PROJECT MUSE®

The 'Radical' Welcome Table: Faith, Social Justice, and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina

Priscilla McCutcheon

Southeastern Geographer, Volume 56, Number 1, Spring 2016, pp. 16-21 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2016.0005>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612519>

SPECIAL FORUM ON THE CHARLESTON MASSACRE OF 2015

The 'Radical' Welcome Table Faith, Social Justice, and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina

PRISCILLA MCCUTCHEON

University of Louisville

Acclaimed author Alice Walker's (2011) short story "The Welcome Table," set during the Civil Rights Movement, is a fictional tale of a Black woman who ventures into a white church in the rural South. As the white churchgoers wrestle with how to handle this unwelcomed Black visitor to the church, the women in the church take matters into their own hands, physically throwing the Black woman out of the church. On the doorsteps of the church, the Black woman looks into the distance, sees Jesus and begins to walk with Jesus as he passes by the church. Walker (2011) writes "she [the woman] did not know where they were going; someplace wonderful; she suspected. The ground was like clouds under their feet, and she felt she could walk forever without becoming the least bit tired" (location 974). The story ends with the woman's lifeless body being found on the road in the Black section of the town. Those who saw the Black woman skipping happily down the road assumed she was talking to herself, and suspected she walked herself to death. Walker's fictional account of the welcome

table helps reveal the complexity of what seems to be a straightforward concept in the Black Christian Church. The welcome table is not a utopian space, where all who come to it experience peace and joy. It may or may not be within the church, as the Black woman in Walker's story did not find it in the place she suspected. While it is oftentimes assumed the welcome table is found in the afterlife or in heaven, the welcome table is also an earthly and tangible space that many fight to find and have a seat at.

My goal in this essay is to take seriously the spiritual geography of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Mother Emanuel) in Charleston, South Carolina. Henderson (1993) defines spiritual geography as the way in which humans "organize reality to account for the disparity between the known and the unknown" (470). Spiritual geography largely considers how individuals utilize their internal motivations to rationalize and actively transform the landscape. In this essay, I consider the spiritual geography of the individual along with the spiritual geography of Mother

Emanuel. On June 17, 2015, a white gunman walked into Mother Emanuel, sat for Wednesday prayer service, waited until those in attendance bowed their heads to pray, and opened fire on them. Nine Black churchgoers were murdered that night: Depayne Middleton Doctor, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Jackson, The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, The Rev. Dr. Daniel Simmons, Sr., Shoronda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thomson. In the aftermath of such a horrific tragedy, there were a myriad of explanations about what happened. Few took seriously how Black liberation and the fight for social justice are crucial to understanding the spiritual geography of Mother Emanuel, a church whose members have always fought to secure liberation for Black people.

In the first portion of the essay, I explore the spiritual geography of the individual and of the church. I argue the church's spiritual geography is one built on prayer, planning and protest. It is one where individual salvation is directly tied to liberation for the oppressed. In the second portion of this essay, I delve into the interrelationship between the spiritual geography of Mother Emanuel and the landscape outside of the church walls, a landscape where white supremacy is painfully visible. Since its inception, Mother Emanuel has stood in stark contrast and outright opposition to the glaring celebration of the Confederacy in Charleston and across South Carolina's landscape. Third, I return to Walker's conceptualization of the "Welcome Table," and begin to disentangle what a welcome table, in the image of the nine massacred at Emanuel A.M.E., would look like.

THE "SPIRIT" OF MOTHER EMANUEL

The "spirit" is largely understood to be individual and difficult to surmise to the outside observer. Members of Mother Emanuel utilize the spirit in discursive, material, and transformative ways. Individual prayer is essential to the spiritual geography of Mother Emanuel, consistent with Black liberation theology in which the individual must be liberated before the community can be. In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler (2000) says, "pray to focus your thoughts, still your fears, strengthen your purpose. Respect God. Shape God. Pray working." So while prayer is a time of personal transformation, its purpose extends beyond the internal visceral reaction that prayer might elicit in the individual. Prayer in Black liberation theology is geared towards liberation, which encourages action. James Cone, a well-known theologian and one of the founders of Black liberation theology, says this about liberation:

Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head; it is the socio-historical movement of a people from oppression to freedom—Israelites from Egypt, black people from American slavery. It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down (Cone 1997).

In Black liberation theology, radical prayer is a vessel through which persons of faith work to create a transformative landscape, one in which social justice is evident and all are able to be free and

achieve liberation both inside and outside the church's walls. Prayer is needed to achieve such transformation, and serves two purposes: individual salvation and social justice for the oppressed (Warnock 2014). Importantly, the nine individuals murdered during Wednesday prayer service were likely praying with their eyes opened and their feet on the ground, meaning their prayer was geared towards action and transformative change. We will never know for certain precisely what those individuals were praying for when the gunman opened fire, but can be fairly certain that it was prayer geared towards action, as they are a part of a church and a denomination where social justice is not separate from, but rather a part of their spirituality and religiosity.

