

Article

Remembering the Neighborhood: Church, Disability, and Religious Memory[†]

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[†] A version of this article was first given as a conference paper, “Touching the Distant Other: Remembering Spivak’s ‘Harlem,’ Recalling Absalom Jones,” at the North American Academy of Liturgy in January 2015.

Received: 18 August 2017; Accepted: 30 September 2017; Published: 10 October 2017

Abstract: This article focuses on rituals of community life within a North American church in which many of the congregants live with psychiatric disabilities and whose participation in religious life is affected by their experiences of poverty and gentrification. I begin by exploring an aesthetic practice of remembrance that the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies and performs in an essay entitled “Harlem”. Drawing upon Spivak’s description of an imaginative practice she identifies as “teleiopoiesis” and my own ethnographic research, including participant observation and interviews, I analyze an example of how this community incorporates visual art into its practices of communal memory as part of one church’s weeklong liturgy. I then argue for the church’s gathering of members from across the city as a practice of remembrance across time and space that confronts the structures and injustices of urban life that challenge the communal identity emerging from this congregation’s religious practices.

Keywords: memory; disability; church; gentrification; mental illness; liturgy; Spivak

1. Introduction

Sacred Family¹ is a Christian congregation in Atlanta whose identity is shaped by the intersecting experiences of disability and poverty of many of its congregants. About 60% of the congregants live with diagnoses of mental illness and many come to the church from group homes. Located in a neighborhood that has undergone significant demographic shifts over the years of its existence, Sacred Family’s current religious identity is also marked by a complex and changing relationship to a neighborhood and a city, in which the lives of poor people with disabilities, many of whom are also African American, are often erased or displaced. In this article, I draw on three years of participant-observation as an ethnographic theologian at Sacred Family in order to argue for this congregation as a site of religious memory and imagination that resists the practices of gentrification, abuse, and erasure of poor people with mental disabilities that are common in this urban environment.²

To do so, I begin by first offering a brief history of Sacred Family in order to suggest how Sacred Family’s past shapes its current identity, and I map my own social location in relationship to Sacred Family.³ I then examine a method for remembering employed by the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Harlem”, an essay in the volume, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Spivak is concerned with how one might remember a past that is not one’s own

¹ The name of the church and all names of persons have been changed to protect confidentiality.

² My research was approved by Emory University’s Institutional Review Board (file number IRB00069703) on 16 October 2013. The Institutional Review Board aided me in establishing research and informed consent protocols that took into account the mental differences that are present at Sacred Family.

³ Some portions of this paper, which provide background for the central argument, are taken from my dissertation, *Works of Love: Beauty and Fragility in a Community of Difference*.

without reducing its complex textures and thereby turning it into a commodity. While Spivak is not writing about religious memory, her approach to remembering as a relational and imaginative practice provides a generative lens through which to view the struggles and the hopes that characterize Sacred Family as it remembers its past, celebrates its present identity, and imagines a future.

In the third part of the article, I apply Spivak's method to religious memory as it is performed by congregants in Sacred Family. Drawing upon Spivak's description of an imaginative practice she identifies as "teleiopoiesis", and my own participant observation, I offer and interpret a specific example of how this community remembers a Christian ancestor through visual art as part of this church's weeklong liturgy. In the fourth part, I argue that a religious understanding of remembering and remembrance across time and space confronts the structures of urban life that challenge the communal memory emerging from this congregation's religious practices. I claim the existence of the church itself as a form of teleiopoietic possibility within the neighborhood, reminding other Christian churches and other Atlantans of people whose lives might otherwise be erased from communal memory.

1.1. *Sacred Family as a Community of Difference*

Remembering the past is crucial to the identity of Sacred Family, where people with psychiatric disabilities are central to the life and liturgy of this small parish. While communal practices of remembrance are vital to most religious communities, whose transmission of liturgical traditions and sacred stories shape communal identity, at Sacred Family, one particular story helps to shape an unconventional sense of religious identity. This retelling of the past explains how a small Christian church came to be a community unlike most of the other congregations or communities in Atlanta. It is also the story of how it came to be a church that centers around people with psychiatric disabilities.⁴ As an ethnographic researcher, I have been privy to many histories of Sacred Family, some of which I solicited through interviews. Most of these stories, of different lengths and with different emphases, point to the uniqueness of Sacred Family and its relationship to surrounding neighborhoods. The narrative I offer to begin this article emerges from some stories that were shared with me.

Sacred Family, founded in the late 1800's as a mission church, moved to its current location in Atlanta in the 1950's.⁵ A small and struggling white parish for many periods in its history, Sacred Family, like other churches and communities, was challenged by the racial integration of schools that took place across Atlanta's neighborhoods in the 1960's, as well as the effects of post-war white flight to the suburbs. According to one story told around the church, in the early 1980's, after a series of changes in the neighborhood and conflicts over church leadership, membership at Sacred Family had dwindled once again, and the parish faced imminent closure by the bishop.⁶ The vicar at that time began inviting people he met in the neighborhood, many of whom lived in group homes. The church not only shared a weekly meal with those who visited but also welcomed them into the worship life of the community.

