Black Geographic Possibilities

On a Queer Black South

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The American South has received considerable intellectual attention. Social and cultural geographers have called attention to its diversity and the relationships of power that construct its everyday operation. An addition to the way that power and relationships can be examined is through Black Geographies. This paper seeks to interject alternatives to traditional methods and theories of doing geography. Black Geographies centralizes a Black sense of place and disrupts the normative conceptualization and mere geographic containment of Black subjects. By focusing on the ways that Black subjects and places invoke agency and create space, Black Geographies contributes to a broadened geography that resists reductionary knowledge formation. This paper expands the study of the American South by positing Black Geographies as a modality for centering queer Black Southern life.

El sur de los estados unidos ha recibido considerable atención intelectual. Geógrafos sociales y culturales han llamado la atención sobre su diversidad y las relaciones de poder que construyen su operación diaria. Una adición a la forma en que el poder y las relaciones pueden ser examinados es a través de geografía del Negro. Este documento trata de intercalar alternativas a los métodos y teorías tradicionales de hacer geografía. Geografía del Negro centraliza un sentido de lugar del Negro y interrumpe la conceptualización normativa y la contención geográfica de la raza negra. Al centrarse en las formas en que los sujetos y lugares negros invocan agencia y crean el espacio, Geografías del Negro contribuyen a una geografía ensanchada que se resiste a la formación del conocimiento reduccionario. En este trabajo se aplica Geografía del Negro a un cuerpo de investigación sobre la vida del queer negro del sur, ampliando así sus posibilidades teóricas y empíricas.

KEY WORDS: Black Geographies, Race, Queer Geographies

PALABRAS CLAVE: Geografías de los negros, raza, Geografías Queer

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, on a hot, summer day in Tennessee, I joined a group of women participating with several state and local groups in what was termed the Equality Walk. The day before, June 26, had brought a ruling from the Supreme Court of the United States that granted a constitutional right to marriage for same-gender couples across the nation. Hundreds of people woke up early after a night of celebration and joined a twenty minute walk to walk from the intersection of 2nd Avenue North and Union Street around the block holding signs, waving rainbow flags, and shouting their excitement to onlookers and to each other. The Equality Walk was the kickoff to

the daylong Nashville Pride celebration, a remarkably well-timed event on the dawn of a changed region. Here, in the capital of the state on the lawn of the Nashville City Hall and the Davidson County 3rd Circuit Court, a festival ensued for nearly nine hours under the watch of the Southern summer sun.

At the end of the march, a white woman whose name I never learned excitedly asked me how I reacted to the ruling the day before. She startled me, and perhaps I stared blankly at her as I tried to conjure an emotion that might satiate her desire for an exuberant response. The day before, Friday, I had been in my office calculating final grades from a summer school course I was teaching. In recent years, I had grown accustomed to keeping track of the Supreme Court's blog as rulings were released, including on similar sunny day in sitting in Atlanta, Georgia, as the Voting Rights Act was dismantled in 2013. I had already planned to attend the Equality Walk and knew that this 2015 ruling would shift the climate of festivalgoers into one huge party. However, like in 2013, I found my thoughts and emotions in an odd state of chaos. I had not yet recovered from the massacre of nine parishioners at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston just days before the ruling. I had been watching as the Movement for Black Lives was preparing to convene in Cleveland, Ohio, the following month. I remembered conversations with my students, many of whom were using their summers scrambling to round up documents for the financial aid office before the registrar dropped their schedules within the next 30 days. My reaction, like the land I stood upon, was in conflict. Instead of ruining the moment for this woman, though, I responded to her joy-filled question with, "Oh geez. I was just in so much shock. I couldn't believe it!" and smiled.

As I walked around the festival with my "Y'all Means All" rainbow-clad button from Belmont United Methodist Church, I reflected on the morning's interaction. What would have happened if I had attempted to explain my positionality to this woman? Would she understand my perspectives? Or would she wave off my concerns about race and class in addition to gender and sexuality as overreactions? What would "y'all means all" actually mean to her?

