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Gentrification and the Black Church:
Mitigating Black Suburban Displacement in a Post COVID-19 World

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THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Jordan Ashlee McCray

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Patricia Ehrkamp, Professor of Geography

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Gentrification and the Black Church:
Mitigating Black Suburban Displacement in a Post COVID-19 World

Black churches have been playing an important, stabilizing and supportive role for their members, their neighborhoods, and their communities more broadly. However, these churches' memberships, community functions, and abilities to support their members have been threatened by the accelerating displacement of African Americans due to the ongoing effects of gentrification, defined by massive economic investment in low-income areas leading to the displacement of low-income residents. At the same time, COVID-19 has also changed the ways churches are able to deliver their support and outreach, with some moving their services to be completely virtual, and many outreach programs having to be canceled completely due to social distancing measures.

Given this rapidly shifting context of the role of the Black church in (sub)urban Black communities, this thesis asks how members of primarily Black churches in Alexandria, Virginia, an influential D.C. suburb, experience the effects of gentrification, the subsequent removal of public housing, and more recently, the economic uncertainty experienced by their congregants due to the recession caused by the current pandemic. This thesis draws upon literature from Black geographies, urban geographies, and critical geographies of religion to argue that through their outreach programs, Black churches attempt to mitigate intentional harm induced by the state, and that a de/postcolonial urban critique is necessary to understand the process of, and communal responses to, racial exclusion. In examining the complexities of Black suburban geographies, this thesis disrupts essentialist notions of suburbs as white spaces, and reveals the differing ways in which Black residents experience and respond to neoliberal suburban housing policies.

KEYWORDS: the Black church, suburban, gentrification, displacement, Alexandria, Virginia

Jordan Ashlee McCray

05/06/2021

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Gentrification and the Black Church:
Mitigating Black Suburban Displacement in a Post COVID-19 World

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Overview

This thesis serves to expand understandings on what constitutes a specifically Black geography. In focusing on how geographers might differently theorize gentrification a) through Black churches as centers that aim to intervene before moments of “racial banishment” (Roy 2019) that are b) situated in the suburbs, I add to a growing body of literature in geography and interdisciplinary urban studies on suburban economic theory, namely “neoliberal suburbanism” (Peck 2011) and “suburban gentrification” (Markley 2018). As the current pandemic has changed the urban populations’ relationship to the inner city, and the flight from these densely populated areas to the suburbs is ongoing, my work serves to dismantle the homogenous imagination of suburbs as spaces for upper- middle class white communities to ensure economic security. By recounting the history of the racialized creation of the suburbs and the legacy of the unequal effects of neoliberal gentrification during a pandemic, my work follows the ongoing process of Black dispossession through the lens of economic progress. In addition, this research shows the socio-spatial change of how churches serve as socially distanced centers of care and collective grieving given the mental and emotional impacts of COVID-19 and the collective racial reckoning during the summer of 2020.

1.2 Research Questions

I used the following research questions to guide my research on the relationship between Alexandria’s Black Churches and gentrification:

1. How do congregants of Black Baptist churches in Alexandria, Virginia experience the impact of demographic change within the neighborhoods surrounding their church communities?

While there are quantitative studies that provide evidence that D.C. and its surrounding suburbs have been gentrifying in the past few years, I set out to center a qualitative analysis of the process through examining the perceptions of church leaders. Question 1 sets the stage for such an analysis by asking interview questions about church leaders' perceptions of and experiences with demographic change. This question led to discussions on neighborliness and belonging, which is discussed more in depth in chapter 4.

2. How do these congregants assess the effects of these changes on the church and its programs (i.e. basic resource distribution, youth recreation, affordable housing)?

Interview questions inspired by my second research question allowed for more in-depth responses to how demographic change is experienced by providing an analytical anchor for my participants. In discussing specific programs, community change could be remembered through dates programs occurred, and tracked affectively through the atmosphere of each experience (i.e pride, disappointment, longing, etc). These findings are discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

3. How does this demographic change affect the church's strategies to engage with their surrounding communities?

This question ties in all of my conceptions of how outreach strategies would likely need to change to either fit the needs of new demographics, or to be able to reach the targeted audience who is no longer in direct contact. I discuss these findings in chapter 5.

My own experiences motivated me to ask these questions. Growing up in the Black Baptist church shaped my perceptions of space, place, and social inequities from a young age. Sunday after Sunday as we took the same route to church, the neighborhood slowly changed around me, a change that was also present in the church. Slowly, then all at once, I noticed that as the new gourmet doughnut shop sat in the middle of what is still a predominantly Black neighborhood, our Saturday church outings with the youth group became less and less frequent. As the new high-rises with Starbucks' on the bottom floor were erected, I noticed the children I grew up with started moving too far away for the church van to reach them each week. And as the youth population in my church started to go down, I saw myself with fewer peers, and fewer opportunities for youth programming. Further, I noticed that this correlated with the changing of the physical landscape of Alexandria. As one of my participants explained to me "if you moved back to Alexandria after a few years, you wouldn't even know where you were." Even as a resident of Alexandria, I frequently found myself having to reorient myself in a space I thought I knew Sunday after Sunday driving through the city.

In becoming a geographer in my undergraduate studies, I soon realized that this process was gentrification and the more critical theory I learned, the more I realized that gentrification involved intentional processes of displacement. One of the pastors interviewed argues that "they're disrupting communities", with "they" being both the processes of forced displacement and the individuals implementing them. As I grew older, outreach became a larger part of my experience. Church was never contained to just Sunday services – we were always expected to be in church multiple times a week and we were always expected to give back to the community. Thus, as I began to

conceptualize this project, outreach was inherent to my perception of not only the Black church, but of the qualitatively demographic change through the lens of religious spaces. It is with this context that I decided to research how the gentrification of Alexandria, Virginia has affected the city's Black churches through discussing how outreach strategies have changed. This project seeks to center the Black church as a Black geography through which the disproportionate effects of gentrification on Black and/or low-income communities can be examined.

1.3 The Black Church

The Black Church is a phrase generally used to refer to the breadth of African American Christian churches in the United States. In one of the largest studies on Black Christian churches in the U.S. (1990), Lincoln and Mamiya recognize "the black church" as part of "the pluralism of black Christian churches in the United States", and center the significance of Black churches as the oldest institution within Black communities, predating even the Black family. While I use this phrase for my title and throughout my work, I acknowledge that it is hegemonic in nature by not taking into account non-Christian houses of worship and traditions that shaped the Black experience, such as hoodoo (e.g., Hazzard-Donald 2012). The centrality of the "Black church" to Black liberatory history and contemporary Black communities is further discussed in my conceptual framework.

1.4 Mapping Alexandria, Virginia

Figure 1 D.C. Metropolitan Area, Alexandria Focus

Alexandria, Virginia is a prominent D.C. suburb, located just outside of Washington, D.C. Due to its proximity to the capital of the United States, as well as to the plantation of the U.S.' first president, Mount Vernon, Alexandria has a rich history rooted in the colonial United States. Thus, it is important that I provide spatial context to situate the site of my analysis. However, when making my indicator maps for this project, it became clear that visually representing Alexandria as I, and many residents, understand it would prove more difficult than expected. The physical boundaries that demarcate "Alexandria" in census data I have found thus far refer to "The City of Alexandria" that is also within Alexandria County. However, there are parts of "Alexandria," as defined by mailing addresses, that are also part of neighboring "Fairfax County" (see figure 1).

The part of Alexandria in which I was raised, and in which one of the churches resides, lies in that liminal space that is both "Fairfax county" and "Alexandria city." Further, in publicly available data sets, I was unable to find a boundary to separate the Alexandria mailing addresses within Fairfax county from neighboring Springfield or Gum Springs.

Aside from complicating how I might portray my understanding of "Alexandria, Virginia," this dilemma also opens an avenue for discussing the role of geographic boundaries in urban policy. While my first instinct was to claim this anomaly "made no sense," the new training I had acquired as a critical urban geographer led me to believe the opposite- that this seemingly innocent geographical discrepancy has to be intentional. Thus, while the map above demarcates the "City of Alexandria," it does not fully capture Alexandria as extensively as it is generally understood both by myself and my participants. Alexandria more broadly, along with a brief recounting of the city's urban history, will be further explored in the conceptual framework chapter. Indicator maps that spatially situate the churches within the city are found in chapter 3 (see figure 2).

1.5 Global Context

In the midst of COVID-19 and protests against the systemic racism affecting African-Americans in contemporary cities, Black churches have been playing an important, stabilizing and supportive role for their members, their neighborhoods, and their communities more broadly. From continuing their weekly services as spaces for communal processing and centering their weekly sermons on the importance of religion in social justice, to hosting rallies in major cities such as Washington D.C., they have continued the legacy of being a pillar to Black communities since the inception of

American chattel slavery. Though they were not central to my project creation, the varied unprecedented events that characterized the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter global movement and COVID-19 global pandemic, are major contextual keys to my research.

On March 23, 2020, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam ordered the first city-wide shut down of non-essential business and K-12 schools (Northam 2020) just under two weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020) Many churches responded by closing entirely while some switched to virtual services, all for the sake of adhering to public health recommendations of social distancing. Only a few short months later, Derek Chauvin, a police officer, murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis during an arrest, sparking a resurgence in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. This led to a global insurrection in which colonial and confederate statues were toppled, police precincts were burned, and protests were sustained for months in various cities in order to force these cities to reduce police budgets. Though many Black churches served as spaces of racial support prior to the summer of 2020, and most have a history of social justice, some pastors interviewed described this as a notable event that they responded to within their congregations, and within the communities at large through rallies and sermons encouraging parishioners to take part in justice movements.

Thus, the context in which I conducted research was drastically different from the world in which I conceptualized the project. COVID-19 has changed the ways churches are able to deliver their support and outreach, with some moving their services to be completely virtual, and many outreach programs having to be canceled completely due to

social distancing measures. Further, the movement for Black lives evoked an immediacy to discuss racial justice for most of the pastors. Given this rapidly shifting context of the role of the Black church in (sub)urban Black communities, I asked members of primarily Black churches in Alexandria, Virginia, an influential D.C. suburb, to discuss their experiences with the effects of gentrification, the subsequent removal of public housing, and more recently, the effects of the current pandemic on their congregants and their churches' functioning.

In Chapter 2, I review the three subfields of geographic literature I draw from to make my theoretical argument: Black geographies, critical geographies of religion, and urban geographies. The chapter begins by theoretically situating the site of Black churches as historically significant and one of the first formal institutions within Black communities in the U.S. Further, in employing Ananya Roy's de/post-colonial urban intervention of "racial banishment" (2019) I argue that like the modern processes of gentrification and neoliberalism, the Black church has its roots in settler-colonial U.S. logics of displacement and dispossession of Black communities and thus, the Black church is an ideal site through which to analyze their ongoing effects. Additionally, I trace literature on suburbanism and gentrification to situate racial banishment as a process that applies beyond the inner city.

In Chapter 3 I detail my research design. I lay out in depth my research methods in addition to describing how my positionality affected how I conducted my research. I begin with an overview of the sample of churches and participants. After a discussion of my process to ensure ethical treatment of human subjects through the International Review Board (IRB), I then discuss how my positionality affected my interviews. I

conducted all interviews through zoom using a semi- structured format. I end with a discussion of the difficulties of conducting digital research and explain how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the research process.

I begin my empirical analysis in chapter 4 which is primarily devoted to the shifting sense of place participants feel due to the changing of Alexandria over the past few decades. I argue that the interviews analyzed in chapter 4 confirm that Alexandria has undergone demographic and spatial change that has caused tensions between churches and their newer neighbors. The interviews reveal that while processes such as the redevelopment or removal of affordable housing projects play a role in the out-migration of the city's Black and/or low-income residents, some also leave of their own free will. Ultimately, participants reveal feeling pride in their community and a duty to serve those around them, while acknowledging tensions they must navigate with what they perceive to be a whiter population.

In chapter 5 my empirical analysis turns to examining the day-to-day aspects of running the church and that outreach for these churches is theologically grounded. After clarifying what is meant by spiritual and material outreach, I provide examples of some programs within the churches interviewed. I then analyze the materiality of these programs using literature that discusses Black religious outreach as filling gaps in state-sponsored welfare (Hackworth 2010, Barber 2015, McCutcheon 2015) and examine the ideology as one rooted in racial uplift and the politics of respectability (Harris 2003, McCutcheon 2015, Reese 2019). The chapter ends with an examination of how church leaders have perceived social distancing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic as having

long-term benefits in making their churches more adaptable, while acknowledging the emotional and mental toll it has taken on their congregations.

I conclude in chapter 6 by summarizing my research findings in the context of the interviews analyzed in the previous chapters and share implications in geographic research as well as potential future directions. My research shows that suburbs are complex spaces in which homogenous conceptualizations of the intersections of race and class are contested. My interviews with Black church leaders in Alexandria, Virginia reveal that suburbs are sites of Black geographies in which Black residents experience and respond to neoliberal suburban housing policies in varying ways.

CHAPTER 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gentrification in the D.C. area is recognized as the most intense in the United States, leading to the displacement of primarily poor and working-class communities of color (Mellendorf, 2019). The rapid influx of corporations and the middle/upper middle class people to work for them—Amazon being the highest profile case in the Arlington region directly south of the district (Schweitzer, 2019)—forces out communities that lived in the area before investment as prices, including rent and cost of living, rise beyond these communities' economic capacity. These developments are at the center of a growing body of qualitative research on how D.C. area gentrification affects the Black population generally (Prince, 2014), in relation to food access (Reese, 2019), the appropriation of Black aesthetics as central to the process (Summers, 2019), and the functioning of the Black church (Chatman, 2017). Together, these works demonstrate the severity of the issue.

2.1 African American History in Alexandria

Predominantly Black churches, a set of institutions integral to Black communities of D.C., have been among the institutions most affected by Black displacement (Ram, 2012; Chatman, 2017; Holmes, 2018; Zylstra, 2019). As Black communities are priced out of the district and forced elsewhere, churches lack a sufficient congregation with which to economically upkeep the physical space of the church. In Alexandria, Virginia more specifically, a suburb eight miles south of the capitol, Black churches have been integral to the creation and maintenance of the city's Black communities from enslavement to today. Despite Alexandria's historical significance as a former part of the

district in the 19th century (Pope 2011) and current home to many prominent politicians (Gold 2011), there are not many resources available that detail the city's history. The City of Alexandria's official website does, however, contain resources that outline the history of African American communities in the city. The importance of Alexandria's Black history to its communities is made clear through the formation of the Alexandria Society for the Preservation of Black Heritage, which supports the maintenance of the Alexandria Black History Museum (City of Alexandria, 2015).

Black churches have been integral to the survival of African American communities in Alexandria that were first recorded as Free Black communities in the 1790 national census. At that time, 52 freed persons resided in Alexandria, leading to the formalization of Black institutions in the city at around the same time (City of Alexandria, 2020c), as some newly freed enslaved persons jointly rented and/ or purchased land for the purpose of building community churches (Cressey 1995a & 1995b, Ebenezer Baptist Church n.d.). Some of the most historically significant of Alexandria's first Black churches include Alfred Street Baptist church, founded in 1803, which was the first Black Baptist church in Alexandria (Alfred Street Baptist Church 2020); Roberts Memorial United Methodist church, which claims the oldest African-American church building in the city built in 1834, four years after its multi-racial founding (BHCourageousJourney, n.d.); and Beulah Baptist Church, the first church to be founded in Alexandria after Union occupation of the Civil War, that was involved in providing formalized education for runaway enslaved persons despite Virginia law which rendered this illegal (Beulah Baptist Church 2020). Black churches in Alexandria, then, became important sites of communal support as the first formalized institutions within the

city's Black communities. Since the 19th century, African American churches have spread throughout Alexandria, with some being founded as recently as the new millennium.

In addition to specifically Black churches, post-Civil War Black neighborhoods were also central to the survival of the city's Black communities. The digital pamphlet titled "A Remarkable and Courageous Journey: A Guide to Alexandria's African American History" details each of the city's historically Black neighborhoods which more recently, has been adapted into a driving tour to encourage socially distanced engagement with the city's Black history. Of these various neighborhoods includes Uptown/Parker-Grey, a neighborhood of note to several of my interviewees, and the Bottoms neighborhood, which is the oldest African American neighborhood in the City of Alexandria, and is home to the historic Alfred Street Baptist Church.

The Ramsey Homes, established during the second world war to house African American defense workers, are an example of one of Alexandria's earliest affordable housing projects (City of Alexandria, 2019a). The housing project is currently being replaced by a mix of low-income and market rate apartments, a strategy that has been critiqued by urban theorists as ineffective (Newman and Wyly 2006). However, according to Resolution 830, established in 1981, each low-income unit will be replaced on a "one for one" basis (City of Alexandria, 2019b), though likely not in the same region. A review of the resolution prompted the 2013 creation of a "housing master plan" which was approved by the Alexandria city council to combat the drastic decline in affordable housing, like the demolition of the Ramsey homes (City of Alexandria, 2020b). As of 2017, Alexandria saw a 90% decline in its affordable homes since 2000 (Whitehead 2017).

It is within this context of the City of Alexandria that I situate my examination of Black urban religious geographies, aiming to contribute to raced, spatial understandings of these spaces. Further, in focusing on how we might differently theorize gentrification a) through centers that aim to intervene before moments of racial banishment (Roy, 2019) and that are b) situated in the suburbs, I contribute a new conceptualization of displacement to ongoing conversations in urban political geographies.

2.2 Black Geographies

In an effort to understand the racialized aspect of processes of gentrification that occur in the Washington, D.C. region, I turn to works that explore how African American communities as a whole experience gentrification (Prince 2014, Reese 2019, Summers 2019), and what impact gentrification has specifically on the city's Black churches (Chatman 2017).

Sabiyha Prince's (2014) ethnographic study of how African American D.C. residents across class lines experience and combat gentrification gives insight into the multiple axes of exclusion endured by Black Washingtonians. Similarly, Brandi Thompson Summers' *Black in Place* (2019) examines how gentrification in the district is a specifically raced and classed process that aims to displace poor Black D.C. residents from the area and exclude them from being welcome in the "Chocolate City" that profits from the aestheticization of Blackness. Summers creates the theory of *Black aesthetic emplacement* to explain the seemingly contradictory process of the city claiming Black culture and aesthetics as desirable and authentic to the D.C. experience, while rendering

the Black individuals that cultivated such a lucrative aesthetic undesirable, and from a neoliberal policy standpoint, disposable.

One tangible example of how gentrification disproportionately affects African American D.C. residents at the intersection of race and class is unequal access to food distribution systems. In *Black Food Geographies* (2019), Ashanté Reese explores the majority and historically Black Deanwood neighborhood of Washington D.C. and the residents' relationships to food in a heavily gentrified city. Further, she exposes how decades of urban policy meant to specifically target poor Black residents in the inner city through inequitable food systems have been resisted, and the agency these residents assert in their navigation of D.C.'s intentionally exclusive commercial ordinances. Reese theorizes that *geographies of self-reliance* undergird the collective response to navigating the inequities found both in formalized and alternative food systems within a structural "food apartheid… that affirm[s] and normalize[s] such practices" (2019, 7). As I show in chapter 5, Black churches are part of the collective response to this "food apartheid" that the D.C. region experiences currently, and have historically served as sites of resource distribution for Black communities due to purposeful exclusion from federal social welfare programs (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, Barber 2015).

