartography, and conjuring, quite literally, discovering that my maternal grandmother was an indigenous healer who managed to raise 14 children alongside my grandfather in the backwoods and prairie land of Manning, South Carolina. Apparently, people would travel from all over town and across the region to seek out her healing herbs and prescriptive medicinal powers. As relayed to me by my mother, at times, as young kids, they respected her powers so much that they would not speak of it and even distanced themselves from that side of her out of fear of the mysterious and unknown cosmic and celestial powers at work. Other children among the fourteen thought it was amusing and found the whole operation to be a source of enchantment.

Nonetheless, for the sake of methods based on a feminist geographic phenomenological and grounded theory approach, it becomes clear that perhaps the research questions developed for a personal passion project just struck me as fascinating—sermons, conjuring, and spirited landscapes. Amidst the unfolding of the research process, a host of *conjuring* transpired in my own life, surroundings, and within my body. Harkening back to a lecture I once heard at Union

Theological Seminary while taking a campus tour, Professor Aliou C. Niang mentioned that when he set out to write a book on African healing, his own health and life took a turn and all sorts of issues and unpredictable happenings unfurled. In a phrase: I wholeheartedly relate.

Like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, I engage the personal in this methodological section not as an act of academic navel-gazing (Sharpe 2016) nor some sort of kumbaya exercise in public journaling—not that anything is inherently wrong with either—rather, I share such episodes, because as Sharpe says:

“The methods most readily available to us sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what we know. That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black beings in slavery, is gained from our studies...it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday.... Despite knowing otherwise, we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation.... With this as the ground, I’ve been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past. A method along the lines of a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black people any and everywhere we are. I’ve been thinking of this gathering, this collecting and reading toward a new analytic, as the wake and wake work, and I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.” (Sharpe 2016, p. 12-13)

Building upon Sharpe’s analysis, the methods deployed in this study of sermons were designed with an emphasis on a kind of “sitting with” (Sharpe 2016, p. 13) the voices, expressions, movements, thoughts, feelings, and machinations of a still disproportionately dismissed sector deemed as a triple jeopardy (Julia-Cooper 1892; King 1988) or “mules of the world,” as Zora Neale Hurston said (1937). It was designed to map the everyday practices of Black folks in a way that becomes a kind of archival practice demonstrating all the avenues, wild and fanciful delights, along with “shy and awkward vulnerabilities” (O’Donohue 2000, p. 220), the sticky, mushy, ambiguous, mysterious stuff that disrupts the wake(s) of death and focuses on life, place-making, and what I am calling spiritual cartography; that is, a method of infusing or redeeming

spaces with a sense of salvation, in the bell hook's sense of the term (hooks 2001) tending to Black people and love.

The World(s) Before the Text(s)

Semi-Structured Interviews

To truly unpack the veracity and complexity of this project, individual interviews were conducted one-on-one via UT Professional Zoom or telephone, whereby more expansive and organic dialogue and personal revelation might unfold without being under the gaze of others. Open-ended, qualitative, 30-90-minute interviews were conducted with participants to gauge their histories and understanding of the role, purpose, and utility of sermons. This method emphasizes in-depth expressions, understanding that the ways people construct and make meaning of their words are “highly variable and locally specific” (LeCompte 2010). The primary aim of this form of interviewing ensures an open and curious posture, with some aids and prompts, to reveal metanarratives and locally informed practical and theoretical applicability. Honoring the methodological imperatives of participant observation, this study recognizes the hermeneutical circle and aspired to mitigate my preconceived notions with an interview script broad enough for myriad responses to emerge. Additionally, this method aided my reflexive posture of adjusting the guiding frames and follow-up questions with subsequent participants.

After each interview, a thank-you note was sent (Appendix F) along with a brief overview of next-step expectations, including a copy of the transcript for their review. Once transcribed, a copy of the text rendered by www.rev.com was sent to each interviewee, respectively, for their records and to decipher if anything was incorrect or misquoted (Appendix G). While I thought these interviews would prove most impactful—and they were—I

nonetheless found the responses and interactions of the focus groups most gripping, incisive, and eye-opening.

Focus Groups

The focus groups comprised the heart and soul of the data collection process and empirical study. During the group meetings, participants shared from the depths of their lived experiences and reactions, alongside their embedded theologies, or that which is granted based upon the nature of the family of origin, experiences, and other traits that a person inherits through the prism of nature and nurture versus that of deliberate theology or the sights, sounds, emblems, and meaning-making that unfolds after intentional reflection and consideration. In effect, this study served as a multi-tiered experience of deliberate theology, invoking James Cone's dictum of the five-fold typology of theologians: "roles of exegete, prophet, teacher, preacher, and philosopher" (Cone 1997, p. 8).

Out of this backdrop, the focus groups functioned as an incubator or laboratory of sorts to survey and delve deeply into the definition, work, subtleties, circulation, and valence of sermons in the lives of roughly 18 consistent participants, who self-selected and chose their respective group of choice, responding to a Facebook flyer (Appendix D) or by telephone inquiry. Elaborating further on the context, Columbia, South Carolina, Mayor Steve Benjamin, and the City Council enacted a shelter-in-place ordinance on March 29, 2020. Despite being in direct opposition to the governor of the state, Henry McMaster, this edict extended throughout the summer, and, to varying degrees, participants in the focus groups shared their angst, worries, and downright trepidation about proximity. Recognizing that the physical environment impacts focus groups, and ideally, smaller sizes of 4-6 would be optimal, all attempts were made to foster a welcoming, warm, and inviting atmosphere online as participants logged on or called in for three

(3) weeks to engage their sense of attunement, wonder, and theo-geographic experiences and imaginations to explore their ideas around sermons.

Utilizing my positionality as a clinically trained chaplain, as indicated in my IRB data collection instrument, each week opened with a singing bowl³, followed by a moment of silence, and a brief reflective thought, inviting people to center themselves for the task of exploring spiritual landscapes. The following questions were set forth as a guide to be asked of each group. Three questions (#4, #9, and #10) were asked every week. To be flexible, some questions were designed to be asked earlier and others near the middle and final meeting:

1. When you hear the term “sermon,” what comes to mind?
2. What types of emotional journeys do sermons prompt or facilitate?
3. Categorize and reflect upon your reaction to the message—was it helpful, stressful, harmful, anxiety-inducing, ambivalent, disruptive, boring, etc.
4. Recall the last sermon you heard. What are the emotional landmarks for you from that sermon? In other words, as you listened to the sermon, what sticks with you? Did it move you or stir something within you? Or not?
5. What role do sermons play in your ability to survive? To imagine “freedom dreams” or to “dream new dreams” in the language of the Hebrew Bible?
6. Pivoting to the role of Black women, in particular, how do southern Black women conjure new worlds in response to the sermon? How do southern Black people – female, male, nonbinary, transgender—conjure new worlds?

³ Tibetan singing bowl is a form of bell that emits and transmits frequencies through the utility of its properties that have been used by monks and others for healing, centering, and transformative practices.

7. What are the sound prints of the sermon; in what ways do certain sounds, rhythms, words, images, and pauses impact you in the moment? Do certain emotions/reactions linger and re-visit your memory later?
8. Explore the soundscapes of a sermon; geographically, how do you take the sermon with you?
9. During this COVID-19 global health crisis, how do sermons impact your outlook and perspective on (a) yourself, (b) your family, (c) your community/neighborhood, (d) your country, (e) the world?
10. Given COVID-19, what work do you think sermons perform in this historic and unique moment?
11. Who's your favorite preacher, and why?

While I set out to ask certain questions each week, in actuality and on the Zoom calls, at times, the dialogue, conversation, group dynamics, and technological issues caused dynamic adjustments in the moment. However, I kept my “eye on the prize” in terms of guiding the group and being guided and nimble myself toward key topics while adjusting to conversational and emotional detours, per se, and a few emotionally charged moments of confession, sharing, and disclosure. Given the nature of the topic, a protocol was submitted to the UTK IRB in the event of emotional distress or if anyone felt triggered, which did unfold, but in each instance, the tears and emotional responses were cathartic; so much so, that one of the participants sent a follow-up email of appreciation, stating, “Thank you for yesterday, Shaundra. You and my thyatist [sic] and this group are the only ones that asked was I ok. My family and most friends say get over things and move on. Jesus be known [sic] everything praying for our group and the world [sic].”

This email highlights the overall thesis and claims of my project. In effect, spirituality, in a variety of contexts, through the prisms of sermons as well as kinship and group sister-care, function as a kind of Black counter public (McCutcheon 2016; Roane 2018) that valorizes the sanctity and personhood of Black women's experiences, emotions, and feelings. The fact that such a comment came forth after the first focus group meeting demonstrated a felt need for these kinds of containers to hold the vicissitudes of interiority with a small collective bearing witness to the veracity of this participant's inner yearnings. Far too often, as Brittney Cooper theorizes in *Eloquent Rage*, Black women must engage in "a homegirl intervention" in which, although the methods and approach may differ, the essence remains the same – to proffer or offer a necessary reminder or lay bare an eternal truth to integrate: you are enough, you are worthy, loved and needed in this life.

With a phenomenological methodological approach rooted in the literature of womanist theology alongside critical cartography, the research process led to unexpected and even transcendent moments for individual participants/explorers and the group. The levels of sharing heightened each week as each group coalesced around key themes and expressed anticipation of the sermon clips that would be sampled and examined. Turning now to the heart of the matter, the next chapter chronicles and reveals the findings, discussion, and analysis associated with my reimagined summer fieldwork.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis – Spirited Landscapes

Introduction

“Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world” (Baldwin 1959, p. 176). While it may appear that the sermon is a univocal experience that flows in one direction only, emanating from the lips of the preacher toward a static, receptive aggregate of listeners, in the African American preaching tradition, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, as Katie Cannon posits, “preaching is dialogue. That doesn’t mean that the parishioners are actually running their mouths back at you, but it does mean that as you talk, questions emerge” (Cannon 2008, p. 33). In that sense, the dialectic interplay of congregants and the preacher flows more like a dance, give and take, call, and response (even when silent), and the hearer utilizes their hermeneutic circle to interpret, analyze, critique, adhere to, or reject the message that unfolds.

In fact, the power of the congregation is deemed so supreme that, after service, either immediately in the vestibule or spaces of periphery, such as the parking lot, and beyond –phrases of impact, affirmation, assent, and “holiness” circulate in Black religious spaces from coast to coast, whether in a country church in the backwoods of Greeleyville and Andrews or close to Main Street USA in Charleston or Columbia; no matter the locale, an auditory certification stamp necessarily ushers forth with hypothetical responses: *My Lord, didn’t it preach?! or Doc wrecked the house! or Didn’t our hearts burn? or s/he/they were on fire this morning! or I gotta sit with that Word for a while, it was heavy but right on time*. These utterances usher forth from listeners and can be heard instantaneously; hence, literary scholar Hortense Spillers describes this phenomenon in her dissertation as “contagion.” Sermons spread like a virus, it’s an atmospheric, airborne “earmark” (Spillers 1974) that titillates the senses and passes imperceptibly at times and, at others, quite demonstrably.

This present chapter works in tandem with Chapter 5 to reveal findings and analysis concerning both research questions, demarcating essential findings, discussion, and analysis. For clarity, this chapter focuses on the first research question. The three-week focus group experience during the summer of 2020 served as a pilot, of sorts, for a research method I designed in response to social distancing restrictions, global health uncertainties, racial reckonings, and an intent to investigate meaning-making apertures derived from sermons. To closely recreate and approximate this research sojourn, I began with the range, scope, and nature of places that provide sanctuary and function as “spirited landscapes” (Miles 2019) as focus group participants/co-explorers gather their thoughts, reflect, pray, meditate, and take space for or to themselves and the murky, nebulous, sticky feelings that defy categorization (Massey 2013). Next, I highlight one sermon, from week two, as the paradigmatic pillar by which several findings coalesced to answer my first research question and point toward the salience and significance of landscapes of horror, healing, and holiness that were shared as sites of spirited landscapes beyond the domains of the church.

In essence, the sequence of this research mirrored that of a sermon. I laid the foundation by orienting co-explorers/participants to a kind of legend, so to speak, inviting them to intentionally connect dots on spatializing practices in which they engage as part of their spiritual worldmaking. I listened and attentively engaged as people shared their ideas and definitions of sermons along with first recollections and/or experiences of the term, introduced the guiding pedagogical proxy of sermon snippets with attention to variety in cadence and content, and each week built sequentially until the third and final session when participants created sermon maps (Chapter 5). Turning first towards the spirited landscapes, I shall now explore and unpack the meaning-making and new terrain that unfolded as it pertains to spirited landscapes.

Focus Group Context

As a brief review of the participants and context of the respective focus groups, this section shall briefly summarize a few identifiers concerning those involved in this study. The sample consisted of approximately 20 Black identifying persons, separated into two focus groups. Each person in the group self-selected their group, either Focus Group A or Focus Group B, based on their preferred meeting time. Focus Group A met at 5:00 p.m. eastern standard time and Focus Group B met at 7:00 p.m. eastern standard time. The first group was comprised almost exclusively of retirees and those who worked diligently, in some cases, since adolescence as stories were shared about picking tobacco and corn and working on turkey farms and chicken coops while babysitting in segregated households, watching after a White family's children, who could freely take trips and vacations while they scrimped and saved to help support their family. Group A ran the gamut of professions, including those who are retired teachers, accountants, colonels in the military, daycare providers, professors, insurance agents, public service assistants, and post office workers. Group B comprised teachers, counselors, graduate students (MBA and PhD candidates, respectively), a chemist, an IT specialist, a lobbyist, an insurance agent, and various South Carolina state governmental employees. Interestingly, in terms of occupation, many participants in the second group alluded to being bi-vocational or working side hustles to help make ends meet. Except for one participant who joined for one week only due to scheduling conflicts but also granted an interview, the majority of the first group harkened back to disciplines, and vocational pathways often spent within one primary sector even with relocations for over 25 to 40 years until retirement. The first group noted the marks of history and a sense of upward mobility through education and military service, while the latter group bemoaned the 'bait and switch' false promise of the so-called American Dream as evidenced, in certain ways,

by their sense that they followed the proscribed path of school, college, work and yet still noted the albatross of debt, high costs of living, and other systemic factors by which those on the cusp of Generation X and millennials have been deemed the first generation to actually regress financially, and make and save less than their predecessors (Elliott 2016; Levenson 2020).

Findings: Personal Places of Sanctuary and Spirited Landscapes

The findings from the focus groups concerning their personal sanctuaries and places of refuge broke down into four primary categories: (a) Nature, (b) Sacred Mobility, (c) “Altars” at Home, and (d) Creative Outlets. The following section will reveal and highlight discussions from the first week of Zoom focus groups. As a primer to invite the group to explicitly think spatially about their private circumnavigations, the guiding prompt for both groups was to share their names, pronouns, the location from which they were zooming, and what place felt like sanctuary. I emphasized that it can be a physical place or an emotional place, but what place feels like sanctuary to you. The following selection of responses illustrates the initial launch to the groups and the ways in which participants/co-explorers engaged in generative spatialized praxis. To ensure parity and balance in representing viewpoints from the groups, no person is quoted more than three times. Additionally, as an identifier, groupings of quotes are marked either “A” or “B” to signal if they came from persons in focus group A or B.

Theme 1: Nature

One of the most recurrent and potent themes from both focus groups revolved around the role of nature. The responses ranged from physically being in nature to daydreaming about certain aspects of the physical environment that often provided a sense of peace, calm, and rejuvenation.

Group A

One participant stated:

“I have a couple of places. I'm at one right now, and it's on the side of my bed looking out the window because I can see nature, and I enjoy that. Also, my gazebo. I have a gazebo. Early mornings, I like to sit there and just swing and watch nature. That's where I take time and think about a lot of things, put things in perspective, and start my day. Those are the places for me.”

Another participant stated:

“My sanctuaries are, I live near a park. It's called Southeast Park. It has 10 tennis courts. It has nature trails. It has a pond. I just walk around there. I love the outdoors. I love nature. Sometimes I go into a trail, where I feel an urge to sing, and I think I can sing really good, but that's just my opinion. My second place is the mountain. Ashville, North Carolina, Maggie Valley, Cherokee. When my kids were young, I used to take them up there to go.”

Group B

One participant stated, “Well, I just love water because just looking upon any pond, lake or whatever just puts me in to thinking about the creator and all that he's done and everything like that, but just sitting in the ocean and letting the waves pop up on you and the chair on the edge makes me just feel so revived.” Another participant stated, “My peaceful moment is in the forest, in the woods, among the trees. Trees are older than we are, they're aged and if we only dare listen to them, they tell us who we are and about ourselves. That is where I feel closest to the divine.”

In these excerpts, we find the mystifying and soothing import of water and the ways in which such encounters and experiences cause a particular correlation with notions of spirituality, divinity, and the sacred. From these reactions, it becomes clear that flora and fauna offer modes of attunement and grounding in direct proportion to the attention and reverence that these participants place upon their respective places of sanctuary. I should note that I did not define sanctuary but invited the group to collectively use this prompt to introduce themselves, providing

their names, pronouns, locations, and places of sanctuary. The responses highlight the importance of even gazing upon certain topographical features as therapeutic and restorative. Great energy and verve peppered many of these reflections, and, at other moments, the tone took an introspective and brooding tone. The contrasts and pauses during sharing also offered subtle nodes and referents.

Theme 2: Sacred Mobility

Pivoting to a rather fascinating theme that stood out among the codes revolved around movement and mobility. Several shared they find sanctuary in travel, taking flight, quite literally, and daily commutes:

Group B

One participant stated, “For me, sanctuary, probably two places. One is the car which is what I'm currently in driving right now and other just home in the bedroom where I can just relax. Commune with my spouse, commune with God. Those are probably two places.” Another stated:

“That’s a place of solace for me and in my car because I do a lot of driving back and forth. I drive at least an hour to work every day. Sometimes just being able to tune out and focus not necessarily on driving but just clear my mind and hear what God has to say. Sometimes the singing, and I know I don't sing that well sometimes, but just being able to just let loose in my own little private world.”

Another participant offered, “Then another place of sanctuary for me would be on airplanes. That's why I'm always trying to get in the air because I'm usually praying up there. I just feel closer. I'm in the clouds literally floating, and I just feel like I commune one with God at that point in time.”

These comments effuse an element of fugitivity and the kinds of liberatory and emancipatory breath sought through forms of flight (Commander 2017). What pulses with

energy in these excerpts and in the actual moment of sharing, as I re-watched the videos, includes the sense that each one feels a deep resonance with God through their movement. Such comments also point toward the ways in which personalized landscapes endow routines, errands, trips, work, and tourism as sacralized pilgrimages. The “little private worlds” speak to the daily habits that form a set of accumulated spatialized practices that provide forms of communion.

Theme 3: “Altars” at Home

The next category speaks to various forms of consecration or intentionally setting something apart for a special function or purpose.

Group A

One participant stated:

“My sanctuaries, like you, Shaundra, mine is walking, or I try to walk ... six days a week. I walk alone, and I always love walking alone with my headphones. Sometimes I'll even have my music on or listening to a podcast or something. My second sanctuary is here at home. I have what I call my prayer room. I've always had it. It used to be in my office years ago, but it's my prayer room, where everything is laid out, where my altar is. It's just my peaceful spot in the house.”

Another participant offered:

“Believe it or not, I'm in my sanctuary right now. It's upstairs in my little office, that was changed from a bedroom to my office here. That's the first place. Quiet time is drawing when everybody's asleep. My husband is sleeping. Believe it or not, you got to think this is really crazy of me. When I'm taking a shower, I feel so relaxed, and things, ideas, and everything, just come to me, and I just take it all in. Those are my two places.”

One participant stated, “I had my back patio enclosed when I retired in 2012, and that's my sanctuary. I pray, I cry. I have praise and worship out here. It's really a sacred place. I don't really like anybody to come in here. I'm usually here by myself.” Another expressed, “I have a larger walk-in closet, and the closet is big enough to put a prayer space in there. It's like a prayer closet, closed closet, but my next place is the yellow bedroom. I have the yellow room and the green room, and I like going into the yellow room.”

Group B

One participant stated, “I can find the most comfort and the most sanctuary around my family.” Another said, “Then the last place is in the shower. Lots of crying, lots of singing, lots of praise, lots of everything happens in that quiet space because it’s undisturbed, and no one’s going to typically interrupt you while you’re taking a shower. That’s it.” The ways in which each group shared their specially designated nooks and crannies around their homes or temporality around certain times of the day or night showcases how an altar can be erected in a formal sense or in the very life rhythms and daily spaces by which we inhabit our lives. Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, *An Altar in the World*, dovetails with the sentiments expressed and articulated above in that all of the conversations, eating habits, solitude, drawing, and more becomes fodder that can function as an altar.

Theme 4: Creative Outlets

The fourth and final category revolves around notions of creativity and the moments that offer release valves through music and song, cooking, massage, and other creative outlets.

Group A

One participant stated, “Sanctuary for me is anything, anytime I can do something with my hands and be creative. Be it cooking or digging in dirt or planting stuff.”

Group B

One participant stated:

“The place that feels like sanctuary to me, there’s two, I have two as well. Emotionally, it’s songs. Music, when I reflect, when I sing, when I could relate to music, especially in prayers that, definitely feels like sanctuary to me, and the brick and mortar, the church, is just interacting with the members, pastor, hearing the sermon, hearing the word, sharing the word, that certainly feels like sanctuary to me.”

Another stated:

“One of my places of sanctuary, actually, at the spa. There's a reason why I'm always going to get a massage. I don't know the decompression of it all. When I'm faced down, and I'm having someone, I guess physically work out the tension. It also allows me to connect with God. I find myself having quiet moments and conversations with him. Just trying to tune in spiritually while the physical is being worked out.”

Based upon these excerpts, it becomes clear that participants seek and find refuge and respite in a variety of ways, harkening to the ways in which they enliven their daily environs with rituals, processes, and other spaces dedicated toward forms of selective world-making and interiority in the everyday and quotidian activities of life. While listening, I learned just how deeply and consistently people make time and consecrate space to integrate life, as Adrienne Maree Brown posits, apart from the ebbs and flows of institutional church life. I found myself invigorated by the sheer volume and capaciousness of sharing, and this dovetailed into a thoughtful and engaging conversation on each person's definition of sermons.

Connecting Spirited Landscapes and Sermons

Returning to the summer of 2020, the pandemic was in its early and initial stages unbeknownst to all of us that such a public health crisis would persist for years. Additionally, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered with a knee on his neck by police officer Derek Chauvin (Guardian, NY Times, CNN) and protests and reckonings erupted worldwide. This study unfolded amidst the chaos, public outcry, and laments of that summer. Again, focus groups were deemed an ideal method to appraise and study the interior worlds because of the capacity to gauge individual and communal responses with nuance and complexity (Crang and Cook 2007).

Turning next toward spaces that carry Morrison's notion of “re-memories,” those sites too unnerving and terrifying to visit, participants reacted to a sermon video clip by Rev. Dr. Renita Weems (excerpt below) and then shared thematic overtones that focused on horror, healing, and holiness. The sermon was preached at venerable organizer and prophetic pastor Bishop William Barber II's church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. This sermon was selected as

the primary clip utilized for the focus group during the second week to glean reactions to a “trivocal approach” (Gilbert 2011) steeped in womanist theology overtones with an emphasis on social justice. I wanted to ensure that a sermon by a prominent woman in ministry, who happens to have credentials that surpass many of her male counterparts, was featured to ascertain reactions, insights, and any subliminal comparative notes.