This paper seeks to interanimate geography and Blackness by unsettling the myopic identity politics of the American South. In doing so, I use a Black Geographies framework, one that centers a Black sense of place. This epistemological body of work reduces the treatment of Black subjects to additive or static, without agency. Rather, it focuses on the ways that Black subjects undertake space-making practices within a specific set of circumstances and expands Black spatial possibilities, thereby enabling inquiry and resisting homogeneity.

In this paper, I consider discursive formulations of the South over time as well as some of the major moments that continue to shape its regional identity. Then, I briefly outline critical approaches to race in geography before discussing the Black Geographies framework more specifically. Finally, I draw on Black Geographies to explore possibilities for (a) queer Black South, using insights from an ongoing research project. The objective of this paper is to interrupt

traditional trajectories of imagined South geographies by centralizing Black subjects as crucial to spatial knowledge.

THE SOUTH

What is "the South" anyway? In the United States, cultural regions have been nuanced by the intersection of environmental, historical, political and human connections that collude to construct what are termed regional geographies. The complicated formation of region should be considered in terms of multiple layers of identity and power (Paasi 2002). The American South is such a case. The South as a region is often construed as "an easy repository for all that is backward and hurtful in the United States, past and present" (Law 2001, p 3). As a result, the South's cultural identity has remained fixated on a set of historical moments and iconography, such as the pre-abolition South and its secession movement, the role of the South in the Civil War, deep-fried and sugared foodscapes, widespread persistent poverty, and widespread Christian religiosity, to name a few. Relying on these conceptualizations fails to realign figurations of the South as a place of multiplicities. The relationships and identities of the South and its people should not be generalized, as the diversity of issues and points of pride extend beyond these strongholds. The aforementioned markers of cultural identity also do little to hold the South accountable for the political and social ideologies that led to innumerable atrocities across the region. For example, the lineage of legalizing discrimination in the American South, by race, sexuality, socioeconomic class, migration, and gender, remains significant for contemporary sociocultural, political, and economic relationships in the region. Given the South's complex history within and for the social, economic, and political functions of the United States and global empire, studying the region remains vitally important (Woods 2002).

Social and cultural geographers have long considered structures of power and knowledge formation in/on the American South, working to deconstruct traditional understandings and forge innovative ways of knowing Southern geographies. Much of the work is highlighted in the summative essay "Innovations in Southern Studies within Geography" (Alderman & Graves 2011). The essay highlights the diversity of work in which geographers have centralized the South as an important site of inquiry. The agricultural landscapes of the American South remain important for understanding one facet of the South's identity, and they draw on John Fraser Hart (1976), Judith Carney (2001), and Charles Aiken (1998), among others, to demonstrate this significance. More recently, Priscilla McCutcheon contributes to rural and agrarian landscapes have been by demonstrating the intersection of religion, land, and food on Black religious farms (McCutcheon 2013). Alderman and Graves also provide insights into the global significance of the American South by recognizing the region's changing cultural landscapes through immigration, which are portrayed by scholars such as Jamie Winders (2005) and Altha Cravey (2003). James Chaney (2015) has researched the role of transnational networks for Latino migrants to the American South, building on Winders and Cravey. Alderman and Graves' essay highlights the explorations of geographies around significant

sites in the region, such as Clyde Woods' (1998) study of the Mississippi Delta and Peirce Lewis' (2003) and Craig Colten's (2005) attention to New Orleans. Michael Crutcher, Jr.'s *Tremé: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (2010), included in Alderman and Graves' essay, advances a more nuanced understanding of the historical geography of the city. *Hispanic and Latino New Orleans: Immigration and Identity Since the Eighteenth Century* (Sluyter, Watkins, Chaney & Gibson, 2015) makes a similar intervention.

In addition to the range of work covered in their essay, Derek Alderman and William Graves (2011) assert the centrality of spatial analysis to a larger Southern studies work, emphasizing the analytical power of geographic research in moving forward with critical geographic perspectives in the study of the American South. They also call for advancing the impact of American South geographers and geographies by increasing our presence in Southern Studies more broadly, such as through the journals *Southern Cultures* and *Southern Spaces* and utilizing public geography as a tool of knowledge production. Their call for attention to further geographic work on socio-cultural complexities, the environment, economics, and the South as a globalized site (including and beyond immigration) nods to the expanse of terrain yet to be explored in the region. It is my argument that in order to fulfill this provocation, Black Geographies is a crucial and necessary perspective in Southern studies.