Gentrification has serious consequences for both Black churches in DC, and the churches in Alexandria that are at the center of my study. Michelle Coghill Chatman (2017) explores how processes of removal that disproportionately affect D.C's Black residents have subsequently affected the city's Black churches. In "Talking about Tally's Corner" Chatman uses qualitative research to discuss how church elders within the historical Mt. Zion church have experienced the effects of neighborhood change. Some of

these experiences include disagreements with newer residents, often white, regarding parking ordinances and the aesthetics of the church. One of Chatman's participants regards the trend of churches moving out of the city center, into suburbs, as "large megachurches" and "massive parking lots" as disastrous, and interestingly, as a choice (44). However, as my interviews show (see chapters 4 and 5), the suburbs of D.C. are not a safe haven from the ills that affect the inner-city Black churches. Some church leaders revealed that they are debating whether to move farther even from the inner suburbs due the increase in cost of living in the area. Their interviews reveal that the spatial logistics of emplacing churches in regions that hold historical, cultural, and spiritual meaning are subsumed by economic logistics which are increasingly more central to decision making.

Works that intentionally utilize a Black geographies framework are essential to this project as I insist on the necessity of race as an analytic through which to explore spatial processes and the negotiations that occur as a result of these processes. Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* (2006) posits a Black feminist understanding of space that she traces through fiction and archives, from the space of the slave ship to modern day Canada. Her assertion that "black matters… are spatial matters" (2006, xiv) is a succinct, yet long overdue claim to intellectual space by Black academics in the discipline of Geography. The edited collection *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007) takes up this collective claim to space through exploring the "tension between the mapped and the unknown" (4) in the geographies of the African diaspora. McKittrick and Woods note in the introduction that while Blackness is often explored in positivist terms throughout space, the multiplicities of Black spaces are often rendered as

"unknowable" in the academy due to its inherent interdisciplinary nature, and subsequent refusal to be "known" cartographically (6-7).

Both *Demonic Grounds* (2006) and *Black geographies and the politics of place* (2007) render the "invisible" geography of racism within geography itself visible (McKittrick 2006; 7, 10-11) by drawing attention to the notable lack of discussions around race in most of the discipline's history. Indeed, as Audrey Kobayashi (2014, 645) asserts "Theory is always performed. It matters who thinks what, and where, and how ideas are taken up in a disciplinary context". Thus racism, defined by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2007, 28), was left unchecked to pervade the spaces of geography departments themselves as theories of anti-racism were not actively being performed. In drawing from the labor of the Black geographers that have come before me, and continue to provide professional, academic, and emotional support for me to engage in this work, I also recognize the struggles that have come from forcefully carving out a space within a discipline that has systemically excluded us.

As Camilla Hawthorne (2019) notes, much of the work of Black geographies is not solely theoretical work within the discipline, but work on the departments themselves inhabited by Black geographers. Black geographers, then, are uniquely aware of the ways in which "theory" and "praxis", and a lack of critical engagement with both, manifest in the "killing fields" of the academy (Hamilton 2020. This is proven in "Visceral Geographies", in which Joshi et. al. (2015) detail the harmful effects of majority white geography spaces on the spaces of bodies of color. They found that many geographers of color were forced to react internally to the microaggressions they encountered regularly,

and that Black women experience them in unique ways. I am motivated in framing this project as a geographic one due to the experiences the authors outline in these papers, viewing it as a commitment to continuing the work of carving out spaces of belonging and legitimacy for Black thought in the discipline.

2.3 Black Feminist Epistemologies and Religion

Afro-centric feminist (or Black feminist) thought is central to the aforementioned scholars (Joshi et. al. 2015, Hamilton 2020, Hawthorne 2019) and their writings on creating a more inclusive academy, as well as to my conceptualization of the cultural and epistemic importance of the Black church. These accounts demonstrate the necessity of continually formalizing an Afro-centric feminist epistemology, which Patricia Hill Collins claims is necessary to the maintenance of academic Black thought (1989), within the field of geography. Highly relevant to this conceptual framework, Collins argues that the Afro-centric feminist episteme that produces Black feminist work is a necessary alternative, not replacement, to the white male epistemologies that dominate the academy. She also notes the importance of the Black church to our communities as centers of culturally specific knowledge, and as spaces in which the episteme is reproduced and co-created.

As Black epistemology is inherently intersectional, many Black scholars who study secular topics also credit the importance of Black religion within their theorizations (Woods 1998, Robinson 2000, Johnson 2001, Muhammad, 2010, Bailey 2013, Eaves 2017). For example, Clyde Woods notes the centrality of Black religion to Black epistemologies in *Development Arrested* (1998). He argues that the “blues epistemology”

of the Mississippi Delta region, or “the tradition of development theory and practice among working-class African-Americans” that serves as “a system of explanation that informs their daily life, organizational activity, culture, religion, and social movements” (16) is continually disregarded in the region’s public policy. Woods claims religion is essential to the “collective self” organized through life in the “blues bloc” (29), from making sense of communal aspirations for upward mobility (83) to the inextricable link between Black spirituals and blues music (112). Relatedly, Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (2000) also notes the varied significance of religion in his tracing of how racialization is inherent to political economy. Notably, Robinson mentions the role of erasure of Black culture, including religion, as part of the dehumanization central to the trans-Atlantic slave trade (81).

Just as the importance of Black religion in the creation of Black collectivity is undeniable, so too are some of the more negative ways in which it is employed, including the classism perpetuated by Black Baptist women in their attempts to overcome essentialist stereotypes of Blackness (Muhammad 2010), and homophobic ideology within the Black community that is often justified through religion (Johnson 2001, Bailey 2013). In *Butch Queens Up in Pumps,* Bailey explores the space of the Black ballroom scene as an important one of identity formation and place making against white queer spaces, which are often exclusionary based on race, and Black spaces, which conversely can exclude those on the bases of gender and sexuality. One interviewee in particular noted that in Detroit, the city in which Bailey conducted their research, much of the access available to Black communities for HIV/AIDs support is regulated by “the

church", often leading to the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ individuals who most direly need those resources (190).

Muhammad's historiography of the ways some Black communities attempted to create a more polished image of Blackness reveals that Black religious institutions were part of the movement to counter that which permeated the mainstream U.S. imagination after the Civil War and beyond. *Condemnation of Blackness* (Muhammad 2010) traces the criminalization of African Americans throughout the United States as a form of state-control post-abolition. By pathologizing Black culture and families under the guise of objectivity, academic disciplines, particularly, social sciences and statistics, were employed to render Blackness synonymous to danger and criminality.

While churches are often contradictory, or explicitly exclusionary in some cases, many Black people emphasize the importance the church has had in shaping their racial consciousness. E. Patrick Johnson argues that for African Americans who grew up in religious households, the church is part of the "homeplace" that taught them how to survive in a racially oppressive world (Johnson 2001, 19), and thus is not easily turned from. Even those who grow to disagree with the more rigid teachings of the church, namely in relation to questions of exclusion based on gender identity and sexuality, may choose to limit their queer embodiment for the sake of enjoying faith-based practices (Eaves 2017). Latoya Eaves acknowledges this tension in "Black Geographic possibilities: On a Queer Black South" in which she "[unsettles] the myopic identities of the American South" (81) by centering both race and sexuality as axes of difference that complicate how "the south" is experienced in a variety of ways. Eaves notes that throughout her interviews, "religion had a strong impact on Black women's navigational

processes within sociospatial formations" (91), including the sense of freedom assumed to be elsewhere, away from the heteronormative spaces of Christian homes or places of worship. In spite of this, Eaves' interviewees continually engage with their religion, both ideologically and within the physical space of the church (2017, 91-92).

This intersectional complexity, the simultaneous push and pull experienced by Black LGBTQ+ parishioners, is just one example of the necessity of exploring physical and ideological religious spaces within an intentionally raced framework. By examining the breadth of what the Black church offers the Black community, we can begin to understand the sociopolitical complexities that render them both spaces of exclusion, and of sites of radical politics that center moral and material support for its communities, especially for those threatened by gentrification and displacement.

2.4 Critical geographies of religion

Though religion is recognized by many Black geographers as central to African American communities and specifically Black senses of space, not much work has been done on Black religious spaces themselves. Most work on "the Black church" has been conducted by sociologists, with the most in-depth study conducted by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Here, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, 17) define the Black church as "the pluralism of Black Christian churches in the United States", and situate it as the oldest and most stable institution within the Black community, "the only stable and coherent institutional area to emerge from slavery". They present three theoretical conceptualizations of the Black church to Black religious studies: that any examination of Black churches must begin

with specifically African American theological grounding, or *the Black sacred cosmos* (2); an assertion of the Black church as the "cultural womb of the black community" (8); and a six-pronged dialectical model of the seemingly dichotomous functions of the Black church.

Most central to my examination of how Black churches experience gentrification is their second theoretical offering. In tracing the centrality of the Black church in Black culture, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) propose a "partial differentiation" framework of the Black church that recognizes how it is necessarily intertwined with Black society, contradicting the "complete differentiation" view of religious institutions that starkly separates any mutual influence between sacred and secular matters (9-10). In centering the institutional orientation to the secular the Black church has always necessitated to negate anti-Black "unfreedom", I see this as being theologically grounded in "the promise of salvation" (5).

Kendra H. Barber (2015) delves into arguments for and against a contemporary secular orientation of the Black church. In examining the enduring role of the Black church in the public sphere as providing material and moral support for its communities, Barber notes that social support is offered in these spaces not as an alternative to state-sponsored social welfare, but in place of them. While some argue for a clear demarcation between secular and sacred support, Barber offers the Black church should not be discouraged from mobilizing around social welfare, as that it has been a major function of the Black church due to histories of state- sponsored racial segregation and economic oppression.

Harris-Lacewell (2007) details how this communal reliance on the Black church is often utilized in mainstream American political movements. The article goes on to question if this remains a viable campaigning strategy due to the "increasingly un-churched", and the opposing "increasingly mega-churched" (182). Harris-Lacewell proposes that a theological examination of these trends exposes an increase of subscribing to "prosperity gospel", a more individualistic ideology that centers financial freedom as the desired outcome of religious piety (187). In spite of a rise religious individualism, and increasing detachment from the organization of the Black church, Harris-Lacewell concludes that it is the cultural and political legacy of the Black church as birthing Black culture that marks it a target of political participation, rather than it being the singular most strategic center of Black voter mobilization.

As the fight for freedom has always been a collective effort for African Americans, as has the maintenance of Black religion, Lincoln and Mamiya's analysis is solely institutional and collective. Additionally, both Barber (2015) and Harris-Lacewell (2007) analyze the significance of the collectivity that characterizes the Black church. Other works on the Black church, however, demonstrate how religious scholars might benefit from work that focuses on varied scales of engagement.

In "Doing Black Christianity" (2019) for example, Shonta' E. Allen expands on Lincoln and Mamiya's examination of Black Christian spaces beyond an institutional analysis or theological analysis, introducing the idea of an "individual level frame, which considers the agency of Black Christian actors by examining how they construct identity and embody space" (Allen, abstract). The religious views of Bree Newsome Bass, an activist known for tearing down a confederate flag "in the name of God" (10), are

examined to situate Black Christianity as an individual action that believers perform, rather than solely as a collective belief. This article provides a framework in which to situate my examinations of the churches as "institutional" through examining outreach, "theological" through discursive analysis and asking to provide religious texts, and "individual" in giving special attention to each individual's duties within the church. As I will examine later, each interviewee's motivations for holding leadership positions within their home church are deeply personal and are influenced by a variety of social factors. This attention to the individual, then, further supports a view of the Black church that is not "amorphous, lusterless", and "homogenous sites of dispossession" (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, xii; McKittrick 2006, 4).

Allen (2019), Barber (2015), and Harris-Lacewell (2007) continue the legacy of social research that traces the modern influence of the Black church as rooted in the conditions of enslavement, and later segregation, that necessitated a formalized sphere of Black thought. I aim to bridge this gap between sociology and geography in Black religious studies, through engaging Black understandings of space and spatial understandings of religion to existing scholarship on Black religion on individual, ideological, and institutional scales (Allen 2019).

The literature within critical geographies of religion is necessary to assert that religion is an inherently political institution, and recognizes that churches often serve to materially improve the lives of those living in their surrounding communities, often with ideological contingencies. I situate my work within Hopkins et. al's (2013) call for a more diverse engagement with religious geographies. Though class, sexuality, and nationality are the only components of potential "future directions" for religious

geographies mentioned by the authors (2013, 16-17) they themselves engage with axes of race and gender in other works. Where Lily Kong examines the conflation of race and religion within the demarcation between 'sacred' and 'secular' spaces (2016), Peter Hopkins notes the importance of feminist methodologies in examining "gender relations, positionalities, and emotions" in critical religious research (2009). Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel have also responded to this call with research on the racialization of immigrants in southern religious spaces (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014 2016), which they argue is part of "a strategy of growing by caring… [for] those who are ethnically and culturally different" (2014, 321). Ehrkamp and Nagel also note the influence that Jim Crow era segregation has had on the development of religious spaces in the United States south, a legacy that undergirds the racial divide. In later work, they note that not only are immigrants relegated to the space of the "foreign Other" (2016, 1043), but that access to the social citizenship religious affiliation promises is granted on the perception of the immigrants' ability to realize the American dream. Ehrkamp and Nagel demonstrate the ways in which race, along with class and legal status, serves to critically shape religious spaces into ones of political contention (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014 & 2016).

In addition to political geography, works by cultural geographers have taken up the mantel in examining the performance of religion, and the maintenance of religious institutions, as spatial practices. For example, in "Food, faith, and the everyday struggle for Black urban community", Priscilla McCutcheon details her qualitative approach to understanding the role of volunteer run emergency food program in Atlanta, GA's historic Wheat Street Baptist Church (2015). Central to the analysis is McCutcheon's theorization of the Black church as "a black counterpublic space and a black geography

where black people are actively defining space materially and discursively" (McCutcheon 2015, 391). The Black counterpublic, much like the episteme posited by Patricia Hill Collins (1989), serves to validate the experiences of Black communities and individuals. And in the case of Wheat Street, the counterpublic space fostered through the food program is used to further messages of racial uplift by engaging in 'everyday talk', a casual form of discussion around sociopolitical issues that is utilized in the space of the Black church, and in events centered around food (392). While not specifically focused on food, my understanding is guided by McCutcheon's attention to the ideology attached to material outreach in the discipline. It further matters that these efforts are occurring within the Black counterpublic as a subaltern ideological space where Black identity is communally negotiated (McCutcheon, 2015) as it centers Black religion, and specifically Black Christianity aside from normative white views of religion to an institution that is often, though not always, deployed in service of radical change in U.S. sociopolitical movements.

In acknowledging the lack of critical engagement with religion in cultural geographies, Claire Dwyer asks "if religion is suddenly "everywhere" in geography.... **what might cultural geographies bring to the salience of religion in debates in the social sciences**?" (2016, 758). As my work centers the specific culture of Black Baptist spaces, Dwyer's question leads me to question what a cultural analysis of critical geographies of religion can add to understandings of urban political geographies. I argue that the field of Black geographies which is largely cultural, as Black is both "race" and "ethnicity", expands debates on the importance of religion in the field of geography. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, religion is central to the collective Black episteme due

to our shared culture, defined by Lincoln and Mamiya as “the sum of the options for creative survival” (3). Thus, the axis of race is necessary to uncover one very pertinent example of the centrality of religion of how some experience the world, whether they choose to actively engage in said religion or not. When Blackness as an analytic is centered, the answer to Dwyer’s question is revealed, as Blackness, Black culture, and Black religion are all necessarily intertwined in the sphere and spaces of “the Black church”.

2.5 Centering Blackness in (Sub)urban Geographies

Racial discrimination, particularly against African Americans, has been central to the creation and maintenance of the United States. From the implementation of the three-fifth’s compromise within the governing legislature the U.S. relies on even today, to redlining, to ongoing housing discrimination, racial discrimination only shifts to fit the contours of acceptable legality, but never disappears. Racial segregation is central to racial discrimination as the practice of redlining shows. These practices have important consequences for today’s suburbs that are too often imagined as white spaces. As Richard Rothstein argues in *The Color of Law* (2017), “scores of racially explicit laws, regulations, and government practices combined to create a nationwide system of urban ghettos, surrounded by white suburbs” (25). My study seeks to center the ways in which neoliberal (sub)urban policies disproportionately affect racialized communities which, in turn, complicates notions of suburbs as “white” by examining claims by Black churches to suburban spaces.

Texts from urban geographies offer insights into the political and economic structuring of cities (Peck et. al., 2009 & 2013, Newman and Wyly, 2016), and critically examine the lack of engagement with other forms of power (Larner 2003, Roy 2017 & 2019, Addie and Fraser 2019). Theorizations on “neoliberal urbanism” examine the unique form that post-Keynesian free market ideology has taken in urban settings (Peck et. al. 2009, 2013). However, in plotting the path from the “welfare city” to the “neoliberal city”, the authors do not take into account axes of differences of those living through these changes. Wendy Larner offers four possibilities for a more critical engagement with ‘neoliberalization’ in academic literature (2003). In calling for a better engagement with “other forms of power,” Larner (2003, 512) asks “how, for example, have the self-defined needs of social movements, cultural groups, and neighbourhoods been reconfigured and transformed into sites of self-government under neoliberalism?" In the context of my study, this raises questions if Black churches are even included in the neoliberalization of religious spaces, and if so, how this economic engagement with the state might function differently due to the unique needs of the Black community, as compared to the churches in Hackworth’s (2010) study.

Of the varying forms of power mentioned by Larner, “imperialism, police, discipline, punishment, and incarceration," (2013, 512) are centered by other urban geographers through the process of gentrification (Roy 2017 & 2019, Addie and Fraser 2019). Where neoliberalism is the decentralization of federal government and power, gentrification is one if its outcomes- the state passing policy to support private companies in the realm of housing, etc.

First coined by Ruth Glass in 1964, the term gentrification generally refers to an influx of public and private economic capital that raises costs of living, leading to eventual displacement of the "original" residents, and a shift of the cultural embodiment of the area (Brown-Saracino 2013, 12). Since the original conception of the term, however, questions of what is "classified" as gentrification have arisen, given Glass created the term specifically in regards to 1960s London with no intention of it being deployed beyond this context (Brown-Saracino 2013, 16). Some debate has arisen regarding the process of gentrification itself, the motivation of the middle- class "gentry", and the specific market conditions needed to define a region as "gentrified". In my framework particularly, given Glass' identification of "'a switch from suburban to urban aspirations'… as a defining characteristic" of gentrification (2013, 15), I am led to ask- can the suburbs themselves be transformed by the gentry?

Recent work by geographers has begun to answer this question. In his global examination in *Suburban Planet*, Roger Keil (2018) suggests "suburban theory" as a counter to the centralist bias in urban theory. Keil aims to center "suburbanization" as a process, and "suburbanism" as a way of extracting the suburbs as simply "subsets of the city", and proposes instead that urban theorists look at suburbs on "their own merits" (72). Karen Tongson (2011) does just that. In *Relocations,* Tongson situates the suburb as a geography in which queerness is developed and negotiated, pushing back against the rural/ urban dichotomy that dominates discussions of queer geographies. By centering the "queer of color suburban imaginary" of Southern California (2), Tongson bears witness to "the Others who were economically quarantined from the suburban good life during the age of white flight", i.e. immigrants, queers of color, and the working class (9). Thus,

Tongson not only deploys "suburban theory" as meant by Keil, a centering of the suburbs as a useful analytic, but also complicates the space of the suburbs themselves as continually re-constructing this exclusion thought to be stuck in the post-war United States.

Examining the suburb on "its own merits" (Keil 2018, 908), rather than solely relationally through analyzing examples of the increase of "urban subgovernance", Jamie Peck (2011) argues that the relationship between (sub)urban planning and economics shifts throughout time, but continues to serve the economically privileged. Peck (2011) arrives at this conclusion through his study of the parallel rises of neoliberalism and the importance of the suburbs in America. Peck develops this argument by tracing "the zigzagging course of neoliberalization" that makes way for "decentralized, privatist, and market-oriented approaches" (885) that render the suburb the ideal place as "freedom's final frontier" for those who see government deregulation as a return to inalienable rights (886). Peck also specifically examines Northern Virginia suburbs (Loudon County) as part of his argument through the development of the area due to the privatization of the government technological sector.