Further, as a trailblazing scholar of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, Rev. Dr. Weems’s dexterity as both scholar and preacher with a gift for making stories from antiquity contextually applicable—indeed, in all these ways and more, this sermon clip proffered a few “earmarks” (Spillers 1974) for the principal investigator, upon listening, and thought this would offer a good case study for this project. In particular, the sermon offers several reflective and gripping images, world events, and contextual moments that I thought might offer some interesting fodder for the group to explore and note the valence of what resonated or did not. A sermon by Rev. Dr. Renita Weems coupled with the prompts (Figures C, D, E, respectively) guided the conversation. The sermon is entitled: “Keep Moving Forward,” and here is a transcription of the 4-minute clip from Rev. Dr. Renita Weems:

“Our bishop has cut his teeth talking to Pharaoh. Bishop is a Pharaoh-talking preacher. Bishop knows how to cut it just right when he is in the place of the Pharaoh. I prefer to talk about what God told Moses to tell the people. I leave it to bishop to talk to Pharaoh. But let me tell you what God told Moses to tell the people: “Keep moving.” To Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” But to the people, “Get your butt up and keep on moving.” To Pharaoh, it is, “I’m going to bring your kingdom down.” Ah, but the people, “What you crying out to me for? Why you crying?...”

You see, it was Moses that told the people to stand still. I want to say it again. The people got out and got scared because every generation has its own Red Sea. Every generation has its Berlin Wall. Every generation has its Edmond Pettus Bridge. Every generation has its border wall. Every generation has its Ferguson. And every generation's got to make a decision about where the line in the sand is, and whether you’re going to live or whether you’re going to die. Every generation's got to decide whether it’s got the courage to keep going in the face of the pharaohs of their generation. Every generation has its pharaohs, has its Red Sea, has its Berlin Wall, has its Tiananmen Square, has its

Edmond Pettus Bridge, has its Ferguson, has its Charleston, South Carolina. But today you gonna have to decide whether you're going back into slavery or whether you're going to go on and be free. Whether you're going go back to what the master says, or whether you going to go to what our lord and our savior said. Put your hands together and give God some praise.

There is a time. There's a time to stand still, and there's a time to get up and keep moving. And I'm telling you sometime my people love to stand still when they really ought to be moving. {changes voice} 'Oh, I just believe that the Lord, I think we ought to have a prayer meeting now.' Baby, we had a prayer meeting last week –we going to move this week. 'Oh, I just believe we ought to fast and pray.' I believe you need to eat that burger and let's get moving here. 'I just believe that we just need to wait and hear on God.' God done already spoke. The Pharaoh is after you. God is speaking: Get up and move!

Tell the people, no matter how dark it gets, no matter how desperate it gets, no matter how depressed they may be, tell the people to keep forward. I don't care if Pharaoh is coming with all of Pharaoh's horses, and all of Pharaoh's legislation and all of Pharaoh's cutting Obamacare, and all of Pharaoh's stacking the judges and the federal judges with conservatives. I say keep moving. I don't care if they take away everything. I don't care if he come with his horses. I don't care if he come with his chariots. I don't care if he comes with his tribe. I don't care if he comes with the Republicans. I don't care if he comes with the Democrats. I told you to keep moving.

Isn't that what Harriet Tubman told them? Didn't put it in the movie, but I love myself some Harriet. She said, "Looka here. Looka here. Ain't nobody going back. Because if you get started on this journey, we going to freedom, so you better make up your mind that if you take off with me, we're going all the way." So, she said, "If you hear the dogs, keep moving. If you see the torches, keep moving. If you hear them crying out, you keep moving. Because God is always in the future. God is always calling us to come on."

After playing this video sermon clip, I immediately had prompts via PowerPoint shown as shown in Figures 4, 5, and 6, respectively.

Spirited Landscapes of Horror

In the immediate aftermath of showing this sermon snippet, the following remarks flowed from those in the groups. One member remarked:

“So, there's this dualistic tension of trauma and hope and how we and others were able to get over, by moving forward, those sites of trauma and sites of horror. But where I struggle is even in the moving forward, and this also speaks out of my own sort of day job, is: how do we keep moving forward when the rules of the game change?

HOW DOES THIS SERMON INSPIRE YOU TO
CHANGE YOUR LOCAL LANDSCAPE?

(I.E.YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD, FAMILY, CHURCH,
JOB, CIVIC PARTICIPATION,
SORORITY/FRATERNITY, YOURSELF)

Figure 4: Focus Group Prompt A



Figure 5: Focus Group Prompt B

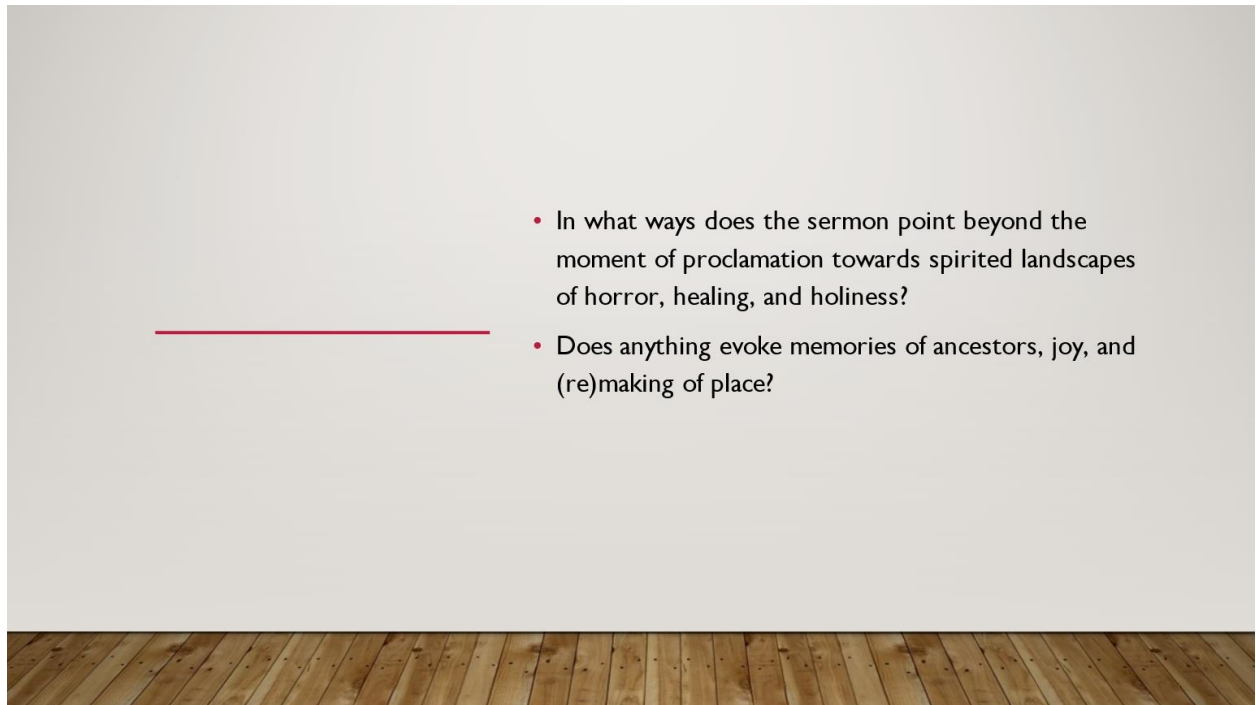


Figure 6: Focus Group Prompt C

“So, if we situate this within the body politics and in civic life, we play by the rules, and we do all the things that we’re supposed to, census, vote, et cetera, et cetera. But yet, those in power continue to change the rules. And we’re trying to play the game, but they’ve changed the rules on us. You have to keep moving forward, simultaneously learning the new rules or not even learning the new rules, but still playing the game by the old rules while they have changed the rules. So how then do we keep moving forward when they continuously place the mark so that we start 10 feet behind. I struggle with that. And so when we think about landscape, even in my own context, it also just brings up the feeling of tiredness. Perhaps I don’t have the strength of my ancestors. I will admit that, but I’m fatigued that every generation we have to fight the same struggles and the same battles.”

Another stated:

“I know in school, we talked about this too, but learned helplessness. Those words just came out, just popped out at me. It’s just a phenomenon. When a child, any child for that matter is a victim of their circumstance or a victim of what’s going on around them. And they kind of acquiesce, or they give in to that and they no longer have the will or strength to even try to continue doing whatever they’re trying to do...”

As these comments demonstrate, emotional geographies of fatigue, lethargy, tiredness, and the dualistic nature of hope and horror guided the exchanges. There is an undeniable sense that all the striving and strides towards racial progress are constantly upended and stymied by never-ending machinations and adjustments by those with levers of power in systemic ways. Such comments point toward the essence of the research prompt conveying the intensity of daily (re)negotiations that unfold amidst the strictures and struggles of working in a system dominated by the tentacles of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and state-sanctioned violence in so many forms.

These two comments also raise peculiar distinctions about notions of strength and what it means to be deemed and considered strong. Interestingly, ancestors are almost always viewed from the lens or perspective of their indomitable strength and narratives of “overcoming” against all odds, which no doubt comprises a great deal of literature and framing on slave narratives or freedom narratives, as poet Sonia Sanchez calls them. Nonetheless, thinking with Eve Ewing,

who recently offered remarks during Smithsonian's (virtual) Afrofuturism Conference (January 2022), mentioned that she would like to think that ancestors were silly and playful and full of human complexity and dimension beyond some of the dominant tropes we often use to sort of encapsulate that "we are our ancestors' wildest dreams" as the t-shirts and memes attest. While being gracious, not snarky, Dr. Ewing asserted that she would like to think her ancestors were invested and interested in matters beyond future generations. In a sense, her remarks harken to the arguments of geographers studying marronage, like comparing oneself to the strengths of ancestors, rooted in generational memories (Erll 2014).

"Even though we know we have to keep moving, because the reality is, "it's life," but while we oftentimes don't want to, or why it's a struggle or why you have people who are silently suffering from depression, who are just dealing with internal issues because the deck is stacked against us in a lot of ways. And every time you think you have a hold on it, then things get turned upside down, flip side round, and you're back at square one. And I just think we're all tired, quite frankly. I know in John Lewis's opinion piece, he was hopeful, or he also echoed the keep moving aspect, but he was like. Hopefully, this will be the generation where the hatred and discrimination and such comes to an end. So yeah, it's hard out here quite frankly, especially being a Black female in America is rough."

Here we see an emphasis on the mental health toll and toil of various systemic oppressions in tandem with another calculation of sorts, in that a person is deemed "back at square one" or nefarious meritocracies whereby one is "10 feet behind." The language of distance and mathematic metaphors seemed to be harnessed as dialogue ensued on notions of horror as ebony-hued creatures kissed by nature's sun. However, in a pointed and poignant pivot, a couple of members of Focus Group B took drastically different views. One participant expressed:

"I do want to address one particular word within the question: horror. I think, unfortunately, as Black people, we're numb to that. We're numb. There's not much horror anymore. I mean the horror of growing up, living, working, breathing Black in America. I mean, Trayvon Martin, I was angry, I was hurt. Tamir Rice, I was angry. I was hurt. Mike Brown, I was angry, and I was hurt. After a while, the names kept piling up, and the anger and the hurt's there for a second, and the lack of response is there. What happened to Charleston's there, but horror, I don't think it's risen to horror in a long time for me

personally and anybody I know. I don't think they're horrified. They're just like, this is life here. We need to do something about it, or something needs to be done, or I hope something changes, or if people's hearts change, we need to pray, we need to march, we need to do whatever, we need to vote. But horror? You're just kind of sitting around waiting for the next thing to happen to somebody Black in America; that is unfair. But horror, I don't know if horror exists in that manner. At least not for me and people that I speak to.”

This comment speaks to the depths and all-encompassing nature of oppression and anti-black sentiments articulated by one of the participants/co-explorers. To suggest that they have become numb to death, numb to violence, and numb to ongoing forms of murder—physical, soul-murder, and public policies that murder. Indeed, in all these ways and more, such reflection reveals the salience of emotional geography in quotidian ways. In particular, the comment “this is life here” echoes a sort of harrowing resignation and pragmatic calculation. Underlying this assertion, the phenomenon of ‘expectation’ lurks in the tenor and nature of many comments and observations responding to the sermon. An expectation that horrific unfoldings will continue to plague and harm Black people, in particular, and those struggling at the margins across so many intersectional identities, commitments, and markers.

This comment builds an affective avalanche of spiritual malaise, which renders itself spatially as the flattening or anesthetizing of reaction. Paradoxically, such comments were rendered with verve and palpable lament as a guiding *pathos* of sentiment felt, shared, and transposed. Despite portending that he could no longer feel or sense horror; instead, this participant/co-explorer’s reactions demonstrated that he deeply felt moved beyond numbness. In a way, such naming performs a different kind of work, akin to a survival instinct designed to neutralize the brutality lest the sheer volume of exposure becomes overwhelming and debilitating as persons still moving through systems and capitalist apparatuses whereby labor, jobs, extraction, responsibilities must always already be attended to.

Another participant commented:

“It seems as if we've got so much going on in society that we have almost become numb to all the violence and all of the bad things that are going on in our lives. Two weeks ago on my job, someone wrote the N-word on a big sheet of paper and stuck it on the locker of a new Black supervisor there. And being that I'm one of the officers in the union, it was sent to me for me to do something about it. And I contacted HR and upper management, and they made a big to-do out of it and sent emails and all this, but in Arkansas, in the South, we know ain't a whole lot going to be done. We hope that it would, but when you look at all the stuff that's going on in the world, all the stuff that's going on in your town and your neighborhood, you can get hopeless. But in order for things to change, you have to keep pushing. You have to keep pressing. We've got too many people who suffered and died. We have to keep going” {voice trembling}.

These two comments caused a potent gasp and time of reflection amongst the group. In particular, the latter comment led to the participant crying and visibly shaken based on the triggering nature of the racism she experienced that week at work. As a facilitator, I held space for the intensity of experiences and, in particular, the depth of pain and trauma of that co-explorer's vulnerability. Organically, other participants utilized Zoom features, such as heart emojis, and several typed in the chat comments, such as “sending a hug to you” and “I feel your pain, sending love and comfort.” Interestingly, while asserting that one has become numb, palpable emotions ensued that suggested otherwise. In so doing, these respective comments opened a floodgate of sorts, and another person chimed in with more experiences and geographic memories of horror. One participant stated:

“I was going to the word horrors and then reflecting in my own family, I know that one of my elderly cousins, who I used to speak with, and my grandmother, they had an uncle who was hanged in Sumter County off of a tree, not too far from where they lived. And then also my grandmother, they had an uncle who was one of the first Blacks to be electrocuted in South Carolina. So, I can look back at my own personal family and see the horrors that happened in the family back then. But again, the gentleman who said that he doesn't feel that he's as strong as his ancestors. I think we all have something in us from God primarily, but from our ancestors that just tells us to keep going, no matter what the struggle has been.”

This comment led to several more revelations but struck a deep chord with the group as the person shared about a family lynching and electrocution. In part, I referenced the state's renovated capital punishment facilities because of the historic, longitudinal aspect of such repugnant carceral apparatuses (Gilmore 2007). This speaks to the ways in which carceral spaces can be hidden in plain sight, yet through coded language, zoning laws, and monikers that dot the landscape, "all places are racialized, not just the 'inner city,' 'the border,' and 'the reservation'" (Bonds 2013, p. 1391). In the earlier group, Focus Group A, the distinct categories of horror, healing, and holiness collapsed, and lines began to blur as participants shared. These comments highlight overlaps and suggests that these are not mutually exclusive paradigms. One participant stated:

"There was horror, there was healing, there was holiness, in the entire sermon if you connect it. You look at all the different movements she went through from Tiananmen Square to the Wall; and I still, even in the midst of all that's going on, we still know that there are kids down at that border that are still in cages. [crosstalk] These things are going on around us. I'm just praying that there's somebody at the wall that can do something to help to get rid of these evils that fester...."

Another participant stated:

"I was pretty preoccupied with my grands, and that oldest one, she started asking questions about our ancestors, in terms of my daddy. [crosstalk], because they saw that, it's a picture that I have...for our last family reunion, but I went ahead and had somebody to put it on an oil painting for me. But she was trying to relate, "Well, who are they in relationship to me?" And to her mother. Then I had to tell her the story about how grandma used to keep her mother when I used to travel. It's almost like a history lesson

for her, but also it was like she... I'm not going to tell you she understood death, I'm not going to tell you that, but she does know, because of her Sunday school teaching, she knows about the heavens."

These two comments revealed an emphasis on the nebulous nature of categories and boundaries as each reflected the horrors they notice in the world and the sermon alongside contemporary human rights crises and a more contemplative response to one's sense of

mortality, progeny, afterlife, and the stories and ethics bequeathed to grandchildren around life and death.

Spirited Landscapes of Healing and Holiness

As dialogues continued, in each focus group, an intention around healing and holiness unfolded alongside a direct connection between the global undertones exemplified in the sermon and their current sense of place. One participant stated:

“I watched “Black is King” this morning. And I almost said that I'm feeling Black this morning, but I'm bringing it up here because the sermon, I think in terms of healing and holiness, it made me think about that in terms of speaking to both the structure and to the masses, that our messaging, it is that, yes, Pharaoh let my people go, but people, I think that was just incredibly salient to me. We need to have each other. Come on. I got you. And arm-in-arm. Let's make our way through this, I think. And understanding who we are and connect it globally. I just think that's kind of what I was feeling in terms of trying to think through healing and holiness, understanding ourselves as divine beings. And then also just that healing of coming back to being communal, as opposed to the individualism, that we've kind of been conditioned into.”

Another expressed:

“But it's the healing for me; well, not the healing, but to continue to move forward was years ago. Because I crossed the bridge with Clinton...we got up two o'clock in the morning to drive to Selma. And we walked that Edmund Pettus bridge with Bill Clinton. And it took us three hours to get through security, but it was worth every bit to be in the atmosphere. And to feel the movement of John Lewis and Coretta Scott King and all of the marches and C.T. Vivian. You could feel it in the atmosphere for those thousands and thousands of people who were packed in there. Covid would've really been all through us, because we were really, literally, back-to-back ... walking across that bridge.”

Another participant added:

“I still have the newspaper clippings and all of that, but it was a healing walking across that bridge to know that Dr. King walked, well, yeah, the others walked across that bridge. But it's just so interesting because we have been threatened. Our people don't know it, but we were threatened years ago to have a cross burned in our yard because...we were so vocal out in Danville.”

Shifting to moments of civic engagement, activism, and communal care and connectivity emerged as people reflected on the nature of spirited landscapes of healing and holiness.

Flashbacks of times in the midst of commemorative walks across historic Civil Rights sites and spaces alongside digital spaces of representative healing through media such as Beyoncé's "Black is King." The next few comments pivot back toward nature and topography as the physical environment provides recuperative care and prisms of rejuvenation, animistic histories in the soil and branches of trees, and so forth. One participant commented:

"The Angel Oak tree, near Charleston, James Island, and that beautiful tree, it does something to me, and I've gone back several times again to that Angel Oak tree. And it's just its landscape, its structure; it's just something spiritually that it's God's creation; how could a tree have lived that long, and the branches are all there even though they look closer up now to keep it up but, that's just, I've never seen a tree glow like that. And just the history that's got to be behind that tree. Just struck something in me, special."

Another stated:

"When I first learned to drive, one of my favorite places was to drive up to Lake Murray and just go across the bridge and see the water and it was so relaxing, and whatever it was I could just leave it out there, and so, when she's talking about parting the Red Sea, they have what actually parted at that point, but I could just get everything that was in me out, or think about new things and be rejuvenated on the drive back and find new things to do. So, it was sort of a purification for me."

These last two comments speak directly to the elements of holiness while reflecting on the role of spirituality amidst COVID-19 and the direct impact that this research study seemed to be awakening in another participant's lifeworld as they received confirmation and "answers" via various sermons streamed that Sunday. Another participant offered:

"You've got to keep finding ways to not reinvent yourself but ways to keep doing spiritual work, no matter whether we have Covid or if it stays, if it goes, that's God's business. What am I supposed to do until he comes back? What can I do to help the kingdom of God until He returns?"

In addition, another participant added:

"But as a side note, and I know this is something completely different, but as a holiness aspect, it kind of freaked me out. Everything that I've prayed for this week, I got an answer for today in a sermon, and now I'm like, "Okay God. All right. Make a note, write that down. Okay, you got this God, okay. We good...."

As the groups continued to build and foster camaraderie amongst one another themes around topography and nature, sacred mobility, altars at home, and creative outlets emerged as key indicators concerning the types of places and movements that endowed or consecrated their seemingly ordinary orbits, routines, and patterns with an element of extra-ordinary meaning, power, and/or valence.

Focus Group Discussion

Before delving into thematic overtones more in-depth, it should be noted that technology played an impactful role in focus group discussions, often in unexpected ways. Technological surprises that were delightful and pedagogically fruitful included the chat feature, the mute button, and the interface for sharing the screen, enabling an easy and clear view of each sermon clip and video. Had we been in-person watching collectively on a television or projector screen the dynamics of the group would have been noticeably altered with possibilities for different kinds of obstructions and distractions (Pink 2015). The capacity to narrow the lens of screen time and focus on displaying just the relevant question, one at a time, helped fortify a neat structure upon which the group could then pivot and diverge in any way, yet pointing back towards the anchor or “true north” agenda of topics to discuss. The chat emerged as a powerful tool as participants sometimes sent an encouraging word, such as “sending a digital hug,” when a participant shared a particularly disheartening experience and noted that they had encountered a racist and triggering event at work. There were other group balms and tender moments that unfolded while complimenting and commenting on each other’s sermon map visual aesthetics (explored in Chapter 5) or the ways that each one was creative in developing their own interpretation of the final sermon prompt and clip. Nonetheless, turning first to the exigencies of the excerpts, spatial subtleties of these findings shall be analyzed.

Analysis: Moving Beyond Church – *Geographies of “Quiet”*

There’s a long and storied tradition of Black people’s folk wisdom traditions and practices alongside certain practices influenced by African traditions, healers, and ancient wisdom that guides and yields Black folks to move beyond the church to engage in meaning-making, find refuge, and sources of healing. Scholar Kevin Quashie notes in his work, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, that “the argument for quiet asks about expressiveness that is shaped by the vagaries of the inner life” (Quashie 2012) and goes on to chronicle the reality that such expressions may be deemed illegible and “hard to codify singularly” (ibid.). Moving away from expressions of Blackness being deemed as always public, deemed familiar and somewhat “commonplace” yet imperceptible at the same time – these formulations and quizzical incongruities that describes, in part, the mathematics that Katherine McKittrick points towards analyzing Black geographies (McKittrick 2014). As I took notes, observed, and engaged with co-explorers in the focus groups, reflecting on the dialogues that emerged, the most salient and pervasive theme across all the codes harkened towards what I shall analyze as *geographies of “quiet.”* That is, spaces, practices, rituals, routines, rhythms, modes, and ways of being that gesticulate the sagacity and sanctity of spirited landscapes. Quietude renews strength. Quiet effuses spatial water for the well. The capacity to come apart for a while, in various scales and dimensions, enables moments to recalibrate. Yet, to be sure, this notion of “quiet” that Quashie espouses does not necessarily denote silence nor stillness, per se; rather, he points towards that which anchors and grounds apart from visible gazes.

