

Making African American Homeplaces in Rural Virginia

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Abstract In this article, I propose that anthropologists of Christianity broaden their understanding of emotion to include intense attachments to home and kin as central to cultivating faith. I use examples from my research with African Americans who continue to live on land purchased by their emancipated ancestors and attend a United Methodist church established by those same ancestors in rural Western Virginia. I suggest that theoretical attention to this worldly home, as well as to God, is key to understanding the process of belief. It opens up the possibility of seeing emotional connection as a catalyst for political awareness and change, and it also brings gender and generational relations into sharp focus. Ultimately, I argue that the maintenance of such African American religious and secular homeplaces works to challenge the legacies of racism in the rural South. [Christianity, African Americans, emotion, home]

The anthropology of Christianity has come into its own recently. Ethnographers, studying Christian societies, have taken up the call of Joel Robbins to “formulate common problems, read each other’s works, and recognize themselves as contributors to a coherent body of research” (Robbins 2007:5). One key avenue of discussion has been the issue of faith. Robbins suggests that we look at the concept of “to believe in,” rather than “to believe that,” because the former reveals Christian values and practices (Robbins 2007:14). In analyzing such Christian belief, anthropologists have challenged boundaries between emotion and text, practice, and knowledge. For example, Jon P. Mitchell, in his study of lifelong Catholics in Malta, critiques the discipline’s duality between cognition and emotion. He theorizes that “emotional knowledge created through feelings—a term chosen to invoke the sense of an integrated mind/body experience—are cognitive events *of the same order* as semiotic and practical cognitions” (Mitchell 1997:80, emphasis in the original). He argues that “the ways in which people learned about religion, and the kinds of memories they had about this learning process, were emotional as well as semiotic” (Mitchell 1997:81).

Similarly, while investigating evangelical Christians, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann conceptualizes emotion as vital to the process of conversion. Luhrmann challenges Susan Harding’s claim that speaking is believing. Harding proposes that “conversion is a process of acquiring specific religious language,” and as such, “if you are willing to be witnessed to, if you are seriously willing to listen to the gospel, you have begun to convert” (Luhrmann 2004:58). Luhrmann urges scholars, instead, to think of faith as a process that involves three interrelated kinds of learning: cognitive—linguistic, “metakinetic” (the ways in which emotions are experienced and displayed within the body), and relational.

New believers learn to identify bodily and emotional states as signs of God's presence in their life, identifications that imply quite different learning processes than those entailed by linguistic and cognitive knowledge. Then, their new linguistic/cognitive knowledge and bodily experiences are put to use through new relational practices. Through prayer and Bible reading, worshippers report that they learn to experience themselves in an intimate interpersonal relationship with their God. [Luhmann 2004:519]

Luhmann concludes that American Christians readily cultivate such a personal relationship with God because it protects "them against the isolation of modern social life" (Luhmann 2004:527). One of the goals, then, of the anthropology of Christianity is to follow the "faith journeys" of individual congregants (Madsen 2009:1266), taking into account how each congregation is a "complex historical object" that has its own "paradoxical" relationship with Christianity's main message of transcendence and its stance toward "modernity" (Cannell 2006:43).

In this article, I propose that anthropologists of Christianity broaden their understanding of emotion to include intense attachments to home as central to cultivating faith.¹ The assertion that familial and communal bonds, as rooted in a sense of place, work to strengthen an individual's relationship with God stands as a critique of anthropology's overwhelmingly current interest in Evangelical communities, which has led many in the field to argue that Christian personhood is a linguistic and experiential process of individualization. According to Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins, the "individualizing force of Protestantism can contribute to a critique of human power" because "Christian conversion shifts the primary locus of obligation away from lateral social bonds among consociates toward dyadic bonds between an individual and a divine alter" (Bialecki et al. 2008:1147). They suggest that anthropologists study how persons internalize the Christian message, how they "become sinners" (Robbins 2004), so to speak, to reveal the ways in which local Christianity evolves (Meyer 1999).

Indeed, in her study of African American Christian women in rural Halifax County, North Carolina, Marla Frederick proposes that it is a woman's individual relationship with God, rather than her affiliation with a particular church community, that defines her spirituality. For the women she interviewed, "spirituality is personal and experiential"—it "comes from inside the person and it's a reflection of how they live" (Frederick 2003:14). Cultivating that "intimate" relationship with God, as Luhmann (2004) puts it, informs people's political engagement, as they follow "the direction of the Holy Spirit" and the knowledge of "what the Word says" within their own lives (Frederick 2003:14). Frederick concludes that it is "the significance of the individual believer's experience," rather than "the significance of the church in their spiritual development" that is most influential, so that spiritually informed activism continues "once church is over" (Frederick 2003:16).

However, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham cautions that it is essential to recognize the continuing legacy that the Black Church has had on individual spirituality.

For African Americans, long excluded from political institutions and denied presence, even relevance, in the dominant society's myths about its heritage and national community, the church itself became the domain for the expression, celebration, and pursuit of a black collective will and identity. [Higginbotham 1993:9]

Tellingly, toward the end of their review of the anthropology of Christianity, Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins note Christianity's "deep heterogeneity" which produces "numerous different forms of Christianity" that should be investigated (Bialecki et al. 2008:1152). They admit that "the individuating force of Christianity seems strongest in 'convert cultures' . . . where Christianity is marked as an imported object that believers must come to terms with" (Bialecki et al. 2008:1151). However, "Christianity is more likely to be invoked to oppose the social forces that are collectively read as 'modernity' in societies where Christianity has been present for a longer duration" (Bialecki et al. 2008:1151). In the case of African American Christian experiences, this could be seen as resistance to current manifestations of the legacies of racism and inequality. Black Christians tend not to reject the past but embrace it as an inspiration for building a better future. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham illustrates in her study of the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church from 1880 to 1920,

At the same time that church values and symbols ordered the epistemological and ontological understandings of each individual and gave meaning to the private sphere of the family—both as conjugal household and "household of faith"—church values and symbols helped to spawn the largest number of voluntary associations in the black community. It follows logically, then, that the church would introduce black women to public life. The church connected black women's spirituality integrally with social activism. [Higginbotham 1993:16]

Similarly, literature on Southern rural African American churches stress kinship as essential to experiencing the sacred. Faye Harrison, in her study of the Reverend Burgess Harper's family reunion in Halifax County, North Carolina on Labor Day weekend, 1992, argues that the return home "provided a symbolically charged cultural context for the articulation and regeneration of a 'sentiment of corporateness' connecting both close and distant relatives who share a common sense of origin and a common 'sense of place'" (Harrison 1995:35). She continues,

Although the locus of a secular event, the homeplace is also of special spiritual significance. . . . The homeland symbolizes freedom, family, and the fulfillment of God's promise to Burgess when he followed the calling he received to preach his word. The fruits of spiritual and practical labor are, therefore, embodied in the Harper family land. [Harrison 1995:44]

Yvonne V. Jones, in her analysis of annual homecomings among Black residents of a rural hamlet in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, asserts that such events "assure the recognition of genealogical ties to the land and to the past, and thus serve to articulate familial expectation in the present and future" (Jones 1980:63–64).