BLACK GEOGRAPHIES

The study of geographic processes of racialization and geographic expressions of racism are vital to 21st century disciplinary interventions. Black geographies emerges in part from foundations in Black urbanism, contributed by the late Harold Rose (1971, 1976) and Bill Bunge (1971). Black perspectives, including that of African-Americans, were given uneven and often undeveloped attention throughout the decades that followed. Woods' *Development Arrested* (1998) arrived during an era that saw the development of critical race theory and postcolonial theory as strategies for dismantling hegemonic and monolithic constructions of space and society. Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick's *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007) has become the foundation of the current movement to centralize Black Geographies in the discipline. With Clyde Woods' book (1998), Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2005), and Laura Pulido's *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left* (2006) solidified the critical study of Blackness and race more broadly in geography. A recent call for contributions to a Black Geographies bibliography yielded nearly 200 works by scholars around the globe[1]. In what follows, I utilize McKittrick and Woods to frame the possibilities for this body of work.

In their essay "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean", geographers Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007, p 7) assert that,

> The dilemmas that arise when we think about space and race often take three very separate approaches (bodily, economic/historical materialist, metaphoric) that result in

> reducing black geographies to either geographic determinism (black bodies inherently occupying black places) or the flesh (metaphoric/creative spaces, which are not represented as concrete, everyday, or lived).

At risk, however, are the exclusionary and limited delineations of Black subjects and Black space. Black subjects and Black space can be, and often are, posed as fulfilling normative expectations about Black communities and individuals. Such monolithic engagements render fixed Black space by, through, and almost only within a highlighted set of moments – the enslavement of African peoples in the United States, the Reconstruction and New South eras, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement – as well as within the context of criminality and the prison industrial complex. Merely relying on analyses of Blackness in relationship to these fixed renderings of space and time misses the opportunity to explore a Black sense of place and the broader political, economic, and social connections of local lives across multiple scales (regional, national, global). In other words, the study of racialized others and their habitats, social relationships, and economic contributions become merely sites of containment, rather than sources of important geographic information. Black geographies offers one strategy to dismantle the traditional trajectories of the Southern studies. In doing so, Black geographies acknowledges the space-making practices of Black subjects and communities as they negotiate with traditional structures and those moments highlighted above but also extending beyond the relegation of Black subjects and communities in to fixed, hierarchical categories. In what follows, I outline Black Geographies as a modality of geographic knowledge formation.

In the Acknowledgements of *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods state that the book "is a reflection of our continuing interest in developing and sustaining questions about the intersections between race, blackness, and spatial politics in the diaspora" (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p vii). Black geographies is both a body of work and an ontological practice that is grounded in narrating the varying matrices of Blackness. Black geographies is an intervention into the discipline by presenting knowledge of racialized spaces, bodies, and landscapes, undergirded by and perpetuated through colonial legacies, pushing the boundaries of critical geographies research. Scholars of Black geographies rely on the corporeal, the aesthetic, the creative, the spiritual, and the elemental (earth, air, water, and fire) as texts with which to read into the meaning of Blackness, its accompanying implications of oppression(s), and its futuristic possibilities (Wilson 1992; Woods 1998; Gilmore 2002, 2007; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; McCutcheon 2013; Shabazz 2014, 2015).

Black geographies are not always cartographically inscripted. In other words, using Black Geographies as a theoretical and empirical framework requires expanding our understanding of "validity" in geographic research. Black geographies also, and perhaps more often, encompasses a metaphysical component that cannot be rigidly mapped (Brand 2002, Alexander 2005). Rather, the roots and routes of Black geographies are diasporic endeavors (McKittrick and Woods 2007)

with foundations in the forced dispersal of peoples from the African continent. This component cannot be ignored in the pursuit of research on Black spaces and Black subjects. As McKittrick asserts, "The relationship between black populations and geography. . .allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic" (McKittrick 2006, p x). Clyde Woods and Rashad Shabazz demonstrate the power of Black geographic engagements to expand the possibilities of geographic thought. In the following, I describe how Woods (1998) and Shabazz (2015) utilize a Black sense of place to provide textured analyses of Black spatial matters.