The essence of this idea finds antecedents in womanist theology by Barbara Holmes, who wrote a magisterial treatment on contemplative practices within and beyond the Black church with keen insight on mysticism and cosmology. Within her book, *Joy Unspeakable*:

Contemplative Practices of the Black Church, Holmes's chapter, "Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep: The Inner Life During Slavery," portends that "crisis contemplation became a refuge, a wellspring of discernment in a suddenly disordered life space, and a geo-spiritual anvil for forging a new identity" (Holmes 2017). Her work oozes spatial dimensions at every turn, as she identifies the hold of the slave ship, auction blocks, and hush arbors as three key moments of contemplation. In relation to the horror expressed in the focus groups, despite being online, there were audible gasps, pauses, deep knowing glances, and audible moans, grunts, and 'umm-hmms.' This facet of the group dynamic registers with Holmes's contention that the moan was one of the contemplative practices utilized across what Lamine Kebe calls "the bitter waters" of the transatlantic middle passage (quoted in Holmes 2017). One of the subtleties that added dimension, group bonding, and empathy stemmed from moments of quiet within the interpersonal exchanges of the group. Without warning and yet not shocking, as some participants shared their numbness to such pain, the audible innuendos and moans ensued on Zoom, perhaps dovetailing with a genealogy of sorts:

"The moan became the first vocalization of a new spiritual vocabulary—terrible and wonderful, it was a cry, a critique, a prayer, a hymn, **a sermon**, all at once....The moan expressed loneliness, pain, and the inchoate hope, which would later fuse with biblical imagery. Its rhythm was not so much the syncopated beat of the West African drum as the rock and sway of the sea-faring vessel which contained their bodies." {emphasis added}. (Noel Jones, as quoted in Holmes 2017)

This sort of spiritual vocabulary proffers and speaks to a geography of quiet that encompasses the everyday lived spiritual experiences that geographers of religion, such as Lily Kong, Peter Hopkins, and Elizabeth Olson, posited ought to become the vanguard of the discourse in their work, *Religion and Place*. To submit that the moan serves as a kind of sermon offers a telling and expansive pivot concerning these revelations amidst the group. At times, it is not uncommon in vernacular expressions across the African diaspora, along with those who have been socialized

in certain circles, across race and ethnicity, especially Southerners, to moan and then declare, “now that’s a word!” In so doing, analogous to the moans amongst both Zoom focus groups, assent and telling reverberations to echo audible understanding, lament, and ancestral tethering.

The four categories delineated among the focus group conversations of spirited landscapes illustrate the kinds of “intimate Black geographies” (Hirsh and Jones 2021) that attend to singing by the pond while taking a walk or gazing out the window while reflecting on the day or taking flight and feeling as if the altitude in the clouds lends itself to quiet time with God. These sorts of moments do not often garner headlines or newsfeeds yet demonstrate the sanctity of meaning-making through habits and movements either intentionally cultivated or unintentionally stumbled upon as one person spoke to getting lost while walking and discovering gems around town that are hidden in plain sight.

Throughout the group, when asked about ‘places of sanctuary,’ it was not uncommon to hear tales of participants’ favorite jaunt or spaces outside, reclaiming Kathryn Finney’s invitation to imagine the nature of the outdoors vis-à-vis African Americans (Finney 2014). Several shared that they enjoy going for walks and the ways in which it centers or offers a space to practice alternative forms of prayer or communion. Another shared that she enjoys looking out the window precisely because she “can see nature and enjoys that;” additionally, while alongside the bed, sitting on a stool, another participant shared that she does her praying and enjoys sitting in such places in the mornings and again at nighttime because “that’s where I do take time and think about a lot of things, put things in perspective, and start my day.”

Through a cartographic history of fashioning worlds amidst the peripheries of spaces, architectures of confinement and exile, to the ways in which the homeplace provides spaces for reflection, like the kitchen table (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015) for reclaiming a sense of radical

forms of care (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Participant shared that she lives near “a park that has tennis courts it has nature trails, and it has a pond...I love the outdoors, I love nature, sometimes I go to a trail, where I feel the urge to sing...” and such spaces offer an outlet for expressing and reflecting upon latent and hidden worries, aggravations, unintended misunderstandings, and the like. Another participant shared that her sanctuary was an enclosed patio space, while another shared that the beach used to be a space for sanctuary, yet it now is a walk-in closet in her bedroom that is big enough that it functions like a prayer closet.

Despite conducting these groups almost two years ago, at this very moment, the South Carolina Department of Corrections just spent approximately \$53,600 to renovate execution facilities and hire a firing squad for death row inmates, granting one of three options: death by firing squad, electrocution, or lethal injection when there is no shortage of deadly drugs (Greenville News, March 18, 2022). Joining Utah as the only other state in the past 40 years carrying out such death sentences, indeed, the sinister nature of such a recent bill, passed in 2021 by Governor McMaster, is matched by the lack of fanfare and “atmospheric” (Sharpe 2016) nature of such horror tucked away in a quotidian bill signing on a regular weekday. This updated bill was one of the first on a pile given to the current governor; amidst a pandemic and racial reckonings, the executive director of the South Carolina state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, Frank Knaack, stated, “Our governor ensured that the death penalty in South Carolina – a system rooted in racial terror and lynching – was upheld,” (Associated Press 2021) after a hiatus, of sorts, when the last execution was held in May 2010. This sordid and ghastly structural context of the carceral state of South Carolina forms the canopy under which this study’s findings are situated.

Private and Public Lamentation

Given the current context of renovated firing squads in South Carolina along with other states and territories in the region and across the globe instituting so many restrictive and death-dealing mechanisms, the spirited landscapes shared by the co-explorers offer moments for reflection but also forms of private and public lamentation. Lurking beneath the surface of what I am calling geographies of quiet, comments, and reactions attest to idiosyncratic and personalized forms of lament. In so many ways, many of these nature trails, trips to the spa, time spent digging in the dirt, walking with music, and driving in silence become release valves. A book that encapsulates these sentiments, entitled *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*, highlights ways in which systemic and atmospheric horror, stress, loss, transition, fear, and countless other emotions take their toll on everyone, to be fair, but with added weight for those at the intersections of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asians.

Interestingly, lament in and of itself takes on so many different forms and textures, as the focus groups revealed landscapes of healing from soil, soot, and sass. Reflecting on moments in life when decisions, transitions, or new opportunities were being pondered, many spoke of absorbing themselves in nature to commune with the earth while praying or remaining quiet to discern the next steps. Lest this analysis portray only an idyllic and healing purview concerning nature, some shared generational warnings and cautions about the dangers in the bush and disease that can come by tick bites and mosquitos along with potions, homemade remedies, and omens, of sorts, to note in the gait and pacing of animals that indicate whether they're frightened, amenable to human proximity, or in predator mode. With these nuanced layers of approaching flora and fauna, keen and palpable distinctions were offered in terms of how to work with one's environment and seasonal conditions in moments of lament. One person stated they enjoy trees

and hiking; however, in harsh weather, they turn to gatherings of friends and, while sharing, after a while, a distinct pivot often occurs whereby sassiness, humor, and playful banter become balms.

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis – Sermon Maps

Introduction

For a person to proclaim that a sermon “preached” and then compare reactions, highlights, “earmarks” (Spillers 1974), and emotional landmarks that resonate in the immediate aftermath is a kind of memory-work (Till 2008) and Black spiritual cartography. Picking up Ella Baker’s respect and reverence for the rigor of everyday people (Ransby 2005), in essence, such remarks and comments post-sermonic conclusion emit egalitarian measures of import, profundity, relevance, and intensity. To declare emphatically – “that’s all right!” – bursts out of an assent attuned with the highest and deepest yearnings of a person’s being, proclaiming that the sermon or message touched them or ‘hit home.’ To that point, opposite reactions also ensue: “Help ‘em, Lord!” or “Make it plain, Reverend!” or “Do Jesus” and a bevy of other colloquial reactions laced with sonic and theological assessment. When a preacher falls short, the people will let them know that the sermon didn’t quite elicit the depth of sonorous, pastoral, ethical, aesthetic, theological, and/or practical dimensions. Responses such as “that was good, but you lost me on that second point,” or “I love your hook! The introduction had me engaged, but it waned near the end,” or “Sounded like you were preaching two sermons in one” or “The delivery was good, but it was missing some oomph.” These are the kinds of responses that clergy who preach often lament or wrestle with during their respective moments of study, preparation, and delivery. To that end, the phenomena of preaching cements the reality that the audience and the crowd carry the authority (Gadamer 1960) and grant it to those deemed worthy and proficient of “the call” (McKenzie 1996).

Since the contemplative tradition, such as the moan and other geographies of quiet, retain their efficacy in Black spirituality and life, even for those who may not describe their style of spirituality in such terms; consequently, many, if not most, people listening to sermons have

honed their own private maps for cultivating “the inward journey” (Gilbert 2018; Thurman 1991). Listening for God amidst private doubts, personal issues, and questions (Weems 2000) or turning to sermons during COVID-19 seeking guidance, encouragement, and spiritual grids by which to make sense of dis-eases from the pandemic and those endemic to structures governing “lifeworlds.” Through the prism of sermons, people trust and have faith that a form of contact will take place, a cerebral and mystical exchange or download from divine forces at play. Thus, there is always a hidden curriculum during a sermon that operates akin to an unspoken “social contract” to play on the late philosopher Charles Mills. Always at work during the sermon and thereafter, those listening ascribe, anticipate, and spatialize meaning-making. In so doing, invisible yet palpable and “visceral geographies” (Hayes-Conroy 2010) dot the sanctuary – even virtually as sermons streamed via platforms like YouTube or Facebook Live, respectively, procure chat reactions in real-time or thereafter with subsequent views asynchronously.

The Eyes of Sermon Maps

To synthesize and organize the findings of this study, while examining sermon maps from focus groups, a crucial heuristic or interpretative framework best frames the analysis of ‘data’ and findings: “the map is an eye” and “the eye is a map” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 109-10). Two people can take a walk and stroll by a park, replete with playground functionality, a panoply of trees, several basketball courts, and perhaps a few tennis courts, yet each one of them will notice and respond to such stimuli from different angles. Hypothetically, the first onlooker and casual stroller happens to be an elementary school teacher, and that person immediately notices the layout of the playground and how well it conforms to certain safety codes in the spatial layout. The second person may be a stressed-out computer engineer who feels immediately awestruck by the sequoia trees, deciding this park shall become a new relaxing

refuge. In either case, their eyes evoke and prove their experiences since “the world we know—the *only* world we know—is in the final analysis dependent on how we see it” (ibid.).

Utilizing this logic, then, the sermon maps created by co-explorers in this study function as eyes. The maps reveal that they are shaped and “subjugated to the human purposes they serve” (ibid.) and thus relayed the biases and preferences along with certain universalities.

Cartographers Kaiser and Wood suggest that people have agency and power in deciding what and how they choose to see, noting that one can keep their gaze and focus upon that which is familiar or open their eyes to “places they have never been before” (ibid., 109). From a popular culture perspective, such was the transporting power of the television program *Reading Rainbow*; it reminded children of their capacity to dream and teleport themselves into completely new domains by training their eyes to see what was on the page while being carried away with the story, the history, the mystery, and so forth. In a similar vein, these sermon maps reveal the ways that each participant/co-explorer transports themselves to another imaginative and/or very specific place vis-à-vis the sermon experience.

The other side of this heuristic frame contends the “eye is a map” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 110), and this speaks to the functionality of what a person will do with what they see. To elucidate this maxim, Kaiser and Wood suggest that a shift in a couple of words would allow this slight yet profound pivot: “The world we know—which is the *only* world we know—is dependent on how we map it” (ibid.). So, when maps based upon the 16th-century projections of Mercator depict the size of Africa as smaller than North America or Greenland as much larger than China when the opposite is true, and these maps become canonized standards, even informing the GPS utilized on Google Maps, among other apps—the world we *know* is shaped by how we shape it. Lest this takes a haughty or self-righteous tone, “all eyes and maps present

selective visions, tailored to our needs. The needs—the purposes—act as editors or filters or lenses to let us hone in on what is important at the moment” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 111). In other words, no map can or should even aspire to see everything as it is impossible in the first place, and would create an imperceptible fog, ultimately. Hence, while examining these sermon maps great emphasis has been placed on the contours, layers, and textures of the maps along with the “silences of the map,” which showcase political and phenomenological implications as cartographer J.B. Harley posits. Keeping in mind that “silence can reveal as much as it conceals” (Harley 1988, p. 58), these maps demonstrate the gaps, fissures, and opaque spaces that usher forth each participant/co-explorer’s sense of spirituality and spatial understanding rendered through the land of sermons. Since “Black matters are spatial matters” (Hawthorne 2019), these eyes reveal dimensions for reflection and imagination concerning spatial knowledge production amongst a group often overlooked historically in cartography and mapping, guided the third and final Zoom focus group. This was the only focus group in which sermon maps were created in real time together via Zoom. Each one of these maps showcases the eyes of the mapmaker and their particularities while demonstrating the ways they conceptualize, hear, ingest, incorporate, silence, and *see* sermons. These maps are eyes that showcase various portals of interiority.

Eye-tuning Progression – Sermon Transcriptions

Building upon phenomenological and creative methods, this section reveals the intentional progression of select sermon clips from each week. Since it has been established that eyes are maps and maps are eyes, the logic unfolding at the center of this colorful iris aimed to gauge participants’ sense of space and sermons, more broadly, alongside their notions of conjuring to address both research questions. Then, in week two, as the previous chapter revealed, a deeper dive into the implications of the work sermons performed for each participant

ensued. That was designed to elucidate sharper apertures of their eyes. Finally, in the third and last focus group, all of the parts were combined to explore exactly what, where, and how participants' eyes would transport them into the land of the sermon.

Each week, after the grounding and warm welcome, I played a 3-minute audio or video clip of a sermon, and then we engaged in the questions; in weeks 1 and 2, I showed two separate clips. Following the order and sequence in which they were played, the very first sermon clip begins with the pastor of the anchor church for this study, Rev. Gregory B. Cunningham, followed by a classic sermon preached by the late icon and third-generation ordained Baptist minister, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and then conclude with a eulogistic sermon by venerable civil rights leader and teacher, Rev. James Lawson speaking at the memorial for John Lewis. This sermon, entitled "Why I Trust My Life in the Hands of the Holy Spirit," based upon the scripture or sacred text of Romans 8:26-30, was preached Sunday, July 26, 2020, on Facebook Live.

"What is it that God wants me to do? What is my purpose? How am I supposed to respond? What things will I get evaluated on at the end of my days as we call like and the rest of this whole idea of being, and sometimes we can piss him off because we have accumulated some knowledge about God, where if we're not careful, we become our own form of spirit where we take what we know in God where it becomes intellectual but it does not lead us into the point where we can that peace, that joy, that security, and understanding, that comprehension that allows us to move in and out of changes in lives that life will bring to us. Talking about holding on to God's unchanging hand.

We live in the time that's filled with swift transitions, and it takes a keen mind to understand – what is my purpose in the midst of this pandemic? What is my purpose in the midst of Black Lives Matter? What is my purpose in this understanding of - are we going to be able to tolerate another four years of 45? What am I supposed to do with all this going on around me and the uncertainty of my tomorrow? The Holy Spirit helps us in using our weakness. I want to say weakness here can also be that which we do not know. It's amazing how the uncertainty of tomorrow can weaken us; it paralyzes us. If we're not careful we can find ourselves in a ditch."

This immortal sermon excerpt from “I See the Promised Land” was the last public utterance by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968.

“Be true to what you set on paper. If I lived in China or Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic first amendment privileges because they haven't committed themselves to that over there. Somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatest of America is the right to protest for rights. That's because I say we aren't going to let any dogs or water hoses turn us around. We aren't going to let any injunction turn us around.

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. It really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know, tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Rev. Lawson's eulogistic sermon in honor of Representative John Lewis happened on July 30, 2020. His sermon remarks were offered at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and live-streamed globally. Given the timing of John Lewis's death and memorial service during the week leading up to the final focus group, this sermon by Civil Rights organizer and strategist extraordinaire seemed apropos as a synthesizing message to test and investigate the eye-tuning distinctions of the participants' sermon map journeys. Now I turn to the transcript of Rev. Lawson's memorial sermon remarks:

“'58, '59, and '60 and '61 and '62, in the same city, at the same time, I count as being providential. We did not plan it. We rolled in there. And when Kelly Miller Smith and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council met in the fall of 1958, and we determined that if there was to be a second major campaign that will demonstrate the efficacy of Satyagraha, of soul force, of love truth, then we would have to do it in Nashville. I planned as the strategist and organizer a four-point Gandhian strategic program to create the campaign. We decided with great fear and anticipation, we would desegregate downtown Nashville. No group of Black people or other people anywhere in the United States in the 20th century against the rapaciousness of a segregated system ever thought

about desegregating downtown. Tearing down the signs, renovating the waiting rooms, taking the immoral signs off of drinking fountains. It was Black women that made that decision for us in Nashville.

I was scared to death when we made that decision. I knew nothing about how we were going to do this. I had never done it before. But we planned the strategy. John Lewis did not stumble in on that campaign. Kelly Miller Smith, his teacher at ABC invited John to join the workshops in the fall of 1959, as we prepared ourselves to face violence, and to do direct action, and to put on the map, the issue that the racism and the segregation of the nation had to end.

So in the 60th anniversary of that sit-in campaign, which became the second major campaign of the non-violent movement...” (Lawson, July 30, 2020)

These sermons were selected to explore both research questions, with emphasis on the second one. Given the vivid imagery, evocative emotions, topical variety, and varying narrative styles – these seemed like ideal sermons to utilize and note what stood out and in what ways persons thought about conjuring, emotional landscapes, and the transformation of their own local communities, orbits, and society in general. In what follows, these maps are displayed to demonstrate the colorful, creative, cathartic capacity of mapmaking through a creative lens.

These maps illustrate:

“ ...that “seeing” is how most of us bring the world into being. We use our eyes to create the world we see. Maps are an “eye” to the world. The more perspectives we have, the more accurate our vision. “Seeing” is meant literally here, but it can also be interpreted as a metaphor. Even visually impaired people “see” the world, although they rely on their other senses to “shape” or create reality around them. And all of us (some more than others) use our imaginations to call forth visions of the future—the world we want” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 109).

The invitation granted to participants and co-explorers after listening to this sermon snippet attempted to ferret and coalesce a previous couple of weeks into these prompts. The sermons were selected in a sequential pattern, beginning with a local illustration by the pastor of the host or anchor church, Rev. Cunningham, and then pivoting to a historic illustration by the late renowned Civil Rights icon and third-generation Baptist preacher, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Following that message, the sermon of Dr. Renita Weems elucidated the intergenerational

connectivity and pulse of struggles for social justice in each era and the invitation or call within such inflection moments to persons of conscious – how do people respond in the face of moral decay and unethical viruses? Given the timing of the coronavirus and various faith communities closing doors, shutting down operations, and moving towards digital means, the sermon by Dr. Weems seemed prescient for the moment alongside several vexing and layered questions for the role of church and society along with people of compassion, no matter their backgrounds. Finally, Rev. Lawson’s eulogistic sermon served as the only sermon snippet shown during the third and final week, which was used to pilot and implement the sermon maps. In a way, all these sermons offered points along with a legend or map of sermonic inferences that I sought to cover terrains of gender, style, topic, cadence, and the aforementioned sermonic approaches.

The Prompt

After watching Rev. Lawson’s sermon snippet, the following prompt was shared on the screen, akin to prior PowerPoint prompts. After answering a couple of clarifying questions, I played Miles Davis jazz for approximately 10-12 minutes while people drew their maps. Afterward, we went around the horn as each person shared. To ensure the maps were seen on the largest possible video ratio, for this final session, I used the spotlight feature in Zoom to give each person the full screen as they spoke with the rest of the group in smaller boxes above. Here is the prompt:

“As you listen to that sermon, these are some questions we've been wrestling with now for the past three weeks: Where does it take you? What sounds do you hear? Here's a big one: What memories come back for you? What are the emotional landmarks? And I encourage you to use your five senses: sight, taste, touch, smell, hearing” (Cunningham 2020).

Sermon Map Results

Recalling that “maps are like eyes” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 109), the sermon maps below provide a fascinating window into participants/co-explorers’ respective visions of the sermon. The eulogistic sermon by Rev. Lawson referenced several themes, including social justice, the role of women in leading and guiding the Nashville action to desegregate downtown, and the importance of Gandhian principles, among other things. Utilizing discourse analysis, one can read the text of a map in a way that highlights the primary themes coursing through the maps. To that end, four themes shall guide this analysis: (holy) ghosts, tenderness despite callousness, illegible intimacies, and cartographies of love. Collectively, I submit that each of these domains empirically and conceptually demonstrate the ways in which Southern Black people, especially Black women, function as conjurers through the sermon maps they create and usher forth.

(holy)ghosts

A dominant thread that the maps focused on in response to the sermon by Rev. Lawson contends with harrowing collective memories, hauntology, and what I am designating (holy)ghosts. That is, the maps display vivid, sometimes colorful, and imaginative dimensions and contours depicting personal and systemic oppression. These maps demonstrate an emphasis on the struggle of African Americans and the larger African diaspora, as certain maps envisaged slave ships, the middle passage, settler colonialism, and life among Southern black folk. These maps encapsulate and spatialize a phrase from 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr., that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Several maps included winding roads and paths, noting how much has transpired during various epochs of time. Building upon the work of Manier and Hirst, scholars in memory

studies, these maps offer new sight concerning “collective episodic memories and collective procedural memories” (Manier and Hirst 2008, p. 257). Turning to the former, a “collective episodic memory” depicts a shared event or experience in the past that members of the mnemonic community can reference as well as the spatial-temporal context (ibid). In that instance, each person watching the sermon clip shared in a collective focus group experience while simultaneously processing and noticing their own reactions, emotional landmarks, and resonances. The “collective procedural memories” encapsulate certain rituals and traditions that produce memories, in which participants may not necessarily know the rationale or history behind each step, such as celebrating Roman Catholic mass or Protestant communion, yet they serve to help produce or procure “certain collective attitudes or feelings” (ibid. 259). In these mnemonic ways, sermons generate both forms of collective memory—collective episodic and collective procedural memories—in which the maps operate as eyes that recall and conjure horrors of oppression, struggle, degradation, violence, and Jim Crow segregation. Figures 7, 8, and 9 show sermon maps addressing the theme of (holy)ghosts, respectively, through various prisms.

Figure 7 Co-Explorer Vignette

“So we’re on a road to get in, it’s a long and winding road. And then he threw out dates of when all these things started, and it was 1958. So I thought about 1958, I put that here. But the starting point is 1619, allegedly the first slaves arrived in 1619. So I have 1619 here, and I have the boat, some little passage.

And then he talked about women, especially black women, and then I thought about Africa. Because they call Africa the mother land...the mother bones are there, so our backbone, our foundation. Black women is likened to where we came from, the continent of Africa. So I drew Africa up here.

Then I have this long and winding road, and I have a few select dates, 1776, when all white protestant men are created equal. 1865, obviously slaves was freed. 1965, Civil Rights Act. And we’re right here, 2020, as you see, we’re not here to the promised land, equality, racial amity, whatever.

And I have the praying hands here in the middle, and they're pointed towards the promised land. But we're constantly praying and trying to get closer to each other and closer to God, to get towards the promised land.

And up here, I started with a date which is 2000 and something. And I had 20, and then dot, dot, question mark. But then I thought about it and I'm like, "I don't know if we're going to get there by 2099, or something. So I scratched it out, and I put two, dot, dot. And maybe sometime this millennia, we will reach the X here, the promised land, the final destination, harmony, equality, et cetera."

Figure 8 Co-Explorer Vignette

"Everybody's ideas are really good. Where's my little camera? Here, let me flip it. Okay. I thought about King in the '60s, and I drew a road being that we were talking about a map. The question, where do we go? I thought I heard him say never did it before. So along with that I'm sure came fear of I'm stepping out and doing the things that they did. They had to go through a long road through the valleys. That's my green grass there, trees.

Also, they had to go through crossroads, "Which way do we go?" So, hey, they went one way, went to another crossroad, had to go through detours perhaps, obstacles. They went around, kept on going back at them, the crossroads, "Which way do we go?" Then they finally got on the right road and I put truth as marching on, they're standing for truth. And X will mark the spot at the destination that they're trying to get, or I'll say all of us that we're trying to get at some point, we're trying to get to that particular destination. So that is my map."

Figure 9 Co-explorer Vignette

"When you think of that time and what he was saying, I immediately thought about the... Can you see the police? And he got his little billy club, and he was like, "No, we ain't having this. We ain't doing this."

And about the water, and again, I drew my little picture of what I figure, "Whites only," Aquafina, or some distilled water kind of thing with the little flowers and stuff. And everything is clean, everything is fresh. And then I wrote black and then I had to change it, and I said, "No, we were Negros and we were colored."

And that's my little poop sign, with the stench coming up. And that's my little poison bottle. And because, in my mind, we were always, we as a people were always given the scraps, and we had to make-due with what we could with those scraps.