When the 1996 Olympics were held in Atlanta, some advocates for people with mental illness became concerned about the increased vulnerability of those who spent time on the streets.⁷ As part of an initiative by the Georgia Department of Human Resources to create safe spaces for people

⁴ For an insightful reflection on the liabilities and benefits of different kinds of language used for mental disability, see (Price 2013, pp. 298–307).

⁵ The church first met in a saloon and then in private homes for some time when the saloon burned down. It moved into its first church building in the late 1800's. Later, it would be forced to move again, to its current location, due to the City of Atlanta's plans to build an expressway through the neighborhood where it was located, beginning the church's long experience with the displacements of urban life.

⁶ I encountered different narratives about how demographic changes in Atlanta affected this particular neighborhood, but it seems clear that practices of racial segregation and integration were important factors in the parish's current identity.

⁷ For an account of the debates surrounding the City of Atlanta's treatment of homeless people and people on the streets in preparation for the 1996 Olympics, see (Smothers 1996).

with mental illness during the Olympic games, Sacred Family began its day programs (Staff Writer 1996). What began as a temporary response to possible stress and displacement during the Olympics evolved into a set of programs known as the Circle. Many of the Circle participants have been diagnosed with various forms of psychiatric disability, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, or cognitive illnesses due to aging. Some live with other kinds of disabilities. Many describe themselves as people whose lives have been affected by addictions and homelessness. Some of them have been incarcerated.

Most of those who come to the Circle have been affected by government and state policies that took effect in the 1970's and 80's when persons were released from psychiatric institutions with the anticipation that community-based supports would provide necessary resources for their well-being.⁸ In place of government institutions, there emerged for-profit group homes, many of which cannot or do not provide adequate support systems for the people who live there. Church staff and lay leaders at Sacred Family speak of group homes as enmeshed in systems that frequently exploit the vulnerabilities of people who have few viable options about where or with whom they live. Those who work at Sacred Family understand part of their mission as ongoing advocacy to secure essential resources for safe housing, adequate medical care, and, above all, the right to communal friendship and support. They believe that Sacred Family itself is one of these resources, a place for relationships that are life-giving and transformative. They also acknowledge the limits of what Sacred Family can do and be for those it gathers, given the circumstances in which their congregants live and the resources the congregation has both in terms of financial resources and membership.

Relationships at Sacred Family are constituted through a wide variety of interactions and contexts. Four to five different kinds of church services take place throughout the week: noon-day prayer on Tuesday and Thursday morning; Eucharist on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening; and a monthly music event on Saturday evenings, which features both dancing and solo performances by community members. In addition to attending services, some members gather twice a week for the Circle (located at the church) to do woodwork and weaving, to paint, and to play bingo and do yoga.⁹ Some sell plants from the greenhouse on second Saturdays during the warmer months of the year. Tuesday and Thursday mornings begin with breakfast, and all of the mid-week services are followed by a shared meal, which is supplied either by Sacred Family or by other churches. After lunch, some choose to stay for support groups for those with mental illnesses. Many Circle participants also share a life together outside the church, returning by van to the eight or nine group homes where they spend the majority of their time.¹⁰

1.2. *Walking to Church: A Reflection on Place, Memory, and the Past*

As an ethnographic researcher who gathers and frames the memories recorded here, and as one who wishes to practice “teleiopoiesis” in order to touch a history not her own, I begin with a reflection on my location in the city and in relationship to Sacred Family. Unlike the majority of congregants who rely on church vans to bring them to Sacred Family, I live close enough to the parish to walk.¹¹ I usually begin my walk to the church by traversing the four blocks to the end of my street, named for a Union

⁸ For a discussion of patterns, practices, and policies of de/institutionalization in North America, see (Chapman et al. 2014, pp. 10–15).

⁹ During the period of my research, the church worked to establish the Circle as its own 501c3 organization in order to secure funding and support that is not available for churches.

¹⁰ While a number of group homes were located near the church when its ministry to persons with disabilities first began, gentrification has increased property values, and many of these homes are now located in other parts of the city. Many congregants now travel into the neighborhood rather than being a part of it. The number of group homes fluctuated during my time at Sacred Family.

¹¹ My experience with Sacred Family extends over a decade. I first served as an intern at the church through my masters of divinity program from 2006–2007, visited occasionally for church services over the next six years, and formally researched and worshiped there as a participant observer from 2013 to 2016. I continue to visit the church for occasional Sunday or Wednesday services and to visit the Circle.

general who died during the Battle of Atlanta, which took place in what is now our neighborhood. I pass a monument to his heroism and death: the turret of a cannon mounted on a pedestal bearing his name and surrounded by rose bushes; his story is told on an accompanying historical marker, one of many in the neighborhood recounting the Civil War battle in granular detail. I also pass other more contemporary monuments to lives and deaths less permanently marked: the smaller, older houses of African-American families in what was recently a predominantly black neighborhood. During the past year, a number of houses have been torn down and edifices three times the size have replaced them. My neighborhood and many of the other neighborhoods surrounding the church have rapidly gentrified since the year 2000.¹² As a white, middle class, temporarily able-bodied resident, with no claim to a long history of identification with this city, I desire a way to resist the displacement of people around me and to claim my part in it.