In *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Clyde Woods reveals what he terms the *blues epistemology*. Woods describes the blues epistemology as "a longstanding African American tradition of explaining reality and change" among working-class African Americans (Woods 1998, p 25). Faced with shifting but present historical structures of power in the Mississippi Delta and the Black Belt South, blues epistemology operates as an expressive trope that not only serves as a cultural art form but that critiques regional development mobilizations, reestablishes collective responsiveness in the face of plantation powers and everyday violences, and [re] asserts the plantation as a mainstay of African American culture. Woods analyzes these areas through extensive and multiscalar discernment of the plantation bloc. The plantation bloc describes the hegemonic power structures imposed on the Mississippi Delta (and indeed the broader region) as a result of the institutionalization of Black slavery and the production of an elite planter class in the United States South. Through the plantation bloc, Woods makes clear that the regime itself survived and became reconstituted through political and economic maneuvers in the Mississippi Delta.

Woods' framework for blues epistemology centralizes a "project designed to recover and expand indigenous African American forms of consciousness, social investigation, community development, and democratic governance" (Woods 2007, p 49). Woods discusses blues and blues knowledge as it originated as a cultural, intellectual, political, social and economic movement for black peoples. In doing so, Woods places "regional schools of working-class organic intellectuals at the center of the production of geographical knowledge. Therefore, families, events, venues, work sites, travel, neighborhoods, households, and prisons become critical sites in the construction of theory, method, and praxis" (Woods 2007, p 60). Thus, blues epistemology exemplifies how a Black Geographies framework resituates the how spatial knowledge is produced. Woods resists constructions of blackness as being merely reductionary and measurable (McKittrick & Woods 2007) and instead offers a framework that explores the intricacies of blackness and place. In *Development Arrested,* he relates the plantation bloc's appearance in the by Clyde Woods described the reconstitution of the plantation into the abjected landscapes of the Mississippi delta: "Plantation regimes create, institutionalize, and manage extreme levels of conflict. Therefore, the current crisis in the Delta is not one of failed policies, underclass behavior,

illiteracy, rural poverty, labor market mismatch, or social "backwardness". Responsibility for the coexistence of great poverty beside great wealth rests squarely at the feet of a dominant region bloc that has fought every effort to expand the parameters of social, economic and cultural justice" (Woods 1998, p 40). Therefore, the incorporation of a Black working-class social theory explains the everyday impacts of and resistance to the plantation bloc, including an examination of the Green Revolution and the policies of Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission.

Rashad Shabazz animates understandings of place with a Black geographic perspective in his book *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (2015). Shabazz centralizes gender and race as encapsulated by black masculinity as an important site of interrogation in the creation and shifting legibilities of black space in Chicago, including Chicago's Black Belt. *Spatializing Blackness*, like *Development Arrested*, ruptures the oversimplification of space. Shabazz interrogates black men's spatial negotiations within varying enactments of carcerality – surveillance, policing, and containment – throughout the twentieth century and into present-day Chicago. Black masculinity functions as an embodied practice of expression, political critique, and resistance to hegemonic ways of knowing and being, in spite of the conditions of the carceral state that produce it.

As Woods and Shabazz amply demonstrate, by centralizing a black sense of place, Black geographies promotes the humanization of place. In turn, geographers and other scholars can express the material and imagined geographies that augment the assumption of static and categorical states of Blackness. This serves to disrupt the racial contours of power and knowledge that are recognized as objective truth in geography.

BLACK SEXUAL GEOGRAPHIES + THE SOUTH

Black subjects reveal power relationships that exist in space, and these power relationships, if they are not subsumed, have to be explored and negotiated systematically. My research enters into conversation with the scholarly endeavors of Black Geographies, underscoring how raced, gendered, and sexual attributes become spatially constructed and homogenized into a presumed stasis of a broader "Black community". My research also furthers the goals of emerging empirical analyses of that destabilize the normativities of place and region, as called upon by centralizing a Black sense of place. It is my contention that Southern studies and Black Geographies are ripe for expressing the material and imagined spatial expressions of at the conjuncture of race, gender, and sexuality.