And when I think of the, colored only sign, and the... Here we go. My own personal experience. When we first moved here from Chicago to Arkansas, there was a little department store on Main Street, here in Warren, that was called Martin's Department Store. And we pulled in, we parked on the front, on Main Street, we walk in the store."

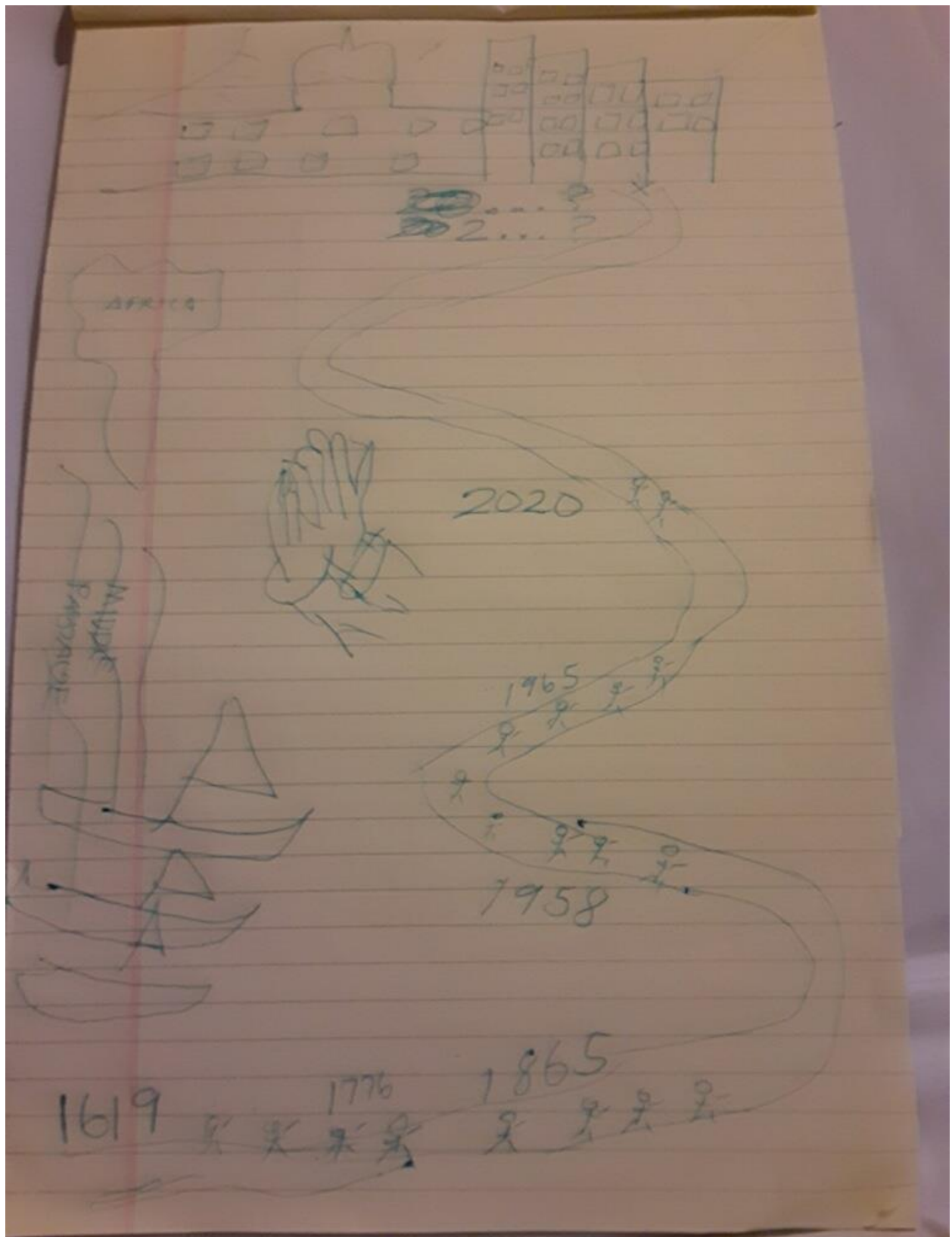


Figure 7: Sermon map - (holy) ghost theme with windy road

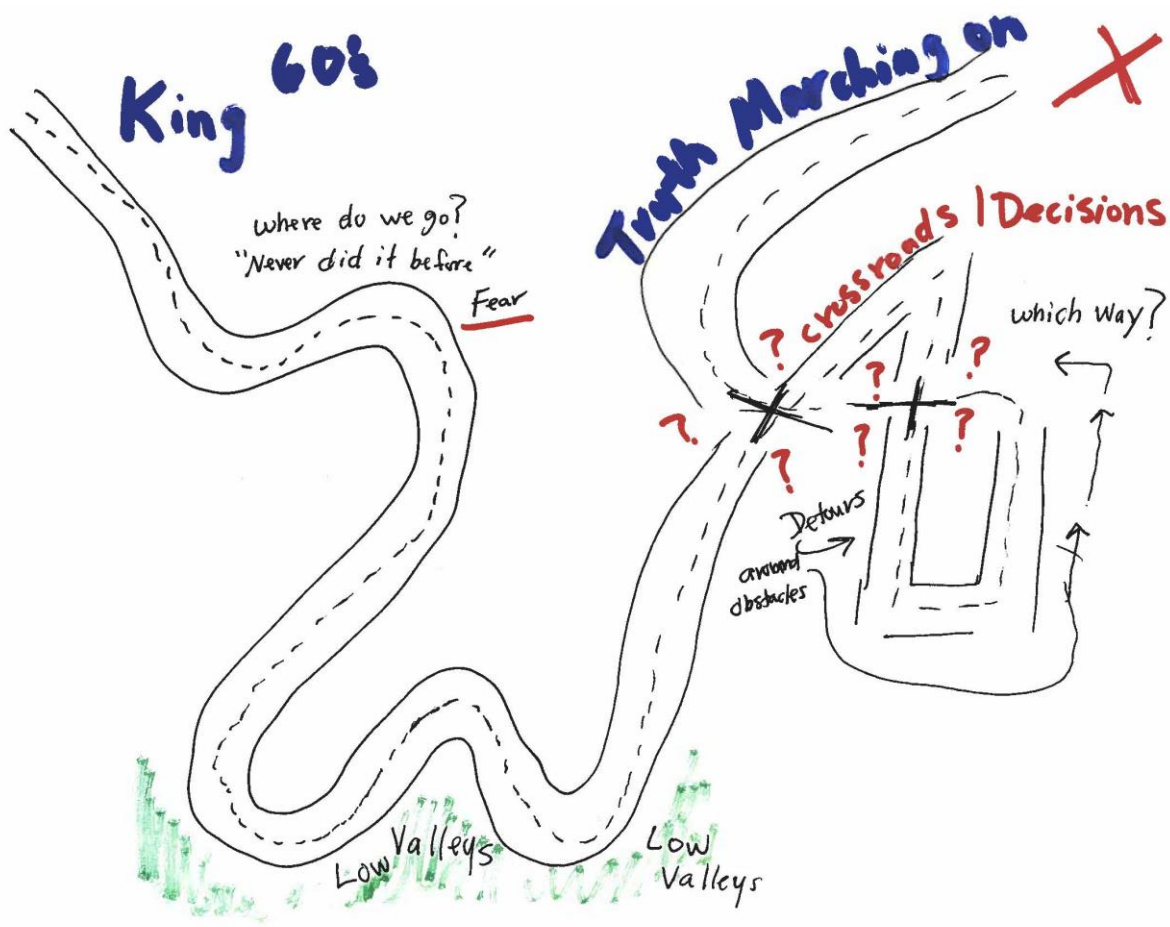


Figure 8: Sermon map - (holy) ghost theme with detours and crossroads

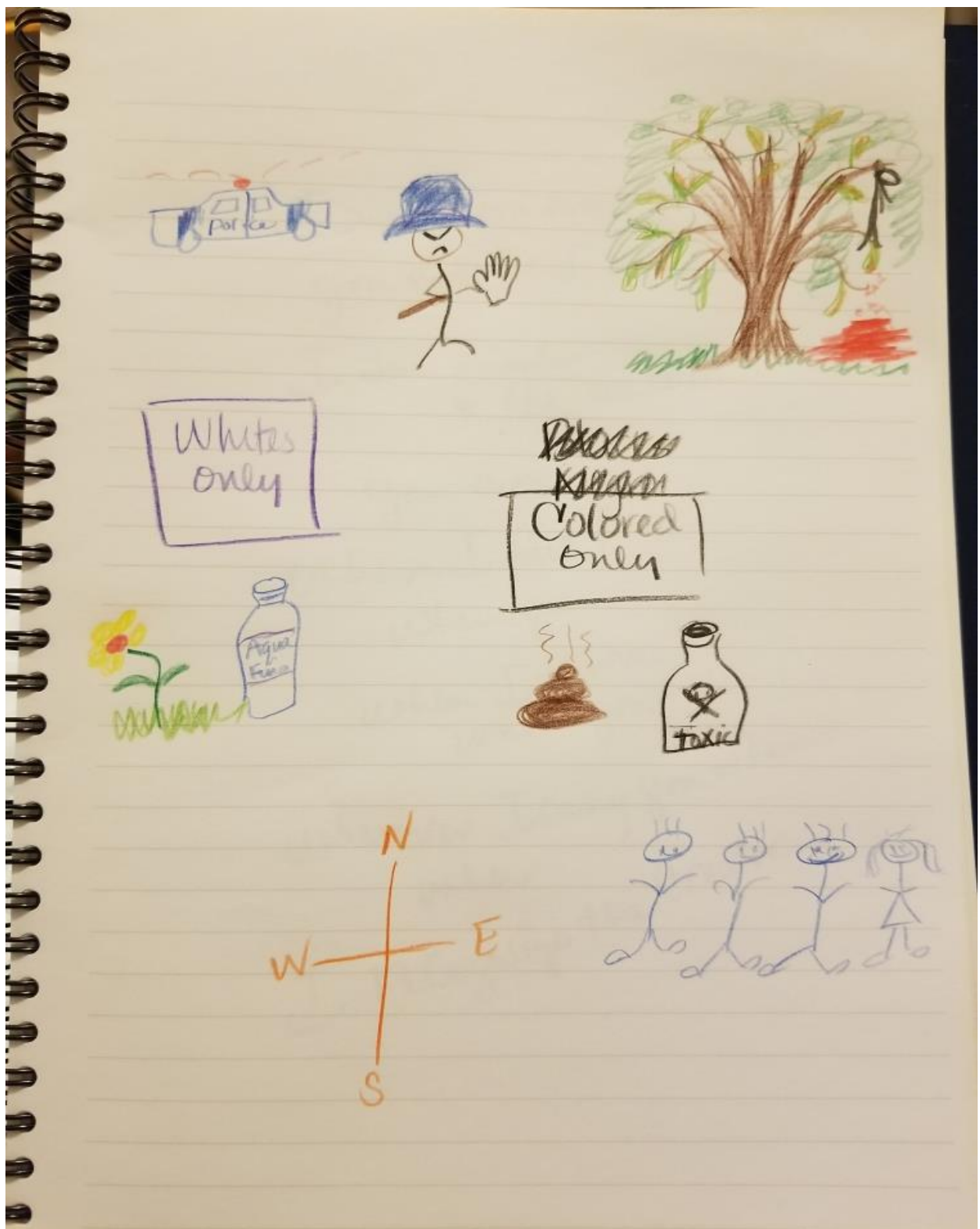


Figure 9: Sermon map - (holy) ghost theme with colorful hauntings

“Well, we're new, we don't know anything about the customs or anything. Well, immediately, we were escorted, me, my mama, my sister to the back of the store, where the clearance racks were, and that's when we noticed that there was a little side door. And on the outside, this is 1975, still had a whites only sign, and black a colored entrance.

So, when I thought about this, and these are the things that come back to my mind. How when you look at the whites only entrance, it was all clean and just pristine. And then when you go around the corner to the blacks only entrance, or the colored entrance, it was leaves, and debris, and trash, and all that kind of stuff around that doorway. And it evoked those kinds of memories for me.

And as far as the senses, seeing the dirt as comparing to something clean and pristine. And then I thought about the women that was in the movement, because they had to feed these folks. And so I'm sure somebody was in the kitchen, and somebody had collard greens or somebody had black-eyed peas, and some corn bread. Sorry, I'm smelling your soul food Sunday, kind of smells.”

The maps above highlight the ghosts that still haunt, linger, and terrorize body-minds and spirits. These ghosts are sometimes holy, akin to the kinds of memories that recall the liberatory sacrifices, courage, and faith required to march, protest, resist, and organize, on the one hand, but also to have children, raise families, plant gardens, celebrate anniversaries, chuckle, and explore frivolity as well. I intentionally bracket the term (holy) as certain maps draw on dimensions that recall prophetic visions and quests alongside that which has been endowed or consecrated as set apart in ways that tap into theologian Paul Tillich's notion of the holy, drawing from *Dynamics of Faith* (1957) that posits each person has faith because the phenomena of faith is the state of ultimate concern; hence, the source of one's ultimate concern(s) be that money, family, beauty, power and so forth becomes that person's god. Inasmuch as each person carries such ultimate concerns, these cherished ideals, aspirations, longings, and more become holy, and the rupture or threat of losing or not having them necessarily disrupts and ravishes the person's psyche, not unlike a form of death (Tillich 1957). Beyond Tillich, through the literary masterpiece of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, she has a character “Baby Suggs, holy,” who was *the* preacher for the community and performed conjuring work through “The Clearing,” as a place deep in the woods

where catharsis, wailing, moaning, dancing, and forms of release emerged through her sermons. These two referents form the backdrop of my analysis of the word “holy” as kinetic, alchemic, and a presence that may be more universal than many would ascribe through a Tillichian lens.

These three maps build upon and cement the notion of ghosts that seep into the daily fabric of those removed from certain vestiges of slavery, yet still channeling the past that is always present through memory and through somatic and cellular remembrances. Some of the incanted and recollected ghosts might be deemed as an offshoot of the trinity, or holy ghost, as used in certain spiritual circles, emblematic of a force that elides description or even the capacity to see yet one knows the evidence of its handiwork and guiding light as womanist theologians like Jaqueline Grant espoused. These sorts of ghosts function like “a lamp unto thy feet” (Psalm 119), helping to guide and steer a person’s path for the third map to convey and demonstrate the stark contrasts between clean and pristine operations versus those that are grimy and slimy, or the windy roads of the first two maps charting movements through history and the ways prayer, spirit, community, and kinship have carried and sustained Black people. This first theme answers the second research question by proving that black people conjure alongside unwieldy and highly charged sources, not unlike lightning bolts of energy, inspiration, quick reactions, gut instincts of danger, and quick instincts of safety. On the other hand, certain ghosts tap into the third definition of conjure, which is “to summon a devil or evil spirit by invocation or incantation” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). In other words, as this first set of maps illustrates, not all ghosts are working with nor rooting for you. Some ghosts will strangle and destroy you. The venom, vitriol, and hate-spewed sermonic utterances of certain preachers deem it godly for hound dogs to attack and decimate. These impulses surface through pulpits and sermonic maps as preachers and their co-explorer congregants espoused anti-vax denial theo-geographies,

support for Donald Trump and his venomous and traitorous insurrection, and current building campaigns still proclaiming the 2020 United States presidential election was a big lie and steal. As the maps above purport and hear echoes back to the transatlantic slave trade through 1619, that signals another polemical ghost around the audacity of Nikole Hannah-Jones and her award-winning 1619 Project at *The New York Times*. These ghosts take many forms – people, places, campaigns, Supreme Court rulings, legislative policies, and quintessentially, my focus: sermons.

Such ghosts swirl in pulpits each week as Anthea Butler traces innate racism as a crucial element in her latest treatise, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, along with Jemar Tisby's book, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. These two texts reiterate the sermon maps above (Figures 6, 7, and 8) and the respective commentaries accompanying them: it is an ongoing struggle towards equity and equality whereby the promised land of “beloved community” can be achieved. Indeed, the ghosts of white privilege and supremacy still wreak havoc alongside ghosts of xenophobia, as evidenced by these maps; however, each sermon map has either colors, textures, or windy road destinations that point towards “a more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). In each of the maps, there are figures and emblems, ranging from praying hands (Figure 7) to the colorful flower and water (Figure 9) that point towards those spirited landscapes of refuge and reprieve even surrounded by horror. Despite the low valleys as portrayed in Figure 8, the map highlights that “the truth keeps marching on” with an open-ended path, suggesting that those of us who remain become stewards and agents of manifold witness that imbues tenderness.

Tenderness Despite Callousness

To be surrounded by venom and insatiable appetites for carcasses of black flesh, black psyches, and annihilation of black spirits yet to arise daily, continue to survive, and still act in

ways that effuse tenderness is an act of fortification and womanist resistance. These maps collectively shed light on another dimension of conjuring and that is “to imagine, to contrive” (Merriam-Webster online dictionary). While some of those in the study may not utilize such language as womanism to describe their daily movements, affect, and ways of being, nonetheless, this grouping of maps below suggest that such values guide and frame their lives in ways that enable them to envision and imagine more holistic, tender, and grace-full ways of being. The following maps portray and portend layers of looking back, reaching back, remembering sweet and tender childhood memories that evoke and sustain a person’s discipline or commitment to pursue dreams and passion projects. These maps also attend to the ways in which the framing heuristic that eyes are maps and maps are eyes continue to unfold. In one instance, the co-explorer mentioned they did not really listen to the words as much as they were instantly transported to an indelible funerary experience in their past and proceeds to unpack in sublime ways how the sermon prompted their senses to smell, see, remember, and plan next steps for a latent idea to launch community-empowering short films. The following maps demonstrate the facet of conjuring that deals with ideations and subversive imagination rooted in their inner compass of tender gratitude and magnanimity. Figures 10 - 19 show a range of emotional and spiritual contours.

Figure 10: Co-Explorer Vignette

“I put the yellow palm here, because I thought I was reminded a lot about the way back, that Beyoncé, Find Your Way Back. And acknowledging the ancestors and their work. And so we have the sea here, and the sun.

And then I put here in the queue, Order My Steps, because that's always when I just start thinking about journeys, and where my life has been, where my life is going, that song is one that just always comes up for me, and moves me.

But I also say that I put the sun here, because the sun also represents our femininity. I've been thinking a lot about Oshun, and how she might be helpful to me in my life. And so as much as the water is about the sea, I'm also about that W-A-P life...”

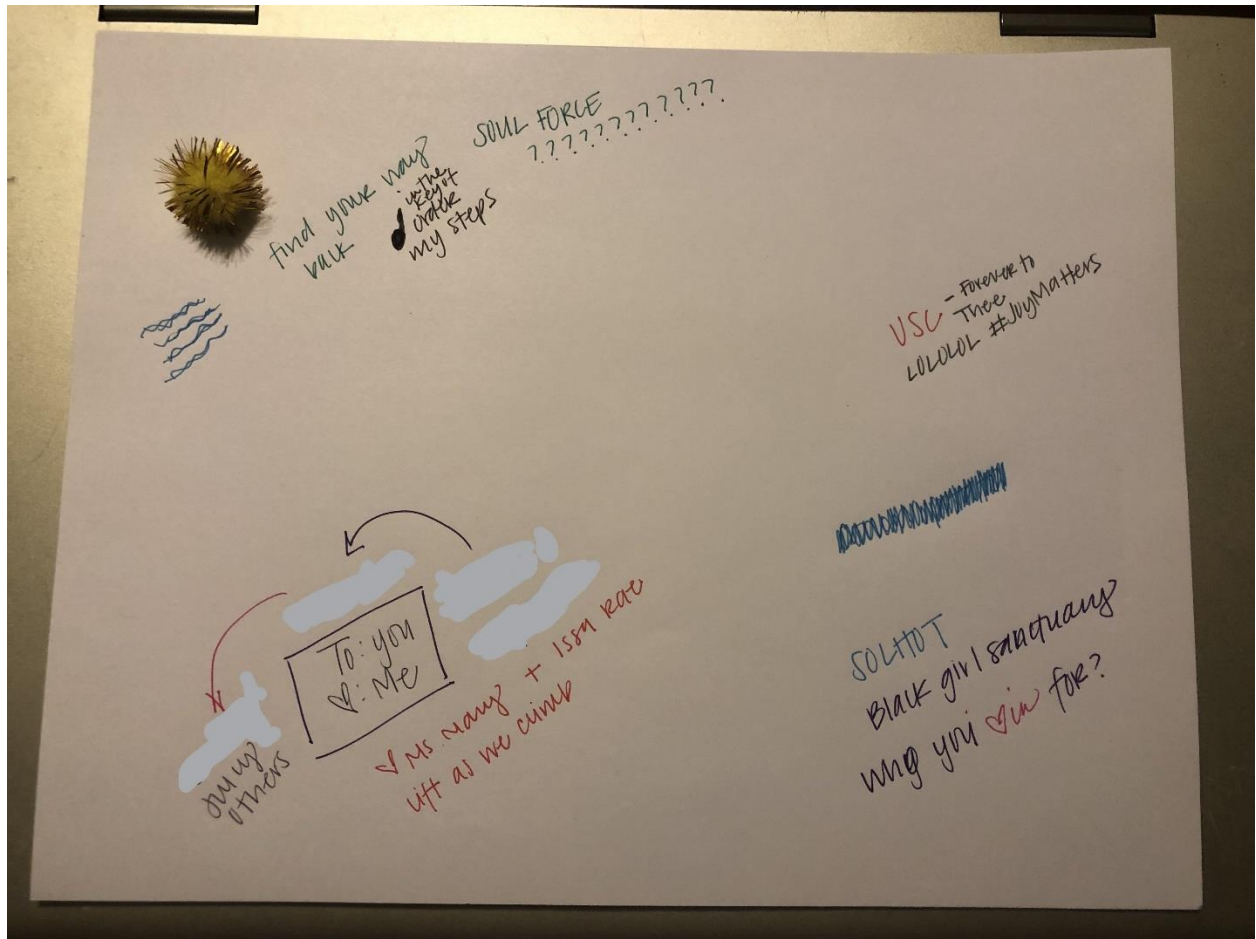


Figure 10: Sermon map – Tenderness Despite Callousness with textured yellow sun

“And thinking through a politic of pleasure and also being able to love Jesus. So all of that is up in this little area right here. I'm trying to find the ancestors, I'm trying to find my Oshun, all of that. And I want Jesus to order my steps right into my house then, amen?”

C: Hallelujah

All of that. Thank you, Reverend Lawson. Thank you. Oh, In terms of the soul force, I just found that to be such powerful grammar, that I hadn't thought a whole about. So for me, that's just one that's lingering. And so sometimes, I can be a wanderer. Things linger with me, and so I don't know what that looks like in the cartographer's world, but for me it's out there somewhere.

So when black women become our sun, how does that change things? And for me, working with organizations is so hard, and then working with my own work, in terms of what it means to be sanctuary for black girls, is what I think about in terms of those black women. The kind of black women that I'm working and striving to be, and becoming.

And I thought a lot about that when he started talking about invitations. And how John Lewis received an invitation from his mentor to be there. It wasn't just happenstance. He didn't know who he was going to be there with, but he wasn't just there by chance. Someone reached back for him and invited him to this space. And that has been the testimony of my life, of people reaching back for me, and teaching me things, and calling me to be that person for others.

And so, I just have some... I'm going to circle with a note here, "To you from me. To you, love from me, and the directions that it goes. Who's come back for me? The people that I have intentionally gone back for in prayers, that others might be on my manifest.”

Figure 11 Co-Explorer Vignette

“So when you initially played the sermon Shaundra, my mind wasn't even focused on his words, just seeing the actual funeral, took my mind back to being at funerals that I've been to in the past.

So the first thing that came to my mind was the cross. You all can see it. It's semi nice, but the cross, and then my mind also took me to coffins, and for some reason my mind went immediately to my grandmother, my maternal grandmother's funeral. So I started thinking about her obituary. And then when I started thinking about her, it took my mind back to my childhood, growing up there in the deep south of Manning, South Carolina.

