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Emma Hanlon April 14, 2020

Spiritual Community, Sacred Congregation: Ritual, Discourse, and Space in the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta

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Abstract

Spiritual Community, Sacred Congregation: Ritual, Discourse, and Space in the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta
By Emma Hanlon

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta. This congregation, founded in 1976, meets on Sunday mornings in its sanctuary in Candler Park, Atlanta for Celebrations of Life. Those who attend these gatherings represent a diverse array of religions, races, socioeconomic classes, belief systems, and identities that then come together as one congregation on Sunday mornings. There is a tension that arises in this space between the individual subjectivities that populate the sanctuary and the oneness of the congregational body. This paper interrogates this tension in three realms of ethnographic material: ritual, discourse, and space. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that the radical acceptance of multiplicity becomes that which holds this heterogenous congregation together.

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Introduction

On a Sunday morning in late September 2019, I made my way from my Emory apartment to Candler Park for the Celebration of Life (COL) at the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta (First E). By this time, the semester had started, and classes were underway. My proposed fieldwork period was largely completed, and while I could continue to collect ethnographic data, I had been advised to limit my visits and begin reading, analyzing data, and writing my thesis. However, after having gotten in the routine of waking early each Sunday, buying my one dollar coffee at the Candler Park Market, and meandering my way up the hill to the Old Stone Church, it felt only natural. But I vowed to not take notes on this day. It was purely a day of experience. Thus, I remember little of the service on this day. After looking through the First E records I can say that the COL was entitled "The Power of Passion" and Lisa Cottrell was the speaker. Beyond what is named on the website, I have no recollection of the songs that were sung, the content of Lisa Cottrell's speech, the art on the walls.

I do remember crying. On this particular Sunday, a longtime member of First E, Beth Yorke, was holding a release party for her new album following the service. I can remember many new faces in attendance on this day, new faces who were especially there for Beth's party following the service. There was a shift in the atmosphere that morning, maybe because I wasn't taking notes, or maybe because of the immanence of a celebration, the return of old friends and long lost members, but the atmosphere was swollen. The sanctuary felt full. For the special music section of the COL, as the gold offering trays were brought through the crowd, Beth played us a song from her album. As a music therapist, Beth sat at the grand piano at the front of the sanctuary and instructed us to close our eyes. She began slowly; I breathed—listening. I can't quite remember the melody now, and even if I did, I'm not sure if I could describe it, but the

tempo picked up into a kind of crescendo, a climax. My breathing had settled at this point, and I was much more aware of the music, the way my body moved with it. She slowed again, and ended on a long, low chord—a release. I had started crying early, and my tears were mostly dried. When I opened my eyes, I noticed Jean had approached the piano from her seat and was overwhelmed with tears. She held her hands in a prayer position. Beth mirrored her and they touched their prayer hands together, looking deeply into each other's eyes. Jean embraced Beth and returned to her seat. A slow and happy and melancholy applause came from the congregation, as if shocked by the effects of the moment. Beth sat again with her friends in the green seats facing the stage, the musician for the day resumed his place in the piano bench, and the COL carried on.

I spent my summer as an existentialist. I might still be one. I haven't yet reflected on my own beliefs. But I am a friend of the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta; I do find community in the people of First E; I did indeed place First E on my graduate school applications as my congregation of affiliation. This is a distinction I will explore further throughout this thesis. What follows is an ethnographic account of the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta that took place in 2019 and was completed in 2020. In my time at First E, I have come to realize that, just as within myself, there exists a schism of sorts between individual identity and collective purpose. Implicit in this is a schism between existentialism as a deeply rooted philosophy with which each person identifies, and existentialism that serves as a basis for gathering, collectivity, community. First E is fraught with tension—with paradox. This thesis embraces these paradoxes. I aim to show that through its asymmetry and its ambivalence First E maintains an ethos of fluidity, plurality, and constant renegotiation of identity.

In the front matter if this thesis, I include a description of the field, my methodology as a researcher, and an extended literature review that covers the theoretical conversations into which I hope to add this work. In these sections, I hope to do two things. First, establish my own positionality as a student and as a scholar. I hope to contextualize the work within my life, as it is largely a product of such circumstance. However, in an effort to not take away from the heart of this thesis, First E and the people of the congregation, the body of this thesis will take the form of ethnographic description, analysis, and discussion of how meaning is created in this congregation. In this body, I will address the three analytical spheres in which I have noticed the tension or the paradox of First E most actively, and through which I am best able to understand the negotiation of the community-congregation duality. By constructing the categories, Ritual, Discourse, and Space, I am able to look triadically at what the congregation does, what they say about what they do, and the spatial context in which they do these things. More importantly, as these categories are constructed as such and their boundaries are rigidified only as an analytical strategy through which to analyze material, I hope to also emphasize here and throughout that First E is inherently a space of fluidity and flux. Nothing is bounded and the few boundaries that do exist—stage and audience, speaker and spoken-to, member and visitor—are frequently transgressed. Flux, movement, fluidity, asymmetry—these terms describe something about the greater implications of this work. First E is a moment of religious renegotiation and redefinition. It is a space of individual agency, resistance, and creation, as these individuals work together to reimagine their spiritual beliefs, practices, politics, and values. Ultimately, it is the radical acceptance of multiplicity that holds this heterogenous congregation together.

The Field

Much like Apple, Disney, and Pearl Jam, First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta began in a basement. The late Lanier Clance, founder of First E and the primary host of these gatherings, was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, raised as a Baptist, taught in the Disciples of Christ seminary, ordained as a Unitarian Universalist Minister, and eventually came to identify as a existentialist. He always had dreams of becoming a preacher, and with his newfound understanding about life, religion, and politics, he sought to establish his congregation in the heart of the south, for what he called, "a challenge". He wanted to create an unconventional spiritual community in what is commonly understood as a religiously conservative region of the United States. On Friday evenings beginning in 1976, Lanier and his partners, Nancy and Pauline, hosted philosophical discussions they termed Celebrations of Life. In 1978 the members of these gathering voted to affiliate themselves with the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Later that same year, with a growing following, The Celebrations of Life moved to the Decatur YMCA with a new meeting time of Sunday mornings. Through its Unitarian Universalists association, the Congregation was able to purchase its current property in Candler Park, formally known as the Old Stone Church and, while the timeline is unclear, it was not long after that the former basement group officially changed its name to the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta.