I am aware that many scholars in radical and critical circles might be weary of my attention to prayer and spirituality as the impetus for social change. It may seem even more outlandish that I contend that social change can exist within the context of organized religion. Marx famously stated "religion is the opiate of the people—the instrument of those who rule in that it disinvests people of their own powers by investing God with all power and thereby rendering them submissive and deferential towards the status quo" (West, location 219). However, Black liberation theology in many ways does the opposite of what Marx suggests, by instructing its adherents to not accept the status quo, as God is on the side of the oppressed. History tells us the spiritual geography of Mother Emanuel is freedom and justice for the oppressed, in some cases by any means necessary. One of the founders of Mother Emanuel was Denmark Vesey, who was convicted and hung for attempting to plan what would have been the largest slave revolt

in U.S. history; the bulk of the planning occurred inside of Mother Emanuel. Vesey meant to take freedom for Black people by any means necessary, and his actions were informed by his spirituality and religiosity. Simply, we have to take into account the totality of motivations for social movements, not only the ones that conform to our single-minded definitions of radicalism.

OPPOSING LANDSCAPES

Mother Emanuel is located in Charleston, South Carolina, also known as the "Holy City," located on a street near other historically prominent Black and white churches. Mother Emanuel has long been designated a historic landmark, a part of Charleston's heritage tourism. The Confederacy is engrained into the landscape and economic fiber of Charleston through heritage tourism that idealizes history in a way that is easily consumed by white tourists. Social justice and racial reconciliation are not apparent on the surrounding landscape. Mother Emanuel is located on Calhoun Street, named after John C. Calhoun, a political theorist and staunch defender of slavery, who is also memorialized in Marion Square. At any given moment walking down Calhoun Street towards King Street, one might see the occasional carriage tour with a tour leader dressed in the attire of a Confederate soldier. Mother Emanuel's true revolutionary history is also not readily apparent on the landscape. A passerby might learn about the planned slave revolt as an event, a moment in history, but not as a longstanding commitment that links together Emanuel's present day calls for social justice.

W.E.B. Dubois (1903) conceptualized Black life and Black institutions

post-slavery as operating from behind the veil, hidden from white society. During slavery, Blacks held Bush harbor services, which were religious services that often doubled as secret meetings held under the bush (i.e. trees). These services were conducted in coded languages, such as Gullah, that slave owners could not readily interpret. Blacks were always aware that while white slave owners did not want to worship as one with them, they still wanted ultimate control over the messages of religious services, and were in constant fear of revolt. Later during Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement, Black religious spaces maintained this multi-purposed role as spaces of both worship and organizing. Much of the planning during the Civil Rights movement occurred in the sanctuary or fellowship halls of Black religious spaces.

Black churches were never utopian spaces, immune to racial violence, as they were targeted with bombings and other threats to the safety of their members (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). One of the most tragic examples that remains etched in the minds of many is the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights movement, when Klansmen killed four little girls. During the 1990s, a rash of Black church burnings in South Carolina prompted FBI involvement and a visit by President Clinton; the bulk of these church burnings were eventually traced back to white supremacist organizations. The cultural landscape outside of many Black churches has often been in direct conflict with messages of liberation taught within Black churches like Mother Emanuel.

Much has been written about the full impact of Black churches. Many argue

Black churches are the longest standing institutions in the Black counterpublic(s), and continue to be places where Black people gather for the purpose of religious and spiritual growth, as well as economic, social and racial uplift (Harris-Lacewell 2004; *The Black Public Sphere Collective* 1995).¹ However, Black churches are not a monolith, prompting scholars like Lawrence Ware (2015) to contend that the Black church as such does not exist. Ware (2015) argues in a recent article that "there has never been a unified, holistic position taken by all black churches on the question of Civil Rights," and that many Black churches and Black pastors are silent on present-day social movements like "Black Lives Matter." Ironically, he homogenizes Black churches in the same way that he cautions others against doing. It seems that part of the reason some believe the Black church does not exist is that it is difficult to see its measurable impact on the landscape. However, we must also consider that the landscape on the other side of the church walls might be in direct opposition to the liberatory spirit of the church.