So she had this house, this gray and blue house. She had a screen door, and she had a rocking chair, and she always rocked on that rocking chair, so I wrote out rocking chair. And then, also since she didn't have cable, we had to entertain ourselves, so we would play hopscotch, so I drew, or I tried to draw, a little hopscotch situation...”



Figure 11: Sermon map - Tenderness Despite Callousness through hopscotch flashbacks

“And then, I did try to focus in on his words. But the main that stuck out to me, was when he mentioned that it was a black woman who made the decision to take those signs, those blacks and whites only signs off of the water fountains. So then my mind went to, "Okay Destiny, you are a black woman, what is going to be your contribution to society?" Because that's something that I have been thinking about post 30.

And when I thought about that, I automatically went to recenter, refocus. And as far as the different senses, for some reason the sense of sight and smell were the only two senses that I focused on. So with regards to the sense of sight, everything had a vintage-type feel, everything was vintage. And then the smell was a mixture of fresh air and wet wood. I don't know where the wet wood scent came from, but that's just immediately where my sense of smell went towards.”

Figure 12 Co-explorer Vignette

“Also, during that time, we had segregated schools. We had leftover books. Everything that was done was segregated. We also experienced the water fountain. The blacks only, white only. We would use the black only.

During that time, they had the sit-ins, the cafeterias. Students that were older than me, in high school, the seniors, they went into the cafeterias because they were following all the people that were going through these things, they decided to give experience.

What we found comforting was church gatherings where all the friends and people would gather together. There were no laws there. We were church friends, we worshiped there. All of this brings back memories to me. Even though I didn't participate, I was part of that time. I was born during that time.”

Based upon these three examples and vignettes, each person shared and offered ways in which they drew maps that embraced the conception of conjuring as invention and imagination rooted in people and places near and dear to the heart. The first co-explorer/participant contends with a feminine mystique that prioritizes women not just at the center but as the sun – the preeminent life sustaining force, orienting the universe – and begs the question as to what kind of alternative geographies might emerge from such placement. Given this person’s mention of summer 2020 smash hit, by Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion, “WAP,” referencing a woman’s pleasure and the need to develop and nurture such (brown 2019) while still loving Jesus as womanist

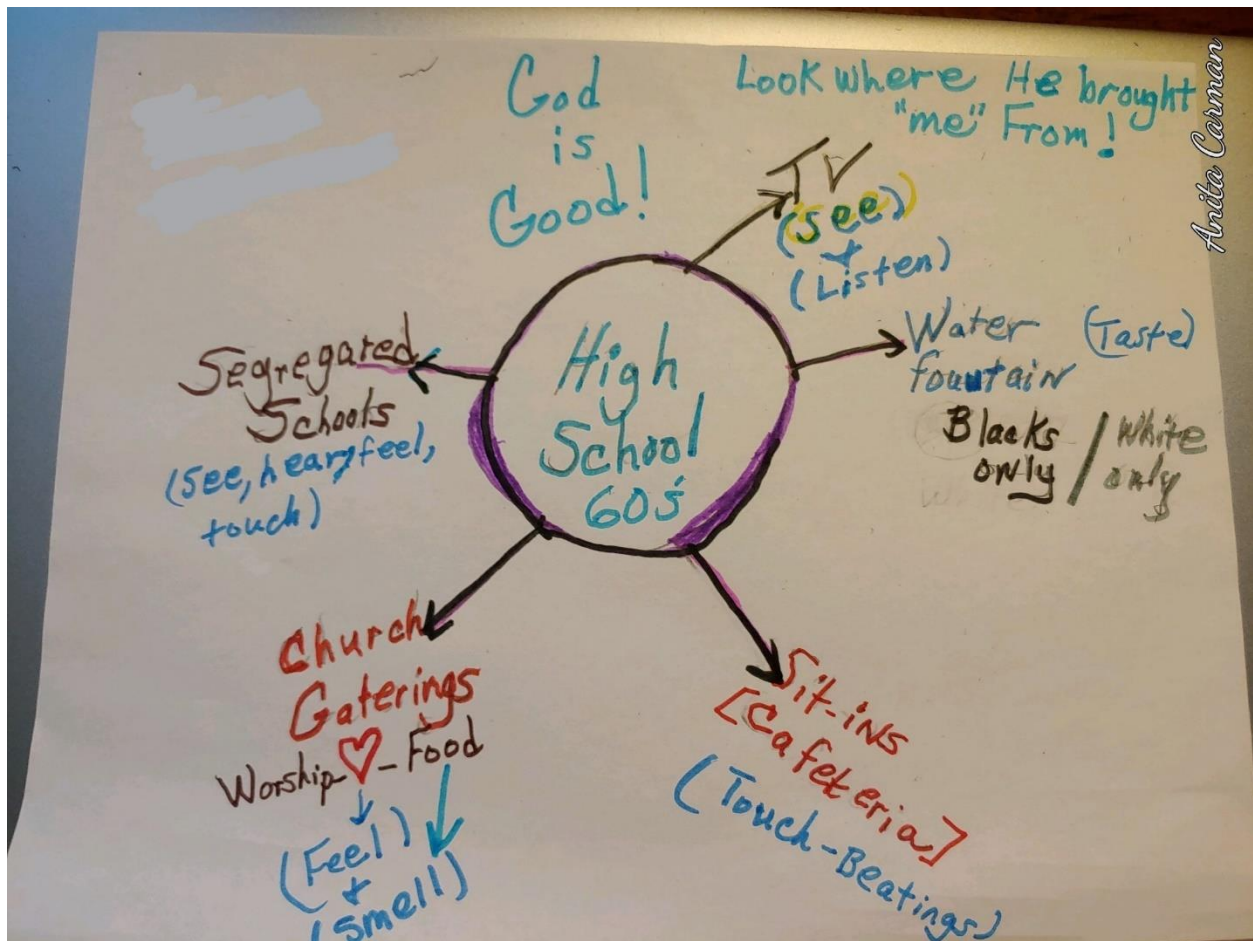


Figure 12: Sermon map - Tenderness Despite Callousness through orbits memory

theologian Jacqueline Grant posited a distinction Black women's Christology being based in liberating and proximate tenderness of Jesus, seen as an understanding Savior (Grant 1989). Notably, this person shared a deep and abiding commitment to following or modeling the women mentioned in Rev. Lawson's sermon – going back, returning to certain neighborhoods and people to adhere to the adage to lift as you climb. Similarly, the next two maps began with a highly personalized immediate response and then pivoted towards invention or imagination. The second person/co-explorer happened to be in her mid-thirties and made references to her grandmother's funeral. While noting and remembering her own experiences, the scent and smells also return as she watches and absorbs this sermon. In turn, in the end, she makes the direct link to a self-reflective call to action, noting her purpose and ways to help transform her environment through the arts and film.

In a similar thread, the categories of symbolic landscapes emerged amidst the groups and their respective sermon maps, as the third participant/co-explorer conjures history that she endured reflecting on the comfort of church amidst so many unknown, herculean obstacles and laws forbidding “aliveness,” (Quashie 2021) and noting the mechanisms, outlets, and subaltern spaces that were fostered and nurtured anyway to enable sustenance and strength with an unquenching spirit that pushed forward “working against racial apartheid and different kinds and types of violence” (McKittrick 2021, p. 28).

This reference speaks to the undeniable unction that drives and compels action, community involvement, and a spirit of public witness, under an invisible force that cannot quite be captured yet drives one to action despite perhaps an individual preference, at times, to inaction. McKittrick recalls Glissant, arguing that the “production of space, for black subjects, holds in it the possibility of a nonworld that unravels, in post-slave contexts, as a totally different

system of geographic knowledge that cannot replicate subordination precisely because it is born of and holds on to the unknowable” (McKittrick 2021, p. 34). This otherworld of geographic knowledge is not that different from the notion of “the undercommons” (Harney and Moten, 2013) recognizing that in certain ways, the felicity with language and symbol requires or demands that certain knowings be withheld or rendered opaque for the sake of collective and communal safeguarding against the forces of neo-liberal capitalist forces that would simply gobble up, steal, extract, and exploit.

In essence, one emotion – tenderness – proffers another portal of consideration for a more humane, loving, and holistic “Black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011). Taking to heart the weariness and heavy concerns in this life, therefore, necessitates tenderness. This emotion was heralded and made famous by Otis Redding’s rendition of “Try A Little Tenderness” in 1966. Originally written by Jimmy Campbell and Reg Connelly as well as Harry M. Woods in 1932 and recorded by the Ray Noble Orchestra with remakes by the likes of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, among others. Nonetheless, Otis Redding’s version picks up the soulful groove and Stax recording studio sound in a way that harkens to the hopscotch games and rocking chairs sketched by the co-explorer along with Oshun and the African goddess orbiting and enlivening all creation through womyn centered suns. These maps and attendant reflections build and elucidate the “imaginative and aesthetic aspects of human spatiality” (Atkinson et al. 2007, p. 30). The maps also surface a more granular point about the nature of tenderness; that is, witnessing while also being witnessed, which “rests on relations of mutuality and respect, tenderness” (Perry 2018, p. 192). This form of tenderness, as Imani Perry muses, functions with deep philosophical dimensions that find footing in and through interior processes that shed light on “spiritual knowledge that impels and compels testimony” (ibid). So then, through group dynamics and

processing, the very nature of the sermon map process afforded moments to bear witness that in and of itself became a site and space of tenderness.

Illegible Intimacies

Based on the next three sermon maps and excerpts, I utilized my spatial scalpel to chisel away symptomatic versus core sentiments; in so doing, a subtle yet precise category took shape during focus groups: illegible intimacies. It may sound oxymoronic to analyze and bridge a word that signals closeness, revelation, and understanding with a term that suggests the exact opposite, but such slippery approximations oozed out. Conversations, gestures, and expressions in the course of sharing revealed textures of melancholy, frustration, regret, disappointment, and resignation, harkening back to the need for “geographies of quiet,” explored in the last chapter, as an antidote for feeling misread. Accessing my literary and poetic side, if I had to select a color to underscore this sub-section of findings, it would be yellow. Right before COVID-19 shut down the universe, the University of Tennessee Humanities Center hosted a symposium called “In a Speculative Light: The Arts of James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney.” Renowned scholar and authorized biographer of Baldwin and Delaney, David Leeming spoke during one of the plenaries and left the room on the verge of tears, himself included, noting the kind of “madness” and psycho-somatic ruptures Delaney endured to bear witness through art.

In a similar hue, during the keynote the night before, Fred Moten noted that Beauford Delaney left a legacy as the most gifted painter of the color “yellow” in the world (Moten 2020). Unbeknownst to me, I later learned that yellow connotes vibrational and ancestral moorings teeming with complexity. Incidentally, as this summer research took shape and took flight, yellow butterflies became a constant companion *conjured* into my orbit by my mother’s wise and mystical invitation to visit our family’s gravesites, places of memorial, familial lands, spirited

landscapes that bear “re-memories,” (Morrison 1987) and dazzling delights. Such butterflies have since sporadically emerged, or rather, in *kairos*⁴ time, synchronously danced around me in just the right moments of despair, disgust, or distress. In parallel patterns, certain focus group co-explorers emphasized butterflies as their guardians and companions along with a special place for the color, yellow, in rooms within the home, yellow porches, yellow school buses, yellow suns, yellow notes of joy, yellow testimonies of grace through fire, yellow flowers and yellow attire at funerals—in these ways, I contend yellow paints the canopy and backdrop.

Of course, some may challenge my view that yellow fits this category, insisting that yellow ought not to be deployed for such work as illegible intimacies. I contend, however, that yellow fits the bill perfectly as a color that captures both melancholy and joy, sublime essence, and unconscionable horrors. So it is, then, that the next three maps offer contours, lines, emblems, and stories that echo yellow.

Figure 13 Co-explorer Vignette

“All right. Well, I thought about the movements that happened as you can see here. Trying to make sure you all are going to see it. I drew just a movement, I made a bridge because I went back to that time period. So I thought about the Bloody Sunday with the bridge incident. I drew protesters here, going to go take down the no colors of white only signs.

They all know what's going to happen, but they're there, they're there ready to take it down. This is supposed to be a town in Tennessee, and you can see all that. And I drew officers in blue, that's why they're all blue. Not that they're going to stop. So that's what I thought about when I heard about it. But that's my little drawing. I drew a sun for hope right there. Yeah. That's what I thought about.”

⁴ *kairos* contrasts with *chronos* as a linear and chronological locus of keeping time. Instead, *kairos* designates the right or opportune moment or a crucial intervention based upon ancient and primordial leanings of pace.

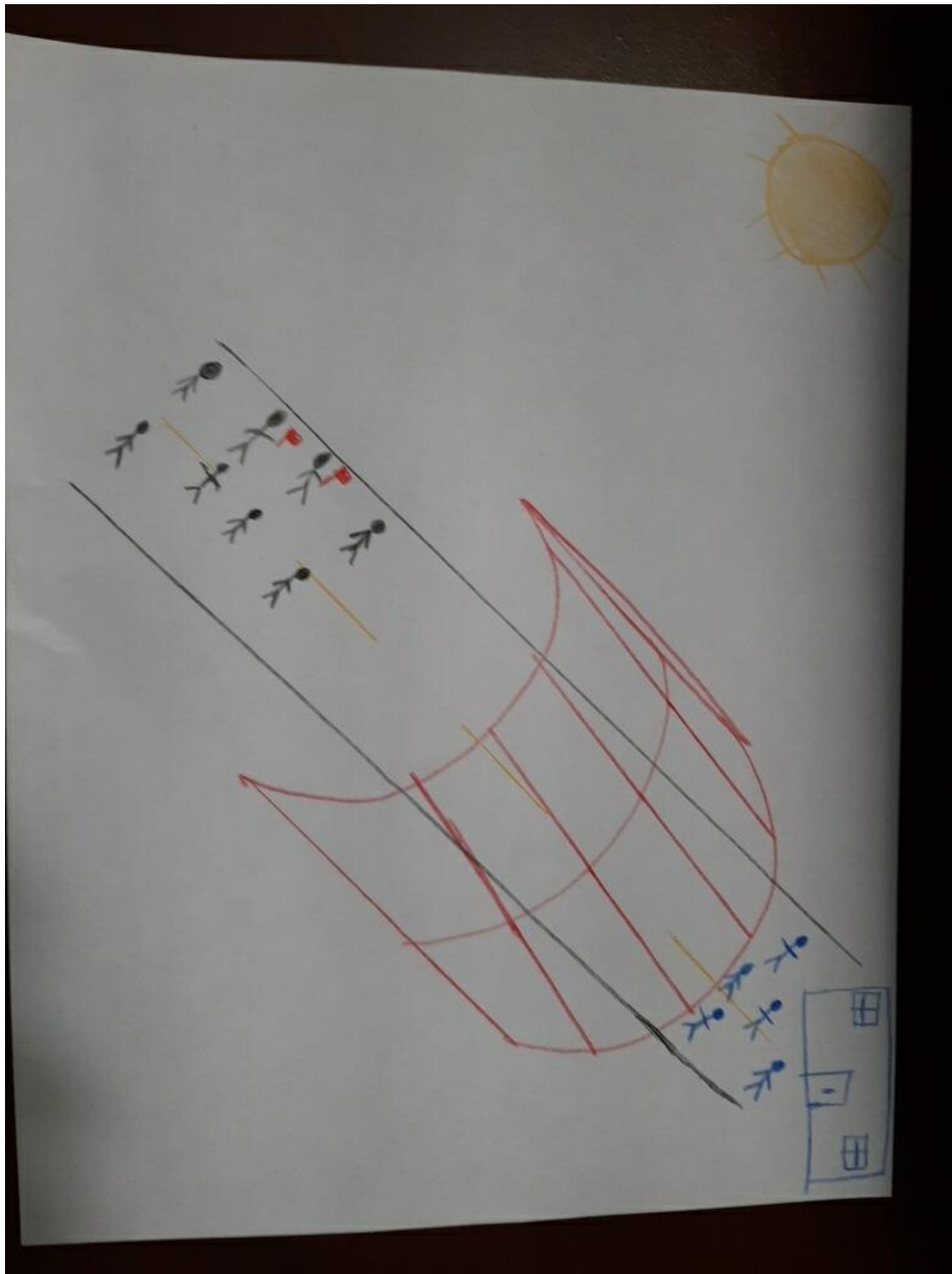


Figure 13: Sermon map - Illegible Intimacies of movements among shadows

Proverbs: 3.5 (Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on thine own understanding.)

1. Sight - I can see the blood shed of our Ancestors resisting leaving Africa. I also see our 1st Black President.
2. Taste - I can taste mama's homemade baked banana pudding and the leftover fish stew daddy made for the white folks.
3. Touch - I can touch the innocence of my children and the grinds not truly understanding the legacy of history and appreciating so many liberated accomplishments nor the rewards of others hard labor.
4. Smell - I smell the stench of the wet, smelly tobacco in the field and under the barn and remembering how much I hated it.
5. Hear - I can hear the sounds of some relief and delivery from the cry of injustice and the sound of a brick thrown in the window of Mama AND Daddy's house.

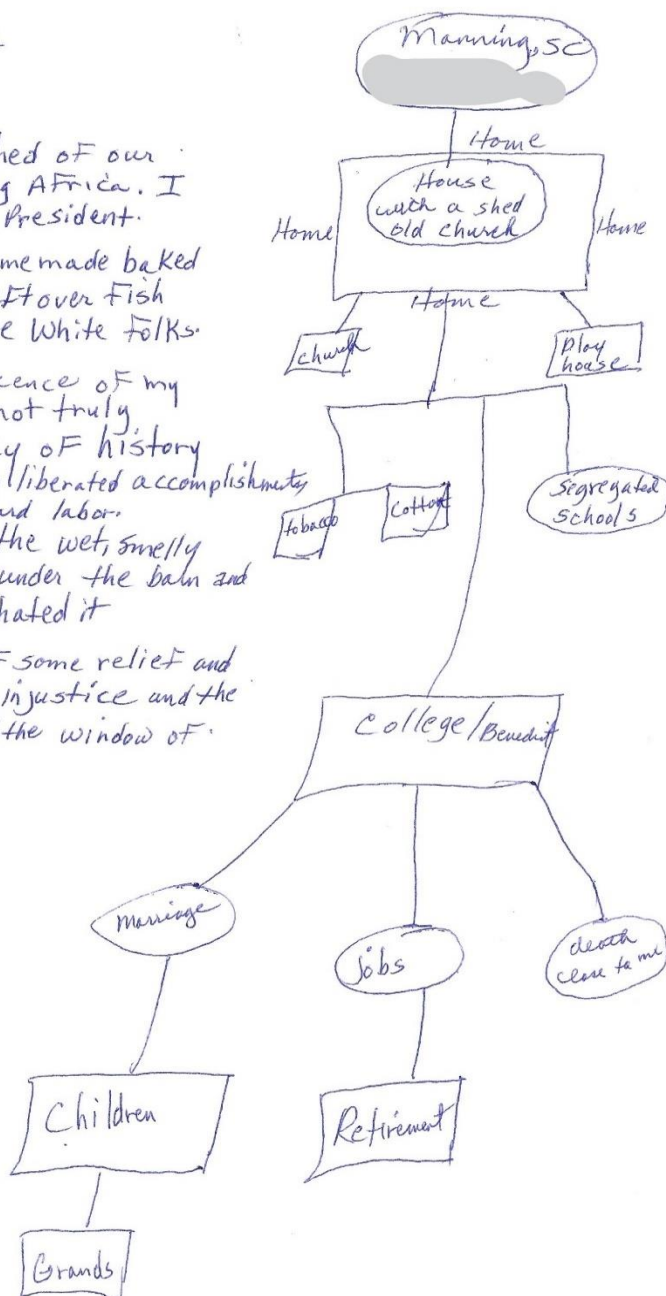


Figure 14: Sermon map - Illegible Intimacies of inter-generational inheritance

Figure 14 Co-explorer Vignette

“I took this thing from a whole different approach, in terms of what was going through my mind. But listening to all of that, and by the way, all of you, there's so much history. Gosh, I wish I can just hear more of this. I think I've learned more history from you guys than I did in the history books. At least in the little town that I grew up. And it was somebody that mentioned about the used books that we used to have in the school system. That was one of the things that caught my attention, because my first-grade teacher she used to tell us, especially, and I've always remembered, that's why I have such a love for reading. At least I used to anyway.

She used to tell us that you may not be that person that can go on a vacation during the summer months. But she used to just read, read, read, let your mind take you where you want to go. Vacation was nothing for us. I don't know what a vacation was or how to spell it. Because I was telling people that in terms of what it truly was and what it meant. We didn't have a vacation.

But anyway, it was the fields where we worked. So, when I heard all that in terms of the senses, in my mind it actually reflects... I can still remember the sound of, well, I can still, in my mind, I actually, I can see the bloodshed in many ways, in terms of what I read and what my history teachers used to tell us about the bloodshed and stuff of our ancestors coming across to America.

And at that same time, it reflected on me that first time and I went to that inauguration, and saw our first black president. So, I'm in that group of people who basically was so overwhelmed to see a black president to... you just cried about it, to be honest with you.

But at the same time, because of where we were, what was going on, my mind also reflected taste, rather. Those good old home cooked meals mama used to cook in the kitchen. Really, she didn't go anywhere. She dressed us up to go to church... Don't laugh now, but I was one of those people, I didn't like to go to town because it was too many of us in the car. I was afraid to cross the overhead bridge. Don't laugh.

So as a result, I never actually went anywhere except to church and school. Because I used to put myself into books and stuff, that was my thing. You give me a book, I'd cover my head up under the cover. I would read as long as there was light. But again, my mind reflected those good old banana puddings mama used to cook as well. That fish stew that daddy used to cook.

Listen carefully. It wasn't necessarily for us. It was the leftovers he brought back to us. But at the same time, I can touch the innocence of my children and their children, not truly understanding the legacy of the history that black people went through. I had to go through and that's why I was really eager and excited that they wanted to go to a black college or a predominantly black college, or historically black college.

But also at the same time, I was telling you earlier about basically what we had to do in terms of work. To this day, I can pretty much smell the stench of that old smelly tobacco and not wanting to go to work. Gosh, I didn't want to go. To this day, I don't get my nails done. Because I used to have to work in the yard so much and I still like working in the yard but with that old brown stuff up underneath the nails. That something else.

So can you imagine really a six or seven-year-old on the back of a truck, early in the morning? And I have my reading glasses. And the last one I can still hear the sound of some delivery from the cry of injustice. I can hear that brick that was...

T: Jesus.

B: Thank you, Lord.

F: All right, sister.

D: K, you weren't even born, but a brick was thrown through the house. The window, mama's house. And we thought it was the Ku Klux Klan. All mama told us to do was get up under the bed. I can still hear it.

D: It's a brick that was thrown through the window.

Group: Oh, my God.

D: Sure was. But anyway.

K: At night?

D: I can see it, it was like at night, dusk, dawn, it was like dusk, dawn.

K: I guess that's why she kept us in the backyard.

D: Yeah, this was like dusk dawn. But I think what it was, during that time, the blacks were trying to integrate. Remember, K? We didn't go... Because I was the class of forced integration. Remember our neighbor."