As I walk, I reflect on how changing neighborhoods have affected the life and liturgy of Sacred Family. At one time, many lived within walking distance of the congregation. Now, the personal care homes have moved further away from the church, affected by rising property values, and, instead of walking, congregants arrive by van. The church has had to establish an eight-mile rule: it will not (cannot) pick up any group who lives more than eight miles away. Some congregants who were part of Sacred Family no longer come; they live too far away.

As a researcher, I mourn a past I have not witnessed and have no direct access to except through the narratives of others: a time when more of the congregants could walk to church, breaking down one of the clear divides between the wealthier members (sometimes referred to as ABCs or Arrive By Cars) and others with less control over their arrival and departure times. I anticipate a time in the future when the intersections of poverty and disability will force many congregants to live in Atlanta's suburbs, and it will no longer be feasible for this parish to gather its disabled congregants and bring them together through a common liturgy.

Sacred Family often emphasizes its identity as a Christian community called by God: people with and without mental illness, people of different experiences of wealth and poverty, people who live in very different parts of the city, people who own their own homes, and those who live in personal care homes are all children of God. Members emphasize Sacred Family's identity as a church and not a charity. Yet the poverty of some members means that the congregation relies on other faith communities and organizations to fund its community life and to gather its members for worship and fellowship. While these resources are essential to gather and sustain a community of people from across the city, they also make the church vulnerable to the use of mental illness and poverty as commodities in order to assure the resources it needs to survive. The church must demonstrate its ability to make a difference in the lives of poor people with disabilities and produce stories and outcomes that satisfy those who control financial resources. Sacred Family thus faces the challenges of recalling and narrating its unique identity in a way that builds solidarity among its members and with other churches without essentializing the experiences of poverty and disability within the congregation.

2. Remembering Harlem and the Art/Work of Teleiopoiesis

In order to explore practices of memory that neither erase nor essentialize a people and place, I now turn to the theoretical imagination of postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and offer a brief introduction to her understanding of the "teleiopoietic" possibilities of receiving messages from distant others across space and time. In "Harlem", an essay in the volume, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak meditates on the difficulty, almost impossibility, of remembering the past without turning the ragged variations of culture into a smooth commodity available for easy

¹² While I do not identify these neighborhoods for confidentiality purposes, information about gentrification in Atlanta and data supporting this claim can be found here: <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/gentrification-in-cities-governing-report.html>.

distribution (Spivak 2013, pp. 403–4). If “Harlem” is a continually shifting collective—so that no stable identity can be claimed—how, Spivak asks, can the heritages of its prior residents be transmitted to future inhabitants of this space and time rather than obscured or commodified? Recognizing how the process of remembering and celebrating a collective past can easily become an act of erasure, she argues that there must be a way to trace and to touch the past, through the power of the imagination, moving between the forced options of commodified identity and/or the inevitable erasure that displaced communities face (ibid., pp. 405–6, 426). Such imaginative practices would touch the “cutting edge of the vanishing present” so as to remember the present even as it disappears (ibid., p. 405).¹³

Spivak is concerned about memory and identity as a “double bind”, a dichotomous presentation of options in which neither is ethically tenable. The task of resisting the double bind, as Spivak imagines it, is to remember Harlem as a scene “of fierce deprivation and fierce energy”, without packaging it as a seamless culture that can be easily transmitted and sold. The danger of compiling self-evident souvenirs of cultural identity is that such an act obscures the multiplicity of lives lived over the course of Harlem’s history; their many names and heritages are displaced although their memories cannot be completely erased.

She begins this essay by illustrating the double bind through a question: “How do we deny ‘development’ to the disenfranchised?” (ibid., p. 399). Seeking to “play” this double bind, she neither denies development nor celebrates disenfranchisement. Instead, she performs an art of reading old photographs obliquely and thereby suggests an answer to her question: learn how to “sharpen the imagination rather than collect and classify an impossible embarrassment of content” (ibid., p. 403). This imaginative work for Spivak is relational and responsive rather than archival or commemorative; one remembers in order to complicate the maps of present and future rather than catalogue or freeze the past. Thus, for Spivak, conceptual art is a more hopeful conduit for memories of the past and present: by resisting the verbal it invites multiple interpretations of that which is symbolized, inviting the one who receives message from “distant others” into a questioning of present maps, spaces, and social arrangements.

Spivak describes such imaginative work of memory as *teleiopoiesis*: “a reaching toward the distant other by the patient power of the imagination, a curious kind of identity politics, where one crosses identity as a result of migration or exile”. In light of such indirect access to a past not our own, “[w]e must ask again and again, How many are we? Who are they? as Harlem disappears into a present that demands a cultural essence” (ibid., p. 404). *Teleiopoiesis* involves seeking and receiving messages from a past and receding present with an attentiveness to how these messages may alter and reorient one’s own memories and identities.