(Sub)urban economic processes within the D.C. metropolitan region are also examined by Perry and Waters (2012) who trace the history of Arlington County's Black businesses from the Civil War to integration, with the segregation of Black and white neighborhoods being the primary axis of analysis. They argue that the white movement into the region led to the segregation of pre- established Black communities, and that this is one of the regions Arlington County's Black entrepreneurship shows evidence of both southern and northern cities. This article helps me to situate my work as being part of a

larger process of racial capitalist exclusion in the D.C. metropolitan area as Perry and Waters center Arlington as a historically Black community disrupted by white in-migration. Additionally, the introduction offers a good historical background of the formation of the Black community in the Alexandria/ Arlington region from first arrival in 1600.

Examining the (re)construction of the suburbs necessitates a racial understanding of the shifting nature of spatial exclusion under new names—such as gentrification or "new Urbanism." Scott Markley's overview of the effects of "new Urbanism" in the inner suburbs of Atlanta Georgia (2018) centers gentrification as a process that exists in the suburbs. Markley found that "new Urbanism" which broadly encompasses a variety of redevelopment efforts, leads to exclusion rather than improving the built environment of these communities, subsequently raising cost of living and forcing working- class communities of color out. This occurs in higher levels within Latino neighborhoods, through the demolition of both public housing projects and the replacement of private apartment complexes (613). As Markley's work demonstrates, suburbs are no longer solely "white," though processes of segregation through economic and racial banishment (Roy 2019) still influence their spatial reproduction.

This centering of the racialized nature of the suburbs is critical not only for my work, but to widespread understandings of how race is experienced in spaces beyond the "rural" and "urban". From Donald Trump's pleas for suburban women to "please like [him]" (Galofaro, Oct 2020), to Congresswoman Alexandria Occasio- Cortez' inaccurate claim that a world without police "looks like the suburbs" (Nopper, Jul 2020), the suburbs are beginning to take center stage again in American economics and politics with

race as an invisible (or misrepresented) factor of their continued reproduction. Further, given the flight back to the suburbs in the summer of 2020 due to social distancing measure enacted to slow the spread of COVID-19, accurate portrayals of the suburbs are necessary to combat the classist, racist depiction of suburbs as sites of refuge for rich inner-city urbanites, and to center suburbs as spaces of permanent residency for communities of all backgrounds in which the "right to stay put" (Newman and Wyly 2006) is increasingly being contested.

More recently, critical theorizations of neoliberalism, gentrification, and forced/ encouraged displacement have been taken up by urban geographers. Addie and Fraser (2019) theorize the gentrification of Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood as a continuation of settler colonial policies targeted at racial minorities. Their analysis of the gentrification of Over-the-Rhine serves as an example of expanding examinations of cultural and affective tactics used to transform and contest neighborhood change (2019, abstract). The shift from the city's economic accessibility to the rising housing prices (1372) has led to the similar process of "accelerated out-migration of the neighborhood's low income, primarily Black, population" (1373) that has occurred in the district and its surrounding suburbs. This process goes beyond the gentrification and (sub)urban neoliberalism framework that is most often used to characterize urban development, and frames the process as "also a spatial and racial project to reimagine the city and whom cities are for" (1373).

Similarly, Ananya Roy's various insights into the process of gentrification in Los Angeles conceptualize it as one rooted in material dispossession which makes the way for a legal retraction of personhood, also specifically targeted at people of color (2017).

Roy's theory of "dispossessive collectivism" centers a decolonial approach to the question of the urban land question of who it belongs to/who is allowed to belong, and the subsequent evictions by state institutions that attempt to claim ownership to inhabited space (2017). By engaging with Black and Indigenous de/postcolonial urban theorists, Roy centers "an ethics of human life in the face of social death" (2017, A3). Further, in centering both the role of the state and the disproportionate effects of dispossession on Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, Roy suggests a greater engagement with the theory of "racial banishment" to complicate studies of displacement in the discipline of geography (2019).

If, as Roy states, this process of "racial banishment" is "the necessary counterpart to… 'the possessive investment of whiteness'" (2019, 228), then I read racial banishment as the intentional divestment of Blackness. In the case of Washington D.C. in particular, the possessive emplacement of Blackness through aesthetics, and simultaneous intentional divestment of Black bodies through redlining, has supported a continual displacement of D.C.'s Black residents as a project of the state (Reese 2019, Roy 2019, Summers 2019). To that point, since "the antonym of racial banishment is, as the Black radical tradition insists, freedom" (Roy 2019, 229), I draw from the work of Black geographers to contextualize how agency is asserted within Black communities.

My study examines how Black churches continue to intervene in sociopolitical issues of the public sphere before the moment of racial banishment (Roy 2019) to *expect* Black life rather than *accept* Black death (McKittrick 2013). I draw on McKittrick's "Plantation Futures" (2013), which names urban spaces as "plantation geographies", or spaces "that continue to harbor the lives of the most marginalized" (5), and yet "asks that

we imagine Black-*life* as anticipatory". Together with Roy's work this framing allows me to situate the past as inextricably tied to the present of Black spaces, in order to productively engage with the past, which is crucial to the creation of a particular future for Black communities.

For my conceptualization of the nuance of market-driven neighborhood change in the suburbs, Peck's analysis of D.C. neoliberal suburbanism (2011) serves both as an example of previous geographical work that has been done regarding the suburbs, and as an example of the need for suburban theorization to be expanded upon. Further, the main argument of the paper, especially Peck's claim of an increase in "market-oriented approaches" (885) in the suburbs rings especially true in relation to the "Housing master plan" for redevelopment in Alexandria's inner suburbs that has affected multiple of the Black churches and their congregants, through the demolition of public and section eight housing under the guise of protecting low income Alexandrians. However, Peck doesn't fully examine the ways in which racial processes affects the neoliberalization of US suburbs, and conversely how race is experienced through these shifting neoliberal policies, which is something my work in turn aims to do. I see my work as expanding upon Peck's examination of suburban self-rule by teasing out the effects of neoliberal economic policies Black and Brown lower-class populations are experiencing in Alexandria's inner suburbs through the lens of the Black church.

2.6 Ethical Cautions

Employing a de-/post-colonial and Black geographic framework necessitates that I intentionally work to subvert the harmful, "damage-based" (Tuck 2009) narratives often

used to describe the fate of racial minorities and poor communities in urban areas. Following *Plantation Futures* (McKittrick 2013) decentering of Black death and dispossession, I recognize that studies involving Black communities often reduce people and their personhood to statistics and points on a map (McKittrick 2014). This "violent enumeration" (Simone Browne 2015, quoting Katherine McKittrick) which is rooted in racial capitalist attempts to render Black people as inferior beings, is inherently tied to the academy, and more specifically, to the inception and maintenance of the social sciences (Muhammad, 2010). Additionally, the mapping of historically Black neighborhoods in Alexandria, in contrast to what little is known about what is experienced by those effected by urban development, mirrors the tension between the cartographically "known" of Black spaces, and the "unknowable" of Black experiences (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 4, 6-7). As my interviews do not center the experiences of those displaced from Alexandria, it is of vital importance that I do not reproduce these patterns of expecting Black dispossession. And as my interviewees explain, they do not perceive the out-migration of Alexandria's African American communities as solely a by-product of suburban gentrification but rather see part of the process as contributing to upward socioeconomic mobility for Black Alexandrians (see chapter 4). Combined with Audrey Kobayashi's (2014) insights into the history of how urban theories in geographies have been used to intellectualize anti-Black racism in the academy, these articles show the historical importance of where I'm situating my work, as well as the importance of doing so cautiously and intentionally.

2.7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I aim to explore how Black churches in Alexandria, Virginia experience gentrification and in this chapter, I have laid out my theoretical backing for doing so. In the introduction I gave a historical background of the City of Alexandria's African- American communities, and the centrality of Black churches to the creation and maintenance of these spaces. I then moved onto an overview of Black geographies to assert Black churches as contradictory spaces of inclusion and exclusion that are integral to the Black community, both historically and presently. The work of Black geographies helps center a Black geographic episteme as a unique lens through which to theorize race. Following that, I laid out relevant arguments within critical geographies of religion as this body of literature helps me to understand the importance of religion as a spatial process. I supplemented their work with sociological work on Black Christianity, as not much has been done specifically by geographers on Black religious spaces as central to their work. I ended this chapter by exploring how suburban theory influences my work in calling for a spatial analysis that centers the suburbs, and allows me to retheorize suburbs as Black spaces in which Black churches play a significant role in expecting Black life and countering racial banishment before it happens. In doing so, I seek to contribute to critical urban theory with a specifically Black theoretical engagement of questions of social difference. I detail the research process in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3. CHURCHES, PARTICIPANTS, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

My research took place from May 2020 to February 2021 in Alexandria, Virginia. In order to answer my research questions, I conducted qualitative research based on a sample of four churches. As I detail below, the COVID-19 pandemic required several adjustments to my research design, but also facilitated additional insights into each churches' relationship to gentrification in Alexandria. The remainder of this chapter first lays out the sample of churches and introduces the rationale for selecting them before introducing each church in a bit more detail. That discussion is followed by an outline of my research design beginning with the recruitment process. I then discuss the toll seeking IRB approval took both on the research process and myself as a researcher. Next, I lay out the interview process, the role my identity as a young Black Baptist woman played in creating spaces of trust within my interviews, and the benefits and drawbacks of transcribing Zoom interviews. I follow by describing the four thematic codes I created to analyze my interviews and explain in which chapters I share the findings within each theme. I continue by discussing my ethical commitment to writing about Black geographies in a complex and nuanced manner that rejects racist, essentialist, and homogenous stereotypes of Black life. I end this chapter with a discussion of changes to my overall research design and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected myself and participants.

3.1 Churches and Participants

Figure 2 Church Census Tracts

The four churches that form the sample for my research are the most ideal case studies for this project because they share many historical and geographical similarities while bearing differences that provide necessary contrast and nuance in their experiences of the shifting Alexandria landscape. I have chosen not to use the names of the churches in order to maintain my respondents' confidentiality. Churches A and B are within the bounds of the City of Alexandria, but do not reside within Old Town Historic Alexandria, while Churches C and D are within the bounds of historic establishments as defined by the city (see figure 2 for a map highlighting the census tracts of each church). Churches A and B are also relatively young churches as they were founded within the past 40 years,

compared to Churches C and D, both established in the late 19th century. Their shared roots during the Civil War U.S. provided context through which to understand the importance of land ownership for newly freed African Americans in Alexandria, and the church as a Black geography within the "Black counterpublic" (McCutcheon 2015). Where Churches C and D's founding points to the importance of the Black church in relation to the colonial plantation system, insights from Pastors A and B on their experiences of "planting" their churches illuminates more of the logistical aspects of the process. Additionally, while Churches C and D are younger churches, they are headed by relatively older leadership as compared to Churches A and B, which have centuries long histories, with millennial pastors leading the congregation.

The unique characteristics of each house of worship weave together to tell a portion of the story of Black religion, Black resilience, and Black community in Alexandria, Virginia, while providing the consistency in shared experiences needed for a viable research project. Highlighting these characteristics within the different churches serves as a refusal to present "black geographies as homogenous sites of dispossession" (McKittrick 2006, 4). More specifically, the different outreach programs each church offers, as well as the differences in the neighborhoods each church is situated in, has yielded varying results regarding the relationship between the "Black Baptist church" and perceived gentrification. I introduce each church and my interviewees next.

3.1.1 Church A

Church A was established in the late 1980s, making it one of the younger Black Baptist churches in Alexandria, Virginia. After moving locations for the first four years of its establishment, the church settled down on the same street as another longer

standing Black Baptist Church. While still in Alexandria V.A., these two are about seven miles farther south from D.C. and downtown Alexandria than the following three churches. Church A's website boasts both community based and international outreach.

Pastor A & Assistant Pastor A: I conducted a joint interview for Pastor A and Assistant Pastor A as the two are a married couple. Pastor A's "pastoring" duties take a "holistic approach" and in his own words they include "taking care of the sheep, taking care of the flock." This spans from overseeing major life events (weddings, funerals, baby dedications), administrative duties, maintaining the physical building of the church, as well as overseeing missions, education, and music. Assistant Pastor A describes her duties as a "support role," helping Senior Pastor A in all aspects of the ministry including engaging with the congregants personally, ensuring ministries are cooperating smoothly, and helping to maintain the vision of the church. Pastor A describes this vision as "making disciples" through the generations, and "improving… the community through outreach".

Deacon A: has been a member of Church A since 2000, was appointed to the role of Deacon in 2009, and has most recently been in the role of Deacon Chair for one year. Deacon A also describes the position as being a support to the pastor in "all the different arms of the church", including personally supporting families in need. As a woman, Deacon A would historically be a "Deaconess", which was the given title she was given when being ordained. As the youngest of the Deacon ministry, Deacon A embodies this role because she "love[s] serving in any capacity," and thus sees her position as a "natural fit."

Reverend A: describes his role as being a support to the ministry as a whole, and notes that there are times when he is specifically asked by Pastor A to give the sermons, and to counsel congregants, all while serving as a Sunday school teacher. Rev. A has been a member of the church since the early 1990s, was licensed to preach in the late 1990s, and was ordained in the early 2000s. When asked why he chooses to serve at Church A specifically, he tells a story in which he felt spiritually guided to become a member, sharing that "until God leads me away from there, or… gives me a new assignment, I'll be there."

3.1.2 Church B

Church B was founded in the late 1990s by Pastor B, who is still the current Senior Pastor of the church. After splitting off from Third Baptist Church (Alexandria, VA), paralleling the history of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Pastor B bought half a building a few blocks Northwest of Old Town Alexandria, and later purchased the entire building, including the apartments on the top level of the building. Church B's outreach efforts include food distribution programs in coordination with the National Capital Area food bank, donation drives, and prior to COVID-19, Vacation Bible School.

Pastor B: describes himself as the "planter" of the church, which he defines as starting the church with a "core of individuals". As since- retired long- term educator in the Arlington Public School system, a country that neighbors Alexandria, Pastor B sees the skills gained from his previous career as vital to his successful planting of this house of worship. Though I will be referring to Church B as a "church", Pastor B stresses that he intentionally named his ministry a "community of faith," as he feels the name "church" tends to connotate a lack of concern with engagement beyond the walls of the

physical building. Noting that "Jesus… never even had a church house," Pastor B sees the purpose original centering of outreach as an "attempt to make a difference in the community, and the community at large."

Reverend B: identifies as one of the original charter members of Church B, along with being Assistant Pastor for the past five years. Rev. B's duties include aiding Pastor A "in preachment and in ministry," being the liaison for the deaconess, church school, and youth ministries, providing support for the parishioners, serving as the church school Superintendent, and being the point of contact for the monthly food distribution with the National Capital Area food bank. Rev. B explains that as a "small community of faith… [that has] always functioned as a larger church," it is common for Church B leadership to hold an assortment of positions.

Deacon B: is a fellow charter member of Church B. He was ordained as a Deacon a few years after the Church's founding and has served in many roles that he explains has provided a "perspective of service." While these range from being on the budget ministry to leading the "young men and boy's ministry," Deacon B sees all of his duties as functions of "serv[ing] our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Deacon B recounted in- depth the process of "planting" Church B, demonstrating the close ties between the logistical and the theological in the vision of this "community of faith."

3.1.3 Church C

Church C is one of the longest standing Black Baptist Churches in the City of Alexandria. After splitting with another historically prominent Baptist Church in Alexandria, the founding members purchased land and built the church building in the early 1880s. Church C's recent outreach efforts include multiple community food

distribution efforts including serving meals to the city's homeless population, canned food drives, giving away groceries to those in need, distributing other material goods such as clothing and school supplies, and being involved with local community and social justice organizations.

Pastor C: became the 11th Senior Pastor of the church after winning the vote in 2013, and self- identifies as a millennial. He acknowledges the business responsibilities of being Senior Pastor, which he summarizes as being "CEO of all active ministry pieces related to the… inner workings of the church," as well as being the spiritual "overseer" in terms of "preaching, teaching, counseling, [and] ministering" to the entire congregation. After conducting doctoral research on bridging the generational divide between millennials and baby boomers within the church, Pastor C sees longevity as a community, and within the larger Alexandria community, as central to his role as well.

Trustee C: has held his current position for about six years, at the request of Pastor C. As the Chair of the Trustee Ministry, Trustee C is concerned with all monetary and business aspects of the church, including the properties of the church and regular income from parishioners. Trustee C repeatedly alludes to the large amount of work this responsibility comes with, sharing that "nothing compare[s]" to being born and raised in Mississippi and working in cotton fields when asked why he continues to serve in this role. Trustee C has been a member of the church for about 40 years.

Deacon C: is also a self- described millennial like Pastor C, and has been a member of Church C since childhood. He currently serves as Chair of the Deacon Ministry, a position he's held for about a year, after being appointed as a Deacon two years prior. Additionally, Deacon C has been in charge of the media components of the church and

church services for over ten years. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Deacon C has been involved with shifting the church services and programs online, and sees the pandemic as revealing the necessity of technology to the sustainability of Church C, and to the Black church as a whole.

3.1.4 Church D

Along with Church C, Church D is one of the longer standing Black Churches in Old Town Alexandria. Founded in the 1860s, Church D was born during the Civil War, both housing and educating runaway enslaves persons as was forbidden by law. Church D is currently headed by its 14th Pastor, who I refer to as Pastor D. Outreach efforts undertaken by Church D include being involved in policy conversations, particularly those concerning affordable housing in Alexandria, meal distribution

Pastor D: has served as the 14th Senior Pastor of Church D for the past three years, and has been a member for 13 after moving to Alexandria. Prior to his appointment, Pastor D served as an Associate Pastor and youth minister, and is a self- defined millennial preacher. He explains that "like most millennials… [he] stopped going to church for a number of reasons…" which he later describes as "the same reason he came back," including hypocrisy in "the church" as an entity, and what he refers to as "boring" and "monotonous" church services. Pastor D describes his responsibilities as "three pronged"- "connections to the community and social justice issues," "theological pastoral care," and the "entrepreneurial business aspect of the church," including the church's 501c3 status and financial management.

Sister D: is a long-time member of Church D, having grown up in the church and with it, in Alexandria. Along with being a member, Sis. D is the head of the education

ministry, is responsible for information dissemination within the congregation which she refers to as "global communications." She is also part of a technological "working group" tasked with building a digital infrastructure including the church's website and social media presence which is primarily on YouTube and Facebook. As she has "been at [Church D] since birth," Sis. D describes feeling a personal responsibility to play a role in maintaining the legacy of the church and its presence in Alexandria.

Deacon D: also mentions having long- standing ties since childhood to the church and to the City of Alexandria. Though he has attended a variety of churches over the years, Deacon D prefers the "close-knit family" he has found within Church D. In addition to being ordained as a Deacon about four years ago, Deacon D also became a coordinator for the teen and young adult church about two to three years prior. He describes his role as a mentor to the younger members of the church as coordinator, and assisting the pastor in duties surrounding communion and "prayer and worship" as deacon.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Recruitment and Sample Size

The recruitment process began in June of 2020 after a successful proposal defense and initial IRB application. I first submitted my protocol to the University of Kentucky's Office of Research Integrity in June 2020, but was not approved for research until early August of the same summer. Though I recognize the need for IRB in keeping research participants safe in both medical and non-medical projects, the process also revealed to me the ways in which the IRB structure fails to represent the full breadth of subjectivities hidden within the university-researcher-subject relationship (Martin and Inwood 2012). I felt myself subject to the suspicions of the IRB, a process Martin and Inwood address as

the "unprotected subjects- turned-objects," (10). Additionally, in the drawn out process of seeking IRB approval in the midst of multiple global pandemics, including those of COVID-19 and global anti-Black racism, I found myself expending more time and energy than I had to give (Martin and Inwood 2012, 11), particularly as a Black woman, and also as a junior scholar. Both the inconsistency of the process (Martin and Inwood 2012, 14) and the unprecedented, unpredictable, nature of the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to adequately prepare my revisions, and subsequently, complicated my ability to schedule my interviews. However, once I received approval, I was clear on the role of my participants in my research and had all materials ready to disseminate to interested parties.