In its current form, "First E" is an assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association and is comprised of a congregational fellowship and an elected Board of Directors. The Congregation varies in size. Often when a speaker is recurring or has personal ties to the sanctuary, he or she will pull in a larger crowd of less than regular attendees. On average, a Celebration of Life will have 20 to 30 people in attendance and on holidays, such as our Founder's Day celebration, we

reached a peak of 66 people in the sanctuary. While I was not interested in learning the ages of each member in attendance, it became clear to me that most of my interlocutors were seniors. Most of these older members have connections to the initial basement gathering at Lanier's home and thus have aged with the congregation. A second generation of members makes up a significantly lesser portion of the congregation, albeit a crucial portion. Patton, Robert, Laura, Jan, Cindy, Kathy, and a few others range in age from 40 to 60 and have deepened their involvement in leadership positions in recent years. Lastly, those with younger children will bring these children along, albeit the most children I have seen in attendance is four or five. I represent a generation largely missing from the congregation. The millennials are absent at First E. The congregation is largely a white congregation, with few people of color attending sporadically. This being said, many of the invited speakers on Sunday mornings are black. Gender and sexuality are demographic distinctions that will be further discussed in chapter 2, but for the purposes of establishing the field, women are the most represented gender with men also having a noticeable presence. The identity information on the congregational body is crucial information to understanding some of the more particular contexts in which these spiritual practices and this philosophical gathering takes place.

While this congregation does not identify a religion, but rather as, "an experiment in philosophical spiritual community", it meets every Sunday morning, a very churchly time, in its historic sanctuary in Candler Park. My "field," then, was largely defined in terms of time. In the introduction to a larger collection of essays, *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World,* Vered Amit addresses this specific issue of the temporality of the field, arguing that as we become more critical of how knowledge is produced in this discipline, and we come to embrace reflexive, intersubjective truths, the strength of constant participant-observation

for an arbitrarily set duration of time, and the access it provides to deeper understandings, can itself be seen as limited (6). The distinction between the "here" and the "there" in which the anthropologist is supposed to "be" is a temporal and spatial distinction, instead of an experiential or relational distinction (Rappaport 2000, 73), and it is in this very materially based construction of the field that the "other" becomes rigidified and still. My field challenges these assumptions by challenging the temporality of fieldwork. Although First E certainly fosters relationships that move beyond the sanctuary walls, the congregation itself, defined by its gathering, exists on Sundays for about two hours. Because the content of each celebration differs each week and the people in attendance fluctuate, the most fundamental pattern is the gathering on Sunday mornings. It is a space that constantly recreated. My field was part and parcel of this recreation each week. It was constantly fluctuating with new members and it was materially closed when the lights were turned off and the doors were locked following the Celebrations. My field was first and foremost influenced by the rhythms of the gathering of the congregation.

Secondly, in terms of space—which will be covered in more theoretical depth later in the literature review—my field site was restricted to one property and was thus relatively small. The sanctuary proper exists on the top floor of the building. A wide staircase leads from the Candler Park sidewalk up to the large wooden doors. Necessarily, though, a long and winding ramp wraps alongside the building and many in attendance choose this route. The sanctuary space is approximately 1500 square feet. Most Sundays the green chairs are aligned in rows of five or six, all facing the stage that takes up the back of the space. On the sides of the sanctuary run large windows decorated by houseplants and art. A kitchen takes up the back right corner of the sanctuary and six larger rocking chairs are lined in the back left. The floor is made of beautiful hardwood and a grand piano sits just below the stage, taking up much of the front left corner.

The sanctuary is supported by a large basement space that First E rents out to the Primavera Preschool, a Spanish emersion preschool and afterschool center. The basement looks like a preschool with children-sized tables, shelves of books, carpets printed with the alphabet, and crates upon crates of toys. While most of my time was spent above, in the sanctuary space, some congregational meetings or book club readings were held in this lower section. And opening up to the right of the building is sizable yard that holds the gardening plots for the preschool and a long string of wooden benches. I sometimes sat on these benches after services with congregation members, to discuss the speeches of that day, or maybe talk more candidly about our lives beyond the sanctuary.

Lastly, my field was very much intertwined with my home. In his introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Bronislaw Malinowski defines good ethnographic conditions as, “cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible,” and that it, “must be far enough away not to become a permanent milieu in which you live and from which you emerge at fixed hours” (1984, IV). Malinowski is often credited with having concretized the parameters and expectation of ethnographic fieldwork; he brought anthropology from the armchair and into the communities about whom we write. And while he is fraught with evolutionist language and a relation to the imperial construction of knowledge, his work is still taught regularly in anthropology courses. His notion of “the field” is that far away island or village that must be the utmost strange to the ethnographer. However, as anthropology moves towards a post-colonial, reflexive attitude toward research, this notion of “the field” is widely outdated. Following from the above discussion of the constructedness of the field, I want to address a bit about how my field was constructed and position myself in the imagining of this field. I learned of First E in 2016. A

friend, who lives in the area, recommended the congregation to me as something "right up my alley". At the time I was deeply invested in my own spiritual discoveries and had not yet begun my scholarly approach to religion. My grandfather and grandmother met as young kids within a Boston Irish community called Mission Hill. Catholicism, of course, was the religion into which they were born, and while I'm not privy to specifics, this was also one of the many of Catholic communities that fell victim to clerical sexual abuse. They were alcoholics for much of their adult lives and, after getting sober, my grandparents moved to New Hampshire. They raised my father and his siblings spiritual-but-not-religious. The 12 Step Program that saved my grandparents was stripped of its Catholic religiosity and reformulated into the life lessons of the family. Instead of the Bible, my grandfather kept "As Bill Sees It," a collection of writings by the Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Willson, at his bedside. My grandmother followed the Dalai Lama and kept crystals as part of her work as a masseuse. This is the spirituality into which I was born and with which I was raised. My father described it to me as a lineage of sorts. While we children were not raised with a religion, we were meant to search for our spiritual beliefs independently but the questing for religious knowledge was to be passed down. In my early years at Emory, I balanced my deep interest in anthropology with this spiritual identity and was often labeled a "hippie girl" by my peers. However, after I began to take religion courses, I found scholarship, specifically anthropological scholarship, of religious lives to be much more tangible in my education. The energy I put into discovering what I believed in was transformed into academic energy towards understanding the beliefs of others. And the fluidity of practices and beliefs that I found in First E resembled that of my grandparents.