Therefore, in the case of African American Christians in the rural South, theoretical attention to this worldly home, as well as to God, is key to understanding the process of belief. As Higginbotham, Harrison, and Jones show, faith is grounded in family, land, and church in ways that can open up possibilities for political action.² But what I want to emphasize here is the emotional content of those connections as a catalyst for political awareness and change that brings gender and generational relations into sharp focus. The field of psychological anthropology has many fine examples of how embodied, emotional experiences of the past and present motivate political action.³ For example, Jennifer Cole in her study of Malagasy memory and politics, discusses how

Emotion played an important role in linking the symbolic and bodily dimensions of people's experience. . . . It was only when discursive memory, embodied experience, and emotion came together that they appeared to motivate action and the kinds of political decisions that people made. . . . Memory of the past was linked to desires for the future. [Cole 2006:212]

To understand the emotional experience of homeplace as embodied and an inspiration for political action, I turn to the work of bell hooks. Her poignant journey to her grandmother's house articulates the centrality of home in spiritual and activist sentiment.

It was a movement away from the segregated blackness of our community into a poor white neighborhood. I remember the fear, being scared to walk to Baba's (our grandmother's house) because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness—those white faces on the porches staring down at us with hate. Even when empty or vacant, those porches seemed to say danger, "you do not belong here," "you are not safe."

Oh! that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edge of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of our grandfather, Daddy Gus, sitting in his chair on the porch, smell his cigar, and rest on his lap. Such a contrast, that feeling of arrival, of homecoming, this sweetness and the bitterness of that journey, that constant reminder of white power and control.

I speak of this journey as leading to my grandmother's house, even though our grandfather lived there. In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women. [Hooks 1994:448]

A similar concept of "homeplace" exists among members of Asbury United Methodist Church, an African American congregation in rural Brownsburg, western Virginia where I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork.⁴ Because of the small number of African Americans in Brownsburg, Virginia, this area possesses strong generational linkages grounded in land and faith. Black families in Brownsburg are descendants of slaves who

worked in white houses and on white farms. Although many house slaves attended New Providence Presbyterian Church with their masters, farmer laborers gathered in their own “hush harbors” to worship (Raboteau 1978). After emancipation, blacks who remained in the area established their own “home church” in 1869,⁵ founded their own cemetery, and purchased their own properties beginning in the late 1880s. Although many blacks left the area because of the constraints of segregation, those who stayed continued to work as expert field hands and trusted domestics for white families until recently, as many have found jobs in factories, restaurants, hospitals, janitorial, or lawn services. The congregation today consists of about 12 core members, with 20 others who come to special events. They continue to refer to Asbury as their “home church,” the church in which they “grew up,” and their land as their “homeplace.”

Borrowing Peter Stromberg’s notion of a “culture of commitment” (1986:79), I conceptualize the community at Asbury as constituted through “effervescent experiences,” whereby congregants have “emotional investments” in their beliefs that become the basis of their commitment to the home church and homeplace (Stromberg 1986:12). The symbol of home blends with their experiences of it, thus appearing to them as feelings “that can be described” (Stromberg 1986:13). But what are these sensations of homeplace? First and foremost, I believe it is essential to develop a theory that would fully engage with the notion of home as a “vexed place” (Stack 1996:xv). On the one hand, home—both one’s family house and church—is an object of loyalty and love, because it has been a place “where a formal commitment to religion began, where family meets, and where forebears once gathered” (Rankin 1993). On the other hand, home has also been a place of fear and disappointment because of racism. Following Leith Mullings, I conceptualize racism as a “relational concept” that “works through modes of dispossession” (2005:684). Creating a homeplace and home church explicitly involves addressing what was dispossessed, not only in terms of property and selfhood but also in terms of what was forgotten through the “dislocation and alienation” of slavery and Jim Crow (Morrison 1997:5). The contradictory emotions of love, fear, and loyalty have played a part in the formation of a particular kind of Christian belief and activism among Asbury congregants.

Attempting to understand the important emotional repertoire of “home” for Asbury members, I have looked to the work of Martha C. Nussbaum. In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Nussbaum lays out a theory of emotions as “appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person’s own control great importance for that person’s own flourishing” (Nussbaum 2001:4). She advises us to “imagine those attachments, their delight and their terror, their intense and even obsessive focusing on their object, if we are ever to talk well about love, fear, or anger” (Nussbaum 2001:2). Nussbaum’s work is highly applicable to anthropology for several reasons. She envisions emotions as having a “complicated cognitive structure that is in part narrative in form, involving a story of our relation to cherished objects that extends over time” (Nussbaum 2001:2). Emotion as story allows anthropologists to invoke the “dynamic” aspect of this judging process through the collection of personal accounts (Nussbaum

2001:45). Nussbaum investigates, in particular, the profound grief she felt over her mother's death. Although Anna Wierzbicka finds fault in Nussbaum for universalizing emotions based on an Anglo cultural understanding of the word "grief" and thus critiques her for underestimating "the role of language in people's emotional experience and its interpretation" (2004:594), I see Nussbaum as providing a fruitful way to discuss the push and pull between individual agency and sociocultural norms, as well as the formation of the self in relationship to the needs of the community. Drawing on the constructivist perspective of emotions in anthropology, Nussbaum acknowledges that individual "emotion-beliefs" arise within the learned "emotional repertory" of specific cultures (2001:72, 143).⁶ And yet, she is adamant that "social construction must make room both for cross-cultural intelligibility and for human freedom," as well as "do justice to the narrative history of the individual personality, as its distinctive emotional traits are laid down extremely early in interactions with individual parents, siblings, and other caretakers" (Nussbaum 2001:173). Ultimately, Nussbaum theorizes that individuals experience emotions, as "value-laden cognitive states" accompanied by "feelings of tumult and 'arousal'" (2001:64). Such emotions are "eudaimonistic," in that they reveal how people struggle to accomplish their "important goals or projects" (2001:4).

Nussbaum's account, however, does little to address power relations involved in emotional repertoires. This is where I find William Reddy's scholarship to be helpful. Reddy criticizes social constructivists for associating "emotions so closely with goals, motivations, and intensions," so that it becomes impossible "to attribute to individuals any goals, motivations, or intensions that come from outside culture. Thus the individual cannot want anything unless the culture has taught him or her to want it" (Reddy 2001:47). He acknowledges that while emotions play a central role in the maintenance of social life, the coherence of such an emotional range is not a given. Instead, the unity of any community rests on "its ability to provide a coherent set of prescriptions about emotions," an ideology as to which emotions are the most appropriate, because emotions are central to "the dense networks of goals that give coherence to the self" (Reddy 2001:61). Indeed, "a community's emotional order must take the form of ideals to strive toward and strategies to guide individual effort" (Reddy 2001:62).

In rural Virginia, the notion of home incurred an intense emotional resonance for African Americans from the time of emancipation until the civil rights movement. The Black Codes, segregating blacks and regulating labor contracts (Finkelman 2006:257; Wallenstein 2004), limited publicly acknowledged physical, social, and affectionate connections between the races. Charles Frank Robinson II insightfully notes that an "intimacy color line" was "the foundation and the justification for the maintenance of all segregation and discriminatory measures" in Virginia (Robinson 2003:xiii). In particular,

White Southerners made a distinction between interracial sex and interracial domestic relationships. Interracial sex involved an informal sexual connection with the absence of any evidence of genuine care existing between the people engaged in the activity.