My initial point of contact for each church was either the Senior Pastor or their administrative assistant. I contacted them through email, in which I included information about myself and the project. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated communication and response times. While two of the churches responded relatively quickly, one of the churches I initially reached out to denied my request for an interview due to the time constraints of the Lead Pastor. Additionally, another church never responded, leading me to decrease my original sample size from five to four churches and replace two of them. Once pastors expressed interest and confirmed their intent to participate, I sent the interview questions and informed consent sheets. I provided the same information to other participants within the church recommended by the pastor, with the interview questions tailored to their specific leadership positions within the church. I conducted the first interview on August 15th, 2020, and the last on February 5th, 2021.

In “How many qualitative interviews…” (2012) Adler and Adler suggest “gather[ing] data until empirical saturation is reached” (8) for qualitative research, and advise graduate students to do so within “a sample of loosely around 30” (9). For the purposes of this study, however, empirical saturation was reached after 12 interviews spanning four churches. As Julia Brannen notes in the same piece, the ideal sample size for each research project is highly contextual, and depends both on the resources available to the researcher and the cases selected for interview (2021, 16). Further, as my overview of the churches and participants earlier on in this chapter shows, the synthesis of the data acquired from 12 participants in the four churches provides both adequate similarities and contrasts to illuminate the range of experiences while providing confirmation of major themes within the city. These recurring themes include a common perception of the changes to Alexandria, a decrease in the percentage of Black residents over the last few decades, and subsequent effects on church outreach efforts. Some differences that arose within the interviews are the timeframe in which gentrification began and the most prominent causes of the out-migration of Alexandria’s Black residents, both of which will be explored further in later chapters.

3.2.2 Interview Design

After confirming and scheduling a mutually agreeable time with each participant, I conducted primarily individual interviews with each church’s pastor, as well as two other prominent leaders the pastor recommended. Eleven out of the twelve interviews were individual, but my conversation with Pastor A was also conducted with his wife, First Lady and Assistant Pastor A. I used Zoom for all interviews. Most conversations were both visual and auditory in nature, while some were just auditory. Each interview was

semi-structured to allow for participants to add content to our discussion that my questions did not address (Valentine 2005, 111). Further, I opted for semi-structured interviews in my research design as they have been proven to be a successful research method in projects centered around critical geographies of religion (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014, 2016), as well as work specifically done within Black churches (McCutcheon, 2015). I allotted one hour for each conversation so as to not "outstay [my] welcome" in regards to my participants' time (Valentine 2005, 122), though interviews ultimately ranged from 40 to 90 minutes total depending on how much the interviewee had to share.

Planned interview questions ranged from why participants choose to be members of their church, to changes they have noticed regarding the functioning of their outreach programs, ending with how adaptations to social distancing measures might change the way their church functions after measures are lifted. These questions led to unstructured, but generative conversations about the histories of each church, how the dynamics within church leadership has shifted over the years, and even how the demographic of the interviewee (i.e. age and/or gender) complicated their leadership role(s). For those who were born and raised in Alexandria, the conversations often turned to their experiences growing up in the city which exposed perceptions of redevelopment over various time frames.

3.2.3 Trust and Shared Identity in the Research Process

As a young Black woman who grew up in the Black Baptist Church, my positionality ultimately served to legitimate my motives behind doing this specific research project. At the beginning of my interviews, I would ask participants if they had any questions for me, either about the interview process or about myself and the project in general. A few times

participants asked what inspired me to take up this project, and each time I responded with the truth— my background of growing up in Alexandria, Virginia, driving by the affordable housing projects over the years, and noticing that correlation to the increasing lack of children in the church. My background as an "insider" within Alexandria's Black Baptist Community, coupled with my relation to a prominent Black Baptist pastor in the area and understanding of the physical and affective geographies of Alexandria, made space for trust and deeper conversations that were possible due to a lack of necessity explanation about the city itself, and the reverence for the Black church by many Black folx.

I also found myself confronting assumptions that others would agree with my preliminary analysis of the changing of the city. My deep familiarity with the region, and with the context in which my participants and I were exploring subjects of perceived gentrification and shifting church dynamics, led me to sometimes offer leading questions based on my previous knowledge of Alexandria and its Black Baptist community. While this "in" was helpful to legitimize my motives to participants in the recruitment process, I wonder if it skewed my results or how it would've turned out had I not been in this position. However, as Kvale notes regarding the ethics of interviewing, leading questions do not always skew the responses of interviewees, but can be used to "verify the interviewer's interpretations" and "enhance" the soundness of the interview (1996, 158).

Ultimately, I found that there were conversations or unspoken understandings about race that I was able to share with my participants which most likely allowed for more candid responses than if I held a different racial identity, a similar sentiment shared by Priscilla McCutcheon in her participatory research with a historic Black Protestant church

in Atlanta, GA (2015, 396). I also appreciated the space this project created to intentionally interact with my faith positionality throughout the interview and writing process, which Denning, Scriven, and Slatter argue would benefit "all cultural, social, and historical geographical researchers" (2020, abstract).

3.2.4 Transcribing Zoom Interviews

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and state-enforced social distancing guidelines, most of my interviews were conducted through Zoom. The platform's automatic transcription service provided some relief to the transcription process, but still required heavy manipulation to ensure as accurate a transcript as I could create. Poland's (1995) article on the reliability of transcripts in ethnographic research explores barriers to transcript quality, ending with a call in increase the monitoring of quality. This was an issue I encountered in conducting interviews through Zoom.

While it was convenient to be provided with a preliminary transcript, it was most useful when there was no background noise happening within the interviews. However, due to the portable nature of a digital interview, personal nature of conducting all professional business in our respective homes, and hectic nature of pandemic life, there were many instances where focus was pulled from the interview and background noise was present. Real-life impediments to clear audio files included children laughing and screaming as one interviewee looked after her grandchildren, to another driving his mother to the doctor's office in the rain. Additionally, even when participants were undistracted and sedentary throughout the duration of the interview, unstable internet connections led to multiple dropped Zoom calls. All of these interruptions added to the more common "judgement calls" that must be made by researchers regarding how to

textually and grammatically portray the conversation (1995, 297). As Poland notes, however, "there is a limit to the degree of painstaking attention to detail that can be demanded of a transcriber," (1995, 300) a statement that I found especially true as a graduate student, but difficult to contend with nonetheless. To combat this I relied heavily on the audio recordings both in the transcription and analysis stages to ensure the highest possible level of accuracy.

3.2.5 Analytic Coding and Themes

After finalizing the transcripts based on the ones provided through zoom, I created four "analytic codes" to reflect the four prominent themes I discovered in my interviews (Cope 2010, 283). The codes are as follows: (1) emplacement/ displacement, (2) community outreach, (3) church logistics, and (4) COVID-19. Each theme encompasses a range of responses from participants. The first code includes mentions of the noted change overtime of Alexandria's demographics primarily relating to race and class, demographic differences between those who live in the church's neighborhood and its congregants, and general perceptions of gentrification. I primarily analyze this code in chapter four: Disrupting Community Emplacement.

In chapter 5: Sustaining a Church, Community Outreach, and COVID-19, I share my analysis of the remaining three codes. Where chapter 4 examines the interviewee's, and their churches, relationships to Alexandria, "community outreach", "church logistics," and "COVID-19" all center the everyday functioning of the churches. "Community outreach" is both spiritual and material, spanning from evangelistic efforts to state funded, and thus necessarily secular, youth engagement programs. I expand more on the difficulties of succinctly defining "outreach" in my analysis. "Church logistics"

refers primarily to financial matters and how generational differences in ideology manifest materially within the churches services and programs. Finally, I use the code "COVID-19" to discuss both the uncertainty and the anxiety that the global pandemic has caused the interviewees and their churches congregants more broadly, as well as the opportunity the pastors have seized in embracing technology to adapt to social distancing measures.

As the start of this chapter reveals, I use pseudonyms to refer to the churches and participants. While heads of churches can hold multiple titles, often including "Doctor (Dr.)" and "Reverend (Rev.)", for the purposes of this thesis Senior Pastors will solely be referred to as "Pastor". Other participants will be titled using a leadership role they addressed in our interview. The letter following each title corresponds to the church in which they serve.

3.2.6 Writing Black Life

In the creation of my codes, I was careful to pay special attention to Katherine McKittrick's various calls to prevent the reproduction of anti-Black violence in the research process (2014 & 2020). For instance, in my writing of the first thematic code, I attempt to combat essentialist rhetoric that all Black residents of Alexandria were forcibly removed, but do so while not victimizing those that were. However, I recognize that just as anti-Blackness is not upheld in one singular event or piece of writing, neither can I, or anyone, undo this force in early-career writing alone. To that point, I see McKittrick's claim of "the task" being "to get in touch with the materiality of our analytical worlds" (2020, 12) as recognition that this task is undoubtedly an action, an ongoing process. While it is one that necessarily goes beyond this thesis, and beyond my academic work as

a whole, I see this writing as a commitment to remembering the material origins and effects of the theories I employ.

3.2.7 COVID-19

As I have referenced multiple times throughout this chapter, the COVID-19 global pandemic forcibly adjusted the research project I had conceptualized prior to March 15, 2021. From delayed IRB approval to conducting the majority of my "fieldwork" during the Fall 2020 semester, this pandemic has led me to become a more adaptable researcher than I previously thought possible. In reflecting on how the uncertainty of the pandemic reduced my capacity to do work, I naturally consider the toll it took on my participants. Conducting this work also revealed vignettes of how the pandemic has been affecting others outside of my household. One of the people I contacted ended up in the hospital just a few weeks following. Others who were not infected with the virus (to my knowledge) still seemed perpetually busy, stressed, and "Zoomed out," a feeling that only increased the longer and longer we were subjected to inadequate governmental responses with no end to the crisis in sight.

Even with the fatigue and rapidly shifting world that colored our conversations, participants seemed eager to share their experiences, and often noted that while "gentrification and the Black church" wasn't a topic they had previously intentionally analyzed, they had a lot of thoughts upon reflection. Some participants even audibly expressed excitement to have the chance to share their thoughts in a way they also feel is important. It is these reminders that have inspired me to endure in my research and writing.

CHAPTER 4. DISRUPTING COMMUNITY EMPLACEMENT

One of the most common outcomes of gentrification is economic-based displacement, and Alexandria, Virginia is no exception. A Washington Post article states that at the time, D.C. experienced the highest intensity of gentrification, a trend tracked by the out migration of low income and communities, primarily those that are predominantly Black and Hispanic (Shaver 2019). While there are studies that look at the effects of this displacement on the Black church in D.C. proper, there are few that look at the surrounding suburbs. Local newspapers, by contrast, draw attention to the gentrification of Alexandria, particularly through the lens of displacement of African American Alexandria residents, notably the Del Ray Patch (Leayman 2019) and the Alexandria Gazette (Miles 2017). This trend is one that most of my research participants, particularly those who are native Alexandrians, have noticed over a sustained time periods.

This chapter examines the process and effects of state-induced urban renewal as perceived by Black Baptist church leaders. I begin by discussing some of the general trends around the displacement of the Black community. I then go on to examine how housing precarity was discussed throughout the interviews, primarily through the lens of affordable housing ordinances. I end with the perceptions of my participants regarding the importance of their churches and his histories to their communities, and how it starkly contrasts with the new emplacement of Black churches in what feels like to my participants, white neighborhoods.

4.1 Displacement

Ruth Glass' 1964 original theorization of gentrification was relegated to the inner cities of London. Since then, it has become a term widely debated in scholarship, as well as widely known in the U.S. (Brown-Saracino 2013). This expansion of discussing gentrification as a commonly recognized phenomenon is one that I noticed during the interview process. When I brought up the topic every participant knew the phrase and though there is growing literature on suburban gentrification, participants didn't allude to conceptualizing it within Alexandria as a different process than the one that is occurring in inner city D.C. In analyzing the interviews, I found participants conceptualized the gentrification of Alexandria based on three primary changes they observed: first, urban renewal and development of architecture, both commercially and residentially; second, rising costs of living, most notably relating to housing; and third, the out migration of many Black and/or low-income Alexandria residents, both voluntary and involuntary.

4.1.1 Qualitatively Tracking Gentrification

All participants noted a visible change in the city which they tracked through the displacement of African American/Black Alexandrians and changes to the physical landscape of Alexandria. Many participants noted movement of the Black population from Alexandria to Woodbridge/ Prince William County, Manassas, and Southern Maryland due to a lower cost of living compared to Alexandria. While one participant mentioned noticing a difference mainly within the last 5 to 7 years, the most common response to the question of when this process began was between 10 to 20 years ago. Older participants who are native Alexandrians date the catalyst for change back as far as 30 to 50 years prior. Deacon C, who was born and raised in the city, confirms that:

> “…**yes, the neighborhood is completely different. Such as the city, the main reason, of Alexandria. You know, when I was a kid it was a lot of black families in the neighborhood, *mostly* black families in the neighborhood, I grew up in old town Alexandria. So it's completely shifted to an all Caucasian neighborhood.”** (Deacon C)

In addition to tracking the demographic changes of the city from majority Black to what he perceives as “all Caucasian”, Deacon C mentions renewal projects on the landscape that captured his attention. When asked if he could recall a time period in which gentrification in Alexandria intensified, he noted that “it’s been slowly coming the last 20 years.” He goes on to describe the changes that highlighted the process:

> **“I mean they were building these luxury condos and apartment complexes. And you know they redid TC Williams, and redid most of the elementary schools, and you were like ‘why is this changing now? What’s going on? [laughing] Where has this been all these years? Why are all these buildings coming up?’** (Deacon C)

Deacon C ends that passage noting that now, “the entire area just looks different from what it used to be.” This skepticism regarding the intention behind renewal projects is shared by Pastor B, a long-term resident of Arlington, the neighboring D.C. suburb. In discussing the recent renovation of a community recreation center in Alexandria, Pastor B notes that “they did a really beautiful job with that, but they knew who was going to use it” most likely alluding to the newer, more economically privileged, whiter population moving into the city. And while it is only conjecture that “you don’t see Black people in there on their bicycles and whatnot when you look through the window,” (Pastor B) this quote reveals that to those who have been witnessing the changes in Alexandria, it is apparent that these changes are not made for the benefit of the city’s long term Black and/or low-income residents, but rather to appease the gentry that is present, and to likely attract more.

One highly controversial catalyst for the continued gentrification of Alexandria has been the movement of Amazon into Arlington's Crystal City region, situated about two miles north of Old Town Alexandria. This was raised as a concern within multiple interviews against the already precarious amount affordable housing available in Alexandria. Pastor C notes that Church C has a group committed to addressing housing justice in the city. In partnering with "Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement" or VOICE, the group was involved in pushing the City of Alexandria to get Amazon to allocate a percentage of their budget "toward housing, toward education, toward equity for Black and Brown individuals" (Pastor C). Similarly, Pastor D briefly mentions being involved in conversations around Amazon's moving into the city in relation to his attempts to rectify "how the Black church, particularly [Church D] was noticeably absent from these conversations."

These markers noted by interviewees of rising costs of living, the out migration of a long-standing community that is primarily African American and/or working class, and tensions over the local politics and public space, are addressed in *The Gentrification Debates* (2013) as "changes that are less immediately visible" than those of commercial properties that are more easily seen on the landscape (278). However, these hidden tensions were central to my conversations indicating that the commercial landscape is not the most accurate way to track gentrification, particularly in the case of Alexandria.

Additionally, as Alexandria is an inner suburb of Washington D.C., the participants describe a process that Roger Keil (2017) refers to as "primary urbanization". According to Keil, primary urbanization is a "suburban formation which occurs in high tech and resource areas… gated and otherwise access- restricted enclaves of privilege… and

existing, though sometimes abandoned, undervalued inner suburbs that await renewal and regeneration." In the case of Alexandria, all of the markers listed above are acknowledged throughout the interviews I conducted. Deacon C's questioning of "why now?" reveals the years of abandonment and undervaluing by the City of Alexandria that Old Town experienced prior to more recent redevelopment efforts. Allusions to Amazon's headquarters by Pastors C and D serve to further legitimate Alexandria as a suburb that is attracting businesses based in the technology sector. This claim is also taken up in Peck's analysis (2011) of Northern Virginia suburbs as aspiring "techtopia[s]" (888) and "fast-growing 'boomburbs'" (887), in which the historically and inherently racialized and classed space of the suburbs become ideal spaces for decentralized "urban subgovernance" (908).

4.1.2 Voluntary Out Migration

While all participants agree both city governance and personal choice were factors for many who have left the city, some participants emphasized one part of the process more than the other. For example, some participants centered the actions of voluntary out migration in our discussion of demographic change in the area. This focus was consistent within the participants from Churches C and D, the two churches residing in historic Old Town Alexandria. When asked if anyone who left Alexandria shared the details of their decision with him, Trustee C, a native to Old Town Alexandria, notes:

> "A lot of us transitioned from the South, and most of them moved back, well some of them moved back to [the] lower part of Virginia, some moved back to Georgia, some back to moved back to South Carolina, and quite a few of 'em just passed on. **And their younger children unfortunately sold their houses, and not kept it. Most of the houses right around the church were owned by members. And when they died, or moved on, the kids sold [the] house"** (Trustee C)

Pastor D recognizes a similar process, though he is not “from” the city:

> **“**By the time I arrived in Alexandria, much of the gentrification had already occurred**. …there was so much complaining about, as they framed it, white people moving in and taking it all. But as I retort it back to some of them, but you sold your home. Or you sold your parents’ home.** And so we have to recognize yes, there were external governmental forces at play, and yes it was strategic, and calling for certain people to be displaced and affordable housing to end in Alexandria, I get that. But then **you are also** in I'm not speaking anyone particularly, **a willing participant. In the sense that you gave up your family home**.” (Pastor D)

Similarly, Sister D, also an Alexandrian since birth, shares that she doesn’t believe the process was entirely forced. However, she goes on to note the complexity in making monetary decisions in a rapidly changing city:

> **“Well, I can't say personally from experience that I believe that it was forced,** um, I just think that… Alexandria is a relatively small, and now has a small town feel I think that you know the people who lived in these rather than invest in those homes and stay just—. And again, in Alexandria, there's not a lot of room to expand… So I imagine- so forced maybe by way of making the process difficult for you, maybe, **but I do believe that people took advantage of— probably during the height of development was probably some very lucrative, you know, purchases or sales in their case and they were able to take and, you know, get more ‘more house’, if you will.”** (Sis. D)

This quote on the difficulty of acquiring “more house” shows the tension revealed between “voluntary,” “involuntary,” and “encouraged,” out migration. Sis. D notes that some African Americans who voluntarily moved out of Alexandria did so to take advantage of the “lucrative” market values that lay outside of the inner suburb. This statement complicates the process of gentrification in the area by revealing that African American Alexandrians experience and respond to the rising market values differently across class lines. In Alexandria then, Black residents have varying levels of control over their housing options and assert their agency in different ways. On one hand some residents are seeking “more house” as Sis. D notes, or are acting as “willing participants”

as Pastor D notes, to generate more wealth. On the other, Alexandria residents who rely on state services for affordable housing have less control over their process of displacement (see chapter 5).

Further, I read Pastor D's passage as somewhat disapproving that some Black Alexandrians have voluntarily sold their homes or left the city. Pastor D is careful to demarcate the process of forced displacement as a result of "external governmental forces at play" from those who willingly "gave up [their] family home[s]." His use of the phrase "gave up", and earlier in the passage that they were "complaining" about the complex demographic changes in the city suggest that he feels that had they stayed in their family homes, they might have played a role in mitigating some of these changes by choosing to continue on the legacy of Alexandria's historically Black neighborhoods and in turn, support the Black churches within them. This out migration also impacts the finances within some of the churches in this study (see chapter 5). I see this economic drain as also influencing the disappointment in Pastor D's statement.