After a few visits to the Celebrations of Life in 2016, I was unable to make the long commute from where I was then living each Sunday, and my visits stopped. In 2018, when I

moved to Atlanta to continue my education at Emory, I once again attended First E from time to time when my course-load allowed. Primarily, my field was constructed through the lens of my Emory undergraduate education. This project would have looked much different if conducted at a different academic level, from within a different institution, and in the context of a separate project. Thus, my field was developed as a field for an honors thesis project in Anthropology at Emory. The deadlines that guided this project, my preexisting understandings of Candler Park and Atlanta had evolved from a position within Emory, and even the language through which I presented myself to the congregation was determined by this institutional background.

My field was also developed through relationships. The temporal and spatial boundaries of this fieldwork, while significant in shaping how I experienced the congregation, should also show that place-based notions of community are inherently limited. If my field were purely determined by the building itself and the meeting time on Sundays, I would have explored all there was to explore about the sanctuary, and I would have become quite bored in the long months of my attendance. However, as I have stated, each week the congregation was recreated, and it was recreated by the people who showed up and by those who were absent. It was also recreated by where I chose to sit, where each other person chose to sit, who was playing the music for the day, who was facilitating, the title for the Celebration, the parking conditions outside, by the individual lives of each person in attendance, by the national news and the behaviors of President Trump that week, and by an infinite amount of factors. So, my field was grounded in the close relationships I made with members. The community I developed allowed me the comfort of participation as well as a diversity of points of observation. Many who I talked to had only recently began attending, whereas Kitty and Linda and Lorraine had ties to First E

beginning in the seventies. First E is determined by its space and its time, but it is created through its people.

Methodology

My principle method for this ethnographic work was participant observation. I attended First E every weekend from May 2019 through December 2019 and have continued to attend as my schedule permits. During my summer of intensive research, I also made it a priority to attend all extracurricular activities held by the church. For example, I participated in the Fall book club that met twice after the Celebrations for a few hours. These events and activities also took the form of parties, feasts following services, discussion groups on existentialism. art openings on Saturday nights, and extraneous events such as golf ball pyramid building day.

In my attempts to better understand the experiences of the individuals of First E, I conducted several interviews with the members I had become most acquainted with. These interviews were largely conversational, and often followed my informants down meandering tangents. However, all three oral histories involved discussions of the religious upbringings of my interlocutors, their first memories of First E and how they came to be members, and the ways in which they experienced the congregation as a part of their lives. Beyond these long form interviews, I did extensive recording of other forms of sensory information. Smaller conversations, informal quotes, short-answer questions after the COLs, and the sounds of the speeches during COLs—all have been compiled as the discourse of First E and will be analyzed here as transcribed oral material.

In the vein of this oral recording, I have also attempted in my fieldwork to incorporate multiple modes of data collection. Of course, the bulk of my material is in the form of fieldnotes,

scattered across several journals. I have also made considerable advances to my research through a multimedia approach that uses video recording, photographic documentation, and material collection. My analysis of these material, then goes beyond the literature of religious studies and anthropology, and into a realm of experimental and sensory ethnographers. Primarily, my photography extends from the work of Sarah Pink, who says of visual methods,

> Using a camera provides ethnographers with the possibility of creating (audio)visual research materials that invoke not only the visual or verbal knowledge that might be produced through interviews or observations. Rather, it implies that such research materials might provide a route into the more complex multisensoriality of the experiences, activities and events we might be investigating (2012, 6)

My photography was done purposefully from the perspective of a congregation member. It took place as I maintained my role of participant observer, and I took photos as my participation allowed. The photos that frame this thesis allow for a visual experience to take place along with a literary one. They illustrate my words but shall also extend beyond them and allow for a fuller descriptive experience.

Lastly the ethnographic methodological process includes writing. Writing is not simply the product by which information is disseminated, but it is an integral part of knowledge production in this discipline. In *Writing Culture,* James Clifford calls for the acceptance of new forms of writing and interrogates how writing in new and imaginative ways can further the research and the nuance the knowledge we produce (6). Partiality of perspective, he says, must be internal to the writing. I have first attempted to write self-consciously and with the purposes of imploring and exploring a partial experience of First E. Participant observation, emphasizing my own individual participation at a member of First E, has given me a very individually based

perception of First E, one that cannot be all encompassing or claim to be omniscient. Oral history, an inherently intersubjective method of research, has allowed my research to expand empathetically beyond myself, and gain access to the experiences of those around me. But even now, it is me who writes this story. Therefore, I believe my writing process is importantly included within my discussion of methodology, in that this work is largely written from my subjective experience. I have made choices to incorporate certain aspects of my fieldnotes and leave out others. More importantly, this ethnography has been written to answer the specific question I am interested in, and is not intended to be a comprehensive written account of my fieldwork.

A Theoreical Conversation

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, whenever I would explain my project to interested peers and family members, in an attempt to simplify for the sake of conversation the essence of my thesis, most would quip something along the lines of, “It sounds like a bunch of hippies!” And while, with its historical context, one might think of the counterculture and hippie movements, I choose in this thesis to avoid rationalizing or intellectualizing this community into concretely reified and previously studied groups or movements. Instead I hope to follow the theoretical work of William James in practicing a somewhat altered version of Radical Empiricism. In his work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* James establishes his lectures series as being in conversation with both “medical materialists” as well as “dogmatists” in that the former attempts to rationalize the origins of religious experience as the effects of physiological symptoms (1982, 13) and that the latter situate the origins of religious experience in intuition, revelation, and prophecy (1982, 18). James takes issue with both by arguing that the roots of religious experience are unknowable to us, and that instead, “By their fruits ye shall

know [these experiences], not by their roots" (1982, 20). In other words, James is interested not in the truth or falsity of religiosity, but instead on what religion *does.* Therefore, the project of Radical Empiricism, as James states in a later essay, is to "neither admit into its constructions any elements that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced" (2012, 21-22). Thus, the construction of any work that claims Radical Empiricism must be concerned with the parts, the particulars, and refute any abstraction from that which is directly experienced. He states, rather memorably, "Probably, a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. 'I am no such thing,' it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone'" (1982, 9) and, to quote Devaka Premawardhana as he discussed James in a lecture, "Life-as-lived defies categorization" (2019). Moreover, from this stance, life-as-lived exists first in particular, individually experienced relationships and phenomena.