THE RADICAL WELCOME TABLE

The radical welcome table is a place of truth, reconciliation, and reckoning with the past. It is based on "divine liberation," and those sitting around it speak truth to power. It is a place where people are held accountable, and where historic acts of racial violence are no longer silenced, but are spoken about. Such acts include the Orangeburg Massacre of 1968, in which three Black students were murdered in front of South Carolina State University by the South Carolina Highway Patrol after they attempted to integrate All Star Bowling

Lane. The spiritual and protest song “The Welcome Table” has multiple titles, one of which is “God is Going to Set this World on Fire.” The verse below is instructive:

I'm going to tell God how you treat
me, yes sir
I'm going to tell God how you treat me
Some of these days, hallelujah
I'm going to tell God how you treat me
Tell God how you treat me
Some of these days

If the welcome table is truly a place of reckoning, those who seek true reconciliation must listen to those who yell and scream against racial and economic injustice, as reckoning is never comfortable.

A radical welcome table that honors the victims of Mother Emanuel is steeped in the Black prophetic tradition, in which divine liberation and transformative change are the ultimate goals. Such changes cannot occur simply through symbolic gestures like the removal of the Confederate Flag. To be clear, I understand and experience the pain that my fellow South Carolinians feel who have had to look at the flag for their entire lives, and who have fought tirelessly to have it removed. After the horrific tragedy at Mother Emanuel, the monument to John C. Calhoun was found with the words “Black Lives Matter” spray-painted on it. Many decried this as an act of vandalization, but this act represents the transformative change that many want to occur. Removal of the flag is not enough without attention to present day issues affecting Black people like high unemployment, mass incarceration and racial oppression. As a state senator and pastor, Rev. Pinckney was known for championing the causes of the poor. At the time of his tragic

death, he was working in the state legislature to place stricter background checks on guns. He did all of this while simultaneously fighting to have symbols like the Confederate flag removed.

I strongly caution journalists and scholars alike against using the faith of those murdered in Mother Emanuel to sanitize their legacy, as has been done with many Black Christian leaders who were fighting for liberation and transformative change. Cornel West reminds us in *The Radical King* that the dominant narrative of Martin Luther King, Jr. is one that purposely neglects his radical history and his lifelong fight for racial and economic justice. The essence of King's work, his faith, is the very thing used to sanitize his legacy. However, those who understand his faith as a part of the Black prophetic tradition realize that earthly liberation for Black and poor people had always been his ultimate goals. King understood that this would not come without a fight, and there would be threats to his safety. Those who write about the victims of this massacre must also understand their radical love, which is as much about loving your enemy as it is about holding your enemy accountable for change.

Finally, the welcome table must be a space where we can dream of a new world. For those at Mother Emanuel, dreaming is informed by faith in God, which has historically mandated action. In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) writes about the importance of dreaming and imagining in Black radical movements of the past. He learned to dream from his mother. He says,

with her eyes wide open my mother
dreamed and dreamed some more,
describing what life would be for us.
She wasn't talking about a postmortem

world, some kind of heaven or after-life, and she was not speaking of reincarnation. . . . She dreamed of land, a spacious home, fresh air, organic food, and endless meadows without boundaries, free of evil and violence, free of toxins and environmental hazards, free of poverty, racism, and sexism . . . just free (Kelley 2002, location 116).

The spiritual geography of Mother Emanuel has historically been one in which its members dreamed and fought for a better future. Those around the radical welcome table must dream beyond the present day circumstances to create a landscape where liberation is evident, visible, and available to all.

NOTES

1. The Black Counterpublic is a response to the Habermasian notion of a public sphere that traditionally excluded women and people of color. It is meant to consist of spaces where everyday Black people can discuss matters of concern to Black people as a whole. Institutions like Black churches, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Black social spaces are crucial to the maintenance of the Black counterpublic.

REFERENCES

- Butler, O. 2000. *Parable of the Sower*. New York City: Warner Books.
- Cone, J. H. 1997. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. Kindle Electronic Edition.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1999. *The Souls of Black Folks (A Norton Critical Edition)*. New York City: W.W. Norton Press.
- Henderson, M. L. 1993. "What is spiritual geography?" *Geographical Review* 83(4):469–472.
- Kelley, R. D.G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press. Kindle Electronic Edition.
- King Jr., M. L. 2015. *The Radical King*. ed. Cornel West. Boston: Beacon Press. Kindle Electronic Edition.
- Lacewell, M. H. 2004. *Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Lincoln, E., and Mamiya, L. H. 1990. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- The Black Public Sphere Collective. 1995. *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Walker, A. 1973. *In Love and Trouble*. Kindle Electronic Edition.
- Warnock, R. G. 2014. *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Ideology, Piety and Public Witness*. New York City: New York University Press. Kindle Electronic Edition.

PRISCILLA MCCUTCHEON (priscilla.mccutcheon@louisville.edu) is Associate Professor of Geography and Geosciences at the University of Louisville. Her research focuses on the intersection of race, food, space and religion in the context of black faith-based food programs in the Southeastern United States.