Deacon C also centers voluntary movement out of Alexandria by Black residents noting that "…people had to make that decision to you know move away. Just better opportunity for the family, more room, more house. So yeah it definitely is something that happened in waves. Because you know, yeah **church used to be a community thing. Now it's not**"(Deacon C). Deacon C's focus on seizing the "opportunity" for "more room, more house" echoes that of Sis. D and Pastor D. Deacon C then immediately ties people moving away by choice to the experience of church no longer directly coinciding with people's residential communities. His understanding of church,

then, is spatial and part of the legacy of Black churches historically being rooted in Black communities.

Deacon D notes that out migration in some cases indicates positive economic growth within Alexandria's Black communities:

> "So, you know, we were getting more educated in ourselves so we're sending families who may not have went to college, their children are going to college and so they're able to get better jobs, and they're able to move to other parts of the country, and you have a percentage of them that went into the military, and move because of the military. **And so it hasn't always been bad, you know it's not a bad thing because we have progress and we are not trapped in one four- block area as [it was] years ago. 'Cause of course years ago they had redlined districts where Blacks couldn't move here and they couldn't do that. And now it's more open, and you can move [inaudible, cuts out]** (Deacon D)

This passage from Deacon D notes not only an increase of socioeconomic mobility experienced by Alexandria's Black communities, but an increase in spatial mobility as well. As Brandi Summers details, Black Americans are both historically and presently rendered immobile due to control through spatial policy and behavior surveillance (2019, 155). Thus, Deacon D's attention to the positive aspects of the out-migration of some African American Alexandrians necessarily complicates the narrative of gentrification in the city, as well as that of Black movement in the United States. Both spatial and socioeconomic mobility are rejections of state control, particularly given the context of gentrification in Alexandria.

Deacon D mentions the economic process of redlining which refers to discriminatory housing practices that maintained spatial segregation. The Federal Housing Administration, established in 1934, refused mortgages in predominantly African American neighborhoods. The practice was even challenged by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and deemed suitable by the FDIC due to the discrepancies in market value between white and Black neighborhoods. More recently, banks use

“reverse redlining” in the form of “exploitative loans” to continue the process of systemic economic disenfranchisement in Black communities. Redlining, and reverse redlining, still has lasting effects on spatial segregation and socioeconomic disparities across racial lines. (see Rothstein chapters 6 and 7)

As gentrification encourages movement of white residents while controlling the mobility and behavior of Black residents (Summers 2019, 154), the agency enacted by Black Alexandrians in choosing to move when possible defies the aims of redlining processes. Moreover, this attention to the racialized component of out migration within the city complicates the highly racialized creation of the suburbs themselves, and subsequently the racially exclusionist nature of their redevelopment. In his analysis of suburbs in a specifically North American context, Keil invokes the phrase “white flight” referring to the exodus of white people from the inner city to create these “access-restricted enclaves of privilege” for the purpose of self-segregation (217). African American Alexandrians choosing to take advantage of relative improvements in housing policy by moving out of historically (and forcibly) majority Black neighborhoods complicates simple assumptions that suburbanization is solely maintained by white homeowners. Tracing Black residents’ decisions to exert economic and spatial control by deciding to move to the city’s outer suburbs (and beyond) allows for rethinking these spaces as Black geographies and Black residents as independent economic actors. And as economic actors, Black people challenge the ‘access restricted enclaves of (white) privilege.

As much as the process of suburban gentrification in Alexandria leads to displacement for some low-income Black residents, it also creates opportunities for

middle-class Black residents to capitalize on rising housing values outside of the inner suburb. Centering the different ways in which Black residents across class lines experience and respond to gentrification serves to counter homogenizing accounts of Blackness in (sub)urban studies.

4.1.3 Affordable Housing Projects

The closing of affordable housing projects was repeatedly acknowledged as an issue that disproportionately affects Alexandria's Black communities, and in some cases, the churches themselves. Their observations resonate with urban scholarship that explicitly centers race in discussions of urban political arrangements and displacement. Ananya Roy (2019) coined the term "racial banishment" to center "the role of the state and the centrality of race" in processes of displacement, "which emphasizes state-instituted violence against racialized bodies and communities" (227). While this theory was created in relation to the inner city, I argue that the aforementioned diversification of (inner) suburbs, and "booming" of the suburban metropolises, renders this argument applicable to the complicated nature of "voluntary" migration, but more poignantly, to the affordable public housing policies in the city. As the next few quotes will reveal, my participants perceive the process of redeveloping affordable public housing in Alexandria, Virginia as a distinct catalyst for demographic change in the city.

Multiple interviewees mention their involvement over the years in efforts to mitigate the effects in affordable housing, such as Church C's involvement in VOICE, and as will be further explored in the following chapter. As a longtime resident of Alexandria, Deacon D notes the creation of the Braddock metro station as a catalyst for the destruction of affordable housing in the city 30 years prior:

> **Deacon D:** " …when I was growing up, they were trying to get rid of public housing [services?]. Once they moved the subway through Alexandria that gave them power to- you know more people come in, people who have money because it's an easy train ride to D.C., like two stops from D.C. So when the subway came in it was like "okay, y'all had the city for long enough. Now we want it back." So that was probably the biggest change that happened, and that was over thirty years ago. Because I remember the subway went right through the projects, or the public housing.
>
> **JM:** The Braddock subway station, right?
>
> **Deacon D:** Yep, went right through the housing that was there. It was called John Roberts. Once they got the O.K. to tear those down, they teared it down, it was like okay… [chuckling].

Like Deacon D, participants mentioned a variety of different housing projects either by street name or by the name of the housing complex, including "The Berg", "John Roberts", and "the Ramsey Homes." The Ramsey Homes, noted as historically significant by the City of Alexandria, were redeveloped as part of the "Braddock East Master Plan" (City of Alexandria, 2019a), and serves as just one of many examples of housing projects in the city affected by redevelopment. In *Public Housing Myths* (Bloom et. al. 2015), Heathcott works to undo the notion of affordable housing projects as separate from their surrounding cities (31). City Master Plans that detail the renovation of affordable housing reveal "the projects are woven into the fabrics of their cities" (Bloom et. al. 2015, 46) and dispels the myth that projects are in any way detached from the city in which they reside.

As a native Alexandrian who grew up in the city's southside and used to work for the Alexandria Housing Authority, Deacon A was able to detail the process of section 8 housing closures and redevelopments:

> "**Yes, so I used to work for the Alexandria housing authority. And so I'm very familiar with their policies and their resolutions, they had an 830 resolution where when you tear one public housing unit down, you have to replace it.** So even if you do a new build or a new development and you have so many houses that are for private, you still have to have, you know, those public housing units. So I've seen where, you know, a lot of white people are moving into that area where it used to be predominantly black. **And I've seen how they**

> **scattered the African American, Latino, the non-white residents. They've scattered them throughout Alexandria, to other parts of Alexandria, where it may not be considered as prime property**. Versus like down near the waterfront, like where there was there's public housing units that were blocks from the waterfront where you know they would bring in housing. There's still some units there for Public housing, but they reduce the number down and put the other ones on the west side." (Deacon A)

In detailing the renovation of affordable housing, Deacon A mentions resolution 830 and its intended purpose of mitigating the disproportionate effects of section eight closures/renovations on low-income families. However, even as the resolution itself states that "no tenant will be displaced" (City of Alexandria, 2019b), Deacon A's experiences working for the housing authority suggest overwise. Though on paper the one- for- one replacement ordinance is meant to ensure the basic human right of housing for the city's "low- and moderate-income families" (City of Alexandria, 2019b), we see that it is not without disruption. Deacon A's use of the word "scattered" to describe those affected by the housing authority's policies demonstrates the subversive effects of urban policies. The same policy claiming to mitigate displacement directly contributes to it. Similar to Deacon A, Pastor B used the term "dispersed" to refer to how disruptive the renovation of affordable housing is to Alexandria's Black communities. Further, this passage reveals the inadequacy in using public policy to address "the ethics of human life" which Ananya Roy argues is "what poor people's movements necessarily do" (2017, A9). In chapter five, I detail an example of one such movement in Alexandria shared by Pastor B of a former church elder who was a prominent leader in the city's affordable housing movement.

Redevelopment efforts sponsored by the City of Alexandria, however, are not the only means of eviction and relocation for low-income Alexandrians in public housing.

Research participants from churches B, C, and D, mostly referred to the housing projects in Old Town Alexandria as affordable housing. For Pastor A, affordable housing also referred to policies in other areas of Alexandria such as Fairfax County. Pastor A explicitly refers to Fairfax County's "low tolerance" policies:

> " **So many African Americans got evicted because of some of their low tolerance [policies].** For example, if you had a child, a family, and your child was like eight years old, 10 years old, or 12, or whatever**, when they get 18 if you don't report that they're in there, your rent will go up** when they find out that you did not report that they were in there. And so many people unfortunately did not report they were in there. So when they found out that the rent went up there- [inaudible]- a few people were able to help save them that way by helping them. **But when they can no longer afford it, they got evicted**." (Pastor A)

Pastor A did not share in his interview if people were simply unaware of the policy, or if they purposefully did not report that their children are now legal adults. In both circumstances, however, Pastor A's quote offers insight into the bureaucratic burdens placed on affordable housing residents by the city. Similarly, Deacon A notes that the perception of each tenant's behavior plays a primary role in the city's decision to allow them to remain housed in the redevelopment process, sharing:

> "…when they were placing different families different places, you know, obviously, they would want to place families that, you know weren't going to cause any trouble or anything in that particular area where they had these brand new builds**. They wanted to make sure that whoever they were putting in there were going to take care of the unit and, you know, be respectful neighbors and different things like that. Um, obviously, they can't discriminate in terms of placing those families but naturally they did consider that, you know, these are our new units, the area that they're going into, you know, they wanted to have good tenants in there."** (Deacon A)

The above quote reveals that the city officials' racist and classist assumptions of what constitutes good behavior is central to the residents' ability to access housing. In this quote, the newness of the units are valued over the lives and wellbeing of the people who will occupy them.

A similar theme is reflected by Rev. A who notes that when he was growing up "the projects back then were different. Because you would only know they were projects by outside of the building, because if you went inside those homes were immaculate, people took care of them, they had flowers and everything." He then attributes the changes in affordable housing to younger single mothers, arguing that "if they were going to keep those younger ladies in those projects, in those places by themselves, they should have made it so that they had an elderly person move in with them. If not, they should have put those younger people in the where they had the senior citizen homes with the security where they had to come in and out with security, where they couldn't bring anyone else in there with them."

Rev. A's description of the process of affordable housing redevelopment can be understood through the lens of "respectability." The term "politics of respectability" was first coined by Evelyn Higginbotham and refers to Black Feminist politics within the Black Baptist Church characterized by "temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity" (Harris 2003). In *Condemnation of Blackness,* Muhammad (2010) examines the role of respectability politics in efforts by the Black Baptist church to reframe the image of "Blackness" in the American consciousness as synonymous with crime. While respectability politics are viewed by some as a necessary function of racial uplift, it is also critiqued as an exclusionary viewpoint, primarily on the basis of class. Further, as sexuality is policed through respectability, it is also disproportionately applied to women than men (Harris 2003), as Rev. A does in his reference to "younger ladies".

Yet, while Rev. A recounts the history of affordable housing in Alexandria from a very dogmatic point of view that centers responsibility and respectability, he shares the same sentiment as other interviewees that the erosion of public housing in Alexandria was orchestrated by the city. He shares:

> **"… that's why I just believe myself that the authorities here in places, that they set us up to fail. They set us up to fail. And so what happened was, then they, when the problems come, they start shutting down the affordable housing…. they say they're going to build some new affordable housing and they'll give them a couple of places in there, but soon as something goes wrong, they put them out. And then they shut down that affordable housing there. So, you know, they set you up to fail because soon as there's a problem, you're going to be out of there. And then usually, another person does not get into that affordable housing who needs it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"** (Rev A)

This notion of an un/deservingness to be housed demonstrates the various ways in which urban housing policy serves to exclude certain populations. What it means to "cause... trouble," "be respectful" and be a "good tenant" (Deacon A) are up to interpretation and I argue, can be wielded for the benefit of the state in whatever manner benefits them. A politics of deservingness is explored by Nagel and Ehrkamp in their research on immigrants in southern U.S. Christian communities (2016). Deservingness "hinge[s] on culturally specific understandings of goodness" that "often serve to uphold the interests, norms, and viewpoints of privileged groups" (2016, 1042). Where Deacon A perceives the "desired outcome" of imposing a merit-based system to affordable housing as natural behavioral control, in seeing failure as an inevitability, Rev. A sees this meritocracy as central to the city's justification of displacement. In both cases notions of respectability as a problematic appeal to the ideal of middle-class whiteness color their understandings of the right to reside in affordable housing.

Further, Rev. A's claim that Alexandria's affordable housing tenants, particularly those who are African American (in reading the "us" in "they set us up to fail") aligns with Ananya Roy's various theorizations of urban housing policies as intentionally exclusionary on the basis of race. For Ananya Roy, "banishment" is "a form of exile, often from the demarcated territory of a city or nation" (2019, 228). This definition opens up an avenue not only to apply Roy's theory of racial banishment as a project of the state to the affordable housing projects of Alexandria, Virginia, but as a continuation of the longer history of "racial exclusion and colonial domination" (2017, abstract) enacted by the state (and those complicit with the state) in which behavior seen as unacceptable is controlled bureaucratically.

Perhaps Pastor B best summarizes the connections I see between the city's housing policies and the history of anti- Black violence in the United States:

> "…they dispersed people and called themselves, I guess, just taking them out of the ghetto, I guess. **But they disrupted community**. So you're getting helped, on one end you're getting better housing, in some instances. But you've lost your identity. **All kind of ways of just disrupting us. And they know, they know what they're doing. Even when *you* don't know what they're doing**." (Pastor B)

Pastor B's mention of "all kind of ways of just disrupting us" harkens back to the forms of "racialized violence" listed by Roy— "slavery, Jim Crow, incarceration, colonialism, and apartheid"— in arguing that a decolonial framework allows for an all-encompassing view of "gentrification and displacement" that has traditionally been left out of modern urban policy analyses (2017, A3). In linking specific (sub)urban policies to their material effects, and then tracing the history of the material dispossession of those historically subject to state violence, we see that the space of the (sub)urban is also open to

interpretation as a plantation geography, where African American Alexandrians are on the one hand subject to “exploitation” through displacement for capitalistic gain, and on the other hand there is emplacement through generational and ancestral ties to the land (Roy 2017, A9). I examine those next.

4.2 Emplacement

Central to understanding the historical discontinuity of the displacement of Alexandria’s Black residents is examining how they experience being “in” place, or emplaced. Tim Cresswell (2014) argues that “the most straightforward and common definition of place [is] a meaningful location” (12). For Black Baptist leaders in Alexandria, such meaning is created through emplacement within their communities. As my work reveals, Black religious leaders in Alexandria’s Baptists churches have assigned meaning not only to their houses of worship, but to the wider Alexandria community. Further, Cresswell notes that place is “central to forms of resistance and struggle” (3), a theme that my interviews show is present within the churches. By engaging with Alexandria’s various communities through policy intervention, organizing, and even the distribution of material resources, the churches are attempting to mitigate the effects of white supremacy as the Black church has done for centuries (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990), and all of its more modern iterations, most notably neoliberalism and gentrification (Roy 2019).

Alexandria’s Black churches are resisting state violence by materially cultivating community through care with an ideological rooting in Christian theology and the importance of maintaining one’s “place”. Thus, through the particular history of

Alexandria and the relationship of the churches and their congregants to the city, this "space" that is physically located a few miles south of Washington, D.C. with a rich history of Black life and resistance "is turned into place" (7). In what follows, I track the participants' account of the place that they understand as Alexandria, including their telling of church histories, their understanding of church as/within "community", and everyday experiences with new neighbors that reveal racial tensions. As "physical displacement is not gentrification's only consequence," (Saracino-Brown 2013, 280) this portion of the chapter reveals what is at stake for those (people and institutions) who remain.

4.2.1 Church Histories

The importance of socio-economic changes in Alexandria is so stark due to the deep sense of emplacement each church (leader) feels within their respective neighborhoods, seen through the amount of interview time dedicated solely to discussing the history of the churches. Churches C and D have been in their neighborhoods since the 19th century, while churches A and B were founded by the current senior Pastors in the last 20th century. Most participants, notably the pastors, demonstrated a depth of understanding of the history of their church (if it preceded them), and a history of their neighborhoods. These histories reveal the place-making practices of the past within Black religious spaces, and the reproduction of these meanings in the present through their retellings. For example, participants from Church D centered the legacy of the church within the city's Black history, tracing it back to the Civil War and the founding of predominantly Black institutions. Pastor D shares:

> **“[Church D] came out of a school that was started by a free born black man in Virginia to educate newly freed formerly enslaved people. That within itself is social justice**. The founder of the church [redacted] was not only born free, but he received a college education at a time of course when that was virtually impossible. He went to Pennsylvania which is now Lincoln University historically black college university, came back to Virginia to start the school out of the school came to church, so it was **connecting the dots for the members about the history of the church itself.”** (Pastor D)

Sis. D from the same church notes feeling a responsibility to the church due to its importance to Alexandria history and the wider history of the establishment of Black institutions in the post-Civil War U.S.:

> “**I believed in the legacy of [Church D], it's one of the long standing historically black churches in Alexandria. It has a connection, I'm a graduate of an HBCU, and it has a connection to the foundations of HBCUs.** So I just, you know, sort of a personal calling, and just, you know, sort of how what I think about sort of my mission is in general was very aligned with me taking a leadership role at Beulah.” (Sis. D)

Given their location in historic Old Town Alexandria, the importance of Black history to Church D stands to reason. Pastor A’s attention to the history of Gum Springs, the neighborhood in which Church A is located about 6.5 miles south of Old Town, reveals a continuity in the pride the pastors have for the history of their communities, of which the history of their church is an integral component. Pastor A in particular devoted much of the interview to recounting the history of the area dating back to times of American enslavement, seeing it as relevant to the process of gentrification in modern history. He begins by discussing the founding of the Gum Springs neighborhood itself by West Ford, a freedman. Pastor A even goes on to explain the origins of the name of the region— a combination of the prevalence of Sweet Gum trees in Alexandria, and the proximity of the neighborhood to a spring at which George Washington would water his horses. Pastor A’s investment in the history of the region is an example of the tangible pride Black

pastors have for their communities. He goes on to tell the founding of the church as part of the history of the area's development:

> "… we built our first church in 1991, December 7, 1991. And when we built the church in 1991, we had only purchased one acre at that time. But when we moved to this area that time, 75% of the residents of this neighborhood were African American. … **We were still on the edges of gentrification that had really, not really totally started its development. … streets that had not really been paved, curbs not right, the drainage system wasn't really still correctly [built] yet….** **It was just woods and swamp, woods and swamp.** So, we were able to, I would say if you will, though, from a church respective, keep Gum Springs and the acreage in the hands of African Americans…." (Pastor A)

Pastor A's emphasis that the area "was *just* woods and swamp" reveals the pride he feels in building the church in an underdeveloped neighborhood. Referring to the transformation of the land, Pastor A reimagines the space of Gum Springs' swamps into the meaningful place that is now Church A. Similarly, Pastor B demonstrates pride in the ownership of his 20 year old church in noting the physical site in which he "planted" Church B. He notes "…the church is like an island within itself. The whole building, we own that whole- as Pastor would say, we own that whole block. It might be a small block, but we own that whole block." Pastor B's recurring use of the word "planted"[1] in referring to founding Church B echoes Pastor A's reflections on cultivating the land of Gum Springs.