As ethnography becomes increasingly aware of its role in telling others' stories, this theoretical foundation of empiricism has found its way both explicitly and inexplicitly, into the works of many anthropologists. Geertz, on particularities, states,

> The major reason why anthropologists have shied away from the cultural particularities when it came to a question of defining man, and have taken refuge instead in bloodless universals is that, faced as they are with the enormous variation of human behavior, they are haunted by a fear of historicism, of becoming lost in a whirl of cultural relativism so convulsive as to deprive them of any fixed bearings at all. (1973, 45)

From this school of steering anthropology away from a search for objectivity and universality, James Clifford follows Geertz and asserts the partiality of truths in ethnographic writings (2010, 7), and, in this lineage of dialogue, Lila Abu-Lughod responds to Clifford in *Writing Women's*

Worlds, with her project of "writing *against* culture" (1993, 9). While her response is most directly to Clifford's claim that feminism, "has not produced wither unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such (2010, 21), her primary argument is that anthropology's linkage to "culture" as its focus, has erased the many fluid intricacies of individual lives, and thus her project of privileging the voices of her interlocutors is an unconventional form of ethnography. In other words, through the project of finding a synthesizable culture about which to write, the anthropologist homogenizes, essentializes, and makes uniform that which is often fraught with cracks of resistance.

In his most recent book, *As Wide as the World is Wise: Reinventing Philosophical Anthropology,* Michael Jackson characterizes James' role in the field as that of complexifying our historical urge to categorize, explain, and reify the lives of our interlocutors into categories created by academia. He writes, "James writes against both reification and obfuscation…I seek to do two things. First, to make a case for doing exactly what James advocated 110 years ago. Second, to show, through empirical examples, why his radical empiricism and his psychology of consciousness are by no means irrelevant…" (2016, 63-64). I hope to follow Jackson's lead in this thesis.

Within this project we can bring to the fore the projects of Marcia C. Inhorn and her development of the ideas of "emergent masculinities" as opposed to hegemonic patriarchy, in her *The New Arab Man (*2012), Renato Rosaldo's work *Culture and Truth: the remaking of social analysis,* in which he states, "Cultural depth does not always equal cultural elaboration" (1993, 20), and Devaka Premawardhana's work in on Pentecostalism in Mozambique and the inherent fluidity in the religious identities of his interlocutors (2018). This scholarly moment, in which particularity is privileged, and each context of study is awarded the utmost importance, gives

agency and subjectivity back to those about whom we write. Therefore, this thesis attempts to follow in these footsteps. The First Existentialist Congregation will not be explained, here, but will instead by studied from the truth of its existence. I will look not to reduce its existence, but instead to present what the congregation does, and how it operates. As a project in both the Anthropology and Religions Departments of Emory, this project aims to exploit the growing understandings in both fields for this kind of empirical, ground-up, particular perspective.

This thesis is most influenced by the methodological shifts of Joyce Flueckiger's work, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India.* In her introduction, Flueckiger defines "vernacular Islam" is Islam that is "shaped and voiced by individuals in specific context and in different relationships, individuals who change overtime in social, economic, and political contexts that also shift" (2006, 2). Amma, the protagonist of this ethnographic account, inhabits what is conventionally a male role as a healer alongside her husband, Abba, who fills the role as *pir* (Islamic teacher) in all other capacities. Amma's ritual space is a space of fluidity in both religious identity and gendered conventions. In writing this narrative, Flueckiger is making the "case for case studies," with the fundamental position that individual lives show us cultural structures at work, but, more so, it allows us to see the flexibility and inherent creativity of these structures. This thesis will argue that First E, in ways similar to Amma's healing room, is a space of vernacular religion. It is ever-shifting and subject to the ambiguity, fluidity, and creativity of its practitioners. It should be described *by* itself.

And yet, as focused as this work is on particularities, on reading individual moments as culturally significant, it is important to add the narrative of First E to larger in the fields of religious studies and anthropology. Thus, the theoretical projects of both religious scholars and anthropologists have shaped not those answers that may be problematically surmised about the

First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta, nor the understandings I held before ever entering the Old Stone Church, but to work instead as a lineage of scholarship to which this research can be added. This thesis is divided into three larger chapters on space, ritual and language. Yet in my time at First E, it became increasingly clear that these elements of the congregation were not, and could never be, fixed and bounded loci of analysis. Rituals often operate to construct the space, discourse is often inextricable from ritual, and much of my education and experience of the Old Stone Church has been through narrative and myth. Therefore, while the following section establishes some of the existing conversations on ritual, space, and language, I hope for this work to be read more fluidly. The ethnographic material that fills each chapter should be read with just as must, if not more earnest, as it is my subjective, and multifaceted accounts of the fluidity of the life of First E.

Literature

Whether it be the historical embeddedness of First E, specifically due to their role in leftist activism in the city, or simply the frequency with which I have become used to referencing it, I have found that many Atlantans have at least some connection to or recognition of the congregation. Surprisingly, however, the only existing scholarly account of First E is its inclusion in Nancy Tatom Ammerman's work, *Community and Congregation.* This work is a sociological survey that attempts to address how" the social processes of community formation govern the rise and fall of congregations, and the spiritual energies generated in congregations help to shape the social structures of communities" (1996, 3). Ammerman is primarily interested in the gay and lesbian population of Candler Park and the relationship between this community and the congregation of First E. A more concentrated analysis of First E occurs in chapter four of the work, "Adaptation: Integrating Gay and Straight." She writes, "Theirs is a curious mix of

tradition and anti-tradition, a haven created by people who often feel they have no other home" (1996, 185). Of First E, she concludes that this, "radically unconventional congregation in one of Atlanta's few countercultural neighborhoods," has created an environment that is, "naturally open to the lesbian and gay people who began to attend almost from the beginning" (1996, 195). Ammerman adds First E to a larger discussion of LGBT congregations and concludes that the "unconventional" nature of First E is reciprocally built by the liberal community of Candler Park, which lends itself to the largely queer congregational body. While I do agree with Ammerman about the seemingly non-normative structure of First E, and the culture of counter conventions that make up the congregation, Ammerman lacks a more nuanced account of the ways community and congregation are in conversation. In my research, Community (the more secular networkings) and congregation (the formation that identifies along religious lines) are largely in tension in this space; Tension is understood, not as a negative anxiety provoking force, but as a perpetual conversation between forces that that requires constant negotiation. This tension between community and congregation is negotiated in what I see as three main analytic categories: ritual, discourse, and space. Here I provide some of the foundational scholarship on these categories of study.