Interracial domestic relationships were defined as semiformal to formal sexual affiliations in which two people manifested more of a bond and treated each other as social equals. Southern whites invoked anti-miscegenation laws against the latter while largely ignoring the former [Robinson 2003:xiii–xiv].

Examples of this outlawed emotional contact were the awkward situations that Northern white teachers found themselves in when they arrived in the South to teach newly emancipated slaves. Leon F. Litwack, in his seminal study of the aftermath of slavery, reports how G. L. Eberhart, superintendent of the freedmen's schools in Georgia and also a Freedman's Bureau officer, requested "the transfer of several teachers under his jurisdiction who, in his estimation, had exceeded 'the limits of prudence and propriety'" (Litwack 1979:491–492). There was one teacher in particular who took on too much familiarity with black students, "totally disregarding local feelings and customs" (Litwack 1979:492). "For a white Northern lady here to kiss a colored child is very *imprudent* to say the least of it, and, in reply to an insulting remark made by a white person, to say that the negroes are as good as that white person, is *entirely unnecessary*" (Litwack 1979:492).

It is within such a publicly sanctioned regime of white supremacy that home took on the role of a cherished object for Southern blacks. It was essential to their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Bell hooks argues that the

task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could reaffirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. [Hooks 1994:449]

The homeplace and home church were two intertwined places of positive identity. Many scholars have discussed how segregation in the south caused the Black Church to take on both sacred and secular functions (Zuckerman et al. 2003:xvii), so that it became one of the only places where African Americans could achieve recognition and power (Sernett 1999; Toth 1999). Although desegregation has opened up opportunities for blacks to join interracial congregations, today black churches continue to serve as community centers offering spiritual salvation and recognition of individual talent (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). African American Christianity has been described as a religion in which God is "an immediate, intimate, and living presence" (Levine 2007:174). Scholars have typified this as "ecstatic religious behavior" (Raboteau 1995:149), "an emotional religion" (Blasingame 1979:105), "uninhibited religion" (Levine 2001:183) and "spirited worship" (Litwack 1979:461). Albert J. Raboteau explains how the origins of this tradition came from both the Evangelical revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the African religious culture of enslaved blacks.

In the revivals, African Americans found a context in which the bodily expression of religious emotion was not only permitted, but encouraged—harking back to the danced religions

of their African forebears. Black American Christians were filled with the Spirit of the Christian God, but they responded in ways markedly similar to the ways in which their ancestors had responded to possession by the gods of Africa. Possessed by the Holy Spirit, slaves and freedmen danced, sang, and shouted in styles that were African. More important, ecstatic trance was at the center of their worship as it had been in Africa. In the revivals, African and Christian traditions met on common ground, ecstatic response to divine possession. [Raboteau 1995:149–150]

Recently, there have been studies on the positive health benefits of sharing joys and concerns within what Cheryl Townsend Gilkes calls a “therapeutic community” of prayer and worship (1980; see also Ellison and Taylor 1996 and Mamiya 2006). Others have focused on how such self-expression can help foster “resistance to a white-dominated society” (Baer and Singer 2002:x).⁷ However, my work aims to evaluate the importance of home within African American Christian belief, namely how it influences the faith journeys of individual congregants within the emotional repertoires of the family and larger society. Because of the continuing legacies of racism, homeplace thus becomes a forum for a certain kind of political activism.

Mothers’ Making Home

How did today’s congregants at Asbury learn to imagine home as a cherished object, highly central to their material and spiritual flourishing? As bell hooks suggests, mothers have been central to making home. Asbury members first learned faith from their mothers who made home into church and church into home—natal family into church family—through song, prayer, and Bible lessons. Although they usually remembered their fathers for their strict discipline and Bible studies before and after meals, congregants mostly reminisced about the daily guidance they received from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and female friends of the family.⁸

Ann is a woman in her early forties who comes to Asbury only on special occasions and holidays because of her work schedule as a nurse. She lives on family property near the church that has been inhabited by her father’s mother’s side of the family since 1880. She and her mother and father, two sisters, and grandmother maintain separate residences on the land. Ann said that that Asbury was where she was raised: “That’s the first place I stepped foot in, and that’s where I’ve seen my whole family.” When I asked her if she had memories about when she first learned about Jesus, she replied:

My mom’s mom, Rose, used to sing in church. . . . They’d make you go to church. I’m talking about *make* you. It wasn’t “Do you want to go to church today?” It was “You gonna go to church. I don’t care if you’re cryin’ or not!” Grandma had a piano in [her house]. And my cousins, all of them were musically talented. I don’t know what happened to me, but they would play that piano . . . and sing that stuff, and I was just in awe. But when they said, “Let’s go to church.” I’d say, “I don’t wanna go.” And Grandma say, “You going. If you hadn’t

stayed up all night. . . . You're going to church." So we'd go. But when you're little and you look around and see all these people clapping and you're looking at each other. I'm looking at my cousin, and I'm like, what's going on? And they walking up and down the aisles and stuff. But it was a good feeling back then, because everyone was together at the family, and you were enjoying it. You may not have understood it, but as you got older you knew, and then you started joining in. [interview, July 14, 2010]

This story portrays Rose as teaching her children and grandchildren about faith with both love and coercion. Ann learned to feel the same way about church, and ultimately Jesus, as she did about her grandmother—with respect, a bit of trepidation, joy, and warmth. If ritual is “a disciplined rehearsal of ‘right attitudes’” (Tambiah 1985:134), then weekly Sunday gatherings that began at Rose’s home and culminated in worship at Asbury worked to fuse the concepts of home and church into “home church,” guiding Ann to internalize the important goals of family, Jesus, and motherhood. She came to understand her place within this community via a specific emotional repertoire.

Asbury members talk about their older female relatives as providers of physical, as well as spiritual, sustenance. Brenda, a congregant in her sixties who is also the church treasurer, told me about the great aunts on her mother’s side, whom she used to visit in Brownsburg during her summer vacations: “They were very nice old ladies to us. . . . They taught us. Sometimes they had Bible studies with us. They’d have this nice country breakfast, and sometimes we’d have lunch with them. You know. They were real nice, and kept us in line.”

Congregants remembered fondly how their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts showed them the right way to live through song and prayer. Judy, Ann’s cousin (her mother’s sister’s daughter, i.e., another one of Rose’s granddaughters), grew up in the area and was a frequent performer at Asbury’s annual Mother’s Day programs. During the 2006 celebration, Judy commented:

When I was younger, I remember a lot of songs we would sing. And one of the first songs I remember was “I know Jesus Loves Me.” . . . But as I grew older, I really understood how Jesus loves me. . . . “Jesus loves me. This I know. And the Bible tells me so.” But do you know who also told me? My mother. And someone might say, “And how did she do that?” She did that by the things she did to show how great God is, and how you need the Lord. [field notes, May 14, 2006]

Susan, who married into the local area, commented on the differences between fathers and mothers during the anniversary celebration of a neighboring black church. She said that fathers will provide: “They do a lot. . . . But I’ll tell you, unless you have a strong mother, whether it is your biological mother or one of the mothers in the church, or somebody that just takes you under their wings, like a mother. But when mother prays, mother can get a prayer through.”

At Asbury's 2009 Mother's Day celebration, Susan was asked to perform solo her signature song "My Mother Prayed for Me."⁹ People in the congregation knew it by heart. They stomped their feet, clapped their hands, and joined in on the chorus—their words are noted in parentheses below.