Pastor A's claim to a majority Black neighborhood in Alexandria, while rooted in a newer church, also speaks to the importance of land ownership as seen through the history of the Black church. As Lincoln and Mamiya note, the pooling together of resources after the Civil War in the U.S. for the purpose of founding Black churches was common (1990, 244), and those of Alexandria were no exception (Cressey 1995a, b).

[1] The phrase "planted" is also formally used in the Baptist tradition to describe establishing a new church.

Though Church A is roughly 30 years old, this mention of keeping physical land ownership within the Black community points to the importance of legality in sustaining communities. Ananya Roy notes in her examination of urban anti-eviction politics that while centering property as a mode of liberation against "social death" prioritizes "a logic of possession," (2017, A6) this possession can be collective in nature.

Additionally, Pastor A's rooting of the story of Alexandria's gentrification in an antebellum U.S. context demonstrates the importance of a decolonial approach to examining urban housing governance (Roy 2017, 2019). I employ this collective logic of possession rooted in a decolonial framework to situate the historic and ongoing role of Black land ownership through the Black church in a gentrifying city. In continually acknowledging the colonial legacies of Black death and dispossession, and the resistance that accompanies it, the significance of communal ownership as a way to avoid communal erasure is seen as both central to the Black Baptist heritage and necessary for its survival.

4.2.2 Inclusive Redevelopment

The church as an institution was central to the maintenance of autonomous Black life in the United States and remains an ideal Black geography through which to track the effects of urban policy in the United States. Lincoln and Mamiya's conceptualization of the Black church as the "cultural womb of the Black community" (1990, 8) is useful for understanding the importance of the Black Church to African American communities and the challenges that displacement brings for the latter. It is not surprising then that Black church leaders perceive the role of gentrification and urban development in Alexandria in complex ways.

While Pastor A and Assistant Pastor A are careful to note that gentrification has had disproportionate negative impacts on Alexandria's Black communities, they do not perceive redevelopment itself as the impediment to sustaining a cohesive community. After discussing the history of the community in which Church A is housed, Pastor A explains how he understands gentrification and how it has impacted Gum Springs and its residents:

> "**Gum Springs, the residents,… always wanted some improvements to make their lives better before they began to experience the- so they *could* I guess maybe I should say. So they *could* be able to experience the development, other people were around, but they wanted to experience it in a slower pace I think, in a slower pace so that they can help to keep the identity of the community. They wanted to do it at a slow pace to keep the identity, if that makes sense.** Because we want our living conditions improved, but the residents, I think I remember reading somewhere, many of the residents wanted to, I guess, maybe pull *their* resources and do their own development amongst themselves without bringing in what we now know as gentrification." (Pastor A)

Notions of redevelopment as it has been experienced in Alexandria relates to Pastor B's earlier claim that the disruption of community leads to the loss of identity. If, as Patricia Ehrkamp claims, "identity construction is intricately linked to the social production of place(s)" and "communal places in particular foster both expressions of identities and reinforce them" (2005, 349), then the unsettling of communities through gentrification-induced displacement understandably leads to an unsettling of identities. While Pastor B takes a more skeptical look at redevelopment in the city, Pastor A continually invokes a version of the process that necessitates the demands of the current residents of Gum Springs:

> **"They want slow development. They don't want gentrification just like that [snaps fingers]. Right. They don't want that like that. Whereas unfortunately, that has happened. In Alexandria, a lot of other places."** (Pastor A)

Assistant Pastor A goes on to note that “there’s some stages of development that actually would probably benefit the community.” She then explains future plans to develop Gum Springs as part of the larger project of widening Route One, the major highway nearest to Church A (see Smith 2019, VDOT 2021). Though Assistant Pastor A does not support the plan, she admits that she **“**can see both sides of it. We need some development there. And in the long run, it probably will be a positive because other than that, it's probably going to end up more of a dump…” And that she hopes “the community and the developers can come to some kind of agreement as to it being a part of the future development of Gum Spring.”

Here, we see Pastor A and Assistant Pastor A envisioning a sort of inclusive redevelopment that centers the concerns of the residents of Gum Springs. They describe a process of renewal that is taken up primarily for the benefit of the existing community and is not economically dependent on replacing them with residents of higher socioeconomic status. Deacon C similarly makes a distinction between redevelopment as a whole and the disproportionately negative impacts the process has had on Black Alexandria residents:

> “**I mean that it's a nice place, I don't want to underestimate that. It's a nice place to come, I mean I know it's been ranked in a lot of magazines and different things, one of the best cities in the United States, and you know, but. I think throughout the years, especially for African Americans it lost its, you know. We got lost, you know along the way.** As far as schools, as far as Community. Just because we, you know economically we're not, you know as prevalent, just put us to the side, you know. **Which, once was a you know quote unquote Black Community, I mean it just shifted totally where I think they just did not care enough to include us in this, you know revitalization. Instead they wanted to move us out. So you know, you always be proud of where you grew up where you come from, but you know, don't always agree with you know the direction that it's going.”** (Deacon C)

Pastor A's sense of the community wanting to experience development on their terms, coupled with Deacon C's note here that "they just did not care to include us" suggests that my participants feel the development itself is not the problem, it is the continual disregard for local residents' and institutions' wants and needs.

Where Church A is located in the outer Alexandria suburbs, Church C is right in the heart of Old Town Alexandria— a region that was frequently noted as historically Black. Participants from Church C note feeling a call to be rooted in the community surrounding Church C, or more specifically, note feeling a departure from the past in which they felt like a "community church":

> "I wanted as I saw it, and as I prayed and sought God, I saw a golden **opportunity for [Church C] to be a Community Church**. Where most of the people started off being able to walk to church, **now the lion's share are commuters. Why is that? Because of your topic of gentrification.**" (Pastor C)

The term "community church" comes up several times in Pastor C's interview, the meaning of which ranges from the location of the parishioners in relation to the church, to the role of the church in the community. He states- "I wanted to set the precedent that we were going to be a community church, that we are opening our doors to the community, and we're not going to be the kind that turns them away." Pastor C's conception of what it means to be a "community church" relates to more traditional, historically prevalent notions of the importance of the Black church within Black communities. As the premise of this projects reveals, and as noted by Pastor C at the end of his quote, gentrification within the City of Alexandria has shifted the relationship between the church and the residents surrounding its building. In questioning the role of the Black church in no

longer predominantly Black communities, Deacon C ruminates on the sustainability of this contradiction:

> " …**as far as the future of the church goes… you can't really have as much of an impact as you would like to just because you know the people that the church stands on, that it was built on is just not around anymore. … But it's just hard to do the best that you can do without those people being able to like literally reach out and touch them. Or you go down to the, you know City Hall, and make an impact to change anything, because they're like who are you doing it for? None of those people live here. You know? It's just, it's tough."** (Deacon C)

Where Pastor C mentions gentrification as an impediment to *sustaining* a "community church," Deacon C's passage reveals the tensions that arise from not *being* a "community church" including hinderances to political organizing within the community. These statements parallels Pastor B's discussion of dispersal as community disruption, and Deacon A's account of the scattering of Black and Hispanic affordable housing residents. Deacon C further notes that "… the church, black church anyways, [which] is the lifeline of the community…. [is] not a community based thing anymore." Pastor C's yearning for a "community church" is then revealed to be disrupted by the cultural and demographic chasm between the "church" and the "community"— a phenomenon that historic Black churches in Old Town Alexandria have, for the majority of their centuries long histories, avoided. The former "community church" is then paradoxically deemed "out of place" within the community it once birthed.

4.2.3 Surveilling the Community Church

In her reading of surveillance in "gentrifying spaces," Summers argues that surveillance is a "racialized… form of social control… that reifies the boundaries of race" and "define[s] what, or who, is in or out of place" (2019, 155). Much like the meritocracy of deservingness for immigrants in southern Christian communities (Nagel

and Ehrkamp 2016) and for Alexandria's affordable housing tenants as addressed earlier in this chapter, racialized surveillance defines "'appropriate' behavior in public space" (Summers 2019, 153). This racialized surveillance is a challenge for black churches that now have to navigate what Deacon C refers to as majority white populations surrounding a variety of black churches in the city:

> "**Yeah it's a, it's a tough navigation. It's, you always have to be on your best behavior, for sure. Because you don't want any issues.** Again, like you said, **parking, noise. You know, doing too much**, I mean you know, in the city, especially in Old Town, I mean you got to have a permit to do this and do that, you make sure you always you know up to code or anything because you know it can be, you know, a problem. So you know you don't want any those problems to arise with the people in neighborhood."(Deacon C)

He then alludes to the change that is experienced by the church as the demographic surrounding the building changes:

> "**… I'm sure we've had, you know, noise complaints before,** you know. You know **just having church,** you know, **but you know people can hear, you know the music or whatever you know next door across the street** so, um. **Yeah it's definitely a strange thing when you know, it's like you got all these black churches in the neighborhood and the whole community is white for the most part.** It's something that both sides have to adapt to, I guess, you know. We're not doing anything purposeful to, you know, to disturb anybody, and they have to understand that. And you know we have to understand that that's their property, you know, we don't want to do anything to disturb them either, so. Yeah it goes it goes hand in hand, so I guess it's a transition for sure in the neighborhood." (Deacon C)

Deacon C's attention to being on one's "best behavior" so as to avoid "problems" with neighbors reveals how the shifting demographics surrounding Alexandria's Black churches correlates to a relatively new feeling of his, and the church's, actions being monitored. Further, he reiterates the racialized nature of surveillance, referring to "all these black churches in the neighborhood [while] the whole community is white". In confirming that this demographic change is relatively recent change and requires

adapting, Deacon C's comments also suggest that complaints of noise and parking only emerged with the racial change in the neighborhood that have created gentrifying spaces that impose new cultural expectations (Summers 2019). Perhaps when the communities surrounding the Black churches were indeed Black, there was a shared cultural understanding both of the importance of the Black church and of its affective and material traits. While the cultural specificities of Black and white religious traditions are beyond the scope of this project, their differences reveal the racialized nature of "noise complaints" submitted by supposedly white residents in proximity to Black churches.

As Lincoln and Mamiya note, "music, or more precisely *singing* is second only to preaching as the magnet of attraction and the primary vehicle of spiritual transport for the worshiping congregation" (1990, 346). In the Black Christian tradition music is not simply a long-established part of the service left unchanging and unchanged, music is woven throughout. Songs are sung spontaneously by the Pastor or by other congregants deeply engaged in a spiritual moment (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 348), and the call and response that is a signifier of Black culture, including the blues tradition (Woods 1998), is taken up by the rest of the church. Songs are chosen based on the affectual heat of the moment to best fit the atmosphere, and the intensity of the moment is often expressed through volume. Spiritual praise is also expressed through "shouting," which as the term suggests, can get objectively loud.

The importance of music and the physical embodiment of praise in the Black Christian context, then, is historically significant, and attempts at controlling volume can be read as a suppression of Black culture through stifling religious expression. This suppression is imposed through racialized surveillance, deeming long-standing traditions

in the Black church "out of place." As Deacon C's quote shows, this racialized surveillance is further justified through the legitimacy given to the ownership of private property. And as Roy's (2017) use of the "logics of possession" reveal, the ownership of private property is inextricable from the ability to assert personhood, particularly in contexts in which displacement is prevalent. Thus, though the church as a whole is engaged in a collective logic of possession, which I have stated earlier is indicative of the longer history of the Black church, this takes a back seat both to the relatively individual possession of residential property as well as the presumed whiteness of the residents making complaints.

Deacon C's attention to "adaptation" was a topic of concern for Trustee C as well, who discusses his perception of the church's relationship with its residential neighbors after describing the process of neighborhood change as "a little frightening." He tells the story of tensions between a less than accommodating construction company hired by the church and the church's neighbors for whom the company caused a disturbance. To resolve the issue, he shares "we won't have that company back anymore because we try to be neighborly and we try to get along with everybody." Further, Trustee C shares that peaceful relationships with neighbors are attainable, "but you just got to be proactive."

As the passages from Deacon C and Trustee C show, for leaders within Alexandria's Black churches, their sense of place has been altered due to the change in demographics in the city. And while I have analyzed their passages using theories of possession, surveillance, and control, they see the process as an adjustment that they have learned to navigate. Ultimately, the quotes suggest that when Alexandria had a higher percentage of Black residents, participants noted a greater sense of "community." Now

that there are fewer Black residents, there are feelings of having to change behavior, and an overall shifting of the importance of the Black church to Alexandria's new communities.

4.2.4 Historical Emplacement

The importance of state-recognized historic preservation is a theme that ran through many of the interviews. This was seen in two ways: first, the regulations put in place by the Historic Preservation Division of the City of Alexandria's Department of Planning and Zoning, and second, the pull to acquire historical markers for establishments without one. Multiple participants mention having to seek approval to make changes to the church building. The following passage from my interview with Trustee C reveals how the introduction of new metro stations to the city shifted the zoning:

> **Trustee C:** "… Old Town stopped at Washington Street, and when Braddock Road and King Street metro stop came in, Old Town stretched always down to King Street exit. So, in essence, you can't change windows out, you can't paint, you got to get approval from the city. So, it's a different, it's a real change."
>
> **JM:** So is [Church] specifically a historical landmark in Alexandria by the city, or is it just the region as a whole?
>
> **Trustee C:** Region as a whole. We haven't got that marker yet…. You got to go through this process to get the marker as a historical site. And I think one of these days if I get some time, I'm going to do that.

In addition to detailing the restrictions imposed on buildings within the bounds of "Old Town" proper, this passage gives insight into the allure for Black churches of being formally recognized as historically significant.

Where the Historic Preservation zoning is established by the city (City of Alexandria, 2021), individual historic districts and sites are part of the larger National Parks Service's National Register of Historic Places (City of Alexandria, 2020a). This

holds true for other churches in my study. For example, after Pastor A detailed the process of purchasing and preserving the home of the first African American principle in Gum Springs in our interview, Assistant Pastor A jumped in to ask about the possibility of acquiring a historical marker for the building. So, while these quotes point again to the larger sense of pride felt by Black church leaders in the legacies of their churches and communities, they also raise questions about the relationship between the gentrification-induced *displacement* of and state-regulated *historical emplacement* of Alexandria's African American communities.

Indeed, *what role does historical emplacement on the landscape play in the wider process of (sub)urbanization when confronted with the active displacement of Black bodies?* In *Black in Place* (2019), Brandi Summers argues that spatial aesthetic emplacement, often enacted through historical preservation, separates Blackness as a cultural entity from Black people, allowing the former to function independently while the city benefits from the intentional removal of the latter. Summers further describes that "Blackness lends itself to the process of urban aestheticization through the paradoxical incorporation and exclusion of Blackness" (2019, 23). The following quote by Deacon A, a former employee of the city's Housing Authority, offers an example of this tension:

> Deacon A: "Yes, there has there has been several representatives that would speak up at board meetings and different things. **I know the last set of homes that they decided to tear down and redevelop are called the Ramsey homes, and those are basically right next to the African American Museum across from Charles Houston. So those were the last set that I know that they have demolished**."

This quote shows the paradoxical role of Blackness where the city's Black History Museum emplaces Blackness, while the adjacent Ramsey Homes can easily be torn down

to displace Black residents. When coupled with the efforts of the city to change the landscape to fit the changing demographic, I see the attempts of churches to acquire historical landmarks a way of ensuring they will be on the landscape and be remembered. Because Black history is respected, perhaps they hope to gain the respect/humanity of the importance of their existence in this space retroactively.

4.3 Conclusion

(Sub)urban redevelopment in Alexandria, Virginia has negatively affected the city's Black residents at a disproportionate rate. As this chapter shows, Black church leaders in the city note this inequity while acknowledging the complexity of the experience of mobility in African American communities. Further, while interviewees demonstrate skepticism towards the city's planning and policies, they also express a willingness to peacefully coexist with their new neighbors, and in some cases, to create multicultural/racial congregations. Across the variances in the specificities of how gentrification is perceived, one constant is made clear— the changing demographics of the City of Alexandria has changed how the churches engage in spiritual and material outreach. I turn to a discussion of these changes in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5. SUSTAINING A CHURCH, COMMUNITY OUTREACH, AND COVID-19

In chapter four I discussed how participants perceive the process of gentrification in Alexandria, Virginia. In this chapter, I continue my analysis with a broader discussion of how the churches' outreach programs have changed as a result of gentrification. Theologically, Christian outreach refers to mission work with the purpose of spreading Christianity. Outreach within the Black church was historically and continues to be a form of communal resistance against white supremacy and the structural violence it ensures poor Black communities are subject to.

Alongside the involuntary displacement of congregants that used to live in the city's affordable housing, participants describe a shifting demographic composition within their churches as older members pass away and younger adults move away in search of job opportunities, both of which affect the scope of outreach efforts themselves. Outreach programs have also been affected by funding allocated by Alexandria to non-profit organizations, a classification that each of the churches holds. Through engaging with their communities by meeting needs directly, the churches continue the legacy of "operating in the *absence* of state welfare rather than as an *alternative* to it" (Barber 2015).

5.1 Community Outreach

Before analyzing the outreach programs and how they've adjusted, "outreach" as a phrase must first be defined. "Outreach" within the Black church was the initial motivation for the conceptualization of this project. In growing up in a Black Baptist church I witnessed, and engaged in, year-round efforts to both bring "souls" to the church

while getting material resources out into the community. When writing my interview questions, I used the phrase "outreach" to refer to more of the material aspects of community engagement— food drives, youth recreation and engagement, clothing and resource drives, etc. As the interviews progressed, however, it became clear to me that the scope this phrase meant for me, even subconsciously, was too narrow. Where I understood outreach initially to be the materiality the public sees, discussing the logistics of the necessary components for successful outreach revealed to me that a solid theological grounding was one of those components for most of my participants, and certainly for all of the pastors interviewed. This revealed to me how material outreach is conceptualized for church leaders— the 'why?', or theological grounding, is where all outreach efforts begin.

Additionally, the "Great Commission" was used by multiple participants as their theological basis for engaging in community outreach. The "Great Commission" is used to refer to Matthew 28: 18-20 which reads:

> "(18) And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, *All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth*. (19) *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*: (20*) Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*. Amen." (King James Version 1996)

While this command to go out into the world and spread the teachings of God was mentioned in relation to these churches attempting to mitigate the effects of state neglect within their communities, it was also historically used in part to justify the creation of these systems of material scarcity. Religious scholars note the use of the Great Commission to justify global colonialism, which included of course the global slave

trade, and more specifically, the American plantation system (Lawson 2018). Though I don't engage in depth with this tension in this study, I see it as an interesting departure point through which to examine the seeming dichotomy between exclusion/harm and care that Christian outreach missions embody.

5.1.1 Outreach Programs

In Alexandria's Black churches, outreach takes many forms. All outreach efforts are spiritually motivated and some provide material benefits to recipients. While the spiritual and material aspects of programs often overlap, my participants usually referred to primarily spiritual outreach as "evangelism," or seeking to bring "souls to Christ," while programs with material aspects range from resource drives to annual Vacation Bible Schools. Programs that run on state funding, however, are expected to be secular and not contain spiritual content. For example, though food drives maybe be run by labor that is justified theologically, those who participate tangibly receive an item to take with them regardless of their faith orientation. The same is true for state-funded programs. Regarding spiritual outreach, an audience that is recruited to attend the church, or someone that participates in a weekly bible study, does not always receive a materially useful goods, but there's often overlap and community members may take part in more than one program. All churches described being involved in spiritual outreach efforts in Alexandria in a variety of ways.