Ritual

Ritual theory in anthropology is often understood in concert with emergent schools of social theory, however, definitions of ritual have most clearly been articulated in terms of two schools: functionalism and symbolic theory. Functionalism is most notably associated with the work of Émile Durkheim. In his, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim establishes the sacred as inherently separated from the profane, and thus, to him, ritual is the category of actions—both positive and negative—that fall explicitly within sacred space, and that

reciprocally constitute the sacredness of that space (1995, 221-222). Ritual, for Durkheim, is enfolded into his conclusion that religion is the effect of "collective effervescence," and thus rituals have importance because, "they set the collectivity in motion." Durkheim's understanding of society as a positivist force that exists beyond the individual and, this, imparts upon him/her "ways of acting, thinking, feeling" (1995, 3). Moreover, the symbolic school of anthropology, associated most with Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, shifted this understanding of culture as law-driven to a conception of culture that is imbedded in contextualized individual understandings, and is thus constructed by subjects. Rituals, in Geertz's work, were understood essentially as "symbolic models of a particular sense of the divine, a certain sort of devotional mood, which their re-enactment tends to produce in their participants" (1973, 216). Mary Douglas added to this understanding that ritual is, too, a form of communication that symbolically reproduces real social relations (2003, 14). Victor Turner, a third prominent voice to this school of thought, expanded the symbolic nature of ritual to think of rituals as "social dramas" or moments through which tensions of a society could be worked through. He specifically surmised this through the importance of material preparation for ritual purposes and the characteristics of plot, audience, and role-enactment. In such elements, Turner saw ritual as mimetic acts that fall within and co-create the patterns of "values, norms, ideals and attitudes" (1976, 177).

While one school of thought emerged chronologically after the other, no real evolutionary or linear progression can be concluded. As Catherine Bell states in her work on ritual theory:

> The difference in viewpoint is not simply a historical progression from one theory to another, since a British emphasis on social issues coexists with an American emphasis on

> cultural issues. Nor can a clear line be drawn between functional-structuralists on the one hand and symbolic-culturalists on the other. Many theories incorporate aspects of both perspectives, and a number of theorists have emphasized one or the other at different stages of their careers. Some even attempt to synthesize the two perspectives within a single mode of analysis. (1997, 62)

Ritual theory, therefore, has not necessarily grown in "correctness," through the years, but, with infinite research contexts, ritual has come to be understood at indeterminate (Brown 2003, 2) and as an analytic category, ritual is increasingly seen as multivalent. Recent interpretations and theorizations of ritual have taken to more postmodern concepts, namely Performance Theory (Nejad 2017; Gassin and Sawchak 2008) and phenomenological approaches to embodiment (Lycourinos 2017). The flexibility and plurality of ritual theory serves the argument that theory should not operate as repository of possible correct answers, but as a repository of revelatory lenses. The rituals of First E can be read through multiple theoretical understandings to reveal the indeterminate ways in which ritual operates in the Old Stone Church.

Discourse

This project is concerned with discourse, specifically narrative and myth, as a modem for developing community and religiosity at First E. For understandings of narrative, I am again inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod's, *Writing Women's Worlds,* and her use of the narrative style in expanding ethnography. She states in the preface, "The narrative chapters are not meant to be just entertaining or illuminating stories about Bedouin life in the 1980s; they are also critical commentaries on anthropological modes of understanding human existence. (1993, xvii). And while I incorporate this narrative structure throughout my thesis, I am also interested in the ways

we can read narratives, and understand them as central to the formation of First E. The forms of narrative language that I am most concerned with are the foundational principles of life history and myth.

Life History, as both a methodological tools as well as a theoretically charged practice, is understood as a form of narrative that attempts to study not only the contents of a story, but also its political and historical context, the positionality of the story teller, and the reflections of culture there within (Goodson 2012, 6). In Jeff Titon's article, "The Life Story," he differentiates life history from life story stating, "The language of story is charged with power: it creates. The language of history is charged with knowledge: it discovers" (1980, 278). In differentiating life story from life history, Titon stresses that life history, which he ties most to anthropology, is historically a problematic methodology, as its focus on discovering culture "strips the individual of his voice" (1980, 284), whereas life story methodology is more aware of and interested in the creation of the narrative and the location of the individual. "The life story tells who one thinks one is an how one thinks one came to be that way" (1980, 290). However, as we can see through the work of contemporary work in anthropology, these distinctions are continually transgressed. In her work on folk history of the Pentecostal Movement of the American Midwest, Elaine Lawless is most concerned with recording the life histories of Pentecostal women preachers and the ways in which they perceive themselves in their unconventional positions (2019, 13). Through her work, oral interviews, what she terms "spiritual life stories," are understood as creations or collections of both personal experiences as well as traditional expectations (2019, 43-44). Through this methodology, Lawless not only privileges the voices of the women with whom she works, but also comes to understand something about the practices of cultural navigation and agency. Similar theoretical work is done in Robert Desjarlais' work *Sensory*

Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists (2003), a collection of life history interviews in which Desjarlais traces the construction of individual identity as well as larger patterns of narrative construction in the particular Yolmo context. Moreover, recent work on life story/history has concerned itself not so much on the individual-cultural debate, but instead with processes of storytelling, structuring of narratives and with analyzing how the construction of these narratives inform cultural and social change (Gallinat 2015).

Space

The concept of space is crucial to my experience of First E, specifically in the construction and continuous consecration of the Old Stone Church. I am interested specifically in two categories of that larger literature on space: the material culture of altars, altar making, and decoration, and more broadly in terms of the social constructedness of "fixed" space and the fluidity of cultural locality. First, in her work *Beauiful Necessities: the Art and Meaning of Women's Altars,* Kay Turner understands altars, the materials that go into their construction, and the act of construction itself is a form of language. They are spaces of transformative language that have real effects in the lives of women, and they impart upon these women creative powers (1999, 38-39). Similarly, in her work on kolam construction among Hindu women, Vijaya Nagarajan envisions the kolam in terms of its presence and absence in ritual spaces. In its presence the kolam embodies auspiciousness, and its absence signifies ritual pollution (2019, 84). Moreover, in his recent article on community art murals, Michael Mosher refers to these murals as "artifacts of social relations" (2012, 58). Material elements of space carry symbolic weight, their presence in space inscribes upon that space certain values and morals, and their construction is seemingly a moment of relationship building. We can understand the function of these symbolic elements of the sacred space through a theory of architectonics. This is the

analytic that questions how the symbolism of space produces evocative experiences (Fernandez 2003, 187). If we apply this to sacred spaces, such as the Old Stone Church, this question then becomes how does the symbolism of sacred space evoke associations that transcend or differ from the mundane or profane space? This will be discussed in the chapter on space.