Queer Black South geographies exist. Their function, like the Black geographies framework, differs from traditionally-oriented geographic research and epistemologies. Moreover, queer Black geographic work is connected to, but to an extent deviates from, the disciplinary movements of producing queer geographies and sexuality and space literatures. Attempts to locate queer and sexual geographies have often focused on the "where" of geography—seemingly fixed spatial formations in the landscape (gay neighborhoods, LGBTQ-friendly businesses, and

affirming places of worship) and population analysis (density, distribution, etc.). However, the typical patterns of residential clustering and interactions with queer publics are often segregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and class status. To position queer Black geographies as crucial sites of knowledge production requires attention to both the embodied experiences and material realities. As such, categorical frameworks for identifying and studying queer Black subjects do not necessarily take into account different forms of residential living, multivariate space-making practices, varied geographic locations (inter- and intranationally), interactions with the natural environment, and historical spatial transformations. Put differently, queer and sexual geographies can frequently rely on singular node of analysis, such as the negotiations of public spaces or the structure of home life. Queer Black geographic research, as a project of a Black Geographies framework, pressingly calls attention to overlapping dialectics that link institutions, power, and knowledge. Central to advancing Black geographies in Southern studies is the deconstruction of queer sexual identities, spatial productions, and sociospatial interactions.

Queer theories have evolved towards broader approaches to the production of knowledge that extend beyond mapping spaces of desire and renovate essentialisms of sexuality and space. A key contribution of queer theories involves the reframing of language to avoid what Lisa Duggan (1994) calls "strategic essentialism" and move towards new rhetorical and active strategies that work against identity-based imperatives. Scholarship that concentrates on ethnographic and ethno-historical discussions of queer sexualities and behaviors has gained increasing prominence (Ferguson 2004; Moore 2006, 2010; Walcott 2007; Johnson 2008; Gray 2009) including in geography (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Browne, Lim, & Brown 2007; Gorman-Murray, Pini, & Bryant, 2013). Human geographers have contributed to an understanding of space and place as they relate to queer identities and behaviors that deconstruct normative notions of hegemonic sexuality in place. As Kath Browne and Catherine Nash argue, "Queer scholarship, then, in its contemporary form is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge, and critique a host of taken for granted "stabilities" in our social lives" (Browne & Nash 2009, p 7).

These anti-normative structures have been thoroughly critiqued by scholars interested in centralizing the knowledges at the intersection of both sexuality and race, though less frequently at their conjuncture. Knowledge production at the intersection of race and sexuality has often been utilized for notations of difference with a recognition of racism or an attendant form of marginalization as understood through quantitative or demographic measures (sometimes including the absence of difference). Race and sexuality should be understood as active processes that are being shaped and formed by and through power relations. The concepts of both race and sexuality should be understood as the foundation of relations of power producing a series of unequal relationships among and between peoples and places. Often, racialized places are related through bodies cast into specific logics of spatial representation (i.e. an inner city and/or rural South presence) and rely merely on monolithic racial renderings. Therefore, a regard for the ways in which gender and sexuality are intertwined is

absent. By considering the conjuncture of race and sexuality, and thereby reimagining space, place, and power, this paper expands geographic knowledge of the mutually constitutive processes of race and sexuality.

Scholars in queer studies have increasingly attempted the implications of racialization in study. However, this approach has been far less attended to in geography and virtually ignored in studies of the American South. Arguing towards what he terms a queer of color critique (i.e. centering the race/gender/sexuality/class intersection), Roderick Ferguson (2004, p 2) argues that,

> To make sense of that [African American] culture as the site of gender and sexual formations that have historically deviated from national ideals, we must situate that culture within the genealogy of liberal capitalistic economic and social formations.