In Church C for instance, Pastor C describes a spiritual outreach initiative he implemented at the church. Referred to as the Barbershop Ministry, he recounts this program being one of the first he himself began upon taking on the role of Senior Pastor at Church C. The program, he shares, was inspired by one of his parishioners, and his

frustration at the church not understanding the "Great Commission" as a priority. Pastor C goes on to explain that he made this connection with local barbershops as a project for said Parishioner to engage in, and that it ended up being a perfect fit because the owner of the shop agreed, sharing that he "had been praying for something like this." He then describes the reasoning behind conceptualizing a weekly bible study housed specifically in a local barber shop after my prompting:

> "So when I first came to the church, I just remember Dr. Joe Samuel Ratliff talking about '**if you want to know what's going on with the community, you've got to go where the community is**.' So I went knocking on the doors. I went to YMCA, I went to Boys and Girls Club. **And then I went to a few barber shops, because I know our demographic is African Americans.** And I wanted to, you know, I went up and down King Street. Sure. I went to the touristy spots, that was great, but **for a natural thread, for who we are and what was going to be our base, I needed to be where the lion's share of our congregation would be. And so that's where I started.** And in building relationships, the barbershop made sense because there was an under-populated male presence in the church." (Pastor C)

This passage and the preceding story reveal two insights into Pastor C's conceptions of community outreach. First, he sees Community Outreach as a benefit not just to the target audiences, but to the parishioners within the church as well. As the catalyst for creating the program was a member of the church who felt spiritually stifled, and the solution was an outreach program, outreach might then be described here as an outlet for which believers can express the depth of their belief and devotion to God, or more specifically, the "word," seen here as Great Commission. Second, the justification of the place of the barbershop specifically reveals the necessity of having a church's target audience in proximity for an outreach program to succeed or reach as many probable participants as possible. Pastor C's quotes that "you've got to go where the community is" and that "[he] needed to be where the lion's share of our congregation would be" reveals the importance of emplacement and belonging to knowing how to reach said audience. Knowing where

to find the community is also central to becoming and maintaining a "community church" (see chapter 4). Pastor C's passage also reveals an understanding the importance of barbershops as historically and presently significant places of communal gathering and belonging. Bryant Keith Alexander identifies Black barbershops as a "cultural site," defined in part as "a central location within a cultural community that serves at the confluence of banal ritualized activity and the exchange of cultural currency," (2003, 106). In this way, we then see the bible study become part of that exchange, and we see the barbershop's role as a specifically Black geography, serving as central location through which a new cultural community is created.

When asked how gentrification of Alexandria has affected Church B's outreach strategies, Reverend B notes that:

> "**the people who we were helping are African-American, is low income and some Hispanic that would come, and they're not there anymore. There's some but not like there used to be, so then you have to rethink and um you know, how do you reach others?"** (Rev. B)

Similar to Deacon C's explanation of needing to know where and how to reach your targeted constituency, Rev. B reveals that the out migration of groups most affected by gentrification have forced Alexandria's Black churches to adjust their outreach strategies. With less African American residents in the areas the churches used to target, outreach leaders are now finding ways to engage with the presumably non-Black "others" in the city.

Like Church C, Church D engages in spiritual outreach programs that target specific audiences within the city's Black population. Pastor D describes a program titled "Wine and Good News," a bible study group aimed towards engaging millennials

specifically. Though it was a relatively newer program—having only been implemented for about a year or so—Pastor D describes it as being "effective" due to the innovation, but also explained that it was controversial because it involved drinking alcohol while discussing "the Word of God." As a Teen and Young Adult coordinator, Deacon D described in depth some of the age-specific programs for the younger demographics, for example a "seminar" that the youth within Church D were planning in which topics that were important to them would be discussed. Topics such as teenage pregnancy, police confrontations, premarital sex, and even the impacts of social media on decision making would be open for discussion for participants from all over the city. This generational specificity, and tensions that sometimes arise, will be discussed further later in the chapter, as age demographics were described as playing an important role in church functioning.

VBS, or Vacation Bible School, serves as a good example of an outreach effort that is both spiritual and material in nature. As VBS is such an integral part to many Black Christian communities, my participants did not go into much depth explaining the program itself, though most mentioned it being an integral part of their church's outreach efforts. VBS serves as a week-long program, generally during the summer, for people of all ages to engage in Christian education. The week includes classes, which are broken up by age group, and generally provide a meal. Deacon B explicitly mentions VBS as an opportunity to "[deal] with issues of food insecurity, making sure the young people are well fed," while simultaneously providing opportunities for both recreation and education. This attention to age aligns with Lincoln and Mamiya's study, which identified educational programs, including Vacation Bible Schools, as only second

behind evangelism in outreach programs used to target youth in the Black church (1990, 325-326). Lincoln and Mamiya further discuss the link between churches and mutual-aid, arguing that the impulse for communal care has roots in the plantation, and tracing the simultaneous creations of mutual aid networks and churches as "symbiotic" (1990, 242).

The distribution of food within the congregations and beyond is one of the most consistent forms of mutual aid (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990), and the churches in my study are no exception. For all of the churches I interviewed, food distribution in various forms was perhaps the most common material denominator. One such program, described in depth, is "Jesus Cares," housed within Church C. Deacon C shared that before COVID-19, the church would be open to the community for those in need to receive a hot meal every third Saturday of the month. He further details that "words of encouragement" would often be exchanged between the church volunteers and meal recipients, multiple of whom were homeless. Priscilla McCutcheon (2015) describes similar circumstances in her research on the historic Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. In analyzing the church's 'emergency soul food' program, she argues that the space in which the food was created and distributed serves as a Black geography in which food provides both a material function in feeding guests as well as a spiritual function in providing a space for theological discourse. This attention to both the spiritual and material outcomes of Black religious food programs is mirrored in VBS and "Jesus Cares."

In addition to engaging in VBS as an opportunity for feeding the community, Church B is also an official food distribution site for the City of Alexandria. Rev. B describes the church's involvement with a local food bank:

> **"…we partner with the Social Services which is next door to our church. Social Services for Alexandria, Department of Social services**, is right next door to our church. And so we partner with them through social services for the distribution. **So they came to us to ask us if we would like to partner with them and with the national capital area food bank**, and um that's how that started…. [t]hrough the North of Virginia capital area food bank. They look at spots and they targeted Alexandria as one of the neediest places that needed food." (Rev. B)

Rev. B goes on to describe the logistics of the program, which she describes as being even more necessary to the community now due to the economic toll the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on U.S. households. As a "mobile market site," Church B's volunteers repackage food delivered to them by the National Capital Area food bank, which she emphasizes is specifically healthy food— primarily produce, and occasionally dairy and meat. Rev. B also emphasizes that the mobile market program is completely free to participants, and there are no requirements participants must meet to qualify to receive the food. Church B also, however, is a site for The Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, which is a federal program that aims to provide nutritious food to "low-income Americans." The program is housed within the USDA, and participants only qualify if they receive other federal social services, such as SNAP or Medicaid. Rev. B mentions that while there is a distinction, the church believes the participants responses at face value regarding their qualifying for TEFAP.

As McCutcheon notes, "Black churches often take on responsibilities, such as feeding the poor, as a part of their spiritual missions — missions intertwined with strong beliefs in self-help and racial progress," (2015, 392). Similarly, Ashanté Reese's *Black Food Geographies* (2019) emphasizes "geographies of self-reliance" in DC's majority Black Deanwood neighborhood that "center Black agency" in the navigation of a racially exclusive food system that exposes "a reliance on self and *community*" (2019, 8-9,

emphasis added). In the case of Alexandria, then, the willingness of all the churches to take on the labor of food distribution can be read as a "geography of self-reliance," in which much like Wheat Street, they see a racialized engagement with food as a reassertion and commitment to community. While Church B's program is open to the community at large, I see this creating a sort of community that is majority poor/ working class, and majority non-white (as observed from my participation in previous distribution efforts).

Food programs, or even programs in which physical products are tacitly exchanged, are not the only form of material outreach detailed by the participants. In discussing the changes over time to material outreach programs with Church B, a discussion of 501(c)(3) status and a loss of state funding was mentioned. Interviewees within Church B mentioned two previously state-funded programs— an HIV/ AIDS case management program, as well as a community youth program. The first program was aimed at helping adults living with HIV/ AIDS navigate resources in the city, such as food, housing, and health care. The latter, coined the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Program, or TAPPP, was targeted towards youth in the Alexandria region. Rev. B describes the program:

> "…the TAPP program consisted of a mentoring program, tutoring program, training program, because it was also- well teenage pregnancy prevention was the theme. But you also had workshops on how to keep yourself safe, and about HIV/AIDS, what that looks like, how do you keep yourself from that. Um, so it was a multifaceted program uh and it helped uh those kids that were at risk in school." (Rev. B)

She later mentions that due to the state funding, this was not a specifically religious program. Deacon B, however, remembers it differently. He shares that:

> "…embedded in that process of the Teenage Pregnancy and Prevention program was also a context of course of personal development identity formation, anchoring in faith in Jesus Christ, but also of course developing educational skill sets, etc. So that was a major outreach component, right, through TAPP." (Deacon B)

In this program children would receive meals each week, counseling, and homework help. They even receive stipends with the amount based on how many weeks each month they showed up and were often set up with bank accounts with the help of the church staff. Though these material outcomes served to fill a gap created by purposefully absent state services (Barber 2015), they also come with a specific expectation that is stated very clearly in the name— to prevent teenage pregnancy. And though Deacon B mentions that topics of premarital sex were broached with equal attention to "both sides of the equation" (presumably 'boys' and 'girls'), his mention of "anchoring in faith in Jesus Christ" reveals that there were nonetheless ideologies the church was attempting to instill in the TAPP participants.

Where McCutcheon describes a dialectic based on racial progress and Reese describes one based on "a racialized asceticism… in which every behavior counts" (2019, 59), I see these reflected in the work of my interviewees, all rooted in the controversial politics of respectability. First coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in her examination of the political involvement of Black Baptist women, the "politics of respectability" refers to the "promotion of temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity" by African American Baptist women in the Progressive Era (Harris 2003, 213). In addition to appealing to white notions of purity through sexual sanitization, these politics were also both gendered and classed. And many argue that these politics still undergird Black liberal notions of progress and racial uplift, rooted in

gaining access to "full citizenship" (Harris 2003, 213) even today. As teenage pregnancy overwhelmingly is seen as a female issue, and one that stunts socioeconomic growth, Church B's attempts to curtail it are seen as mobilizing the ideology of respectability through providing material benefits through the church's non-profit status.

Pastor D and Pastor B also mention the importance of 501(c)(3) status to the business logistics of the church which for Church B, is the reason why leadership was able to secure such large amounts of funding. Along with the programs that Church B offers in conjunction with state welfare services, the connection between the Black church and the state is complicated. In working to mitigate the conditions of scarcity created by settler-colonial racial capitalism in the US, the churches interviewed use the tools of the state system too, if only temporarily, to provide some relief. Jason Hackworth (2010), suggests that such collaborations necessitate understanding "churches as drivers of neoliberalism, " and Church B's engagement with local food banks and the city's social service department may well be read as part of the process of decentralizing government services. But such interpretations are reductive because they do not adequately take into account the historical and racially specific role black churches play in black communities that have been traditionally and systematically excluded from these necessary resources. Black churches both historically and presently provide material needs that welfare state services fail to provide.

Barber also employs Evelyn Higginbotham's dialogical model of Black religious ideology which, building from Lincoln and Mamiya's dialectical model employed by McCutcheon, "focuses on how the polarities mutually produce each other" (2015, 250). This dialogical model gives space for these tensions to shift, responding both to each

other and to the present moment. Thus, I argue that the dialogical model provides more flexibility to see the "tensions" presented in Black church outreach of control/exclusion and belonging/care as behaviors in a continuum. It also provides space to fully examine respectability equally as both an exclusionary "gatekeeping function" regulating access to "full citizenship" (Harris 2003, 213), as well as a politics through which Black Baptist women attempted to enact their religious ideology and care for their communities.

Further, regarding the demarcation between "church" and "state", the dialogical model necessitates that we examine the full context of the creation of both the secular and sacred components, and why they are not so easily separated. As stated earlier, mutual aid and the Black church have a symbiotic relationship, one that was created due to the materiality of American slavery and the economic effects the plantation system had on the Black community directly following emancipation. In being purposefully excluded from state welfare systems, Black communities necessarily filled these gaps by creating "geographies of self-reliance" (Reese 2019). While Hackworth (2010) does argue that "faith-based organizations" are an ideal mode through which to acknowledge the partial effects of economic trends as many outreach missions "predate the rise of neoliberalism", he only very briefly mentions race/racism and focuses on only one piece of the "dialogue" between the church and the state. And as Ananya Roy's theorization of racial banishment asserts, the ability for common theorizations of "gentrification" and "displacement" to decenter race in their economic arguments (2017, A3) serve to fundamentally misunderstand "the present historical juncture of urbanism in the United States" (2019, 227).

The unequal effects of racial capitalist exclusion in the "present historical juncture of urbanism in the US" (Roy 2019, 227) are highly visible in the nationwide fight for affordable housing in gentrifying cities. Black churches in my study who engage in community outreach see the lack of affordable housing as a racialized issue. This lack of affordable housing was described by my participants as manifesting in Alexandria specifically through the "redevelopment" of affordable housing which sometimes meant replacement with "mixed- income" accommodations, as well as overall increases in rent and property taxes. In order to mitigate the displacement caused by the City of Alexandria's policies Black churches seek different ways to intervene.

For example, Church C collaborates with VOICE, a local inter-faith organization that tackles an array of social justice issues including affordable housing in Alexandria. Additionally, Pastor D sees being at the table where conversations about affordable housing take place as part of his Pastoring duties. Similarly, Pastor B details a committee implemented within Church B that aimed to be part of community initiatives during its tenure. He specifically mentions that his church's Civil and Social Action Committee was "tied into things that were going on in the community, like the loss of housing." Reverend B also remembers a prominent elder in the church, who was also well known in the Alexandria community:

> "… **she's no longer with us, but we have had people, her name is Ruby Tucker, and she was very very much an activist in the community. And she was a member of, one of our members**. And so, she was actually on the board of housing in Alexandria. So she knew what was coming down the Pike, and she knew of plans that they had, you know, what was going on. **But she's one, you know, so she would go to the meetings and she would, she stopped as much as she could. She and a few others slowed it down. But you can't, what do they say, can't fight City Hall, you know. They have their plans, and they had a plan and strategically, and it happened strategically**. Kinda like they pulled the rug right from under the people without them knowing was going on. **But she tried to warn people and because she was a part of us, then yes our church tried to go- we did go to meetings and things**

> **like that, and trying to warn the community in our, and even our own parishioners, what was happening and to be on the lookout for this. And if you have a home, you know, be careful, you know, that type of thing. But again, if you're not in power, if you don't- if you're not empowered, then you fall prey.”** (Rev. B)

To honor Ruby Tucker, a park was named in after her in 2011 following her passing, and not too long after the Alexandria Housing Authority created the “Ruby Tucker Family Center” to honor her commitment “to serving the low and moderate income families in Alexandria” (Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority, n.d.). This naming, rather than fixing issues of displacement and unaffordable housing present 10 years after her passing, also points to the function of historical aesthetic emplacement in the gentrifying D.C. area (see Summers 2019). In emplacing Ruby Tucker and her fights for affordable housing in the past, the issues of the present displacement processes are more easily overlooked. In remembering Tucker in relation to Church B’s efforts to mitigate affordable housing loss, Pastor B mentions shares that “we don’t have a Ruby Tucker to fight… for housing equity and whatnot.”

Many community initiatives previously led by Black churches are no longer as feasible now due to the displacement of the city’s “low-moderate income communities” (to borrow from Alexandria’s housing authority). Deacon C states that the church’s functioning as a whole, and specifically its ability to organize, is hindered by gentrification induced displacement because “the people that the Church stands on, that it was built on, is just not around anymore.” In other words, the emplacement of community activists in the past, along with the mentioning of past efforts for community organizing around housing, reveals what I argue to be intentional efforts to disrupt not only the community, but organizing itself. Instead of church-led efforts, Deacon A details

a city-implemented training effort she was previously involved in that is still ongoing (Parent Leadership Training Institute, n.d.):

> **"… one thing that the city had that was very interesting when I lived there, they had a program called Parent Leadership Training Institute. And so that program basically took parents, you know, parents from low income, all types of income, and you will go through this leadership program. It teaches you about advocating to your community learning what your state does, what the local government does, what the federal government does**. And I mean, this is kind of off task, but out of that particular program you had parents, you know, general parents running for office. Some of them became school board members, some of them developed nonprofit organizations. So they were able to see all these issues in their community and then to go out and advocate for the changes within the community…. **So one thing that we had to do in that program is we had to do a project, and so out of the project that everybody chose some of them branched off and did their own nonprofits."** (Deacon A)

The Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) serves as an ongoing space of community organizing that ultimately focuses on working within varying levels of state structures to create change. Deacon A's note that some parents involved in the program went on to hold positions in local office and create nonprofit organizations confirms this. Parents who are systemically excluded from making policy decisions show agency in choosing to work within these systems to advocate for their communities. The PLTI and Deacon C's comments together reveal that while community organizing is still possible, gentrification creates additional hurdles, such as distance for displaced individuals, and subsequently restricts options. On the same topic, Reverend A mentions what he perceives as a decline in community organizing:

> "… the thing is is that when I came up, my great grandmother and great on and all of my other relatives, they used to protest and march. **They used to go down to the City Hall, which was down in a place called King Street Alexandria now.…**They went to all the meetings that were, because they were trying to get rights…. And this is another value that we lost, because **young people today don't go to those meetings, those council meetings and things tha**t…. just as we push people to vote, we have to get out and push them to go, to push those who living to go, in those communities, to go to those meetings in their community. Because the young people today, they don't. They just sit back and a lot of them, a lot of

> them, I'm not going to say all of them, but a lot of them, they sit back. And that's because they're young, a lot of them are young." (Rev. A)

In this quote, Rev. A expresses a noticeable decrease in organizing within Alexandria's Black communities, though he does so through a lens that prioritizes self-help and traditional notions of racialal uplift. Similar patterns of thought regarding the connection between African Americans and their responsibilities to changing their own material realities within harmful systems were found in Reese's *Black Food Geographies* (2019). In analyzing a quote from a participant that reveals the "contradictions born out of anti-Blackness and consistent unequal access to resources," Reese argues "[t]his dialectic—recognizing structural inequities while also placing blame or responsibility on those who are most affected by them—reflects deeply held beliefs that personal responsibility is paramount to accessing and maintaining high quality resources…" (2019, 56). The same is true for Rev. A, and to some extent, true for some of the programs detailed by the churches. In giving credence to one's individual behaviors as a reasoning for either receiving or being excluded from equal rights, the participants engage in a model of respectability that ultimately serves a "gatekeeping function" (Harris 2003, 213) and upholds deservingness and behavioral meritocracy as legitimate functions of belonging.

Ultimately, I argue outreach efforts by Black churches in Alexandria are an effort to mitigate the effects of structural violence. The church as a center for political engagement and access to material goods is rooted in the founding of the institutions themselves. The conditions of white supremacy necessitated the creation of Black cultural centers, and ongoing systems of racial capitalism and neoliberalism both hinder

them and render them as necessary as ever. In what follows, I detail how the functioning of the churches have changed overtime.