I am also interested in the malleability of space. Eliade defines religious space in the following way:

> Where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself,* the world comes into existence. But the irruption of the sacred does not only project fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a center to the chaos...It is such a break in the heterogeneity of profane space the creates the center through which communication with the transmundane is established...for the center renders *orientation* possible. (1959, 63)

For Eliade, a most canonized theorist, religious space is inherently fixed in its opposition to the fluidity of the profane spaces. However, in applying his theories of liminality and communitas to pilgrimage sites, Turner has defined communitas as a "spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, striped of structural attributes...communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms" (Tuner in Kinnard 2014, 9). It is the elimination of fixed identities that is central to spaces of pilgrimage, and the reformation of a unified communion Religious space and religious selfhood are linked, then, and can be seen as mutually constitutive. Instead of Eliade's cosmology of orientation, we can see religious sites as spaces to which individuals come, bearing religiosity that is hybridized and particular, and as spaces that must allow for and facilitate communitas. Religious spaces are spaces in motion. This concept is made exceptionally clear in recent work by Anand Taneja's work, *Jinnealogy.* The book, most basically, emphasizes that the

religious practices of Firoz Shah Kotla are complexly imbued with politics, ethics, gender, and spirituality; the intersectionality of this religious community is in and of itself an ode to hybridity in religion-as-lived. While Taneja is constantly in conversation with the practitioners at the site, the subject of this work, I argue, is the site itself, its architecture, history, and its agency to do real things for its visitors. And so, of Firoz Shah Kotla, he says,

> People act in ways that constantly challenge and contradict normative morality. Men and women mingle and talk and laugh easily with each other; Muslims and non-Muslims freely interact and eat together; and jinns are treated and petitioned as saints, saints who are asked to bless interreligious unions: none of this fits with ideas of pious behavior if *prescriptive* morality is take to be the norm for Islamic ethics. (2019, 5)

Behavior at this site is creative and ambiguous, much like that of Amma's healing room in Flueckiger's work. The space allows for a multiplicity of experiences and interpretations. Therefore, there is a hybridity attributed to the space, not just to the individuals that go there. Space must be read as a physical dimension of religious practice, as an active agent in the religious experiences that take place within its context, and it must be studied in concert with those other observable facets of research.

From these theoretical lineages, I will move now into my own account of the First Existentialist Congregation, an account that sits within my education at Emory, built upon these texts, but that branches beyond the academy. Analysis at the end of each chapter will include further scholarly works and theories as means for understanding what I have experienced.

1. Ritual: Social Coherence and Subjective Creativity

Every Sunday we meet at 11:00 AM. The sanctuary is open at 10:30 AM and I sometimes arrive earlier to find Patton or Robert or Laura setting up food and coffee. There is a small square table in the back corner of the sanctuary with four foldable chairs. Usually, if a few members arrive early enough, a small gathering will take place at the table. Patton and I once sat at the table and shared coffees before a COL. We talked about my major and my goals of graduate school. I learned he was a professor of Emory in the Physical Education department and he learned I was struggling to find committee members for my thesis defense. When others started to trickle in, we quickly folded the table, slipped it under the stage, and slipped the chairs back into their rows. When I say trickle, I mean trickle. Often friends will continue arriving deep into the COL, missing most of the morning service.

COLs begin with a chiming of bells. The facilitator for the morning has a choice of noise maker from beneath the podium. They call for the congregation's attention and chime the bell of their choice. The facilitator will then call for any children to light the candelabra that sits atop a shorter podium in the center of the stage. This is called the Lighting of the Flame. If there are no children in the congregation, or if there are no children who seem interested in the task, the facilitator will light the candles themselves. Following this, we sing our opening congregational song, and the congregation is invited to stand and sing. At this point, the facilitator will introduce our musician for the morning. People continue to trickle in and fill the seats. The facilitator gives opening remarks to commence the COL. They then call for newcomers or long absent members to stand and introduce themselves and tell the congregation their reason for joining us. We applaud these newcomers as they sit back in their seats. Next, the facilitator will call for birthdays or anniversaries. More often than not, there is at least one birthday among us,

even if it's not that of a friend in attendance. We will sing for relatives who live far away, famous public figures, deceased parents, and any other party who is celebrating something for which we can sing. Our song is always the traditional American Happy Birthday melody, but we clap twice between each line. "Happy birthday to you! *Clap Clap* Happy birthday to you! *Clap Clap*" I picked up on this the first time I attended a service. It is a practice that is never taught but immediately accepted and reproduced. We sing another song and then we enter into our period of silent meditation. Sometimes during this time people will stand and light tea candles on the tables on either side of the sanctuary. After about five minutes the facilitator rings a bell to bring us back into the sanctuary and we sing another song. The period that follows is called Sorrows and Joys. Here the individuals that make up the congregational body are welcomed to stand and speak about their lives candidly, emotionally, and we create space as a congregation for them to do so. Following Sorrows and Joys, two volunteers are asked to take up the offering, and they pass through the rows of green chairs as the special music is played by the musician Finally, the facilitator introduces the Speaker for the morning. The speaker takes about 20 minutes and when they are finished, we applaud. We finish the COL with community announcements that have been passed to the podium throughout the service, a closing song, and a few closing remarks by the Facilitator. Mingling ensues.