I remember
 When I was a child
 Laying on, on mother's knee
 She told me
 Told me about King Jesus
 That I might gain the victory
 Oh, mother taught me
 Taught me from the Bible
 So someday the savior's face I'd see
 My mother bowed
 Oh, bowed and she prayed for me
 Oh, mother bowed and she prayed for me
 Mother prayed [and she prayed for me]
 My mother sure did bow [and she prayed for me]
 And she prayed for me [and she prayed for me]
 Oh mother bowed [and she prayed for me]
 Mother prayed [and she prayed for me]
 Yes, she for prayed for me [and she prayed for me]
 Lord that I may be free [and she prayed for me]
 Oh mother showed me
 She showed me the way to go
 That I may not have, mmmm, them nation woes
 That's when she bowed, woe, mother bowed
 And she prayed for me . . .
 Sometimes, late in the midnight hour
 Oh the tears, oh, they sure would fall
 I can hear mother
 Hear her tenderly whispering
 Talking to her Lord God above
 Heard her call my name in prayer
 I can see her kneeling there
 That's when she bowed
 Early in the morning
 My mother prayed for me [field notes, May 10, 2009]

Church performances of well-known gospel songs like this one are like prayers. Within the gospel tradition, individual singers modify the basic text according to their feelings at the time. What matters most to congregants is not the "correct" rendition but, rather, the feeling put into that particular singing event. Through their enthusiastic drumming of feet and hands, as well as shouts of "alright," and "sing," churchgoers show the value they place on "head arrangements" which proceed "from their own feelings, from the way in which 'the spirit' moved them at the time" (Levine 2001:184).¹⁰ When experiencing strong emotions of happiness or sorrow during these extemporaneous expressions of faith, congregants reaffirm their belief in the Holy Spirit. Their feelings at that moment are evidence that He is

in their company. Similarly, when singers during a church service proclaim that they have not practiced, members of the audience often respond with “That’s when it gets good” or “It’s God.” Judy once explained before her Mother’s Day program in 2006 that she and her sisters “are all going to play it by ear because I was sick and did not get to work with them and practice. . . . We are adlibbing, I love to adlib.” People in the pews shouted out “Yeh! Yeh!” and they laughed and clapped in support. She continued: “If you ever work with me, I believe in adlibbing, and let the Lord do whatever he is going to do.”

The songs performed about a mother’s praying are sweet and mournful—sweet because she put her life and soul into caring for her children and mournful because, for most members of Asbury, their mothers or grandmothers have passed. Because mothers are valued as essential to a child’s physical and spiritual survival, their memory evokes strong emotions of profound love, pride, thankfulness, and grief.

For example, Judy told her audience at the Mother’s Day Program in 2007 how she had been thinking recently about Rose and the “songs she used to sing.”

And grandma always used to sing a song . . . “I prayed and I prayed, but my soul did not rest contently.” I remember her always sitting in the kitchen with her apron on. And I was just thinking about her, just like she was there, because truly, good memories never fade away. [field notes, May 13, 2007]

In the 2009 Mother’s Day Program, Judy actually performed her grandmother’s song:

Now, I’m going to sing a song, and this is an old song, and I see some cousins out there [in the audience], but I don’t know if they remember this. . . . I remember going on her back porch. It was late one night. And that song, “I Cried and I Cried, My Soul Wouldn’t Rest Until I Found the Lord . . . ” I remember Grandma singing that song. [field notes, May 10, 2009]

Judy led her sister Roberta in the following a capella rendition. People in the audience tapped their feet and clapped their hands in accompaniment.

I cried and I cried
 I cried all night long
 I cried and I cried
 Until I found the Lord
 My soul
 Just couldn’t rest contently
 My soul
 Just couldn’t rest contently
 My soul
 Just couldn’t rest contently
 Until I found the Lord
 No, I prayed and I prayed
 I prayed all night long

I prayed and I prayed
 until I found the Lord
 My soul
 Just couldn't rest contently
 My soul
 Just couldn't rest contently
 My soul
 Just couldn't rest contently
 Until I found the Lord [field notes, May 10, 2009]¹¹

According to Asbury members, mothers call on the Lord on a daily basis to help them raise their children right. At the Mother's Day program at Asbury in 2006, Judy's sister Shirley sang her version of the song "I Need Jesus":

Lord I am weak
 But I know you strong
 I know you able to right every wrong
 I come to Thee
 I am depending on you, Lord, just as they depend on me
 I need you to walk with me
 Because my life is sometimes so troubled within
 Same time you trying but not going to win
 But wrap your arms around me Lord
 Don't leave me Jesus when the road gets hard
 I need you to walk with me
 I need you to walk with me [field notes, May 14, 2006]

Through worship, prayer, singing, and Bible study, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers built the foundation of the younger generation's faith and their spiritual salvation at home and in church. They helped forge an emotional regime that was the basis of a life-long striving for faith in God and family, grounded in loyalty to home church and homeplace.

Home as a Cherished Object

Members' attachment to home church and homeplace takes on a narrative form that weaves its way through individual life histories. Congregants first and foremost cited their positive feelings about the church during interviews. Clara is a member of the church in her early fifties, who drives two hours round trip to come to Asbury on Sundays. Her mother's family has been living near the church since it was founded. Her mother Nancy, one of the "church mothers," helped to establish the Back Home Cemetery Club to maintain the cemetery grounds, keep church books, and arrange Homecoming celebrations. When I asked Clara what the term *home church* meant to her, she said that it is "the church that you grew up in. It's just like the home that you grew up in. You say the 'homeplace.' This is the 'home church.' You always come back to where you grew up because your memories there are good."

Rachel, Brenda's sister, is a Methodist Pastor, who serves several churches in an area north of Brownsburg. In an interview on July 30, 2007, she reminisced how in the 1950s she and her siblings would return to Brownsburg from West Virginia, where her father worked on the railroad, to stay with her mother's sister family for the summer. Church was an essential part of daily experiences beyond Sunday service.

When I'd come over here in the summer, we'd clean the church. I can always remember, cousin Edna, she would have on a dark, maybe royal blue, dress, and she had this big white apron that went around her neck and around her waist, and all through the church we'd go to dust and clean and polish. And back in them days they used that old polish that stained. And we'd come out all black, you know, with all this stain on.

Rachel then talked about church services, mentioning the deacons who sat on the left-hand side of the pulpit.

There would be five or six men there, with these dark suits on and white shirts with black ties, you know. And everybody clapped their hands. And sometimes we'd be downstairs and we'd look up and the dust would be coming down on us, 'cause once the service started most of the time the kids went downstairs. The grownups had the service upstairs. And they'd get to shouting and everything. And we'd be downstairs mocking them.

She remarked that the kids made fun of the way the elders fainted during services. It was only when they themselves became adults that they understood and felt the power of the Holy Spirit on them.