5.2 Sustaining a Church

5.2.1 Church Functioning

An important component to the outreach efforts churches can engage in is the congregation that performs the labor. All churches noticed significant demographic changes within the congregation as well, noting that in addition to the scope of outreach efforts, shifting demographics have also affected the finances of the church. As a long-time member of Church D, Sister D gives a broad overview of the demographic shifts within the church over time:

> **"...we have fewer families as a demographic at Beulah which means fewer children**. And so, again, **from the time from me growing up in Beulah we've gone from a congregation that had a fairly, fairly robust Children's church and children's ministry**, youth choir, like every program that we had at the adult level, we had a young person, young adult, or children's version of that ministry. **And a lot of, you know, family participation, don't see that as much anymore."** (Sis. D)

She describes a decrease in families that belong to the church, which she sees as correlating with the decrease in youth in the congregation. Sis. D later describes how Church D has tried to remedy this demographic gap:

> **"So children don't come to church alone, right, they need an adult to bring them. And so a lot of our outreach has been to families, and then because our programs have diminished because we just didn't have people attending those, we have to now developed some programs that will retain, you know, not only attract families but retain families, and keep them interested and fed as a ministry."** (Sis. D)

This attention to families specifically is also brought up by Deacon B:

> “So we are in a transition context where we're looking at how do we do more outreach to *families* in particular. Where we can get that mixture of young adults and children right to grow the process again, while still doing our core service and our worship to the Lord, and the outreach has taken on a different context.” (Deacon B)

These quotes from Deacon B and Sis. D reveal the importance of having a healthy mixture of age groups within the church. Deacon B further describes that in addition to forced displacement due to the redevelopment of affordable housing, other factors have contributed to a decrease of youth, young adults, and families as a whole in Church B. Deacon B mentions the pull towards jobs that aren’t in the Alexandria area as being a factor for the loss of younger potential leaders within Church B. He also sees the cap in resources that each church can provide as a reason for those in need “to move from church to church” to get their needs met, along with the deaths of prominent church elders:

> “And then once you start getting a transition the anchors called home to the Lord, or the anchors in essence get better opportunities out of state because they have all these skill sets, they start leaving. So your workers start leaving, but they're also leaving with the finance. And what you have remaining are those in need…. So I think that began to affect what we could do operationally with outreach if we did not have funding.” (Deacon B)

Deacon B later emphasizes that for Church B, he sees this demographic shift as more of a factor to the limited outreach capacities as compared to solely the removal of affordable housing and displacement of Black residents:

> “So I think it's that mix of things going on the impact of the congregation. That’s socio economics, where people are moving, to what group has needs. It's a very complex, what I call, situational based eco- system if you will, looking at what is there. And as Pastor would say, that *is* the church…. And now what you're doing is you're saying, Well, how do we grow, how do we grow, quote unquote, the church again. Those who will come in, praise, and serve the Lord, so that we can move to the same context that we were before. And that's where we are in transition now. And so as I said before, even though there was that gentrification

> context…. But then, ultimately, that wasn't the key context. It was just dynamic change within our congregation proper" (Deacon B)

What Deacon B describes here— pulls towards jobs outside of Alexandria for younger adults early in their careers, a loss of families in the church, a migratory group of parishioners looking for resources, and the loss of prominent elders to old age— paints just one example of the complicated nature of a shifting church dynamic.

While suburban gentrification-induced displacement was the entry point for this project, passages like this point to the complexity of the process. Just as churches cannot overarchingly be rendered vehicles of neoliberalization (Hackwork 2010) due to the minor role their missions play in state decentralization, neither can out-migration of Alexandria's African American communities be rendered solely as forced displacement, and neither is it the sole reason for changes in the outreach programs of each church. The complicated dynamics of the congregation, while impacted by the surrounding community, is affected by more than Alexandria's affordable housing policy. As Deacon B shares, individual reasons for moving on one's own accord likely play an equal part in the changes within the church overtime. In complicating the narrative of gentrification being to blame for the disruptions in the Black church, Deacon B engages in a critical undoing of essentialist logics of Black lives solely being reactionary to the violence we are subjected to (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 4).

5.2.2 Changes to Community Engagement

Across all theorizations of how these demographic shifts have occurred, most participants noted a shift in community engagement. Pastor C tells a story of an older

member of Church C who has passed away, who he refers to as the "Pied Piper." He notes:

> "She would go to the projects and go get the children and marched them to the church, **which meant that they were a Community Church. Which meant that people were in the neighborhood**. The local candy store, corner store is right across the street from the church, so it was a natural anchor for the community." (Pastor C)

In addition to revealing the loss of elders as a prominent reason that church outreach has changed for most of the churches, this quote also reveals the ways in which emplacement and belonging facilitated church attendance. Pastor C's note of the Church as a previous "natural anchor" to the community points to spatial logistics as an important factor in the community's engagement with the church. Here, we see the prominence of proximity as a logic in church attendance. As Pastor C later describes, "it's just the hurdles of economics and distance" that makes Church C a "commuter church," and subsequently, not a "community church."

This lack of children and youth in the churches manifests ideologically in the functioning of the church. Deacon D summarizes where he sees this discord stemming from:

> "… because young people have a mind of their own, they have a direction they want to go in and the older members are pretty much stern in what they believe…. So trying to get the older members to allow the younger members to worship, or express themselves in a fashion that *they* prefer versus being held to a standard that they may feel outdated." (Deacon D)

As a relatively young leader, Pastor C notes his attempts to be seen and heard by other generations. He shares:

> “there seemed to be a vying for power. And almost a suffocation, or edging out, of the next generation. And so I really did my dissertation on bridging the gap between baby boomers and millennials.” (Pastor C)

Similar to Pastor C, Pastor D describes experiencing some of the same tensions when taking his leadership position. In addition to the outreach effort “Wine and Good News” aimed towards millennials specifically, he recounts the experience of renovating some of the outreach efforts:

> “**reshaping and reforming and reframing the work that “Missions” did. So much of the work that missions did was very insular. Dare I even say it was an Old Girls Club, the Golden Girls Club, where every missionary would get together with other missionaries in the Alexandria community**, and your laughter indicates that you have some idea what I'm talking about. And, you know, it's one thing, and **I understand that it provides meaning for them to dress up in white, and to wear hats and to get together over tea. I understand that. But that does nothing to feed a mother, or a family of five with a single mother, that does nothing to help the community**.” (Pastor D)

To Pastor D, revamping the “Missions” ministry is essential to maintaining the role of the Black church in Black communities- being of service both spiritually and materially. However, it is important to note that the church being a refuge to the community extends to congregants and leaders within the church. Though the “Old Girls Club” as described by Pastor D doesn’t do much materially for “the community” as conceptualized by outreach efforts, it does serve an important function if we are to include missionaries within said community. As Kelly Coogan- Gehr notes in an examination of the racial exclusion of women of color in U.S. feminist scholarship (2011), Black church all women groups are also “safe spaces” that allow Black women the freedom of full expression away from the constant threat of surveillance by “more powerful groups” (100). Thus, a critical reading of this quote recognizes both the constructive nature in

utilizing church outreach efforts for the good of the community, while seeing it as a potential disruption of community within a community.

In addition to the dynamics of church demographics as an issue, most of the participants noted parking as a major logistical challenge to attracting and retaining parishioners. After mentioning that the process of neighborhood change looked "frightening" (see chapter 3), Trustee C discusses why parking is such an important issue within a rapidly shifting landscape:

> "**And we had an issue at one time because [Church C], unfortunately, never reached out and acquired a parking lot**. So we don't have a parking lot like [Pastor B's] church. I guess on Sunday they practically park in a parking lot, but we don't have a parking, period. And back in the day, you could park on the street, no problem, because all our neighborhood was African American. **But now 15 or 20 years or so ago we had an issue on parking, and we went down to City Hall because neighbors at that time was complaining about people parking, and one of our neighbors, she made a statement in the Council Hall is that all these transients are coming into the city and taking their parking spaces. And that was a little [inaudible], and the church had been there since 1881, and they moved in the neighborhood.** And of course, we have some good neighbors, and we have some that don't understand that you've been there for a while. And it's the neighborhood of all of us, not just the neighborhood of the newcomers and neighborhood of the old heads, **but it's the neighborhood for all of us**." (Trustee C)

As less congregants live within walking distance of their churches, securing reliable parking has become a top priority for church leaders in Alexandria. And while parking is now a logistical hurdle, it also reveals some of the ideological tensions that come with having "Black churches in white neighborhoods", tensions that seemed not to exist, or at least be less prevalent. Trustee C's quote reveals that parking complaints in Old Town Alexandria began around 20 years ago, and that these complaints are often riddled in contradiction. His centering the history of Church C in the 19th century in this instance goes beyond the pride Black churchgoers often feel for the history of their

establishments, but also points to the ways in which (sub)urban policies have been used both presently and historically to render long- term communities unwelcome. This apparent complaint from the neighbor that “her” parking spaces were being taken up by “transients” reveals a lack of understanding of the history of the church— to Trustee C, the emplacement of the church began at its founding. The near derogatory way in which Trustee C recounts the phrase “transient” also suggests a racialized use of the word. To the “neighbor,” the emplacement is solely in the present, and ever shifting in the (Black) bodies of the transients inhabiting her space.

5.3 Adapting to COVID-19

For all of the churches in this study, COVID-19 and social distancing measures have forced an adjustment to how the church functions. Some of the programs I discussed earlier in this chapter, such as Church C’s efforts to feed the hungry and Church D’s youth seminar program, were halted entirely. Others, such as Church B’s food distribution program, or Church A’s Vacation Bible School program, were able to adapt to the current moment, either by meeting CDC guidelines of masking and distancing, or by completely shifting the program online. Regardless of which programs churches chose to adapt and how, all church leaders mentioned both fears and anxieties felt by themselves and fellow congregants. But they also described new opportunities for increasing their church’s digital presence, a process which was overwhelmingly assessed as being a benefit to the future of the church.

When asked how Church’s congregants were coping with the pandemic, Pastor C shared his thoughts: “I think what’s happening for everyone right now, and they've

shared— we've had periods of isolation, we've had people that are so fearful. It's like a dark cloud around them whenever we talk about even entering into the church." He then goes on to describe that while some participants feel safe having in- person service simply being masked and distanced, others would only feel comfortable with rigorous sanitation measures. Deacon A shares that for a while, Church A implemented such sanitation measures. When Church A had services in person, there was a cap on the amount of people allowed in the building at a time, and the amount of time spent in the building for each service was no longer than an hour. For most of the churches, services have been exclusively online since that initial March 2020 shutdown enacted by Governor Northam. For those churches, moving their platforms online has been embraced as an opportunity to step into the digital age.

In Church D, attempts to increase the church's digital presence were underway before the pandemic, and were solidified after social- distancing guidelines were enacted. Pastor D shares:

> "I would say, like *most* churches but that's not the case. Like *some* churches we are virtual in the sense that we utilize our social media platforms to virtually communicate the preached word, which I do…. And You know, I had some of our members, our leadership particularly, call me when the pandemic occurred to quite frankly thank me for instituting technology in the church. Because prior to we didn't have any. And so they have recognized the benefits of technology. So they're less afraid of it." (Pastor D)

Pastor D's stress of the word "some" reveals that not all churches were able to adapt to digital programing and emphasizes Church D as part of the distinction of churches that did. He later states that while "the church *building* is closed, but the *church* is still open." This sentiment is also shared by multiple other participants- for Church C specifically in relation to adapting to the pandemic, and for Church B the separation between the church

and the church building is part of the theological grounding of the founding of the church itself. In all cases, social distancing measures, then, might be seen as an assertion of faith, and a commitment to the spiritual role of the church, particularly in times of crisis. Sis. D also details Church D's virtual presence:

> "… I would say, as we as we go into COVID-19 we are trying to transition to a more virtual outreach. And so having, building content in YouTube, for example, that has like story time for children. Doing some online lessons for children, though we're trying to determine what is going to work best because, as most kids are doing their regular education virtually, don't know how much of an appetite they'll have to then sit back computer on Sundays. So we're trying to find a balance, you know, between what will work. With our virtual and even post COVID-19 we still want to have a fairly robust virtual presence. And so we're trying to figure out what that mix should be in terms of outreach for young people." (Sis. D)

Sis. D and Pastor D's quotes show that in addition to the pandemic necessitating church leadership make programs available digitally, congregants who were previously wary of technology adapted. Church D's leadership is already looking ahead to what a sustainably integrated model of digital engagement looks like in a post COVID-19 world, or what the "new normal" might be. Sis. D states that having a hybrid model for church, as some educational institutions have implemented in having both digital and in person components, would benefit the church financially. By spending less time in the physical building, she sees Church D saving money long term on utilities and building expenses.

In addition to seeing digital worship experiences as having logistical benefits, other interviewees see it as a spiritual opportunity as well. When asked how the feedback has been from congregants regarding virtual programming, Rev. B shared:

> "They appreciate it. A lot of them have said we thank you, we thank you for doing that um, thank you for the weekly services, you know, you guys have been steadfast in doing that, faithful in doing it and we appreciate it. The ones that are taking advantage of it are growing in their faith and they appreciate us having that available for them. They appreciate it" (Rev. B)

She further sees it as an opportunity to reach more people and reconnect with multiple former congregants who have moved outside of the Alexandria/ D.C. metro area, and tells the story of one family in particular:

> “We actually got in a letter and some finances from a person, P.O. box the other day, from a former family. Um they moved, they’re a military family and they sent us a letter stating that we want to send give you some money, you know, offering or tithe or whatever it was. Which means to me that they have been watching, they've been watching. ‘Cause we hadn't heard from him in a long time. So I believe that the reaching out in social media has caused some people that had not been coming to seek out again, and are watching. And family members of people who attend the church are watching. So it's a ripple effect. And uh, people that we don't know are watching” (Rev. B)

For Church B, the virtual programming has served as a source of solace and community both for parishioners who were attending the church directly before the pandemic hit, as well as for previous members who have left the area. In this way, we see virtual church services as a possible strategy to mitigate the logistical hurdles physical distance has traditionally caused for engagement with Church B, whether voluntary or forced. Ultimately, all four churches acknowledge that embracing technology is now a necessity beyond solely the COVID-19 pandemic, but one that is integral to the future of the Black church moving forward even after social distancing measures are lifted. Deacon C states:

> “…for our church and I can only speak for our church, it’s such a novice thing because it's something that they've never been comfortable doing. You know, stepping it up in technology, even though we've tried to, we tried to slowly do it over the years, tried to encourage that. So hopefully this time has taught them that, you know it's something that's needed this day and age. This is something that you can't, I don't think you can go without it, if you want to do your best work.” (Deacon C)

Embracing technology is about more than just adapting to public health measures— it also indicates a commitment to the longevity of the Black church’s role in their various

communities. Maintaining virtual spaces even after the physical building of the church is closer to its previous levels of engagement allows for a reimagining of the Black church. Further, virtual spaces serve to close spatial gaps that have historically caused a separation between members who move farther away from their church community. The successful use of technology for church leaders provides hope that whether impacted by a global pandemic or local economic policy, their spaces of worship can become community churches once again.

5.4 Conclusion

Ultimately within the decolonial urban critique I have employed in the last chapter, I see church outreach as mitigating multiple effects of state sanctioned racialized violence— gentrification induced displacement, hunger, and poverty. The variety of themes covered in this chapter reveal that church leaders are aware that the Black church is navigating a range of shifts that affect their ability to engage in outreach. In addition to adapting to the changing demographic landscape caused by both forced and voluntary out migration of African American Alexandrians out of the city, churches are now attempting to accommodate the needs of younger generations for flexibility both in structure and in belief. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a catalyst for change for many of the churches, and has revealed the necessity of utilizing technology as a tool of survival (and potentially growth) in the face of a dispersed congregation.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

> **"I think gentrification is a much needed topic of discussion. I think that everyone needs to stay active within their communities to make sure that we are always represented, that our voice is always heard, and to know that whatever community it is, you belong there just as well as anyone else."** (Deacon A)

As I have shown in previous chapters, churches in Alexandria, Virginia play major roles in Black communities in providing spiritual and material support and challenging racial banishment. The pastors in my study understand these roles as central to the missions of their church and to their personal callings as religious leaders. However, these roles become complicated when the target audience of each church is displaced or otherwise moves away from the surrounding communities. Church leaders of Black Baptist churches in Alexandria are having to adjust their relationships to their surrounding communities, and now with COVID-19, it seems they are looking beyond the city boundaries. This renegotiation is due in part to the gentrification of Alexandria, which has also had multiple effects on the churches interviewed, particularly in their sense of emplacement through the changing of the communities surrounding them through the displacement, or racial banishment of poor/ working class and or Black/ communities of color.

I have further argued that the Black church is an ideal institution through which to examine the effects of gentrification due to its long-standing importance as a stabilizing force in Black communities. Like the origins of the Black church, gentrification is part of a much longer process of racial capitalist control and exclusion by the settler- colonial U.S. Thus it makes sense to analyze a centuries long ever evolving process- racial

banishment (Roy 2019)- through the lens of a centuries long ever evolving institution committed to mitigating its effects- the Black church (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

This research has multiple implications in geographic research and beyond. First, by centering my examination of the process of gentrification within the suburbs, I contribute to theorizations of space beyond the commonly researched inner city. Second, by sharing specifically Black experiences within the suburbs, which have long been imagined to be primarily white and middle- class, my research expands the scope of what constitutes a Black geography, and explores further spatial theorizations of presumably understood urban processes within academic literature. My use of a Black geographical framework within an overwhelmingly white discipline intervenes in reimagining the racist, homogenous urban imaginaries of Black people only occupying inner cities with lower socioeconomic standing. As “Black matters are spatial matters” (McKittrick 2006), when Blackness is erased from certain landscapes, so too are our “matters” and our humanity. Thus, by sharing the realities of “Black matters” within spaces Black communities have been written out of both in the law and in the literature, I aim to contribute to the assertion of Black conceptions of spatial process as integral to the future of the discipline of geography.

Additionally, a de/postcolonial urban analysis of how Black churches experience suburban gentrification holds three primary implications and potential future directions. First, this study opens an avenue to study post-pandemic churches more in depth as the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt, both economically and emotionally. Second, this research answers broader conceptual questions around how affordable housing is perceived by Black communities and offers second- hand insights into how

affordable housing residents negotiate the bureaucracy of living in projects. As a future direction, my research might seek to explore the historical context of affordable housing for Black communities and situate my research as part of that ongoing process. I could also further analyze the meritocracy of deservingness that dictates affordable housing policies. Third, future research might include discussions with persons displaced by affordable housing removal/renewal to discuss perceptions of and experiences within this meritocracy.

Rethinking the suburbs as more diverse and analyzing claims to Black space within Black geographies in the suburbs is perhaps the broadest intervention this thesis makes. Gentrification provides a spatial process through which to discuss claims to belonging and attempts to revoke it. Gentrification of the suburbs in particular encourages me to enter into discussions around suburban economic governance as a mode of exclusion. Part of this rethinking is also realizing that suburban exclusion, like in the inner city, is manufactured through increasingly decentralized approaches. As Jamie Peck (2011) argues

> "... **suburbia has become a strategically significant nexus for open-ended, deregulatory experimentation, systematically favoring more decentralized, privatist, and market-oriented approaches: amid the froth of proliferating forms of suburban governance, the more generalized, pervasive logic is that of urban subgovernance.**"

As discussed in the introduction, Alexandria's spatial boundaries (as acknowledged by the state) are confusing but more than likely intentional. Examining these boundaries in future projects within the context of the city's history might reveal an

example of “decentralized… urban subgovernance” that traces a political/ economic relationship between the inner city, inner suburb, and suburb.

Roger Keil’s proposal of a global suburban theory argues for a centering of the suburbs based on “its own merit” (Keil 2018). While I acknowledge the intellectual benefits of decentering the hegemony of the inner city in urban research, and with it, essentialist conceptions of Black life in inner cities, I am left questioning the feasibility of that goal. Is it not futile as space is not able to be cleanly contained and demarcated? As the line between sub and urb becomes increasingly blurred, is it perhaps more reachable to center that the suburbs are inherently “subversive of the urb” (Peck 2011) rather than trying to separate them? In trying to argue for its own singular merits, do we fall into the trap that urban studies falls into with the inner city?

Though I am left with many questions and potential future directions as a result of this project, one definitive outcome remains: church leaders in Alexandria’s Black Baptist churches are aware of, and are actively responding to, the gentrification-induced displacement that disproportionately affects poor/low-income African American communities. And across all participants from all churches, one sentiment was consistent— that Black communities, and our matters, matter.

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