This overview of a Celebration of life is a skeleton. It is accurate in that the structure recurs every Sunday without fail. And yet, each Celebration of life is vastly different and nuanced in ways that are inimitable. This introductory description is influenced by the weekly itinerary and is how one can expect the COLs to progress. But much is missing from this picture. This grander ritual of the COL is dotted with individual rituals that create meaning throughout the morning and that create continuity to the individual experience of First E. Each section is a

repeated practice, and it is decorated and performed differently each week by the ebbs and flows of individual lives and the changing makeup of the congregational body each Sunday. Rituals, however, are of prime importance here. They are the observed actions that define the existence of First E and the practices that allow congregation to maintain its solidity through time. Beyond the procession which in and of itself provides structure and continuity to our gatherings, there are three specific rituals that I believe most clearly mark the ritual function in this space, and in so doing index the community-congregation tension. The first of these is the silent mediation portion of the COL which epitomizes the theological and philosophical fluidity of the congregation and allows it to take a multivalent form. The second ritual I will look at here is Sorrows and Joys. I argue that the constructedness of these very individual yet very publicly performed announcements of emotion function to establish community cohesion. The last portion of this chapter looks at a relatively new ritual that began during the thick of my fieldwork and that reveals something of the goals of the congregation for its future. This is the short induction ceremonies of new members. In this closer look at three ritual practices, the operative role of each can be seen as promoting social cohesion, establishing individual fluidity and liberty, and strategically working towards institutional longevity.

Silent Meditation

The silent meditation period of the service follows our second congregational song. At this point in the COL, most of the green chairs are filled and the room is buzzing from the energy of the music. The facilitator brings the attention of the congregation back to the stage, and once chatter subsides, he or she will lead us into the meditation moment. When Robert Stewart facilitates, he says, “This is my favorite part of the service,” before introducing the ritual. Patton

will say, “This is a time, for us to be alone together”. While all facilitators will add their own unscripted pieces to the facilitation speech, the silent meditation is always introduced as follows:

> *Now begins our time for silent meditation. This is a time for us to pray, meditate, remember, forget, and just be quiet for a few minutes. We have candles on both sides of the sanctuary for those who would like to light a candle in remembrance. This is a time for us to be deeply within ourselves and share this silence with everyone here. I will ring the bell in about five minutes to bring us back into this space.*

Following this scripted introduction, the facilitator will choose from an assortment of noise makers and chimes that are stored under the podium. He or she will ring the chime once to signal the beginning of the silent period.

My first point of entry as a participant observer into this ritual is my own practice. I frequently meditate in my own life and came to this ritual with my own understanding of meditation in mind. At the time of my early field work I was attending the Emory Buddhist Club’s weekly meditation that is facilitated by Tibetan monks and Zen masters from the city. On the morning of my first COL, I felt compelled to push my chair back and sit on the wood floor of the sanctuary in the meditative position that I had become accustomed to. No one turned to look or seemed perplexed by my choice. In fact, it was a comfortable five minute meditation that came to a peaceful end at the sound of the chime. However, with my choice to push my chair back and inch myself lower, I realized that every other person in attendance remained in their seats. At my next COL, I stayed sitting upright in my chair. This was a different kind of mediation now, one that was not nearly as structured as my Buddhist practice. We were seated in our green chairs. I heard some around me stand and move, my mind wandered with the noises. There was no direction beyond the initial introduction. This mediation it is not meant for

teaching or instructing, it is left intentionally ambiguous. When the chime rang, I allowed my eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight streaming through the large sanctuary windows. A pause of silence framed the moment. And we moved on.

If an existentialist congregation meditates in a sanctuary and no one's eyes are open to see it, does it make a sound? Many sounds, to be exact. Late in my fieldwork, I began to question what was happening—why was the floor creaking? How were those around me moving? Who was still and who was restless? Why was the kitchen faucet running? Who just entered? Or exited? Admittedly, my eyes would often open from time to time simply because I am not a skilled meditator. Sometimes, though, the participant-observer must lean into the observation, and those nagging questions caused me to choose two COLs in which I would refrain from meditating and instead observe, with open eyes, the meditation of others. The first thing I found when I opened was movement. The silent meditation was neither silent nor still. Many people from my side of the sanctuary stood and crowded around the cocktail table near the window that was topped with a scattering of white tea candles. Katrice and Edi stood on opposite sides of the table and silently lit their own candles. The smell of match smoke billowed over to where I sat. They then walked back to their seats and the r creaked loudly with each step. Through talking with Edi after the COL I learned that she lights a candle every Sunday for her parents. I looked back to where Kitty was sat in her usual rocking chair. She rocked forward to her feet and shuffled over to the kitchen. Once hidden behind the swinging door, the muffled sound of the running faucet bellowed around the sanctuary and I could make out the clinking of her dishes as she placed them in the dishwasher. Coughs and sniffles and not-so-delicate snorts decorated the silence, as if to remind us that we were not alone at all. Back where Robert sat, I found him to be deep in meditation, although his form was not that of the typical Buddhist practitioner. His hands

were raised out and up, with palms facing back towards him and his face was contorted as if deep in thought. As my head swung back to the stage, my eyes met those of several congregation members who, like me, were looking around. Aviva, our musician for the morning, was working through a walking mediation. As she paced back and forth near the piano and raised her hands above her head. When they reached their peak above her head, she dropped them slowly, brushing her fingertips along her torso until they reached her sides, and the motion began again. Lorraine sat slumped in her chair, absolutely still and silent, palms clasped in her lap gently. The bells chimed. This time Patton was familiar with the chimes and the sound rang out high, piercing, and clear. Eyes slowly opened across the sanctuary. I even noticed a few whose eyes had been open with mine had returned to a meditative position and at the chime their eyes reopened with the rest of the congregation.

Sorrows and Joys

Following a time of silent meditation, which embraces spiritual fluidity and celebrates isolated individuality, the Sorrows and Joys section reaffirms the congregational oneness. One Sunday, Ted Pettis was facilitating the COL, and after meditation, called for Sorrows and Joys, he said, “This is a time for us to talk about our own lives and make room for really good things or really bad things that have happened to us, so we can share in their burden.” After a moment of pause, Robert’s hand rose from this spot in the back corner of the sanctuary, from which he was taking the notes for the weekly email update. He stood and said, “My son finally started his first real job.” The congregation, all turned in their seats to face him in the back, erupted in applause, and intermittent shouts of “yeah!” and “alright!” Robert doesn’t stand for this section often, as he is usually taking notes, but the few times that he did stand throughout my fieldwork,

he spoke of his son's journey through law school, through the bar exam, and now finally to work. We all partook in the joy of the moment.