Spivak takes up *teleiopoiesis* with and through the artist Alice Attie, who, like Spivak, belongs and does not belong to the landscape and cultural identity of New York City. Together they begin by confusing the question of identity, one with a mother in Damascus, the other with a mother in India, both taking up residence in Manhattan. Reflecting on photographs of old Harlem, they ask: How many are we? Who are they? (How many New Yorkers are we? Who are they who are and have been inhabitants of this place called “New York”?). These questions beg the additional questions of what it means to belong to and leave one’s mark on a place, and how one is to be counted in the hybrid collectivities that one might claim.

Spivak and Attie are hybrid not only in their ways of naming themselves but also in the art forms they deploy in order to touch the past. Spivak, as a literary scholar, thinks with and describes from images already captured and interpreted in Attie’s photographs. In doing so, she intentionally chooses photographs of non-human subjects or profiles of persons in which their faces are not seen, because she fears that human faces can so easily be collectivized, a message of nostalgia rather than inquiry (ibid., p. 407). She ruminates on impermanent objects, for which there may be less nostalgia, such

¹³ Spivak borrows this phrase from Hegel.

as messages written on old walls and buildings: “Keep Out”, “Wake Up, Black Man”, “Virgo Beauty Salon (and restaurant)”. Such messages, she reflects, have no clear sender or receiver, which makes them difficult to grasp or to render useful. Their ordinariness enables a patient, non-sentimental curiosity, a meditation on people who once used them or continue to use them as a means of living and communicating.

For example, wondering about the storefront “Records”, Spivak reflects on the various messages scribbled on the concrete that fills in what had once been a door to a store. She points to a small French sign that may have been put up by Haitian immigrants living in the tenement above, and to the larger English sign that reads “No sitting, No standing, No loitering”. Etched in the concrete there is also a name, which seems to bear no relation with either set of instructions: “Allen” (ibid., pp. 411–12).

Then, there is a photograph titled “Buster Moved” of an old garage door, which is covered with writing that is difficult to decipher. On top of this writing someone has painted in white the words “Moved” and an address: “1972 7th Avenue”. Spivak describes this as a “felicitous public space of mourning/inscription . . . moving into that anonymous public space that memorializes the differentiating present as it disappears”. What does it mean now to remember Buster, to wonder about his life? She does not know Buster, has not looked for him, and cannot know if he is still at the address painted on the door (ibid., pp. 412–13).

She meditates on a store window filled with mannequin faces each displaying a hat. Tucked between the white faces of the mannequins are the words of a sign, an imperative, “Exercise your Faith”. Looking at the photographs, she moves both forward and back in time. Holding the past and the present together is a contemplative act for Spivak, an aesthetic, non-sentimental form of lament that seeks to honor the past by noticing it and holding up its fragments to her readers for their own interrogation of the present.

Spivak ends by reflecting on her own location as a place where the Lenape once walked to the river to fish. She points out that “Lenape” was a name meaning “common” and given to classify many different groups of Native Americans (“Indians” as she calls them, this name given to them overlapping with her own Indian identity) (ibid., pp. 426–27). Imagining herself into the vanishing present through multiple maps placed one on top of the other, through a past once called “New Harlem”, Spivak claims: “It is the negotiability of senders and receivers that allows teleiopoiesis, touching the distant other with imaginative effort. The question of negotiability, like all necessary impossibilities, must be forever begged, assumed as possible before proof”. As an unanticipated receiver of messages sent across time by means of place to unknowable others, Spivak finds hope for practices of attention, curiosity, wonder, and recognition. Somewhere between “the rock of social history” and the “hard place of a seamless culture”, she implies that we must try to touch, name, and honor those whose many ways of living have been erased or displaced and cannot be grasped (ibid., p. 428).

3. Touching the Distant Other, Recalling Absalom Jones

Spivak’s meditation on Harlem serves as invocation to imaginative remembrance that refuses to reduce or essentialize individual textures of communal life. Most of my research at Sacred Family involves the lives of groups of individuals whose differences are obscured within the collectivities with which they are most often identified both within and outside the Christian church: the mentally ill, the poor, the unemployed and the destitute, the Christian church. Much of my research involves attending to sets of relationships and interactions within the congregation that help to keep individual and relational differences visible, audible, and palpable. Reading Spivak, I am reminded of a set of visual art forms created through the church’s Tuesday and Thursday Circle art program as part of gatherings that take place at the church throughout the week, and by which this parish offers the means for people with mental disabilities to create their own signs and messages. Spivak’s meditation on photographs reminds me of the work of teleiopoiesis that sometimes takes place there. To illustrate teleiopoiesis in the context of Sacred Family, I offer the following example to explore the complex work of memory as individuals within this community remember a past (historically their own yet also

difficult for them to access) in order to participate in a liturgy of remembrance with other congregations across the city of Atlanta.

One Tuesday, I wander through the art rooms observing the creative projects underway. I watch Kirby paint a portrait of Mason, who is posing for the painting while doing his own glass mosaic work. I observe Omar carving a wooden bowl so that the wood shavings curl over his shoulders and feet like strange golden hair. I walk into the room where Forest is assembling his intricate collages, miniature figures cut out of magazines, which he gathers in a collection entitled “Beauty and the Beat”.