In other words, understanding space and place requires a more nuanced regard for social location. Queer theory by itself is inadequate for observing the intricacies of spatially produced identities because it would require stable referent categories from which to theorize. In the same way that I referenced the stable classifications from which space and race have been traditionally articulated (McKittrick and Woods 2007), the use of a stable categorization of queer in this paper must resist the seduction of fixing queer subjects in place, with identities that are only capable of fulfilling specific sociospatial characteristics. A necessary disciplinary intervention can be seen in two recent special issues of *Gender, Place, & Culture* genders and sexualities of Blackness, organized by gender and Black studies scholar Marlon Bailey and geographer Rashad Shabazz. In their introduction to the second issue they write, "Studies of black gender and sexual geographies bring forth a better understanding of the quotidian constraints that black gender and sexual minorities confront and how those constraints necessitate transformative spatial relations and practices" (Bailey and Shabazz 2014, p 450). Bailey and Shabazz argue that homogenous understandings of Black geographies limit how Black subjects engage with space. Expanding humanistic examinations of Black life into the everyday experiences offers important and metamorphic insights Black subjects' negotiations with societal structures, communities, and other humans. To engage with Bailey and Shabazz's argument, I consider interactions with a participant from my research process. Specifically, I look at the role of movement leading to her arrival in Western North Carolina and her connections to place, situating how her sense of place provides spatial knowledges that are not likely to be revealed in traditional trajectories of Southern studies. Given that queer Black space-making occurs within different relegations of place and power, it is important to centralize narratives that produce knowledge of disrupted spatial normativities and simplified understandings of Black subjects.

ON A QUEER BLACK SOUTH

My dissertation fieldwork in 2013 produced an encounter with a woman I will call Rebeca. At the time of her interview, she was 27 years old and enrolled in a professional degree program at a regional university. I interviewed her on a Saturday

afternoon at Blue Ridge Books in Waynesville, North Carolina. Waynesville, a town of just under 9700 residents (United States Census Bureau 2016), is located thirty miles west of Asheville, the cultural hub of Western North Carolina, and less than 200 miles from both Charlotte, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia. At the time of our interview, Rebeca had been a resident of rural Jackson County, North Carolina, for just under a year. The entire county has a population of just over 40,000 people with 85% identifying as white in the last census.

Rebeca's relationship with the region allows for thinking about the vectors of "transformative spatial relations and practices" necessary for her geographic story. She, like other Black women I had interviewed, wholeheartedly regards the region as her home, where she wants to live and contribute to for the foreseeable future. In her quest to embed herself into the community, she encounters the limited worldview of lifelong residents in the region. She was taken aback at the extent to which she was categorized as an outsider by virtue of her race. Rebeca understood that she was moving into a rural area with less racial diversity than she had experienced elsewhere. However, she became struck by her community's overall lack of cross-racial interactions. She noted that Black people seemed to be foreign entities to some local residents, as few had interacted with Black individuals in their daily lives. She states, "I find I'm often surprised by the amount of people who say, 'We really don't see a lot of you around here' and who say the only black people they see are on the *Maury* show".

Rebeca's sense of place becomes challenged by virtue of its historical and social spatial formations, accompanied by a limited engagement with and socially constructed perceptions of black people. She must also work through her own expectations of life, after having lived in larger towns and cities with more "diverse" populations:

> I can't even say it's a varied culture, which coming to the area I thought that it would be. Knowing that the Cherokee Indian reservation is nearby and Hispanics are everywhere [across the South]. It's really not. It's not a diverse population here so when I do try to find a community – and not just a community of black people, just a community like me that is diverse and who has known and worked around a lot of people and been around a lot of people – that's a little bit more challenging. They've lived in their box and that's pretty much all they know.

As she notes here, Rebeca's choice of home space has its challenges. It is an insular, rural and white racialized geography. In Rebeca's decision to become a resident and the process she has undertaken to become embedded in the community, she has the opportunity to augment perceptions of Blackness, an emotional but common act of labor in Black spacemaking practices. It is important to assert that even in the absence of Black citizens in this particular community, Blackness has still served to create Jackson County.

In interviews, I never brought up race as a potential probe. Aside from initial demographic questions, my interview protocol included 3 broad questions, with one asking, "What does identity mean to you?" I was interested in seeing how participants conceptualized identity themselves coupled with concepts of community and