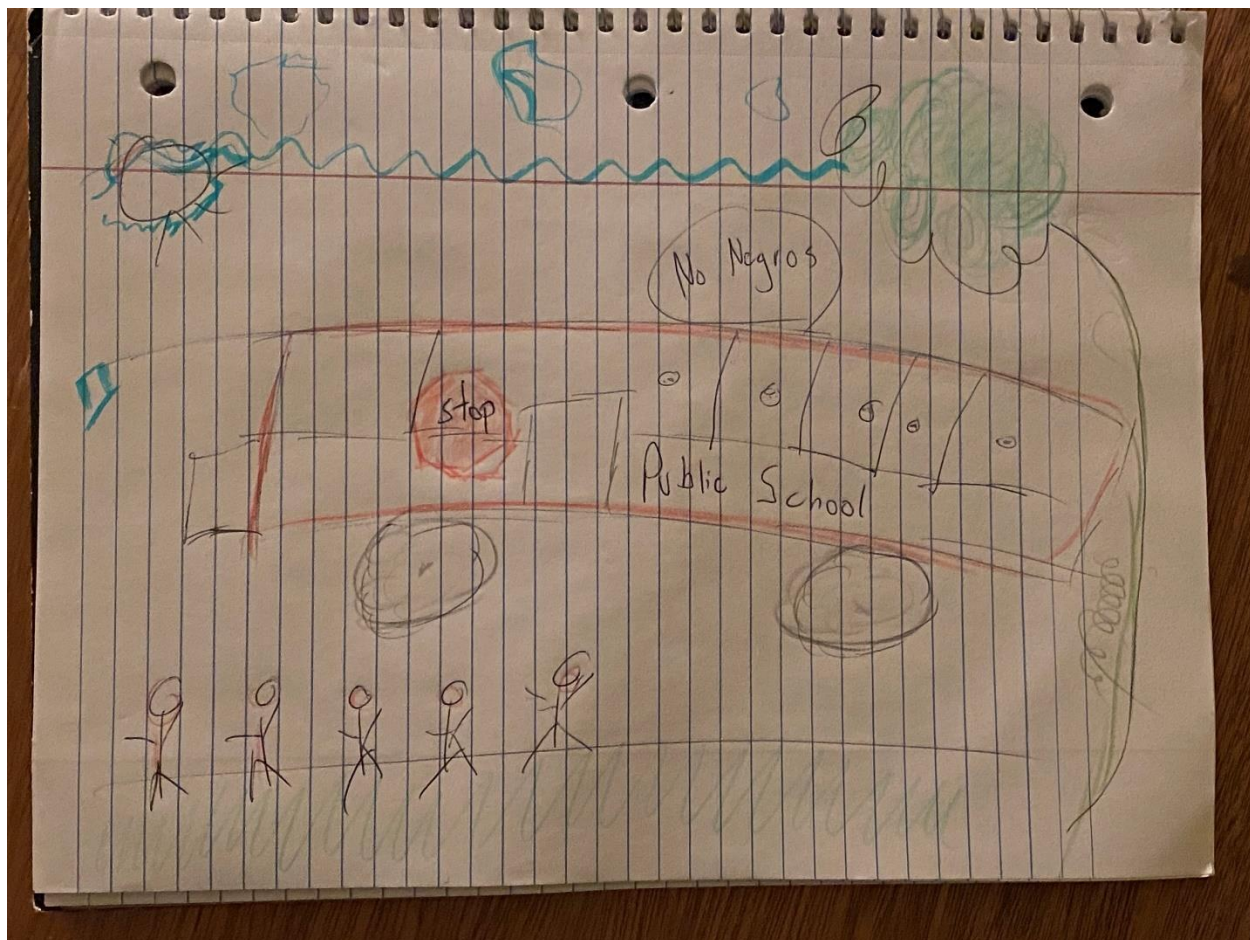


Figure 15: Sermon map - Illegible Intimacies of school stratification

Figure 15 Co-explorer Vignette

“Okay. Actually, just had one memory. I didn't have the five senses, but I just had... We talked about the turn down the signs and desegregating the area or downtown. It just brought me back to a memory that my great-grandmother told me when I was little. And of course, when we get told something, we always think, "Well, this person is crazy when you're little or why are they saying that? Or if we've heard it multiple times. Why are they saying that again.

But she told me the story about when she was little and how when she used to go to school, the kids who were on the ship, they couldn't ride the bus. And so the kids who could ride the bus, the bus would pass by them as they're walking every day.

And the children on the bus would tease them and throw things out the window at them and call them all kind of Negros and this, that and that. And that memory just stuck with me when she said that. And so, I drew a bus as you see and of course my drawing is terrible, but whatever. I drew a bus, I drew the people at the bottom, I drew the "No Negroes." I drew the tree, beautiful tree there, the blue sky, beautiful day, butterflies and all that.

But as you can see at the bottom there is my grandmother and I guess her classmates walking. And also, I thought about the power struggle between they're lower in this picture here, but the school bus and the children who are kind of berating them are much higher. So, you think about that dynamic too, where they're in a lower place and they're in a much higher place. And also, when you think about the socioeconomic status.

And you realize the struggle is not over. You realize, in fact, we've been in it. It's never gone away. It just keeps reiterating in a different way. It keeps manifesting. And so we have to continue to keep up the fight and do what we know is right. And so that was that memory for me.”

These excerpts reveal the subtle expressions of living in proximity yet remaining elusive or opaque. In so many ways, as a retired accountant in her late sixties reflects upon the horror of the Ku Klux Klan throwing a brick into her home as a child, noting the ways that she and her siblings were instructed to play outside and, specifically, in the backyard as a means of safety and protection should they need to quickly run and flee to the woods behind their home. She began crying while sharing this “episodic memory” (Manier and Hirst 2008, p. 257), and the rest of focus group A quickly swooped in to affirm and support her sharing. This ghastly experience offers a window into her reflection in Figure 14 that she “can touch the innocence of her children

and grands” not fully appreciating the depths of labor and life or death ghosts of racist terrorism. This account is heightened as she later shared being the first class that integrated into her hometown, succeeding in the new high school, and having the highest GPA, yet another white student was designated valedictorian after they changed the grading system. This comment connects with a previous lament of a person in focus group B, more than 30 years her junior, voicing their struggles with the rules of the game, so to speak, being changed along the way. It also ties in with Rev. Dr. Renita Weems’s sermon, vividly recalling historic inflection points—from Selma to Tiananmen Square to Ferguson—and the ways decisions must be made to fight for justice. As intense as this sharing was in so many ways, beneath the surface and even discussing her pride that her children attended historically black colleges and universities, the subtle, almost imperceptible residue reveals a somber note. That somber and subdued note is the sense that her struggles and her generation’s travails, and countless eras before, have not been adequately composted, in a sense, by her progeny.

To that end, late Black liberation theologian James Cone apparently expressed a similar lament to a younger, spirited interlocuter and now professor of religion at Rice University, Anthony Pinn. In the aftermath of Cone’s death, Pinn penned a tribute (pun intended) that always struck me for the piercing sense that Cone felt his life’s work and strivings illegible in tone and verve by many of the very students he advised and helped train as black and womanist theology grew and evolved over the years. Pinn (2018) states:

“During our periodic breakfast meetings, he’d remind me that he sensed a distance from the people, the misery and pain of the people that once motivated black theological discourse. Cone would often tell me that passion was missing from more recent work. We are comfortable, he’d say, and in our comfort we have lost some of our righteous anger and perspective.

I sensed Cone found the work of more recent generations too measured, too balanced in light of the fact that “black people are dying!” as he would remind me—putting down his

coffee, raising his voice a bit, and thumping the table at Community Food & Juice. People looked our way, trying not to be noticed looking, but what did we care? He was speaking a truth, and I was learning from one of the greatest theological minds of the twentieth century. His critique couldn't be dismissed, and I couldn't explain it away; instead, I've tried to understand and reflect on it." (2018)

Elaborating further, Pinn contends that simply writing and working in and within the tradition was not quite the gist that Cone took umbrage with – it was the mood. That is the precise subtlety that my co-explorer above and several others in focus group A shared. They wondered aloud if they had done enough to instill that “righteous anger perspective” (ibid) and voiced doubts that their children and grandchildren truly grasped the *mood* of earlier eras and our ongoing conditions in the present.

The other two maps (Figures 13 and 15, respectively) were designed by the two youngest members of all participants/co-explorers. Given their ages and stations in life, they embody and map an indirect retort that they, too, fully appreciate and honor the ongoing struggles for more just futures. In the last excerpt above, the co-explorer reflects on lessons from his grandmother and the ways that she endured such humiliating strife, yet the ways she persevered and continued onwards. He reflects on the butterflies in the sky, and beauty in the air, yet a sense that the mechanisms have changed, in some ways, but fully understands that he is entrenched in the same kind of “weather” that Christina Sharpe theorizes (2016). Furthermore, he denotes his grandmother’s inability to be read nor understood and, implicitly insinuates in other comments that he feels akin to an obfuscated landscape with fuzzy and unclear “architecture of signs” (Atkinson et al. 2007) that signal his place in the world. Opining in another moment, off camera, this co-explorer shared that he excuses himself to the bathroom every morning as an elementary teacher to pray, meditate, and get his mind right to address his kids. The ritual is also done, I submit, to look and examine himself prior to ingratiating a sea of colleagues who mean well, yet

do not always *see* him. This sentiment was reflected again and again, across age and gender, in both focus groups. I can tell weariness seeps in when those who are closest do not *get* you nor understand.

Lastly, shifting the scales of this category further, several expressed notions of illegibility concerning their partners and spouses. Over the course of this study, people shared that part of their struggle with significant others—either finding one or maintaining a relationship—stemmed from a place of being misunderstood, (mis)read, or denigrated. Illness and injuries of physical, mental, and/or psychological import were belittled or begrudgingly accepted with constant ridicule, banter that cuts too deeply, and even weaponized silent treatments. These grey zones of human interaction encapsulated so much of James Baldwin’s writings as he contended with what it meant to truly love another and oneself. Disability activist and writer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha argues in her book, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, that so many desperately need resources but “had to run away from accepting care because care meant control—by family members or partners or workers or strangers.” Exasperation along with a doleful melancholy, may be one of the most misdiagnosed but ever-present affects (Ahmed 2014) when one realizes they have intertwined their heart in relationships, families, and networks wherein their “colors” do not blend, and it becomes taxing to fit in.

Returning to yellow, and its presence on almost every sermon map that used color except two, I believe it functions like sorbet during a meal – a palette cleanser for the soul. This category speaks to *conjuring* that unfolds like that of a summons by incantation or invocation (Merriam-Webster) even if such incantations and daily invocations of being are misconstrued by those closest and dearest. Further, harkening to the scholarship of Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright, who chronicled an oil spill in the Bay of Aratu in Bahia, noting the utter disregard for

black ways of life, encompassing rituals and foodways, they contend that such environmental pillaging illustrates “how Black space is treated as illegible and the ways in which Black life is seen as expendable...” (Bledsoe and Wright 2019, p. 19). Returning to a yellow sensibility, the very activities, movements, altars, and creative relationalities underpinning co-explorers’ sermon maps would render non-existent within the framework of neoliberal apparatuses. This is why “the presence of a Black community with a viable way of life receives no recognition as legitimately occupying space vis-a-vis capitalist practices of accumulation” (Bledsoe and Wright 2019, p. 19). One always runs the risk of being mislabeled, and the inner splendor misinterpreted, yet those in the focus groups emphasized that they press on, even if they must crawl, ever drawn and pulled by higher forces and their own spiritual maps.

“Love Lifted Me”

Nikki Giovani, a native of Knoxville, Tennessee, quipped that she felt a sincere and filial duty towards the “sweet ladies” from her hometown who were stewards and watchful eyes in her community (Girl Trek 2020). In a similar vein, bell hooks discusses and demarcates a distinction concerning a philosophy of work rooted in the context of old southern black folks that she calls “work makes life sweet” in her book, *Sisters of the Yam* (hooks 1993, p. 42). In this chapter, the dignity of work by blacks who engaged in a sort of labor, often as self-employed service workers, including maids, fishermen, cooks, and seamstresses, and more – emit a fundamental brushstroke of sweetness into their days. That is, through pursuing vocations and a sense of calling, they would transform that which may appear mundane and endow the task with grace and fully attuned focus, to the point that work became an extension of one’s artistry. The argument laid bare, suggests a kind of “right livelihood” (hooks 1993, p. 51) that is not based on societal markers or trappings of class, money, acclaim and the like; rather, despite often being

subjected to long, hard, arduous, grimy, and death-dealing forms of labor – even then, black women and people fashion out “their calling, and do the work they are best suited for” or as Katie Cannon, foundational womanist theologian states: “do the work your soul must have.”

This kind of scaffolding harkens back to the sort of meticulous yet devotional-type passion undergirding scholars, artists, activists, cultural workers, and others in the realm of black studies that McKittrick honors and reverences in her sublime latest book, *Dear Science*. The citations, bibliographies, footnotes, parenthetical attenuations offer and speak to the kind of “radical theory-making” that “takes place outside existing systems of knowledge” (McKittrick 2021, p. 23) and how references offer lessons and pointers outside the primary text with kind of subaltern or dare I say, a follow-the-drinking-gourd-type of stealth, rigor, slanted slightly askew (Harris-Perry 2011) as if to mirror the angles by which we enter a discipline, and a world, that slants our humanity and positionality. These sorts of negotiations in space and time render black people as conjurers, in a classical sense of the term. To take a job deemed the lowest on the rung or, conversely, occupy a penthouse suite yet absorb interpersonal microaggressions and other isms while deciding to show up, endure, and infuse colorfulness, like Baby Suggs, holy, wields a sort of “spill” (Gumbs 2016) and spell that reflects spatially stratified incantational living. Such endurance and survival flow from life-affirming practices (McCutcheon 2014; Allen 2019; Reese 2019; Quashie 2021), such as ritual, song, dance, communion, and care. This is why participant and co-explorer A, who designed Figure 16, states:

Figure 16 Co-Explorer Vignette

“I had to make sure my women were properly attired. They had to have on ensembles and matching shoes, that's what took me so long. The hair had to be some sort of way. So that's what initially came to me, is him talking about how the women were the ones that decided that Nashville would be where it all started. So, I wrote, "Let's take Downtown Nashville." And she said, "How?" And the other chick was like, "Not sure exactly, but we'll figure it out.

And I think that's the woman mantra, like there's an issue, we may not know the solution, but we have the will and the determination to figure it out, in all situations. Which is why I have the "No coloreds allowed in the state of Nashville," and they decided that that's not acceptable anymore, so they axed that out. Then I have the planner, because they didn't know how, but they were going to figure it out. So today and tomorrow, we got to come up with some sort of solution to this. And the last thing I have is the sun because the sun is the hope.

So, I just feel like women in general, we're overcoming our fears. Because they knew that there was better out there, and they knew that we were deserving of it. So although they didn't know the how, they knew that it was going to happen, and they knew that it was our right. And so, I thought that was powerful.

To get back to the senses question, I can feel the commotion. How when you're in like a sports arena, or you're going to a concert and there's this nervousness but excitement energy, and the body's moving in and out. I feel the commotion in the space as they're planning, as they're figuring it out, as the "Uh-huh (affirmative)" moments are happening, I feel the excitement. I also feel the tension, I feel the nerves, the energy in the space. I can actually physically feel how that probably felt when they were gathering in the basement of somebody's church, or in someone's home, trying to iron out the details of what it would take to truly take Downtown Nashville. So that's my map."

This vignette connects directly to my thesis by extrapolating dimensions of "visceral geographies" (Hayes-Conroy 2010) through the portal of sermons. In this vignette, sensing the impact and effects of such harrowing nefariously placed systemic forces in downtown Nashville, caused this co-explorer to psycho-somatically feel and intuit a variety of emotional responses. Notably, they ricochet across a variety of dimensions thereby highlighting non-linear absorption of a sort of *cacophony of affects* at work in any given sermon map. This co-explorer teleports or transports through lament, tension, nerves, and excitement in the process of shaping and being shaped by her sermon map and the terrain upon which it takes flight and *conjured* new dimensionality or traverses familiar emotional landscapes with fresh eyes. Further elucidating sticky, subtle, eureka moments of unexpected insight through "uh-huh (affirmative)" moments, points to the kinds of cosmic downloads and visions that guide a person through the land of the sermon; in this case, sensing the "commotion in the space" while women led strategic plans.



Figure 16: Sermon map - "Love Lifted Me" through Sister-girl networks of strategy

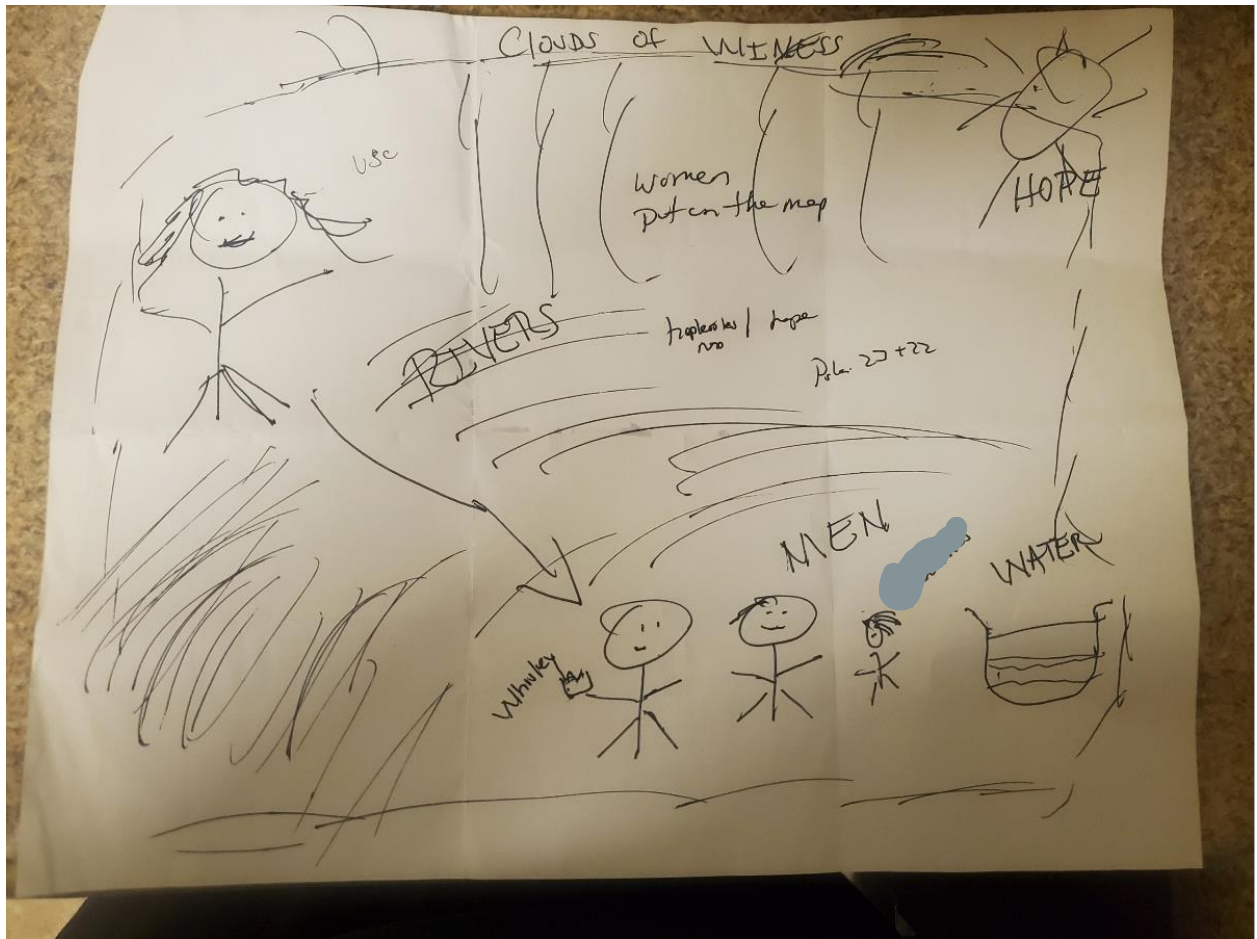


Figure 17: Sermon map - "Love Lifted Me" through Women & Whiskey Organizing

Figure 17 Co-explorer Vignette

“So I also use words to illustrate. So, as I was listening to Reverend Lawson, first came to mind women, black women, right? And how the names of Ruby Robinson, and Ruby Sales, and Diane Nash, Dorothy Height, and list of names of the women who were really leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, but who often don't get the credit, or even mentioned, was first and foremost.

And so there is a direct line to the men, and you see two men here, which I wrote, "Men." And how they are the ones, of course, who are mentioned, the John Lewis's, to his credit of course. The Martin Kings, the Ralph David Abernathy's. But it really was the women, right? And so it goes back at least, even listening to Reverend Lawson, it goes back to our first conversation, when it's always the women who are the leaders of the church, well, the backbones of the church. The women who testified to the ascension of Christ. It is the women, right? Women lead our society.

So it's that dialectical tension of gender within the sermon, but also, even in theology, dare I say. The reason why whiskey, is because whiskey, if you're not a whiskey drinker, or drink alcohol, whiskey has a lot of different notes to it. It's bold, it's flavorful, it can burn you, but it can also be very good for you, right?

And as I think about the men in the movement, first, if you didn't know, they actually did drink a lot of whiskey, they did drink a lot of alcohol, so that's a factual reference. But some men, like Lewis, was bold, good trouble, flavorful, audacious, right? And for some people, that whiskey can burn people. And so, the people in the Civil Rights Movement did that, burned them, right? In a good way.

Then there's a picture of myself, here. Because I think about, also, personalizing this for a second, just the women that have been in my life and that have influenced me and led me to this place where I am in my life. First starting with my mother, but my grandmother, who I just spent a considerable amount of time with. And so, I see myself as part of coming from a great lineage of women.

Also here are clouds. It's the clouds of witnesses, great clouds of witnesses, that are of course in heaven, or whatever sort of reference that you think of the afterlife, that are looking down on us. And these are rain, these are supposed to be rain drops. Because even though we buried John Lewis, and C.T. Vivian, and the millions of others of that ilk and era, it's still pouring, it's still raining on Black America, right?

And that's also why I have rivers if you can see that. So, it's the woman's pointing down the rivers. And I thought of Langston Hughes's poem, I've Known Rivers. And here, is the sun. So, the clouds of witnesses, there's rain and there's the sun. And the sun for me, symbolizes that even though it's raining, and it's pouring like hell, there is still hope, and we have to remain hopeful, even in the rain, the storm if you will.”

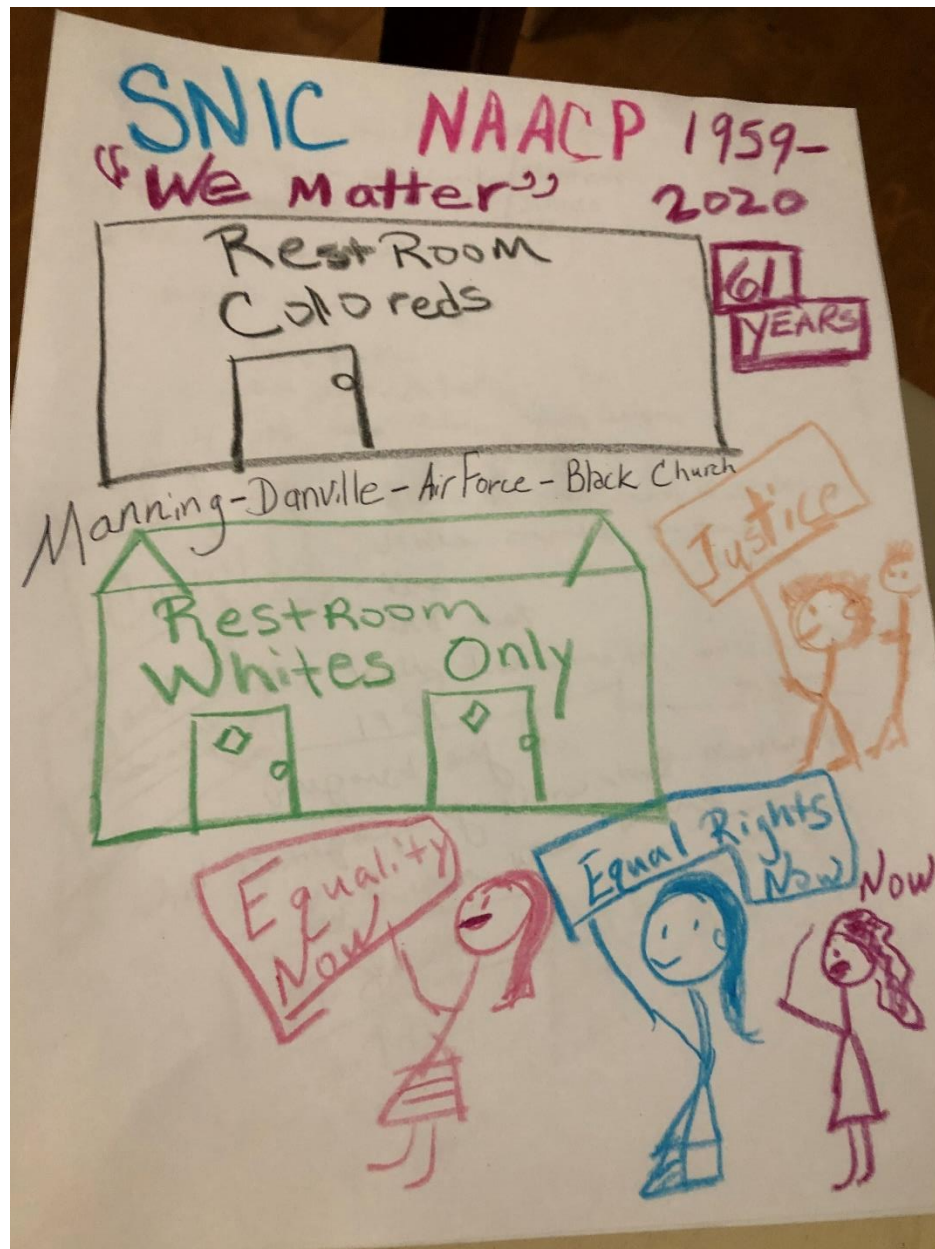


Figure 18: Sermon map - "Love Lifted Me" from Segregated Health Clinics

Figure 18 Co-explorer Vignette

“Well, this is mine. I'm thinking back to SNCC and the NAACP. 1959, I was born, and then we're at 2020. And we're looking at 61 years later.