In a fourth room, one of the most prolific painters, Rose, is working on a picture of a church, which I assume is Sacred Family, since she often paints its red brick building. Next to the church she paints swaths of black on the large bust of a figure, the figure of a man rising out of the landscape next to the building. I ask her who this man is, assuming it must be someone from Sacred Family. She says that she can’t remember his name, but he had been a slave and wasn’t anymore, and this is a painting of *his* church. She tells me that Beatrice (an art program mentor) gave her his picture to paint.

Then, I notice there are several computer printouts of this man’s image around the tables and on the floor. I see that Mr. Cornelius, another Circle artist, is also painting a man’s bust—his painting of the man taking up a full canvas in soft browns and blues. Then, to the right of Rose is another painting of the same figure, this one more impressionistic with bold colors, with greens in his face and reds and yellows in his body.

Walking around the room, I find information about the Historic St. Thomas Church and Absalom Jones, the figure who is now rendered in so many different interpretations, through the work of these artists. The beginning of the computer printout, taken from the website of the Church of St. Thomas, reads:

About Absalom Jones...

Founder of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas 1746–1818.

The life and legacy of The Reverend Absalom Jones is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, his faith, and his commitment to the causes of freedom, justice, and self-determination.

Absalom Jones was born into slavery in Sussex County, Delaware on 6 November 1746. During the 72 years of his life, he grew to become one of the foremost leaders among persons of African descent during the post-revolutionary period. In his younger years in Delaware, Absalom sought help to learn to read. When he was 16, his owner Benjamin Wynkoop brought him to Philadelphia where he served as a clerk and handyman in a retail store. He was able to work for himself in the evenings and keep his earnings. He also briefly attended a school run by the Quakers where he learned mathematics and handwriting. In 1770, he married Mary Thomas and purchased her freedom. It was not until 1784 that he obtained his own freedom through manumission. He also owned several properties.

During this period, he met Richard Allen, who became a life-long friend. In 1787 they organized the Free African Society as a social, political, and humanitarian organization helping widows and orphans and assisting in sick relief and burial expenses. Jones and Allen were also lay preachers at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, PA where their evangelistic efforts met with great success and their congregation multiplied ten-fold. As a result, racial tensions flared and ultimately they led a historic walk out from St. George’s.¹⁴

The narrative goes on to describe more of Absalom Jones’s remarkable accomplishments.

¹⁴ This text is taken from my fieldnotes. It can also be found at <http://www.aecst.org/ajones.htm>.

Next to the sheet propped on a chair is another painting that a fourth artist has begun. In the corner there is a small bust of Absalom Jones sitting in a brown pew with a background of red around him. On the other half of the picture is a computer screen with wires coming out of it. The computer screen is divided in two. On one half of the screen it reads:

“Nov by 1746
Until Now”

and on the other half of the divided screen:

“I the
Come
Puter
And I reads
2014”.

I ponder a connection that I observe the artist making between Absalom Jones learning to read as a slave and gaining his freedom and the computer reading and producing this information for her about Absalom Jones. Many of these Sacred Family Circle participants, some of whom are descendants of enslaved persons, do not have access to computers, through which much information is disseminated in 2014; nor can many of them read well, affecting their participation in Sacred Family’s prayer book services of Holy Eucharist on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings and in morning and noonday prayer. Time has passed from 1746 until 2014, and still conventional narratives of success, marked by degrees of literacy, elude these artists.

In contrast, the narrative on the computer printout is one of steady progress: an oppressed person who has, through his own hard work and an education worthy of a white Christian, overcome the odds against him in a movement toward freedom and transformation of the church. The interpretation of his life next to a computer in the Sacred Family painting is more ambiguous, a reflection on the complex means of producing and accessing his story as part of the Christian tradition.

I find the artist of the painting, Kayla, and ask her to talk about it with me. What inspired her painting of a computer next to Absalom Jones? She responds: “Technology. Oh yeah! See, if you take and you bring certain things up to do date, it will last longer. See the library . . . the computer is really a library. No more opening doors, going in, sitting down reading. Just tell the computer what you want to know, the picture comes up, and on the computer screen you read. You stick your card in and speak your name, and pay your fare and go on out”.

I clarify: “So the computer found Absalom Jones?”

Kayla: “Yes, it found him”.

Kayla celebrates the device that would bring her news of a distant other even though her own access to the computer’s vast knowledge, is limited, perhaps even imagined. There are no computers for her to use in the home she lives in and no smartphones or tablets to teach her about Absalom Jones. In spite of those facts, the computer has made the library obsolete, according to Kayla’s interpretation of her painting. I imagine her walking to the public library to use a computer to gain access to her past, packaged in a way that obscures the forms through which Kayla herself is continually denied access to the central symbols of success that mark leadership in both the Christian church and in society.

The kind of knowledge that Kayla receives is sent to her in the packaged form that Spivak most fears: Absalom Jones is differentiated from his collective only to represent them through a smooth narrative of self-transformation and self-determination. His virtues emerge from a past easily digestible to the visitors who come through the historic church. Yet, in the space of Sacred Family, as part of its everyday liturgy, a group of women and men denied the narratives given to Absalom Jones, sit together

at tables without computers and books and render his life in different colors and textures, some of them forgetting his name. Here, in the vanishing present of 2014, Absalom Jones becomes, for a week or two, an occasion for the work of religious memory of some of the most marginalized citizens of the city of Atlanta.