home (the other two broad questions on my interview protocol). My formal interview process included only Black women. I anticipated they would bring up the most significant structures and embodied experiences. Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, writes, "[i]dentity-research which avoids thinking race both materially and politically risks the elimination of the experiences of modes of oppression, rupture, mimesis, self-hate and denials. Instead, a polished rather than ruptured version of identity in contemporary research is encountered; the violences are narrated out of the dissemination, or indeed evaded in the process of conceptualization" (Tolia-Kelly 2010, p 361). Moreover, Katherine McKittrick argues that to contribute to such a project requires a recognition of varying identity-based perspectives, arguing "the landscape, our surroundings and our everyday places, the vessels of human violence, so often disguise these important black geographies; they can hide what Sylvia Wynter calls 'the imperative of perspective in struggle'" (McKittrick 2006, p xi). As it became apparent, all of the participants were significantly impacted by the conjuncture of race and place in their lives but not necessarily impacted in the same ways. Thus, the interviews and my subsequent analyses highlight the importance of examining these nuances on an individual basis, through a Black sense of place. Geographic stories are incomplete without acknowledging the materialities, histories, sites of memory, and sociospatial interactions that center the perspectives of multiple identities. Given this standpoint, it could be asked, "How can queer Black spaces be rendered or mediated in other regional contexts? Further, how can Rebeca's experience be compared with other types of queer Black Souths? Might Rebeca's North Carolina-based experience be dramatically different from Atlanta or New Orleans or Birmingham? This provocation provides inexhaustible fodder for future research on Black South Geographies, disrupting traditional spatial patterns of imagined bodies within specific racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed constructs and intentionally interpreting limitations and possibilities in place (McKittrick 2006, p 2).

In addition to notions of home and community, as outlined above, Rebeca's sense of place was further influenced by religion. The structural components of a Black sense of place should draw on the role of Black religious practices, and specifically "the Black (Protestant) Church", as the Black Church generates important contributions to geographies of the American South. The Black Church, simultaneously an imagined and material geography, has been maintained a stronghold for Black people and in Black communities (McCutcheon 2015, 2016). Its American origins can be traced to the colonial period, as the forced conversion of enslaved Africans in the Americas to Christianity took root. Aside from a provision of solace and empowerment during the era of slavery, the Black Church has been a cornerstone of Black mobilization and a hub of radical social change.

Sexualities and queerness have long been enmeshed in the fabric of the Black Church, regardless of popular perceptions. However, the Black Church is often rendered visible in mainstream consciousness within the context of social issues. In contemporary times, the Black Church has been sought out in anticipation of polarized discussions of LGBTQ issues. For

example, in May 2012, North Carolina voters passed an initiative known as Amendment One that made the recognition of same-sex marriages and civil unions unconstitutional, expanding on the state-ordained definition of marriage already in place – that being between one man and one woman. Further, it criminalized individuals who attempted to officiate a same-sex union. During the 2012 Amendment One campaign in North Carolina, extensive media and political attention was paid to African American communities, particularly the Black Church, because members of Black congregations were largely expected to support the passage of Amendment One.

Popular culture and the media have covered the most prevalent discursive formation of the Black Church – homophobia – more frequently than other aspect of queer life in the American South. Popular works include the fictionalized film *Blackbird* (2014) and documentary projects such as *The New Black* (2013) and *The L Word Mississippi: Hate the Sin* (2014). Media debates rarely discuss queer Black subjects beyond the opposition of Black church leaders to the movement towards marriage equality in the United States.

Patriarchy, the intersection of racism-sexism, and heteronormativity have long contributed to religious formations across the world. In the American South, patriarchy and heteronormativity have maintain an intensity in the American South, across both Black and White Baptist Churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal Church, Seventh Day Adventist Churches, nondenominational church bodies, Catholic Churches and evangelicals congregations. Homophobia is indeed an important aspect of understand spatial practices of sexualities and race. However, even within these spatializing structures, many LGBTQ Southerners maintain strong connections to the Christian faith, attending church regularly and participating in other church functions.