I'm remembering going to the doctor, downtown Manning. And I had to go to the restroom. And mama took me to the colored restroom. And the white restroom was nice and neat. The outside was pretty, and the black restroom was just plain old door on the other side of the street. And then I remember going to the doctor and sitting on the backside where blacks had to sit in the section that was for the coloreds. And that's what I remember.

And then I remember listening to the sermon where Reverend Lawson, I thought he really was, aside from Barack, I really think his sermon was better than Barack's to be truthful. But that's just me, and I love Obama. But he taught me some things that I didn't know, such as, he said, the women, he said, the women and I guess my ears always come up a little more when I hear women. But he said the women were the ones, and I remember even listening then, the women led the movement.

That's why I have the women up front. I have more women up front and more colorful. And then I have the men right here to the side. Because for some reason, the men always seem to benefit from the march of the women. And the vocalness of the women, and for the most part, women are always in the background pushing. And that's why often I'm rereading Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, because it's quite interesting that she's always pushing Barack, but Barack is up front. Because that's the stereotype that we have in America. Even with Hillary not winning, we have the stereotype that the men have to be the lead, and ahead all the time. But the women know that we're always in the background, preparing and getting them ready, because I even think back to marching in Columbia for Cromarty, and all of the marches. And it was mainly women, just like I'm thinking about when I crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it was mainly women that day when we went back to commemorate.

When I listened to Lawson, it was just so much that he said that just in my mind, you can go back and listen to that message again and again and again. Because John Lewis, don't get me wrong, I don't have anything... I love him dearly. And John Lewis was an icon. He did a lot for all of us.

But when I listened to Lawson saying the history books were wrong, that wasn't the part you played. But he said the history books did not tell it all. Then that clip you showed, he said the women were the ones that led it. And he said he was scared to death. So, it just conjures up in my mind, were these men... I know they were there. Were they there because somebody made them come out, and they were afraid to stay back? Or were they there because it was something they actually wanted to do, or did they get stuck there?”

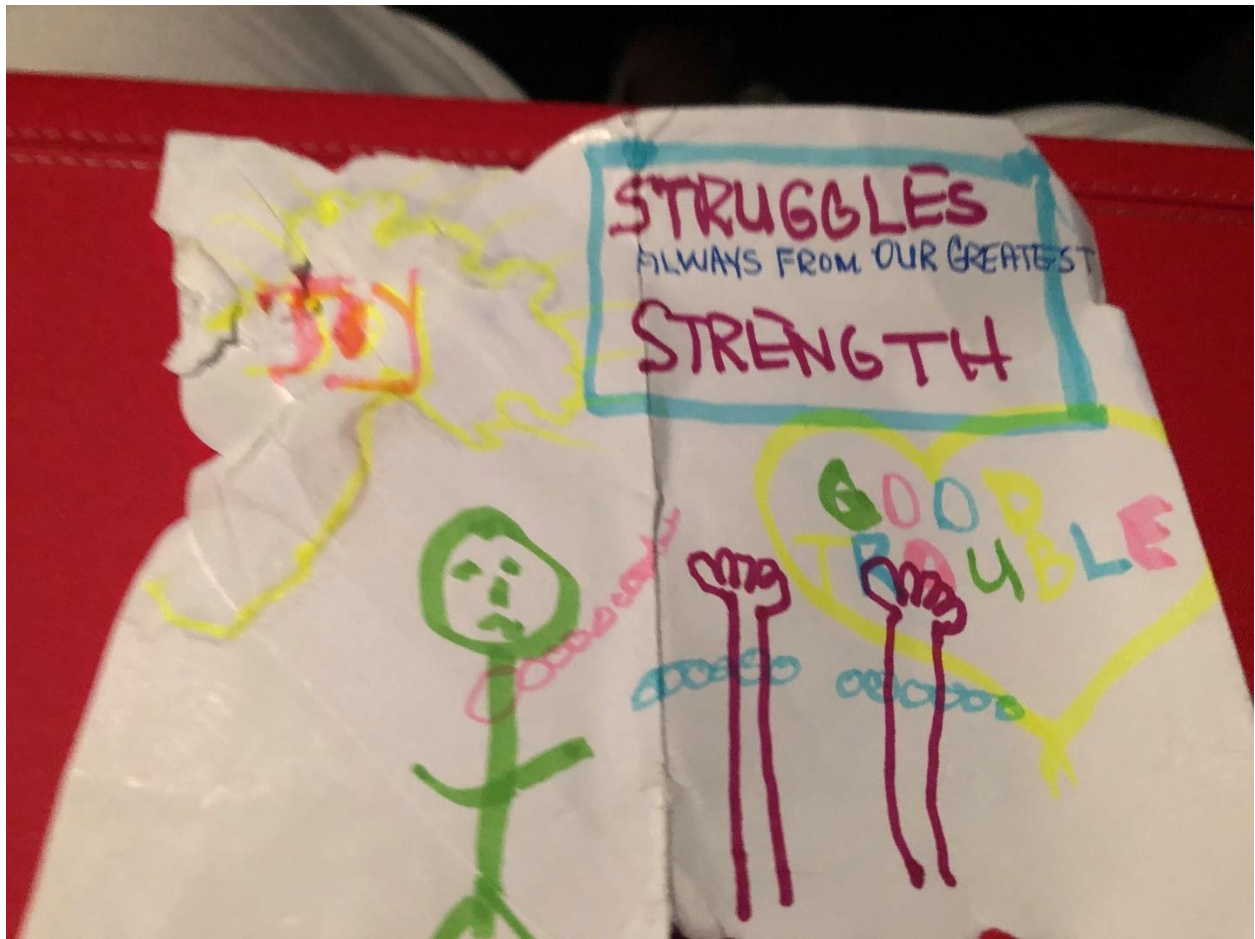


Figure 19: Sermon map - "Love Lifted Me" with 'Good Trouble'

Figure 19 Co-explorer Vignette

“That's fine. Okay. So the first, what I heard when I was listening to the message, I thought about the song Yolanda Adams “In The Midst Of It All,” they've gone through many harsh trials, tribulation, struggles. And so a couple of different memories came to mind for me. And I don't have the date, so is it T? Thank you for the dates, you all just reflect on T's dates because my memory went back to slavery.

And during that struggle with John Lewis and so many others of our ancestors, they lynched, we were hang. So, here's my little stick figure of when we were being hanged. And I didn't have enough time to draw the tree, so I saw that and I was like, "Yeah, okay. So, we were thinking of the same timelines here." So I did go... My mind did go to the struggle that we've gone through from slavery. And from slavery, we moved into, where we were handcuffed and just suppressed.

And during the voter suppression, all that, John Lewis has gone through. And even our ancestors, I didn't focus on one particular gender, female. I do focus on African Americans, all of them. All the African Americans ancestors had gone through slavery. And through it all, through the midst of all of that, we got through it. And we're still going through it in a sense, but we got through it. So that's the arms there with the chains that are broken.

And then from there I moved into, I could feel, smell, hear the joy of it all. And so through the struggles, this little message here says, "Through the struggles, we're always from the greatest." So, John Lewis is one of our greatest, their strength. So, throughout our struggles there's strength and so here, that's my little cloud of joy. So, I felt the joy. And even though there were struggles, it was good. It was John's favorite that everyone knows he's good trouble.”

Laced within apparatuses of patriarchy and spatial dynamics, whether from the built landscapes of pulpit and pew, in which a pastor or minister occupies the forefront, more often than not, and still remains highly gendered spatial domain, the ways in which black women and gender non-conforming persons find joy, despite such factors, speak to another layer of conjuring as spiritual cartography. A familiar and vernacular refrain spoken by churchgoers and elders of a particular hue and ilk, states: “this joy that I have, the world didn’t give it and the world can’t take it away.” In the four sermon maps (Figures 16, 17, 18, and 19) above, the co-explorers share and discuss various elements that gripped them during Rev. Lawson’s sermon, and the key thread through them all is one fundamental component: love. This category blends and builds upon all the others that preceded it. In so doing, turning to the final definition of

“conjure,” in Merriam-Webster, meaning “to charge or entreat earnestly or solemnly,” captures the many portals and prisms that sermons open for my co-explorers. So many resonances surfaced as each one described in great detail the places they traversed while listening to the sermon, including reflections on whiskey, fly outfits, and recollections from surviving segregated doctor’s visits. I hasten to declare that I am thinking about love as an ethic, a mode of being, a pathway of visionary commitment, and an architecture of mapping. As Imani Perry’s latest masterwork, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon To Understand the Soul of A Nation*, declares that most think they know the choreography of the South “they believe the region is out of step, off rhythm, lagging behind, stumbling. It is a convenient misunderstanding” (Perry 2022, xvi). I highlighted half the book, but the chapter on Savannah and Charleston (“Home of the Flying Africans: The Low Country”), along with sea islands in South Carolina, stood out because she points toward the contradictions of the South, noting for instance that expectations around grace and humility can lead to madness as a necessary refuge (Perry 2022, p. 267). Another contradiction deals with the roles of women; some of the most radical women were born and raised or influenced by the South and the many Souths that sociologists Hunter and Robinson trace in *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life*.

In this way, the above sermon maps lift up and give full attention to the mythologies told about the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, and the role that women played as the true drivers of the cause versus the subaltern means in which these logics were flipped on their head. Depicting two women dressed in colorful attire, the first map of this subset (Figure 16) along with the accompanying excerpt, demonstrates a keen awareness of the need and perhaps desire for adornment that projects not respectability but dignity and defiance in the Lorraine Hansberry sense of that term. Hansberry once stated that the very ways she and others moved to function as

a form of defiance and protest – from the waving of hands to the clothes they wear. It all attests to the fact that Black people are still here. Additionally, this first map in the set centers on relationality with two women in the middle of the page and all the narrated options around it. The intensity of emotions and tension is experienced and felt in a way that harkens to the stakes involved. To desegregate any area is an act of courage. The only way to push forward is through depths of spiritual fortitude, strategy, and love, which is “what justice looks like in public,” as Cornel West said. These maps collectively demonstrate that each one focused on personal memories, backstories, connections, art, poetry, and more while bridging the essence to the current moment.

The Eye As a Map: Spiritual Cartography of Love

One of the unique aspects of this project involves not only the map-making process itself but also the ways in which each participant travels and traverses within the land(s) the sermons construct. For instance, the participant who drew “two raised fists, good struggle, and struggles always from our greatest strength” (Figure 19) shows where their eyes ventured in this process alongside the emotional landmark of “joy” in the left-hand corner of the map, suggesting that an ongoing inner yearning and striving was unfolding. In this instance, along with all the rest, each person *places* themselves within the contours of the sermonic emphasis. This happens through the portal of sermons, as geographer Perry Carter submits, because it “affects stick, and in sticking adhere memories to spaces” (Carter 2019, p. 201). A message contending with the life and legacy of John Lewis, and his commitment to public service and human rights, led another participant to reflect and remember SNCC and the various chambers of power, discrimination, and advocacy they engaged, ranging from their hometown in Manning, South Carolina through the military and presently with involvement in the Black church.

Connecting the dots to the contemporary moment, Cory Booker expressed this abiding sentiment of love (C-SPAN, Jackson Confirmation Hearing Day 3, Part 1, 2022) during the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on March 23, 2022, for Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson — later confirmed as the first Black woman on the Supreme Court — while taking the time to decry his colleagues while insisting that he refused to allow the egregious behavior of many congress members to sully or steal his joy and pride nor the love evident in her extraordinary testament of what can be accomplished against the odds. “I want to tell you when I look at you, this is why I get emotional,” said Booker, the only Black member of the Senate committee and one of only three Black senators. “I’m sorry — you’re a person that is so much more than your race and gender” (ibid). Booker noted that Jackson is a Christian, a mother, and an intellect and that she has a love of books. Jackson and others in the audience wiped away tears as Booker spoke. He also became emotional at times. He noted in one example how the film *Hidden Figures* finally elevated recognition for the work of Black women behind the NASA program and also mentioned Jackson’s parents’ patriotism, even though their country “didn’t love them back.” Booker said, “All these people loved their country”(Booker, C-SPAN). “You faced insults here that were shocking to me — well, actually not shocking,” he said. “But you are here because of that kind of love, and nobody is taking that away from me” (Grisales 2022).

Such moments signify the potency and profundity of the maps created by this group because they share and proclaim through their depths of expression that sermons still have the power to transform “by the proclamation of the word, reality is supposed to get better” (Hubbard, 16). And in so doing, the various styles and contours reveal that due to so many kinds of eyes, variety reveals “we do not have to have just one picture. We can have, we do have, many. There is no reason for maps all to be on the same projection. The ceaseless repetition of a single

projection tries to convince people that “this” is what the earth looks like. But the earth does not look the way any individual projection makes it look.” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, p. 67).

Analogously, these maps showcase a variety of angles that all point towards the ways in which Black persons have conjured and constructed new pathways, dared to dream, and still navigated the goals and ambitions, fears and losses, quirkiness and ambivalences, timidity and anger, contradictions and celebrations—these maps paint pictures of fully human, fully divine creatures fashioning their moral imaginations, ethical mores, and spirited landscapes dipped in the residue of Zora Neale Hurston’s classic, “Their Eyes Were Watching God.”

These maps demonstrate aspirational notes as well as somber ones, reflecting from the perch of one who senses they are nearing death, as one map graphs versus another hoping to launch a new company. From the prism of a map demonstrating the communities and projects that sustained their inner black girl epistemic formation to another portrait graphically depicting that sort of sentiment with two women in fly, coordinating ensembles acknowledging that they do not know the path ahead to justice, yet trusting that somehow and someday they will channel their ingenuity, invention, resourcefulness, and tenacity to find a way to change Nashville and construct more emancipatory futures for all involved in the state of Tennessee.

Sermon as Balm, Salve, and Spatially Salvific

Several shared the role that sermons played amidst decision-making moments, after a loss, or amidst ongoing racial reckonings. One participant A offered a harrowing moment of blatant anti-black racism at her job during our focus groups. She shared that a new black manager came to work and saw an epithet, the n-word, scrawled upon a locker in the employee breakroom with his name on it. Distraught, visibly shaken, and saddened by such blatant and violent crosswinds in the atmosphere, she shared her sense of deep distress. The following week,

this same participant shared that she streamed three different sermons, and each one spoke a much-needed word that spoke to her heart and situation, noting that certain elements returned to memory throughout the week as different sermons came to mind helped her make it through the week.

In a sense, when espousing theo-geographic tenets that are life-giving and expansive, the work of sermons can be deemed a balm or salve for personal and systemic injustices. As the ignoble racial reckonings of spring and summer 2020 unfolded, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many others were dominating public (mainstream airwaves) consciousness in such a way that global, transnational companies and institutions began releasing statements and new diversity commercials. Among other gestures, amidst it all, some of the participants in the group lamented working in “essential worker jobs” and dealing with daily threats of COVID-19 while mixed messaging, at best, and denial, at worst, played out in the public square debates among politicians and policymakers. Meanwhile, one person lamented hearing that a good friend died while pulling an extra shift at a big box retailer with no benefits, health insurance, or financial inheritance to bequeath to his family, which remained. While such stories can harden and cause calcified bitterness to take root in the heart, remarkably, participants echoed the grit and sheer will to continue pressing forward, participating in organizing efforts, imagining new possibilities, and refusing to blot their spirits with hate. Not to essentialize; however, the tensions and rage, and disgust also flowed from comments of participants around maneuvering in the face of toxic microaggressions; however, the sermon from Dr. Weems on each generation having to “face their own pharaoh, Edmund Pettis Bridge, Tiananmen Square” served as a rallying cry of prophetic fire and a distinct sermonic salve that soothed the souls of those in the group who mentioned being “unsettled,” though not surprised, and battle-weary and

tired from constantly contending with generationally endured discrimination and white supremacy.

Sermon as Hate-Filled, Misinformed, and Spatially Repressive

Sermons that espouse theo-geographically restrictive, hate-filled, bigoted, and violent sermons spawned a discussion on messages that cause harm. One participant shared that the vast majority of sermons he's listened to could be described as harm-full as it moved towards deeming certain members of the community as un-Godly, such as LGBTQ persons or women or those who had "bad credit" as if having low wealth is something to be ashamed about, adopting and ascribing the very tenets of prosperity gospel during sermons and thereby effectively shaming everyone listening who may not fit the contours of the espoused markers of faithful living and stewardship. Such sermons construct spatially repressive traces that can be seen, felt, and heard in the immediate aftermath of the sermon along with through the circulation that takes place among members, listeners, and others who share threads of that message through their respective maps and spirited landscapes throughout the week.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Summary

This dissertation demonstrates the unique and unexplored domain of sermons as a site for spatialized knowledge production. Through the power of the map, this project explored ways in which persons navigate their lifeworlds and take adventures to new depths and heights. Though unexplored during this study, one could argue that such sermon maps serve as artefacts or a kind of passport stamp, not unlike a souvenir, that tourists collect while traveling. These “maps are important for wayfinding. In the parts of the world where cars are abundant, road maps are especially common. Millions of maps have been published to help people navigate the world’s subways and bus systems. Maps are found in every ship’s pilot house and every airplane’s cockpit” (Kaiser and Wood 2001, 106). Additionally, shifting gears, as a final aside in this discussion, the shape and form of a sermon pivots beyond the insular and myopic dynamic of only a pulpit with an oration flowing and can potentially encompass any number of possibilities.

My Sermon Map

As a qualitative researcher and cultural geographer, I did not want to conclude this dissertation without offering a brief note on my own sermon map. In Figure 19, I inserted a picture of my maternal grandmother’s quilt. As my mother gifted it to me, she emphasized that this quilt was made primarily out of necessity. The fabric and textures combine various threads used to make dresses, curtains, and other wares around their home. It has traveled with me around the world, as a military kid who has lived in the Philippines to North Dakota to Alabama and Seattle – yet, when I seek textured and material comfort, I pick up this quilt. Both functionally and stylistically, it soothes my spirit and provides a personal canopy, often while streaming or listening to sermons and, quite often, while I prepare and develop my own.



Figure 20: Shaundra - Heirloom sermon map quilt

I carry these patches in so many small and seismic ways; they inform my hermeneutic, they guide my strivings and plot a path, sometimes circuitously, as I contend with the colors and patterns. This inherited quilt also preaches a message that varies based on the day I use it or pause long enough to reflect in times of societal panic and dismay. Akin to geographer Dydia DeLyser, this dissertation is firmly entrenched as an act of care-full investment and scholarship (2016). Engaging both my inner enthusiast along with participatory creative mapping bridges together my abiding commitment to “care for the topic, care for the issue, care for the people and the community...care for the present and the past that can build a future” (ibid., p. 809). For the purposes of this dissertation, I think the portal of my eyes through this prism illuminates a burgeoning pathway. Like many, I think the pandemic has been deeply heart-wrenching—and not enough time nor intent has been spent on lament—but it also has been mysteriously clarifying. While I am actively searching and interviewing for positions as we speak, ranging from college chaplaincy to postdoctoral research to organizing—I can now say, ultimately, like my co-explorers, I hope to utilize this research as a launching pad to a community-based, participatory non-profit or hybrid organization. Whether now or later, I sense a tug towards developing and refining, and experimenting with this sermon map “pilot” conducted in 2020 to be used in ways that stretch across race, religion, and region.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Though unexplored in this study, conversational sermons emerged as a topic by a participant/co-explorer, and I do not deeply delve into the contours of this analysis. One participant shared: “I [get] a sermon not just at church but when I was working, I felt I got sermons quite often on the job...sometimes I can be talking to somebody.” This decentralized form would and could lead to fascinating explorations if more focus and time were spent

exploring and unpacking the nature of conversational sermons. Efforts were taken to share sermons across gender and context within the American South, yet despite being a foray into womanist theology and black feminist geographic praxis—only two of the six sermon clips shared featured women, and that feels like a horrendous and telling oversight. Additionally, as I searched for examples of paradigmatic preachers and sermons, regrettably, I remain disappointed that an LGBTQ preacher rooted in the South was not featured nor shared as an illustration for feedback and discussion. Additionally, it might have been fascinating to trace the maps from the first week until the third week to note the shifts and differences along the way. continue to linger and shape the project.

Another decision that must nonetheless be acknowledged concerns the forfeiture of utilizing the semi-structured interviews beyond one example in this dissertation. Beyond additional vantage points and asides from interviewees who happen to be clergy, many of the themes were expressed and reached saturation through the focus groups. For future research, I intend to utilize the interviews to hopefully write and compile my first monograph, examining, for instance, a takeaway from the analysis that sermon preparation is a map. Nevertheless, not unlike geographic education trends, once I finished coding my data both manually and with N-Vivo, some of the most fascinating and salient findings stemmed from focus groups and their interactions while designing sermon maps. Recognizing that critical cartographers posit map-making to be processual, as an ongoing and iterative process (Kitchin et al. 2012). Recognizing this fact, I know that other domains can and hopefully will be explored in future endeavors.

Intellectual Merit

Even amidst COVID-19, black people, particularly black LGBTQ+ persons, are prolific and impactful cultural knowledge producers (Bobo 1995; McKittrick 2021). To endure such

hyper-vigilance, hyper-policing, and even for young children, adolescents, girls, and teenagers to be constantly “adultified” (Love 2020) and treated with aggressive and often debased forms of violence, subjugation, and utter humiliation and be exposed to the viral videos that circulate now via so many digital and electronic spaces, including social media outlets, television broadcasts, radio airwave commentary, and even during church community reflection and one-off comments from the pulpit via preachers and leaders.

To this end, in recent news, the prescience of the need for a restorative theo-geographic balm that valorizes and sanctifies that *every* black life matters, as Pamela Lightsey notes in *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. With polarizing effect and affect, artist Lil Nas X released a song entitled “Montero (Call Me By Your Name)” officially on March 26, 2021, in which a gay man slides down a stripper pole to perform a lap dance on Satan, pushing back against debilitating and dehumanizing theologies and harm-full spatial logics that deem such persons and bodies innately doomed and hell-bound. He subverts and problematizes restrictive spatial tenets that uphold certain persons are included, and others are excluded or asked to abide by “don’t ask, don’t tell” codes of ethics and engagement. In such environs, the church becomes a “landscape of despair” (Dear and Wolch 2014), by which being forced to attend by parents or guardians each week reinforces and imprints a sense of self-abnegation and self-contempt.