Spivak notes at the end of “Harlem” (as a counterpoint to her doubt about the possibilities of an aesthetic education to resist and transform the forces of globalization) that any hopefulness she has is in the negotiability of senders and receivers. The sending and receiving of messages across time and space cannot be entirely determined, and in this gap, there is a slender hope for an otherwise future (Spivak 2013, p. 248). In Harlem, Buster moves, leaving a note on a wall for friends or loved ones, or acquaintances or business partners or clients, and somewhere Spivak and Attie find his message, inviting them to practice teleiopoiesis, a different way of remembering and evoking his past. In Atlanta, Absalom Jones’s narrative comes to the women and men gathered to paint a life they have no direct access to, but they touch his memory through their imagination and render his life for me and for others to recognize. In doing so, Sacred Family artists produce their own messages, all of the senders and receivers of which I cannot determine.

When I discuss the Absalom Jones paintings with Beatrice, the Circle art director, she explains that every year there is a special liturgy at an Atlanta cathedral to celebrate the life of Absalom Jones. Kayla, Rose, Daniella, and Mr. Cornelius have painted pictures of Absalom Jones in order to take them to the cathedral where they join a liturgy of congregants from various churches across this city, who gather to remember and celebrate his witness. The printout from St. Thomas Church on the internet was the only picture Beatrice could find of Absalom Jones to offer her artists as a means of evoking the person of Absalom Jones, the racism and ableism he faced, and his resourcefulness in the face of it.

Beatrice herself has painted a scene from the story. In her picture, a white man with his arms outspread, stands in front of church doors, using his body to keep the black Absalom Jones and his fellow black worshippers outside. Keep out black man. In another panel of the same painting, Absalom Jones stands behind the altar in his own church, his arms in the same position, outstretched over his head, but this time facing a congregation, in welcome, as he presides at a Holy Communion. I ask Beatrice if she can imagine a time in the future when Circle participants might stand behind an altar in Sacred Family Church, as ministers rather than congregants, with their arms outspread like Absalom Jones, inviting others to a sacred communion table. She says she does not know.

In the meanwhile of the vanishing present, Kayla, an ordinary member of this church, talks about her calling to the work of art on Tuesday and Thursday mornings as a vocation from God: “I tried other jobs but . . . God speaks to me through art”. Much of the art created by Sacred Family congregants, including Kayla’s, is sold at different craft markets and church fundraisers and sometimes displayed in local venues, such as the public library that I pass on my walk to church. Congregants often ask the art director how much money she thinks they can get for a piece. They are excited about the small amounts of cash they earn from their paintings, as well as any public recognition of their work.

When I contemplate the possible receivers of such art, the messages these artists create, I imagine homes all over the city of Atlanta and beyond, where these pieces of art, sold in wealthier parishes and communities, now reside. In the future, will “I the Come Puter and I reads” end up buried in the attic of some enormous Atlanta home, or in the dumpster after some smaller house is demolished by a developer and its contents disposed of? It is likely that Kayla’s art, her work of transmitting a message received about a Christian ancestor, Absalom Jones, will disappear. Yet, following Spivak’s logic, such messages could be spirited into the future and received by someone neither Kayla nor I could predict. Perhaps these receivers of Sacred Family’s memories will ask as Spivak wondered about Buster’s story: *What moved him? What moves her?* Perhaps they will use the computer to find evidence of Kayla. They might discover an oversimplified narrative of a mentally ill artist that, nevertheless, captures the fierce deprivation and fierce imagination that are part of her world and her faith. For Kayla speaks to me of her faith: she is certain that she will leave her mark in the world. God speaks to her through art, and her art signifies. Her belief in the importance of her work at Sacred

Family could be interpreted as her confusion or her faith. Even at Sacred Family, the messages of Kayla and others like her are not always viewed as important as those of parishioners without mental disabilities, whose messages translate more easily into conventional and more easily transmittable forms of religious memory such as sermons or prayers. Yet, for the time being, at Sacred Family, Kayla is given the space, time, and materials she desires to create her own messages and to offer her creativity to others.

The deep black and bright colorful body of Absalom Jones emerges through the art of Beatrice and Kayla and Rose and Daniella and Cornelius within the patient, imaginative space and time of the church members' gathering over the course of a week. As such creative work takes place, Sacred Family becomes itself a kind of memory in the city of those who would otherwise be ignored. As long as this church uses its imagination and resources to deem the confusion and gifts of its past necessary to a future survival, there will be congregants like Kayla to recover the stories of people like Absalom Jones in a way that no one else can and to imagine their own future in a way that nobody else will. Thus, Kayla's stories and the stories of those like her matter to the religious memories of Christian communities, and they deserve the space and time to be received and passed on to others. But in order to remember both the pain and the hope of its past and to imagine a future, Sacred Family must be able to gather its members and their memories from across the segregated spaces of the city, and in resistance to practices of erasure and displacement. It must continue to find ways to ask: How many are we? Who are they?