When telling me about the church homecomings, anniversaries, and lawn parties, Rachel painted the following evocative portrait:

And they would start in the evening. It would be at night, and there would be food and fried chicken that you could smell the chicken all over Brownsburg. I mean, chickens don't have that smell now. You could cook chicken [now] and nobody would know. [But these] were raised on the farm, you know. And they would get all these chicken; men, women would be picking and plucking them chickens. And, oh, I'd start heaving, just the smell of them wet chickens! And then, back in them days they had them big galvanized tubs and they'd be full of big chunks of ice 'cause back in them days you didn't know anything about ice cubes and all this. And they would get big old blocks of ice and ice pick and chunk it. And there would be watermelon down in there, and cakes this high, and I mean there's like four-layer cakes would take you two days to eat. There was big old ice cream freezers and the men that churned the ice cream. And people, oh, my goodness! Whenever Asbury would have their lawn party, everybody came! When they had their lawn party, big cars of us, just going and going. And you just got a vision sometimes, when you're standing there at that church and see those old saint having them lawn parties. Of course, those big old black kettles and fried chicken, they'd take the lid off and plopp that piece of chicken on your plate. There was potato salad, there was green beans, there was greens, there was fresh tomatoes. I mean, you could eat yourself sick. [interview, July 30, 2007]

If, as Reddy suggests, emotions inform "the dense networks of goals that give coherence to the self," then when the self is in danger, the recovery of those foundational emotions are

essential to survival. Rachel told me about when she was diagnosed with lupus at age 43 while living in New Jersey. After being in remission for eight months, she developed a blood clot that settled in her left leg. It had to be amputated.

So, I went through that ordeal, and after that, I told my husband, I says, "I'm moving back home!" because I went down to about a hundred and twelve pounds. . . . All you could see was my eyes. And when I did get my prosthesis, my prosthesis leg was bigger than my normal leg 'cause I was just skin and bone. And I just knew I was going to die. So, I said I'm going home to die. He looked at me and says, "No, you're not dying . . ." And one day, my brother in Pennsylvania called me up, and he said, "Sis, are you still going to Virginia? Do you still want go to Virginia?" And I says, "Yes!" I says, "I'm ready to go now, I've got to get out of here." In the meantime, God was talking and telling me that you gotta move.

Rachel's cousin Sarah (Sarah is Rachel's mother's sister's daughter, with whom Rachel lived in the summers) found Rachel a rental place in Brownsburg.

And it was so strange that the house I moved into was owned by an old [white] lady. . . . She had a little black cocker spaniel. And [when I was here for the summers,] Sarah and I would walk from out at the homeplace into Brownsburg to meet my uncle. And when we got to that house, she would send that little black dog down there to chase us, right? And then she would mutter some name or words or whatever. Of course, you know, we were taught to respect the elders or whatever. And I said how strange God has brought me back to live in the very house where this woman used to send her dog down to chase us. [interview, July 30, 2007]

Sarah told me later that one time she carried a stone to throw at that dog, but he never came out that day. She still has the rock stowed away somewhere in her house.

Rachel's story is an evocative illustration of the emotional and foundational power of home. During homecoming and anniversary celebrations, I met several older men and women from out of town who said that they wanted to be buried in Brownsburg. Although Rachel thought she was returning home to die, she actually found the spiritual sustenance that enabled her to recover fully and pursue her new calling as a pastor. She judged home as, Nussbaum would say, "eudaimonistic." Rachel's story is also a tale of social redemption, as she was able to triumph over racism by living in the house of the white woman who tormented her and her cousin. However, Sarah's continued possession of that rock reveals how the dread caused by living within the social norms of Jim Crow has not completely dissipated, but remains part of the emotional repertory of Asbury members.

Home as a Value Judgment

On reaching adulthood, children who were raised in the home church and on the homeplace made their foray into the outside world. All of the regulars and occasional visitors at Asbury told the same story of their decision to return home. They intimated that such a choice was integral to their ability to make a positive life for themselves as adults. However, while all of them cited their attachment to home as the main reason for their choice, dedicated church

members stressed their loyalty to the home *church*, but those who attend church irregularly highlighted their loyalty to the home*place*. For the former, the value of church reflected the value of homeplace, while for the latter the value of homeplace at times challenged the value of church. These differences show the ways that individuals construct and enact their agency within community norms.

Regular Church Members: Coming Back in

When I asked Brenda if she had always been a Christian, she said that her mother had raised her and her siblings to be “God conscious”: “Growing up we knew what to do and what not to do. What you should do. You know. But, I guess you stray out there. You just do what you want to do. But you still know.”

During life history interviews with regular church members, almost every person mentioned a time when she or he was “out there,” and then returned to the church. Sarah, Rachel’s cousin and a congregational member in her sixties whose ancestors lived in Brownsburg before the Civil War, explained how

Back when you were in school, you were out there ‘cause you were searching for life. Let’s put it that way. But as you grew older, you know, you don’t want that. I don’t miss it. I’ve had it. We’ve had good times. I don’t think anybody could say we haven’t had good times, but, you know, there’s a time and place for everything. [interview, July 16, 2007]

Although these narratives have a redemption rhetoric similar to that of Evangelical Christians (Harding 2000; Luhrmann 2004), they are different in that congregants imagine a dedicating themselves to Christ as a return to home—to their beginnings, rather than as a creation of a new self. This “deepened commitment to their faith” was not so much “self-transformation” as it was self-realization (Stromberg 1993:xi). It was a value judgment as to the importance of home church to their own welfare as adults. The emotional regime inculcated within family worship remained a point of reference, however muted, during their wild younger years. For some, the attachment to church home was fraught with more ambiguity than others, but their feelings of love and loyalty ultimately propelled them to return. They all discussed homecoming as a kind of rite of passage through which they became adults—full responsible members of home and church families. Their turning point happened when they became caretakers of others, like their kinswomen had done, and as such, they needed the guidance of Jesus—through prayer and church fellowship—to help them cope. Clara says that women

get to kinda like socializing, seeing everybody. Actually, letting God know that you do care, and you thank Him for getting you through the week with the difficult children, and then whatever else is going on in the house. And I just think that most women have had such experiences in their life that they’ve called on God and He’s helped them. And then you get in church, and say something that relates to somebody else. They just always feel peaceful coming to church. [interview, August 11, 2007]

During her journey to faith, Clara transformed from a passive listener into an active participant. She remembered when she was a child, sitting on her grandmother's lap in a tight row of old ladies at church in the evenings.

And it's all I ever knew was the church. I didn't understand about God until I got to be a teenager. And I kinda didn't understand it then until I got in my twenties, and things started happening that I didn't have any explanation for in my life. I used to always wonder, well what . . . [is] His purpose for me on this earth. I didn't understand why I was here. A lot of times, I'd be just kinda depressed, 'cause living here in the town, there wasn't much to do. [interview, August 11, 2007]

She got her calling in life in her twenties when she went into nursing—that was the way God showed her that she was needed.

If somebody got sick in the family, I was able to be there for them. And now, I really know with my mom being sick why I'm still here, because I was left here to take care of her. And anybody else. I took care of my grandmother, I took care of my grandfather, and my aunt, and I took care of her. So I feel that God. . . . I guess He couldn't tell me along the way why He was teaching me and preparing me for all of this. But I'm glad He did. [interview, August 11, 2007]

The loss of her relatives made her question the meaning of faith and eventually brought her closer to God. She was able to pray more effectively and realize her faith potential. The death of family members also cemented her place as the new caretaker of the family. She even has a vested interest in the spiritual upbringing of her brother's granddaughter.