Within the context of religious experiences, I would like to return to Rebeca and her relationship with her community of faith. Similar to race, I had not probed questions of religion during our conversation. However, as revealed in other interviews I conducted, religion had a strong impact on Black women's navigational process within sociospatial formations. Earlier in the interview, Rebeca had mentioned being involved within a fundamentalist Christian faith community for most of her youth. Towards the end of my interview with her, I asked her how her transition to North Carolina and the South had gone, intrigued by her migration from New Jersey. I should insert here that Rebeca was skeptical of my intentions as a researcher when she initially responded to my call for interviewees via a posting I made on Craigslist. She emailed me with a list of questions about my background, the project, and what I planned to do with my interview data. After providing satisfactory answers to her questions, she emailed me a specific set of parameters for our meeting, including towns, dates, and times. Towards the end of our interview, her initial skepticism and hesitancy towards me over email seemed to vanish, and she was now become comfortable enough with me to divulge a vulnerable story about her life. She began by explaining to me that she had moved to North Carolina at 18 years old by "running away from home". Because the teenage years

are riddled with resistance and desires for freedom, her confession was not too surprising. However, as she continued, I understood her positionality. She said, "I was struggling spiritually at the time" while trying to work through her "same-sex attraction." She continued by narrating her growing tensions with her family around her sexuality:

> At the time, I hadn't come out to my parents. I was having problems with my mom and so I talked to my family. And my dad even agreed at the time, you know, it's probably best if you leave. And an opening came up. Another church member, who claimed to have been going through the same experiences years prior, was kind of key in doing this kind of intervention thing with me. Where she was going to pull me out of the environment that she thought I was in – that was temptation. I had a person that I was seeing at the time, a woman who was older than me. And [the church member] felt like if I got out of that environment and came to a remote town in east North Carolina, I'd be cured of it eventually. That went on for a few years. I eventually headed west [towards Greensboro, North Carolina]. And the cure didn't happen, but the religion was the one to go. Sexuality was the one to stay.

Rebeca's narrative contains a number of striking aspects worth exploring. First, she bears witness to the infiltration of Christian religious practices that extends beyond the South (indeed, a diasporic endeavor), which continued to have significant impact on her relationships to space and place. Further, her embodied religious memory is fueled in part by mobility. Rebeca's sense of place is constructed by her ability to accompany her psychosocial movement by her physical movement down the eastern seaboard and deeper into South. Her navigation is intriguing, given she has entered the Bible Belt, a cultural and spiritual overflow of religious indoctrination with the material presence of Christianity through the frequent appearance of church buildings, billboards with messages from God along highways, and Christian radio soundscapes, in order to attain escape religious indoctrination in the South. As I described earlier in the paper, many LGBTQ Southerners maintain strong connections to Christian religious practices. Moreover, understanding that Black churches and Black religion have been a focal point of Black spatial practices for such a long period of United States history enlists attention towards the ways queer Black subjects negotiate within those practices. For Rebeca, her sense of place is informed by her decision to limit her embodied and material engagement with both her family and her faith practices.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined the elements of Black geographies and its impacts on the production and knowledges of space and place. In doing so, I have articulated that multiple dimensions of the American South that become nuanced through queer Black Geographies discourses, requiring a fundamental transgression of knowledge that highlights the interrelatedness of power and knowledge to discourse of space and place. Space and place come to a point of being accepted as real, constructed, and subjugated instances of

the realities of societies. Alternatives to a normative geographic imagination of the American South and the discipline of geography more broadly are made possible in the oscillations and tensions that constitute Black Geographies scholarship. Katherine McKittrick argues, "[g]eography's discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space 'just is,' and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which 'just is' not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are" (McKittrick 2006, p xi). To counteract this attachment, I argue for considering Black geographies as an intervention into normalized regionalisms and the production of space. An intentional focus on the perspective of Black geographies recognizes the dialectical interactions between spatial and social processes, furthering knowledges produced by Black subjects and spaces. Black geographies promotes a geographic perspective that asks both major and (perhaps seemingly) minor questions in order to disrupt methodological normativities, challenge geographic containment, and decenter assumptions and pathologies as sole, monolithic sites of inquiry and knowledge production. "Black matters are spatial matters" (McKittrick 2006, p xiv), and therefore, multiple vehicles for theorizing and methodologically extrapolating Black subjects and spaces in geography are necessary.

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NOTES

1. The Black Geographies Reading List was created following the AAG 2016 session "Black Matters are Spatial Matters, Part II", facilitated by LaToya Eaves and Rashad Shabazz. During the session, participants expressed strong interest in developing resource materials for the research, graduate examinations, and teaching. A group of scholars compiled materials in a group library on Zotero.org from July–August 2016. In September 2016, the list was released to the public. The Black Geographies Reading List can be found at blackgeographies.blogspot.com.

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