4. Gathering People, Sending Messages: Church as Teleiopoietic Possibility

In her introduction to *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak tells her readers that she takes the term "double bind" from a book by Gregory Bateson entitled *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson used the concept of the double bind to comprehend childhood schizophrenia. She quotes him: "both those whose life is enriched by transcontextual gifts and those who are impoverished by transcontextual confusion are alike in one respect: for them there is often a 'double take'" (Spivak 2013, p. 4).

At Sacred Family, where the community who gathers often experiences and expresses different senses of reality, worshipping together in the gifts and confusions of transcontextual difference, the church struggles to imagine a reality in which the lives of some congregants are not in threat of erasure or displacement. Indeed, while some congregants with mental disabilities have attended the church for years, many others disappear during the time of my research, both because of their health concerns and also because of their housing situations. Sacred Family and other churches, therefore, require, in Spivak's terms, a double take, a way to play the double bind that is presented through the lives of people with mental illness. They need a way to imagine the futures of Kayla, Rose, and other Sacred Family members with hope for their well-being in supportive homes and communities but without disappearing the gifts and confusions that mark their creative memory of their lives and the messages they send and receive as part of the Christian tradition.

Spivak begins "Harlem" with the question "How can we deny 'development' to the disenfranchised?" In my own context, her question might be reframed: "How can we deny 'recovery' to the mentally ill?" Such a question emerges from a double bind of poverty and mental illness. One could argue that if congregants weren't so poor, they would have resources to recover from their illness; or if they were not mentally ill, they would be able to live in their own homes, find jobs, and rebuild relationships with their families; or if they were white, they would not be poor and would have resources to deal with their mental illness. Each form of identity can be pitted against the other as a cause of deprivation and a refusal to recognize the multiple maps of stigma, injustice, and oppression at triple play in Kayla's and others' worlds.

In May of 2012, over a year before my research at Sacred Family begins, journalists Craig Schneider and Andria Simmons of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, publish a series of articles outlining the scope of the abuse and injustice affecting people with disabilities in the metro Atlanta area (both physically and mentally disabled people in both licensed and unlicensed personal care homes). They reported

that in the five years prior to the publication of these articles, the state of Georgia had found 35,000 violations in personal care homes yet had only leveled 544 fines; the average fine was \$600. Of the 18 homes that had more than 100 violations each, fourteen remained in operation (Schneider 2012a). Within licensed homes, violations included insufficient training and background checks on employees, as well as inadequate living conditions such as “dirty floors, bathtubs and walls, soiled toilets and live cockroaches in the kitchen”. Violations also entailed more serious neglect and abuse, including the failure to give necessary medicines for diabetes and heart disease—resulting in the death of a resident—and patterns of physical abuse (ibid.). In unlicensed homes, the violations included such offenses as residents beaten with belts and burnt with curling irons, confined to a basement with a bucket for a toilet, robbed of all of their money, and moved from home to home as owners and managers sought to evade the law (Schneider 2012c).

The authors suggest three factors contributing to the rampant problems they uncovered: the increase in people looking for homes; insufficient government resources to provide oversight; and the impact of the 2007/2008 recession on household income. In short, there are not enough good homes for everyone who needs them. Furthermore, some who provide the housing are ostensibly looking for ways to make a living, but they do so without the commitments or institutional capacities to provide adequate care. The result is that many elderly and disabled people are valued as commodities to be exploited for their Social Security and other entitlement checks (Schneider 2012b).

It is not that Sacred Family congregants are powerless in these situations; many of them tell stories of moving from one group home to the next in search of a better life. I am amazed at the complex maps that many of them attempt to narrate for me as they trace their movements around the city both as their group homes move and as they seek other arrangements. The challenge then is not that congregants do not want or desire something better for themselves, but that when they seek a better life, there are few if any good affordable choices. Even in the best situations, poor congregants with mental illness often live with numerous other housemates with psychiatric disabilities—persons they did not choose and with whom they may find it difficult to live.

The Atlanta Journal Constitution articles about personal care homes reveal the terrors of living in poverty with mental illness in a particular place and time. But disability scholars argue that such forms of incarceration follow an all too common and pervasive logic by which many people with disabilities are deprived of basic rights: their deviance apparently justifies the social controls of those who confine them. “Disability, situated alongside other key lines of stratification such as race, class, nationality, and gender, is central to understanding the complex, varied, and interlocking ways in which incarceration occurs and is made out to be normal, natural, politically necessary, and beneficial” (Carey et al. 2014). Disability scholars question a common narrative about the “failure of deinstitutionalization” that might emerge from stories such as the one told by the AJC about the inadequate resources to provide sufficient oversight for group homes or independent living. They question the “neoliberal policies that [have] led simultaneously to growth of the prison system, the reduction in affordable housing, and the lack of financial support for disabled people to live viably in the community” (ibid., p. 16). In my interactions with Sacred Family congregants, it would seem they have enough money to make them valuable “commodities” to group home owners, but not enough money to give them other viable options about where they live and with whom. Carey, Ben-Moshe, and Chapman point to the desire “to individualize and psychiatrize what is properly a political, ethical, and socioeconomic issue”. This desire redirects attention away from the state and its policies to a “human service sector who are charged with ameliorating the problem with individualistic mental health interventions and haphazardly available free meals or sleeping bags” (ibid.).