In that regard, these focus groups tackled several tenets that illustrated the nature and scope of sermons that cause harm and preach tenets of spatially regressive and repressive tenets. Lil Nas X’s example demonstrates the potency of the pulpit and its attendant circulations that reverberate throughout stated and unstated church *ethos* and customs. His song uses shock value to boomerang the same sorts of shock that LGBTQ+ persons experience and endure in so many apparatuses and technologies of violence. While deemed a provocateur by some media pundits,

his artistry and personhood have been a salvific life force for others contending with shame, fear, and felt the danger of living their lives in the full humanity of their being. So then, his explicit reference to the impact and harm of sermons growing up proves my thesis that such micro-geographies carry deep and unparalleled weight. It is one thing to be told one is so-called “deviant” by society, yet another to be told one is dirty, illegitimate, ontologically alien, and cursed by God through theo-geographic lifeworlds espoused in sermons.

Further, this can be seen at the local parish level as well. In recent decades, enrollment of women in seminary and graduate theological education has peaked around 30% to 34% (Association of Theological Schools 2020-21), yet such strides in gender equity have not translated writ large to congregational leadership, as cisgender and mostly heterosexual males overwhelmingly serve as pastors and senior ministers, though the tides continue to slowly pivot in more egalitarian ways. Indeed, in 2019 the National Congregational Survey reports that only 14% of all congregations, across race and religion, are led by women (National Congregations Study 2021, 36). Among White Protestant congregations, 30% are women-led, and in Black Protestant congregations, 16% are led by women (ibid). Brilliant and audacious womanist and Black feminist preachers and scholars have helped change and adjust the narrative through their living legacies, scholarship, and public theological witness. Women who have blazed trails and continue to serve as models include the likes of Prathia Hall, Teresa Fry-Brown, Carolyn Ann Knight, Yvette Flunder, Cynthia Hale, Gina Stewart, Neichelle Guidry Jones, Valerie Bridgeman, Leslie Callahan, and countless others. Colloquia, conferences, podcasts, retreats, and organizing have all been spawned because such women have dared to curate supportive spaces for women, LGBTQ+, and pluralistic and multifaith, including our dear atheist and humanist comrades.

Research Implications: Fellowship, Kinship, and Wisdom

Anthropologist of religion, Todne Thomas, describes kinship in relation to members of the church in this way and goes on to chronicle the ways that church folks build bonds, form ties, and support one another; in a similar vein, this group built and carved out moments of genuine ties related to identity, circumstance, and a host of other factors. Not unlike what often happens after a church service in person, the sermon serves as a reference point to return to but not be restricted by. In other words, after listening to a sermon, the maps of the message begin to coagulate, morph, and shapeshift into a choreography of its own, akin to Aimee Meredith Cox, who deals with the choreography of black girls kinetically and kinesthetically.

Evidenced throughout the group, moments of shared laments or concerns, or ethical demands bubbled to the surface. Chief among them, a return to the plight of women, mothers, and care-taking emerged; it was a complex web of emotions, both pride and lament, great joy and depths of pain, being lovingly appreciated and devastatingly undervalued – indeed, in these ways and so many more, paradigms of sacred shared or tangential experiences formed. Analogous to the ways Deepsha Philyaw writes about the *Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, it was apparent among participants who attend the same church that, in many ways, they had no idea about certain undisclosed and secret dimensions to their lives. One person even voiced this aloud during a moment of group sharing. The comment assented to this reality – they previously worshipped alongside one another for years, yet, they did not have any idea that the other had experienced an ex-spouse’s infidelity or a current partner’s stoic and detached aloofness at home, creating forms of loneliness despite appearing ‘happily married’ at church and during social functions.

Throughout the scope of this project, and especially during the third and final focus group, participants utilized the chat function of Zoom and shared audibly that they did not want the study to end and asked if it could continue. One member was so moved that she gathered a parting gift for each member of the focus group—and since they respected confidentiality—she asked me how many total people were in both groups as she had some plants she would like to share given how much she felt impacted (Figure 21). These purple plants seemed even more powerful as they had direct import on the symbolism of Alice Walker’s definition of womanism in tandem with developing womanist geographies. Truly, this project was cathartic and so uplifting for me that I couldn’t stop smiling, beaming, and even played some music and cried the night it ended as the participants/co-explorers granted such brilliant, heartfelt, and complex renderings of their experiences and aspirations for the work that sermons might do amidst this pandemic, social justice movements, and the nation. The types of kinship ties and wisdom shared amongst the participants led to sharing and interest in wanting to continue the camaraderie.

In the end, the lived realities and everyday experiences of ordinary people in Southern places are often overlooked, with so much attention focused on major cities and hubs. As a result, we forfeit pivotal insights into the “soulcraft” (Sales 2019) of this nation and miss innovative and capacious ways of engaging the landscape through a visionary geographic lens. Moreover, statistically speaking, more blacks reside down South, and such majestic crevices are laden with potential lessons about the preoccupations and whimsies of people who drive culture and popular discourse – black people (Griffin 2015). Further, undergirding this project, emancipatory frameworks of black feminist thought (Collins 2000) were deployed to engage the interiority and contemplative dimensions (Quashie 2012) of black women as spiritual cartographers.



Figure 21: Gift of purple plants for both focus groups

In certain ways, this project attempts to join critical cartographers in pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a map beyond the notion of a fixed tool (Kelley 2021; Yessler and Alderman 2021), expanding the focus and purview to encompass sermons. Building upon the *Sonic Color Line* (Stoeve 2016) and McKittrick's seminal work on *Demonic Grounds*, the intersections of class, race, gender, and spirituality converge in one study with historical and contemporary valence and veracity. This study charted a new lane in geographic inquiry by developing one of the first womanist geographies, centering lived religion vis-à-vis creative mapping.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Sermon Geographies: Black People as Spiritual Cartographers in the South

Researcher(s): *Shaundra Cunningham, Department of Geography* University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dr. Madhuri Sharma, Department of Geography University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because of your experience listening to sermons. We want to learn more about your reactions, memories, and emotional responses during and after a sermon.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to explore the emotional landscapes that unfold while listening to a sermon to understand what sticks with you, what moves you, and what impacts you. This is in order to learn how you imagine new worlds, develop a sense of place, and create your own spiritual and physical maps to navigate life in response to the sermon.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for one month and will involve 3 focus group meetings and one creative sermon map. Each Zoom focus group will last 60-75 minutes. The sermon map will take 15 minutes to complete and will be done during the last meeting.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to:

Commit to three (3) focus groups on Mondays at 6 pm for a total of 60-75 minutes.

- The only necessary equipment required is to have access to a computer, phone, tablet, or device that allows you to open the link to Zoom, which is a digital software that allows private group meetings.
- 48 hours prior to the first Zoom focus group meeting, I will make a phone call to you, asking if you have any questions or concerns and to see if you have issues with your technology.
- 24 hours before the first Zoom focus group meeting, a reminder email will be sent to you.

- At the beginning of each Focus group meeting, I will open with friendly introductions and a centering moment. Then we will listen to a 3-minute clip (audio or video) of a sermon that I will play. Some will come from sermons preached the Sunday prior at Progressive Believers Baptist Church. For variety, I will also play 3-minute audio or video clips of sermons from preachers in other places and in different eras or moments in time as long as the preacher heralds from a state in the U.S. South preaching in a Southern context.
- Immediately after watching and/or listening to the sermon clip, I will open up with questions to get your response to the sermon.
- This will be the general format at each Focus group meeting.
- During the last focus group, I will lead the group in a sermon map activity. This creative method will ask you to draw a map that tells the story of your spiritual life, including themes, values, images, places, Scripture, memorable phrases, humor, and anything else from sermons.
- At the end of this meeting, please take a picture of your map or scan it and email it to scunni22@vols.utk.edu. If you have any issues or malfunctions with digital sharing, please let me know, and I can come to your place of residence and pick up the map if you will leave it in your mailbox to ensure social distance. I will be sure to wear gloves when I pick it up to maintain CDC guidelines of safety.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact the researcher, Shaundra Cunningham, at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or via phone at [REDACTED].

For any information already collected, your responses will be permanently deleted.

However, near the end of August, research participant data cannot be withdrawn after data have already been de-identified and code key destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Possible risks and discomfort are minimal. However, you may experience discomfort or emotional reactions when reflecting on your journey, personal stories, upbringing, systemic issues, and how these areas of your life interact with your spirituality and sense of place.

- *These risks will be minimized as, I (the researcher), will take great care to pause, offer space, and sensitivity during any deep or upsetting sharing. Plus, I will provide a guiding list of resources on grief, counseling, and crisis outlets (attached).*

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Possible benefits include personal healing, self-reflection that empowers you, new insight(s) around your spiritual and geographic life, and a sense of bonding with others in the group. Even if you don't benefit from being in the study, your participation may help us to learn more about what geographer Katherine McKittrick calls "a Black sense of place" and specifically how spirituality guides the way you interact with, inhabit, and transform your local community and, by extension, the world. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

Given the nature of focus groups, confidentiality may be limited insofar as participants cannot be monitored outside the meetings. Every attempt will be made to remind each of you at the beginning of the Focus group to keep our sessions private.

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by replacing names with research identification codes (ID codes) as you express interest of any sort. All paper copies will be stored in a SentrySafe lockbox for the duration of this study and thereafter for analysis.

All contact lists, email logs, researcher notes, signed consent forms, and audio file recordings from Zoom focus group meetings will be stored on a password-encrypted external hard drive and uploaded using the University of Tennessee Vault File transfer system to ensure added security.

The only individuals aside from me who will have access to your data include my advisor, Dr. Sharma, and the Institutional Review Board (see below).

When information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. I will de-identify your data and remove all traces of identifiable markers. Since this may be a relatively small sample size, I may also utilize "composite counterstories," which combine elements shared to create characters that carry your stories without being readily identifiable.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.

- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research beyond the completion of my dissertation. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Future use by others:

We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. Your data will be included in chapters of my dissertation. Following the custom of Geography doctoral students, my final copy will be deposited in a repository called TRACE for other researchers, and free public access available to anyone who would like to read it.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will need to pay for any data charges for mobile devices and/or your Internet service provider.

What else do I need to know?

Number of research participants. While unlikely, *a small sample size may increase the likelihood of participant re-identification:* About 25-60 people will take part in this study. *Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you.*

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study or have experienced a research-related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Shaundra Cunningham, at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or [REDACTED]. You can also contact Dr. Madhuri Sharma at msharma3@utk.edu or [REDACTED].

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

The researcher signature section below is not required but is recommended for research studies involving an in-person consent procedure, especially when consent may be obtained by multiple members of the research team.

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Appendix B: Abstract Sermon Geographies: Black People as Spiritual Cartographers in Rural South

During a YouTube interview, scholar of African American preaching, Dr. Frank Thomas, lamented, “too much genius is in the grave.” In that interview, he issued an urgent plea for more scholars of black sacred rhetoric and preaching. Against the backdrop of slavery, segregation, mass incarceration, and dehumanization – within such calamitous atmospheres – religion became a vehicle by which “freedom dreams” (Kelley 2002) and theological ideals, such as life amidst death, took flight and planted roots in a people despised as “the wretched of the earth” (Fanon 1961). Propelled by a “revolutionary love ethic,” (hooks, 1993) which insists upon universal ontological dignity, black preachers and congregations co-create new worlds. Infamously, Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied this phenomenon while *preaching* “I Have a Dream,” lifting key phrases from Rev. Prathia Hall, a black woman, resulting in a speech-sermon that ignited a nation to imagine and enact what I consider a theo-geographic reconceptualization of American space.

Analogous to the axioms for interpreting a physical landscape (Mitchell 2008), increasingly, geographers are analyzing embodied and emotional landscapes and moving beyond ocular supremacy toward the ephemeral and ineffable (Wilford 2015). Sermons quite literally construct new worlds and more emancipatory, expansive, and equitable futures. The sermon is, therefore, a unique and unexplored micro-geography warranting an ethnographic investigation.

Historically, women made the church, the community, and the Black Freedom Struggle *move*. Propelled by democratic visions of equality, justice, and a better world, they fashioned a more emancipatory place for themselves as they sought ‘home’ and a sense of belonging. Both kinship and organizing, in many instances, emerged out of the church (Cone 1975; Cannon 1995). Since women still fill the pews in Black Protestant congregations, with 59% active participation (Pew Forum 2014), this project will examine the trajectory of Black people’s placemaking capacities, with an emphasis on the women, during and after the sermon. I am interested in exploring the emotional landscapes that unfold while listening to a sermon and thereafter in order to understand what kinds of personal and social memory, sometimes laced with the wounds of a place (Till 2008), get invoked during sermons. The following research questions guide this study:

- 1.) In what ways does the sermon point beyond the moment of proclamation towards spirited landscapes of horror, healing, and holiness?
- 2.) How do southern Black people *conjure* new worlds and function as spiritual cartographers in response to the sermon?
 - a. Through the prism of sound and silence, what affective or emotional landmarks are evoked in aural/oral dimensions, speaking to ancestors, joy, and (re)making of place?

- b. What types of emotional journeys do sermons prompt or facilitate?
- c. How does the soundscape of sermons shape Black people's visions to transform local landscapes?

To examine these research questions, this project utilizes qualitative methods. These guiding questions will be addressed through archival research, mobile focus groups, semistructured interviews, and participant observation.

Appendix C: Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Sermon Geographies: Black People as Spiritual Cartographers in the South

Researcher(s): *Shaundra Cunningham, Department of Geography* University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Dr. Madhuri Sharma, Department of Geography University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because of your experience listening to and/or preaching sermons. We want to learn more about your reactions, memories, and emotional responses during and after a sermon.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to explore the emotional landscapes that unfold while listening to a sermon to understand what sticks with you, what moves you, and what impacts you. This is in order to learn how you imagine new worlds, develop a sense of place, and create your own spiritual and physical maps to navigate life in response to the sermon.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for one interview, ranging from 45-90 minutes. Additionally, you will have the option to complete a creative sermon map, which will take 15 minutes at the very end of our interview.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to:

Commit to one (1) interview at a date and time of convenience for you.

- The only necessary equipment required is to have access to a computer, phone, tablet, or device that allows you to open the link to Zoom, which is a digital software that allows private meetings.
- Alternatively, you can also engage in an interview via telephone.
- Upon confirming a time, I will send a list of semi-structured interview questions for you to ponder. I will also send a 1-page abstract of my research proposal for context.
- 24 hours before the interview, a reminder email will be sent.
- During the interview, a narrative approach will be used to allow for organic interests to emerge, alongside the provided interview questions.

- As an option, at the end of the interview, I will guide you through a creative mapping exercise called a sermon map. This will only take 15 minutes, if done during our interview, or you may opt to think about the prompt and complete at a later time.
- If you choose to complete the map, at the end of the interview, please take a picture of your map or scan it and email to scunni22@vols.utk.edu. If you have any issues or malfunctions with digital sharing, please let me know and I can come to your place of residence or office and pick up the map if you leave it in your mailbox to ensure social distance. I will be sure to wear a mask and gloves when I pick it up to maintain CDC guidelines of safety.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact the researcher, Shaundra Cunningham, at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or via telephone at [REDACTED].

For any information already collected, your responses will be permanently deleted.

However, near the end of August, research participant data cannot be withdrawn after data have already been de-identified and code key destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Possible risks and discomfort are minimal. However, you may experience discomfort or emotional reactions when reflecting on your journey, personal stories, upbringing, systemic issues, and how these areas of your life interact with your spirituality, the role of sermons, and sense of place.

- *These risks will be minimized as, I (the researcher), will take great care to pause, offer space, and sensitivity during any deep or upsetting sharing. Plus, I will provide a guiding list of resources on grief, counseling, and crisis outlets (attached).*

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Possible benefits include personal healing, self-reflection that empowers you, new insight(s) around your spiritual and geographic life, and a sense of pride in contributing to research in a growing transnational discipline known as Black Geographies. Even if you don’t benefit from being in the study, your participation may help us to learn more about what

geographer Katherine McKittrick calls “a Black sense of place;” specifically, how spirituality guides the way you interact with, inhabit, and transform your local community and, by extension, the world. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

Aside from myself, I will send the audio file of the interview to www.rev.com for confidential transcription services. Afterwards, I will send the transcript to you via email for your records and to review for any inaccuracies or misquotes.

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by replacing names with research identification codes (ID codes) as you express interest of any sort. All paper copies will be stored in a SentrySafe lockbox for the duration of this study and thereafter for analysis.

Upon completion, all documents and files will be permanently destroyed.

All contact lists, email logs, researcher notes, signed consent forms, and audio file recordings from interviews will be stored on a password encrypted external hard drive and uploaded using the University of Tennessee Vault File transfer system to ensure added security.

The only individuals aside from me who will have access to your data include my advisor, Dr. Sharma, and the Institutional Review Board (see below).

When information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. I will de-identify your data and remove all traces of identifiable markers.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research beyond the completion of my dissertation. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

Future use by others:

We may share your research data with other researchers without asking for your consent again, but it will not contain information that could directly identify you. Your data will

be included in chapters of my dissertation. Following the custom of Geography doctoral students, my final copy will be deposited in a repository called TRACE for other researchers and free public access available to anyone who would like to read it.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will need to pay for any data charges for mobile devices and/or your Internet service provider.

What else do I need to know?

Number of research participants. While unlikely, *a small sample size may increase the likelihood of participant re-identification:* About 25-60 people will take part in this study. *Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you.*

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Shaundra Cunningham at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] You can also contact Dr. Madhuri Sharma at msharma3@utk.edu or [REDACTED].

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

The researcher signature section below is not required, but is recommended for research studies involving an in-person consent procedure, especially when consent may be obtained by multiple members of the research team.

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Appendix D: Prompt 3

Facebook Bulletin Board Post and Potential Care Group Standard Email

Do you enjoy listening to sermons? Do you find yourself excited with anticipation to see what kind of sermon will be delivered on Sunday mornings? Have you ever been bored by a sermon or counting sheep until you could leave church? If so, you are the perfect participant for a research study on the emotional landscapes and impact (or lack thereof) of sermons. If you'd like more information, please email Shaundra Cunningham at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or call [REDACTED]

If and when people respond, they will automatically receive Prompt 2.

Appendix E: Data Collection Instrument Semi-Structured Interviews

A major component of this research project revolves around semi-structured interviews. This method will be conducted in a tele-interview format due to Covid19 limitations and safety precautions.

The data collection instrument script of how this will unfold is the following:

Introduction

Hello, thanks so much for taking the time to participate in this research project. It's an honor to have your input and perspective. Just as a quick point of order or piece of housekeeping,

- a. I received your signed consent form on (date) and want to thank you for that.
OR
- b. I've emailed the consent form to you but haven't received a signed copy yet. Do you have any questions or concerns? If so, I'm happy to answer. [Time taken for any comments/questions/clarification.] Now, if you're interested in participating I'm happy to wait while you sign the form. If you're not interested in consenting to be in this study, I still appreciate your time and willingness to engage in questions and dialogue. There's no penalty and no worries at all.

At the end of our conversation, this audio file will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive and via the University of Tennessee OneDrive, with several layers of security. I will also send the audio file to a transcription service and follow-up with a full transcript of the interview. Also, I have a list of references and resources in the event that you should feel distress or any emotional dis-ease that gets evoked during this interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Let's jump right in. This is a project interested in exploring and investigating the role and *work* of sermons, specifically as it pertains to emotional landscapes.

So, right off the bat:

1. When you hear the term, "sermon," what comes to mind?
2. What types of emotional journeys do sermons prompt or facilitate?
3. Recall the last sermon you preached. What are the emotional landmarks for you from that sermon? In other words, as you prepared and then delivered the sermon, what sticks with you? Did it *move* you or stir up something within you? Or not?
4. What role do sermons play in your ability to survive? To imagine "freedom dreams" or to "dream new dreams" in the language of the Hebrew Bible?
5. Pivoting to the role of black women, in particular, how do southern black women *conjure* new worlds in response to the sermon? How do southern black people – female, male, nonbinary, transgender—*conjure* new worlds?

6. What are the soundprints of the sermon; in what ways do certain sounds, rhythms, words, images, pauses impact you in the moment? Do certain emotions/reactions linger and re-visit your memory later?
7. Explore the soundscapes of a sermon; geographically, how do you take the sermon with you?
8. During this COVID-19 global health crisis, how do sermons impact your outlook and perspective on a.) yourself b.) your family c.) your community/neighborhood d.) your country e.) the world?
9. Given COVID-19, what *work* do you think sermons perform in this historic and unique moment?
10. Who's your favorite preacher and why?
11. Optional Sermon Map question: If you have a blank sheet of paper (of any type) now I'd like to walk you through a creative sermon map exercise. This will take 5-10 minutes together. Or you can begin now and return your Picasso creation to me ideally in the next 2 days.

Prompt: I'd like to ask you to draw a map that shows the role of sermons in your sense of place. You can use 1 or 2 sermons as a backdrop as you think through this or it can be a general sense. Where does the sermon point or take you throughout the week? After you preach or after you hear a sermon how do you walk with it? How does the sermon travel with you? What places and spaces do you seek out for reflection (physically and mentally)?

You can be as creative and ornate as you like or as minimalistic. Feel free to include a legend or not. There's no "right or wrong" here; this is designed to get a sense of how sermons *move* you in more ways than one.

Thanks again for your time and willingness to participate. I'm going to stop the audio recorder at this time. I'll be in touch via email with the transcript as soon as I receive it back from the professional transcription service, www.rev.com. If you should have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED] or scunni22@vols.utk.edu.

Also, if you should change your mind for any reason, just let me know, and I'll delete and destroy all your information; however, beyond late August 2020, I will be unable to wipe out your information because I will have completely deidentified and coded it at that point.

Appendix F: Interview Gratitude Email

Dear [insert name]:

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this research study by engaging in an interview. Your reflections and responses were thoughtful and insightful. I appreciate your candor/humor/depth/anecdotes/graciousness to reflect on the role of sermons “for such a time as this.”

In the next two weeks you will receive a transcript of the interview for your records. Should you find any errors, misquotes, or discrepancies, please let me know to ensure accuracy. If you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached at scunni22@vols.utk.edu or via cell phone at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Shaundra Cunningham

PhD Student

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Appendix G: Interview Transcript Email

Dear [insert name]:

I hope this note finds you well amidst the whirlwind. As a follow-up, I am attaching a copy of the transcript from our interview on [insert date]. Please take a few moments to review and let me know if you find any misquotes or errors that don't quite reflect the tenor of your comments. If, by chance, I do not hear from you, I will assume accuracy and proceed with utilizing this transcript in the present form.

Allow me to offer a final expression of my sincere gratitude for your time and engagement. Your contributions are invaluable to the goal of this research.

Sincerely,

Shaundra Cunningham

PhD Student

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Vita

Shaundra Cunningham is a former military kid who has lived all over, but Columbia, South Carolina, is home. She is an ordained Baptist minister and received her Master of Divinity degree from Harvard Divinity School. At Harvard, she organized a conference on hip hop and religion and continues to explore the intersections of theology, gender, and culture. For over a decade, Shaundra has been a chaplain in clinical, community, and collegiate contexts.

Shaundra finished her Ph.D. in geography at the University of Tennessee. She's interested in geographies of religion and spirituality, interiority, and spatialized power dynamics with emphasis on the cultural landscapes of the American South. Shaundra takes delight in emphasizing the festivity and joy of religiosity; like her mother, Liz, and grandmothers, Lucy and Ada, her favorite color is yellow, which informs her approach to research and life. Shaundra's great-grandmother, Martha, lived to be 96 years old, after each visit, in parting, she always planted a kiss, shared a sweet hug, and offered her signature blessing: "be particular." Such particularity shapes Shaundra's sensibilities and she hopes to *conjure* scholarship with both mind and heart.