We'd had a couple of relatives die in the house, [like] my grandmother's sister, and death was kinda introduced to me then. I didn't see her dying but I knew she was. And I heard people talk about it. And then, I don't know, I heard people talk about God a lot and how you have to put your faith in Him, and different times, whenever I would want something or needed help with something, I would just say, God, help me. And He would always be there. That's why I say, in that early age, I kinda understood. And then when I got in my twenties and started working and would be stressed out or have a bad day or something would be going wrong, I'd come home and pray and pray. I always read in the Psalms, the chapters in there, I could find certain chapters that brought kinda relief to me. And I would pray and pray. And it didn't always happen when I wanted it to, but it would happen before it needed to happen. So I guess over the years of doing that, it's just really helped a lot. [interview, August 11, 2007]

Clara describes her desire to come to church at Asbury, even though there are Methodist churches closer to her home an hour away, as visceral. It takes her back to her roots and allows her to know herself better.

When I come here, I feel like it lowers my blood pressure. I feel a calmness come over me. It's very addictive, because I have to keep coming back. And, I get to see everybody that I don't get to see during the week. I feel that whatever the pastor says that sometimes it pertains to me, so it gives me my course for the week of how to react to things. . . . I mean, I've got Methodist churches all around me not more than five minutes, but it's something different about coming home. . . . I feel like I'm close to my mom and

them when I'm here. . . . I think it's just this church. What all I know that's happened in this church and the joyous occasions that we've had. I don't know. It's just something about it. I can't explain this. There's something that draws me here. I can't help it. [interview, August 11, 2007]

Similarly, Sarah describes her faith as revolving around a sense of closeness to God and her relatives. When she was younger, her relationship with God stemmed out of her obedience to her elders: "We knew what we had to do. We came to church. . . . If you didn't listen you'd get punished." As she became a wife and mother, Sarah began to embody the practices of prayer and communication with God. She explained that she wanted

someone that you could talk to, like if you feel like you are distressed, or—I don't know, if you need somebody besides your husband that you can really talk to, and a lot of times I feel close to God if I come and kneel at the altar. [interview, July 16, 2007]

Going to church now is "the most pleasurable enjoyment" she gets. As a mother of five children and several grand- and great-grand children, she feels that "I can talk more freely, about God, and I can talk more freely to my children. They don't listen, but I talk." She reminds them about Jesus, "to let them know that there's a Master that does listen and to let them know there's comfort in talking."

Her spiritual strength ultimately comes from her place of residence—behind the church cemetery—and her membership in her home church. She literally can see her place within her kinship network.

I think I'm blessed by where I live because if I'm doing something that's wrong, I know my mom and dad's looking. And you know it's amazing. That limb on that tree has always parted where their stone is. I can always see it. And my grandmother, I guess she's up under the porch by now, 'cause she's right at the fence. So I say she's down under the porch, so I feel like they're watching out for me. [interview, July 16, 2007]

Sarah's spirituality is thus grounded in the physical closeness of her relatives and efforts to keep up family connections. As she noted,

the one thing that I will have to say, about Asbury, in the last ten years, we made a promise that for the people, for our ancestors that are up there [in the cemetery], and for the ones that are still living, that we would carry on. And the church is just small, but when we do, we do it together, or not at all. And I think we have stuck to that. And I believe that's what gives us the faith and the ability to do what we do. [interview, July 16, 2007]

John, Sarah's cousin on her mother's side who also grew up in Brownsburg, has similar sentiments: "I just feel like this is where I belong, because it is where I grew up. . . . So, I have a lot of memories here. I can see people sitting in them pews now that other people cannot see. It makes me feel like I want to do something for this community." Out of their loyalty for their common ancestors and an embodiment of love for their mothers, they strive to maintain church fellowship. That ultimate value of church (read: family) maintenance

supersedes their desire to witness to outsiders or take a leadership role in United Methodist activities in the region.

Although men and women both experienced time away from church, men's return journeys often were fraught with more ambiguities. They talked as if they had to leave the feminized realm of the home and church to become real men. Finding their way back was much more of a struggle for them than for female members, because church is so tightly associated with maternal sentiment. To reach their goals of a stable adulthood, they eventually decided to take on the role of family provider who is loyal to the church.

Paul, a 73-year-old lay speaker in the United Methodist Church, married into the Asbury "church family" when he wed Rachel. Speaking about his upbringing, he noted that he was like "all young black men" in that he eventually left home. Unfortunately, he said, "when you leave home you tend to somewhat leave the Bible home." Mike, the music director at Asbury, is in his forties, and he is the cousin of Ann and Judy (his mother is their mothers' sister) and the grandson of Rose. In an interview, he contrasted life "on the street" with life at home and in the church.

Sascha: I've heard a lot of people mention the Devil. How do you understand the Devil?

Mike: Well, being out in the world, and just partying and stuff and just acting a fool, really. I mean that's how you put it, I mean, just acting a fool.

Sascha: So what does that have to do with the Devil then?

Mike: Well, he's trying to get you where he wants you I reckon. I mean, just by doing wordly things and, I guess, you know, which I was out there at one time, like I said, and then I came to church and I kinda changed. . . . I changed a whole lot from what I was. [interview, July 10, 2007]

Mike got financially secure with a solid job and began to take his heritage seriously when he became the music director, a post once occupied by his father's mother. Later, when discussing how he "walks" with Christ daily, Mike said that he tries to be a role model to someone. "I mean, yeah, just, you know. Don't go out in the street and try to be a bad boy and stuff. Just try to be yourself and, shoot, you know, just don't try to be all machie and all that stuff. Like I say, just try to be yourself and try to set an example for somebody else." Although earlier in the interview he indicated that he had changed, this latter comment reveals also how he conceptualizes his return to the church as making him realize his true potential.

Archie, Clara's brother, also experienced difficulties in his path to Christian faith. His story highlights the tension between the ideals of male rebellion and a son's loyalty to his mother (as cultivated through the family's emotional repertoire). Early in our conversation, he admitted that his teenage years were "a little wild and rowdy" and that he returned to the church after his mother passed in 2004.

I just started going every Sunday. And she always asked me to come and go to church with her, which I did sometimes, but the majority of the times I didn't. I just felt bad about it, so I know she's looking down on me now and glad that I'm here. Yeah, and I'm

kinda sorry that it took that to, you know, to get me into the church. But I enjoy coming here every Sunday. [interview, July 29, 2007]

When I inquired why the church meant so much to his mother, he replied that “her parents were here, and she didn’t want to see it close, or anything. And I guess just like I was saying, just getting back to the home church idea. Something like that.” In explaining why he ultimately became a full time member, he commented, “I don’t want to turn my back on my home church.” Pressing him further as to why it is so important not to abandon the community, Archie remarked: “We don’t have that many members, for one thing. And they just need the support to keep on keeping on, you know.” In addition, at services he enjoys being with his neighbors and listening to the preacher’s message. “I get a good feeling when I leave, you know.”

A little later in our conversation, he noted that troubles with his mother and the church actually began when he was 12: “I came some, but I just got sidetracked, I guess.”

Sascha: And what did your mom say that tried to persuade you when you were older to come? You said she tried to get you to come.