It is possible to interpret Sacred Family’s existence as one of these individualistic mental health interventions seeking to ameliorate rather than transform the city’s policies and procedures regarding safe and affordable housing. Indeed, Sacred Family’s programs explicitly support the “wellbeing” of its individual members although many of its activities might be hard to classify as evidence of improving the lives of the people who gather. In addition to coming to the church on Sunday for Eucharist,

congregants come to garden, paint, play bingo, sit together, and smoke cigarettes. They come to have their vital signs taken and their nails painted, to go to prayer services, and to dance together in the parish hall downstairs. “Recovery”, as one congregant tells me, “is when you do things that people without mental illness don’t expect you to do”. As a gathering of church people from different places across the city, Sacred Family also suggests the possibility of other ways of imagining church and community than by hierarchies of wealth, employment, and ability. As another Circle congregant Mariah declares to me when I describe writing for those outside the congregation: “Tell people we’re good people. We love the Lord, and we eat all the time. Three times a day!”

In an interview I conduct with a parish health worker, she worries about the future identity of the congregation: “The most wonderful unique thing is that people [here] don’t have to have a goal; they can just come. That would be my story: you don’t have to produce a product, you just come”. She contrasts the work of this church from other kinds of programs for the mentally ill: “It validates that people are people, that they have rights and that they are loved because they’re human beings, and that they’re not being evaluated all the time. Yes, in society we do it [evaluate], but if you live with mental illness, people are objectively doing it all the time, so this [is] the least judgmental place I’ve been in”. For the nurse, this possibility exists because it is a church:

The whole God thing is what it makes it special. People come here, and they say everybody is made by God, and everybody is loved by God, no more no less, and if that’s my premise, then my definition of friendship isn’t as narrow. I do think it’s a faith thing. I do. I do think you see God in everybody and that’s where I come from and that is what I try to teach students . . . We’re all more human than otherwise.

The parish nurse worries about what might be lost if the church’s memory of its communal identity shifted or changed: if Circle participants were expected to produce measurable outcomes from their time at Sacred Family, or if a priest stopped understanding conservation of and participation in joy as the heart of this church’s work. She wishes that the staff were able to stop worrying about running out of money for this work. She wishes that more churches would believe in this church’s work and freely give to this community so that Kayla and others like her might spend their time at Sacred Family as they see fit to do.

While Kayla serves as an example of how teleiopoietic memory is performed at Sacred Family, in a broader sense the fact that Kayla and others gather again and again in this neighborhood as a religious community to worship and work and play together is itself a form of teleiopoietic possibility: a visible, audible reminder to the surrounding community of the lives of persons considered of little worth in the broader landscape of the city. Sacred Family itself sends messages to its neighbors and to other churches in the city: a sign consisting of people whose lives are often not considered worth receiving or preserving because their identities as “the mentally ill” or “the poor” render them as problems to be solved rather than people whose lives and whose interpretations of and messages about these lives matter.

In the vanishing present, as congregants come and go from the church, the teleiopoietic possibility of the church occurs in the very act of gathering. At least four times a week its vans go out to bring the past back into the gentrifying present, attempting to graft difference into the homogenizing and highly marketable future of this neighborhood. The multiple voices and realities brought back into this place cause confusion and alarm for some neighbors. One member of the church remembers how she first became curious about the work of this congregation. Out driving to work in the early morning, she would see human figures emerging from the bushes and trees of the church’s landscape, in her words, “like the walking dead”. Spivak might describe it as: ghosts of neighborhoods past and peoples erased that emerge on the church lawn to haunt the future and to send messages out to those who would pay close attention. Now, this neighbor Donna, comes every Wednesday evening to sit outside of the church building with Martha, a woman diagnosed with schizophrenia, who cannot sit still inside the sanctuary for long but still wants to be part of this church’s liturgy. “We do our own thing, and God knows where we are”, is what Donna tells me. It is the negotiability of senders and

receivers, like Martha and Donna, that inspires a double take; in the Christian tradition, one could say that this is not only the result of human agents but that the Holy Spirit is at work, “playing the double bind” so as to complicate the erasure of poor people with mental illness from the landscapes of the neighborhood and of the city.

If it is to survive, Sacred Family’s religious imagination through teleiopoiesis must continue to attend to the messages sent and received on these city streets. Its practices of recalling its communal identity must touch the fragile cutting edges of the present time, working with its memories of the past so as to touch a different, otherwise future without turning disability or poverty into a commodity. At Sacred Family, playing the double bind involves interrogating, resisting, and recreating the urban maps through which some lives come to matter more than others. It also involves carefully mapping the relationships and practices of solidarity and of hierarchy or distance between church members: the places, names, and kinds of memory that count in the messages and stories passed on as part of a Christian tradition.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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