Archie: Yeah, she would just say, “I ain’t going to be here forever. Come on and go to church with me,” you know. Something like that. Like I say, sometimes I came, special days like Homecoming, Mother’s Day, and stuff like that. But just on a regular basis, I never did. [interview, July 29, 2007]

His sister Clara, in her interview, remembered Archie’s troubles as starting even earlier. When discussing why there are more women in church than men, Clara said,

I think a lot of men just don’t think that it’s the manly thing to be, going to church. . . . My brothers and my dad, when he was younger, he didn’t go to church. Now my dad goes to church every Sunday. And Archie never went to church, even when he was going as a little boy, my mother had a hard time. One day, we were supposed to be baptized. We were much younger. And he ran out of the church. And every time he’d come and he’d stay half the time and before you’d know it, he’d run out and she’d have to go and get him. But he’d never come back.

[Later, when we were grown], I would always talk to him about going to church. And he used to say to me, “Why do you drive all the way over to go to church?” And I said, “Because it makes me feel good. It’s what I want to do.” “Well, I wouldn’t come over here, if it was me!” You know, he’d just go on and on. And after my mom passed, he started coming to church. In December she passed, and first Sunday in January and he’s been coming ever since. I just go home and smile every Sunday that he’s here. . . . Maybe her spirit kinda helped him to realize that he should come and maybe he didn’t see the seriousness of it until then, because we’d never lost our mom before. [interview, August 11, 2007]

By deciding to become full-fledged members, Archie, Mike, Clara, and Sarah saw their feelings toward the church in “eudaimonistic” terms—as beneficial to their well-being.

When they attend church, they feel the same emotions of love, loyalty, and reverence, cultivated during childhood by the mother figures in their lives, and as such, they deem it necessary to give their time and effort to the congregation. In so doing, they have taken on the responsibility of adults, fulfilling the expectations their elders had of them.

Occasional Church Members

If faith is a feeling, an attachment to homeplace cultivated during childhood, then it is possible to experience that emotion within the family, but outside the church environment. Of all the occasional church members I interviewed, each one of them expressed ways in which they have internalized their faith, so that they can carry it wherever they are. Their loyalty then is not only to Asbury but also to their extended natal family, as a result.

For example, Rob is Brenda's and Rachel's youngest brother. He sometimes comes to church on holidays with his wife, who is Sarah's sister-in-law. Trained in masonry and mechanics, Rob moved from West Virginia to New Jersey with the rest of his family. Then, when Rachel, his mother, and other sisters moved down to Brownsburg, he went with them. As he explained it to me: "Family was moving this a way. So I came on down. I was getting tired of the city, anyway." He lived with Rachel in the first house she rented in town. In talking with me about his childhood in Cass, West Virginia, Rob emphasized the centrality of church in his upbringing.

In Cass we always went to church, every Sunday. We had Bible School. We had Christmas plays. Rachel and all them, they were always over all of that, trying to keep us little brats still and learn something. Yeah, we grew up there in the church in Cass. [interview, July 6, 2010]

When I asked him what it means for him to be a Christian, he discussed faith as if it were a biological family heritage: "It's in me. It's in my blood. So there it is." He discussed belief as an innate and personal experience, and yet he also noted that it takes the church context to bring on that feeling.

Sascha: The pastor talks about having a relationship with Jesus. Do you feel like you have something like that going on?

Rob: Well, when I come up from West Virginia and the minister we had, Mr. Tyson—he was a good minister—we haven't seen anything to top him yet—other than my sister [Rachel], she's knocking at the devil.

Sascha: She's what? She's "knocking at the devil"?

Rob: Mr. Tyson, he was good! Real good. You could feel it.

Sascha: How do you feel somebody's good?

Rob: You feel it within yourself. It just comes to you, natural.

Sascha: You think he hit the right message?

Rob: Yeah, oh yeah.

Sascha: Like he's talking to you?

Rob: Yeah, I mean, the Man upstairs and everything. You know when it hits you. You can feel it, I'm sure. You've felt it over there [at Asbury].

Sascha: Sure!

Rob: There you go! [interview, July 6, 2010]

When he goes to church, he said that he feels “relief.” “I feel like I did the right thing. It makes everything better. . . . The Man Upstairs knows what we are going through. He believes that pressure.” But, he said that his job makes it difficult for him to attend services often. He put it as a choice between survival and church, and picked the former.

The older you get, life changes. Sometimes you’ve got to do something, like you gotta work but you rather, you know, but you gotta survive. But I enjoy what time I get to go down there. I enjoy it to death. [interview, July 6, 2010]

Significantly, he grounds his commitment to working in terms of loyalty to his family. When I asked him if he ever thought about the afterlife, he answered,

All the time. My mother and father, my grandfather is all there. . . . Maybe that’s why I am the way I am now, I’m not a bad person or anything. I survive. The best thing I like to do is drag race. You know, I’ve worked hard, having a little race car there, going down to the track. [interview, July 6, 2010]

Mary, Sarah’s daughter, has similar sentiments about faith. She started coming to church again with her son in 2008, but then stopped in 2010 because of her “work schedule.” She told me in an interview in 2008 that she feels “better about things” when she goes to church, but that being a Christian does not “mean that you necessarily have to go to church. You can do all that just anywhere, where you set your mind to it.”

Ann, who told the story about gathering around her grandmother Rose’s piano as a child, said that “you can count” on her other grandmother (her father’s mother), Lilly, who at age 91 is the current church mother, to go to church regularly.

Now [my] mom was like that until she got sick, she would go, you know. But mom’s faith, though, is still just as strong. And personally, I feel good when I go to church. And I don’t like to let my [teenage] son hear me say that, because then it makes him think [it is okay not to go]. But mom just said it doesn’t matter if you go to church or not. But I tell my sister, I try to encourage myself and make myself. But I’m only off [from work] every other weekend. And when I’m on track with y’all, I’ll say, “Well, I’m gonna go to church tomorrow.” But then it may be something else that—and then I’m like, that’s the Devil trying to keep you from going to church. You need to go on and go. And if I don’t go, I don’t feel good that day. When I was little, you knew you had to go. That was a necessity. It wasn’t no question about: are we going to church today? [interview, July 14, 2010]

She says that she enjoys it when her whole family goes to church.

I love when my whole family does anything together. It doesn’t just have to be church. I just love it, because nowadays families just scatter and they don’t keep that closeness. And it can be the simple things of us just sitting up here every day asking each other how our day went and what’s wrong. But I love that. And the church, to me, when you’re in church with your family, that’s the most loving feeling. And I love it. But I’m real sentimental. [interview, July 14, 2010]

With such strong sentiments toward her natal family and her work schedule, it is not surprising that she has internalized home as a feeling that she can carry with her and experience with her family on their home ground. She admits that “I don’t feel that I have to be in there [church] everyday to know the Lord.” She talked about how she grew in her faith. “I was born at church and I believe in God. And I know the Lord, and I know about faith, but my faith wasn’t where it needed to be.” Sam, her son’s father, was the one who really taught her about the Bible.

One day I went with him [to his church]. And I got to crying, and I said, “What you crying for?” That’s what I’m sitting there and thinking that I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I can’t even—and that now, when it hits me, I know that God is beside me. But the feeling that hit me—so afterwards I said, “Sam, I’m crying and carrying on.” He was like, “It’s the Lord with you, Hon. The Lord hit you.” And I said I was embarrassed. And he said, “You don’t be embarrassed at that!” Because I’m looking around and I don’t see nobody else crying. . . . But it will hit me when I’m at church sometimes. And I know it’ll hit me sometimes if I’m at the house and something’s on my mind that I’ve prayed about. And I’ll just let it out. But I know now that God is letting me know that it’s going to be OK, that I’m OK, and what I’m going through is gonna be all right. He’s working through me. [interview, July 14, 2010]

She then noted that her faith really strengthened after she and Sam split up, and she moved back to her parent’s home to live next to her grandmother Lilly and her extended family. She works everyday to cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus, and she brings that connection to bear on her family relationships.

You have to make time for Him. I have to make time for Him every day. First thing before I crawl out of bed in the morning, I’m lying in the bed like this: “Thank you, Jesus.” That’s what I say. And I be tired as I don’t know what, and be like, “I’ll talk to You later.” And then I get in my little car and I talk from here and I have mom laughing. And I if I pass people, that they think I’m crazy. But every morning I’ll talk. . . . I’ll talk to Him and I’ll talk about what’s on my mind, you know. And I pray for my whole family and all that good stuff. But I laugh and I say, “I take up so much of Your time. It’s me again.” That’s what I tell Him, because I always have something for Him. But, I mean, that’s my time. You have to make personal time for Him. . . . And like I tell [my son], when I take him to school, “If your friends are in the car, they gonna pray, too.” And he’s like, “Mom!” And I say, “Well, I’m just telling you. They need to know the Lord.” [interview, July 14, 2010]

As Rob, Mary, and Ann show, the feelings cultivated during childhood toward the Lord sometimes work against church membership, because they can be expressed intensely in the home and personal environments. Faith is still experienced and enacted through home, but it is the homeplace, rather than just the home church, that some individuals see as essential to their wellbeing. As such, the loyalty to Jesus that their mothers taught them can work against the goals of church sustainability.

Home as Political

For those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no “homeplace” where we can recover ourselves. [Hooks 1994:449]

On the surface, it seems that Asbury members are not interested in engaging with the issue of racism. On direct questioning from me, church members were uncomfortable with the idea that their congregation should be involved in political activism. Sarah joked that politics is “too fast. You take us, down here in the country, we don’t move that fast.” Mike concluded that “life is what you make out of it.” Clara acknowledged that

It wouldn’t hurt. I mean, to me, if that’s the worst thing in life, it wouldn’t hurt at all. If that’s the way to move people, like I said, with the teenagers now, the music has changed to pertain that they can understand. So I guess if that’s your way of getting Christianity out or getting peace in the world, I’m all for it. [interview, August 11, 2007]

I believe that this outward reticence is not an example of what some scholars would call the Black Church’s “accommodative” response to racism (which stands in opposition to its other “emancipatory” stance; Baer 1988). Those who choose to continue to live and worship in Brownsburg, a small village that has a majority white population, must take on certain behaviors to have smooth relations with their neighbors. That is why I suggest that the task of making homeplace through emotional attachment, as a locus of faith, is in itself a political act, but one so subtle that it could easily be misrecognized by outsiders as simple sentimentality.

The fact that Asbury members live on land once purchased by their emancipated ancestors and attend church established by those same ancestors attests to the enduring importance of maintaining African American homeplaces. These spaces were established originally as a challenge to racism—to repossess a sense of self, heritage, and family security. Their continual presence is a kind of remembrance, and the act of remembrance is in itself political. It is the refusal to banish the history of tragedy and triumph into oblivion. Faith in the family, as a way to experience the Holy Spirit, compels church members to act. This situation suggests that anthropological investigations of Christianity should move beyond the stark paradigm of discontinuity to a more nuanced analysis of how emotional engagements with place and kin nurture a relationship with Christ. Asbury members show how the process of becoming Christian is an emotional journey of self-realization that renews their commitment to home church and homeplace.

Notes

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1. I theorize the notion of home based on the work of Gupta and Ferguson (1992). Although I acknowledge pilgrimage to holy sites as an important aspect of place, I limit my discussion to home in the local sense.
2. Within the discipline of comparative literature, Angelita Reyes defines “home place” among African Americans as conveying “associations of family and kinship connected to a familiar natural environment and to historical memory” (2009:145). She foregrounds the political aspects of making home by noting that “the home place in the context of a specific cultural ethos is linked to the broad patterns of rural African Americans attempting to establish themselves as *American* citizens beyond the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (Reyes 2009:145).
3. In thinking through the concept of remembrance as political, I was inspired by the work of Pierre Nora (1989), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Joëlle Bahloul (1996).
4. This article is based on research undertaken during the summers of 2007–10 and the 2010–11 academic year in Rockbridge and Augusta counties, Virginia. Residing close to Asbury, I frequently attended Sunday services and special events, as well as spent much time interviewing and socializing with congregants. This study is part of a larger project on making homeplace in Brownsburg from the 1850s until the present. The protocol for this work was approved by Washington and Lee’s Institutional review Board (#050807). I have consulted Asbury members on every stage of the research and writing process. They have been excited to see their history publicly acknowledged and celebrated.
5. The origins of Methodism in and around the Brownsburg area have to be pieced together from a variety of primary sources. By the 1840s, the Methodist Church South had accepted slaveholding bishops, preachers, and members, thus allowing it to work unopposed among slaves in Virginia (Sweet 1955:245). In 1856, Henry Boswell Jones, a farmer heavily involved with local politics and leading member of New Providence Church in Brownsburg, remarked in his diary that his “servant cook” Hetty was “a Methodist church member” (Turner 1979:67). The session minutes of New Providence Church record the appointment of four “colored superintendents” in March 1867, and in the summer of 1868, these men were dispatched to confer with African American congregants who were considering joining the “Colored Methodist Church,” to convince them to stay.
6. Examples of the constructivist approach to emotions in anthropology are Rosaldo (1989), Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990), Collier (1997), and Goluboff (2008).
7. Among sociologists, there is a debate as to whether the Black Church advocates activism or sanctions the status quo. In an earlier work, Hans A. Baer concludes that mainstream Black churches ultimately engender “accommodative responses” to racism and social stratification (Baer 1988:173). However, Mary Pattillo-McCoy argues that “black church culture constitutes a common language that motivates social action” (Pattillo-McCoy 1998:768). Another version of this dispute centers on specific components of African American religious ritual, whereby more “European” influences signal an acculturated stance, but more “African” elements provide a basis for resistance (Genovese 1972; Johnson 1994; Paris 1995). My work builds on recent criticisms of this resistance or accommodation debate that call for more nuanced understandings of African American religion. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya advocate for a “dialectical model of the Black Church,” whereby each congregation is situated along a continuum of “dialectical polarities held in dynamic tension” (1990:17). I will thus investigate Black

Christianity as a product of racism and capitalism, a source of continuity with the past, and a basis from which to challenge the status quo (Barnes 2005; Cone 2000).

8. Nonbiological mothers are considered to be what Patricia Hill Collins calls “othermothers,” women who assist “blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” and play a central role in the “institution of black motherhood” (1992:219).

9. This gospel song was originally released by the Pilgrim Travelers in 1950.

10. As one gospel songwriter noted to Levine, “It’s written for a person who can get the melody and words and interpret the song for himself. We give only the basic idea and the person suits his own concept” (2007:184).

11. This is a rendition of the gospel song “Until I Found the Lord.”

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