In a second example, perhaps an example of sorrow, we can see how performances of sorrow are similarly shared by the congregation, and while not performed or reciprocated at the same level of intensity as the speaker, the sorrow is met, acknowledged, and diffused as acceptance among the many green chairs. Kathy and Clint often bring their son, Ian, to services. If he is feeling up to the task, he usually lights the candles at the opening of the COL. However, during Sorrows and Joys of one particular service, Kathy and Clint stood together, turned to face the congregation, and announced that Ian had recently been admitted to a hospital because his autism had reached an untenable level. Kathy began to cry, and Clint held her. They continued standing through her tears, and when she composed herself, she mouthed 'thank you' to the congregation, and then they turned and sat. As she spoke of Ian, the congregation was silent except for the few hums of acknowledgement, or "Aws" of condolence. No applause was heard as they sat. It was not an announcement of celebration, and it seemed obvious to the congregation that applause was inappropriate. After a longer pause, an elongated silence, and a "Thank you Kathy and Clint," from Patton, the facilitator for the day, the Sorrow and Joys continued. After the COL, once the conversation and mingling began, I witnessed a few people approach Kathy and Clint and ask for more detail or give their personal response. If an announcement is sorrowful, a similar pattern emerges. Silence is obligatory, hums and moans that signify the reception and impact of the news are welcomed, and a long pause of space and time is allowed by the facilitator. Then following the COL, once our last song is sung, individuals will approach those who spoke to check in. I experienced a similar pattern when I once spoke, early in the spring of 2019, and announced my father's recent loss of work. The

pause wasn't as long, and the silence wasn't as heavy, but the pattern remained. Linda, Marsha, and Jo came to check on me after the service.

While these are two examples of deeply felt sorrows and highly applauded joys, there are often other kinds of announcements made in this time that don't quite match the collective cohesion model of ritual theorist. Kitty will stand most weeks and make an announcement about her stuffed animal friends, and Lorraine will stand during this time almost weekly to update the congregation on a woman named "Wild Jean" and her recovery from cancer. In this way, Sorrows and Joys both promoted congregational integrity, while also embracing individual perspectives, and attending to the socio-political community to which the members exist beyond the sanctuary space. By bringing in such references to friends and groups outside of First E, members during Sorrows and Joys bring community into the sacred space, where it can coexist with the congregation at large. However, in instances like these two examples, in which emotion is shared throughout the sanctuary and the sorrow or joy can become diffused, social cohesion is built from within.

Induction of New Members

A new ritual at First E, and one that I have had the privilege of witnessing in its malleable, infant stages, is the induction of new members. Until recently, although I am not sure how recently, new members to First E were not formally inducted through the performance of a ceremony. "Member" is a title that carries certain authority and obligation among the First E congregation. Until this point in this thesis, member has been used strategically to refer to individuals who I am certain are members. Visitors and recurring attendees of COLs, who are immediately considered to be important parts of the congregation, are loosely termed "friends"

of First E. When a friend chooses to become a member, they pledge spiritual and financial commitment to the Congregation. After the approval of the board, the induction ceremony is scheduled into an upcoming COL. This “ceremony” is short. It is less of a ceremony, and more of an announcement, a proclamation of commitment.

The first induction that I witnessed was Leon’s. Leon’s story, I believe, very critically underscores the purposes of these rituals and elucidates underlying context in which this ritual operates. I had met Leon briefly before his induction. He is a relatively quiet man, who often sits behind me, on the left side of the sanctuary. Several times he has brought his wife to COLs, but he alone was inducted as a member. Robert and Mary were called up first. They introduced the ceremony and explained its significance to the congregation. This ritual is not recurring. It only happens on these special days, when a friend has made the choice to become a member. And because it relies on individual agency and choice, its significance must be reestablished at each of these special COLs. Mary and Robert called upon Leon to stand and make his way to the front of the sanctuary space. They each said a few words about membership and about Leon as a person and as a congregation participant. After their words, which simultaneously welcome the new member and establish the sacredness

of the moment, they allowed Leon to speak to the congregation about himself—a re-introduction of himself to the congregation, now as a member.

He began to explain his personal religious journey. He went to Church of Christ related colleges in Oklahoma and Arkansas. He met his wife, Lou, at Harding College in Arkansas. They were married in 1958 and they left for Zambia, Africa later that year for missionary work and their three children were born in the country's capital, Lusaka. They moved to Malawi and stayed there in evangelistic work for 5 years. In 1972 they returned to California where Leon became the pastor of the Church of Christ in Riverside, California for 6 years, after which he resigned and became a computer programmer. They moved to Atlanta in 1979 and have lived here since. Leon went to Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur for 3 years. Then he became a minister/administrator in the Atlanta Union Mission, becoming the founder/director of the recovery program for men at the Mission, having been certified as an addiction counselor. He retired in 2004. Then later began teaching English to immigrants for 8 years, part-time. He fully retired in 2015. He and his wife were members of the Oakhurst Baptist Church for 20 years. Lou still attends Oakhurst. Leon enjoys reading theology and novels, playing pickleball, exercising, studying Spanish and helping Lou in the garden. He found First E in 2019 and quickly grew to love the community and the very political mission of the congregation. After sharing this story with us, Leon returned to his seat a member and the COL progressed. This separated time of acknowledgement and recognition reminded us all in attendance of the uniqueness of each person, the vastness of our personal histories, and the oneness of the congregation to which we belong.

Social Cohesion and Individual Mobility

To read these examples, I will use a lens of religious fluidity and the flux of liminal space. In “Rethinking Religious identity, Commitment, and Hybridity,” Meredith McGuire establishes her argument at the onset as combative towards an institutional model of religions. She begins with the basic assertion that her work “...challenges the Western image of a religion as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices” (2008, 186). It is with this purpose that McGuire then critiques syncretism as a process of “interpenetration and interaction” that all cultural and religious traditions are based upon (190). However, McGuire claims that the use of syncretism has, historically, been to study other religions through an analysis of purity and authenticity. The policing of syncretism has established narratives of “pure” religious forms that necessitates the subjugation of “impure” religious forms. Moreover, in a double-edged way, the focus on syncretism in religious studies has further reified the notion of fixed religious categories (2008, 190). Thus, we as scholars of religion are called not to view religion-as-lived as being the product *of* concrete institutions or traditions that, via some external or contextual circumstances, displays syncretism, but rather to view these concrete institutions as socially constructed for the purpose of “centralizing authority” (2008, 203), and external to the inherently hybrid nature of religion-as-lived. Finally, she argues that we look, instead, to where religious commitments lie, rather than assuming commitment based on prescriptive models, and accept religious identities as "continually adapting, expanding or receding, and ever changing” (2008, 210). Turner, likewise, establishes his argument by defining social life as a “dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality” (1975, 97). Fundamentally, in both understandings, we see religious experience—experience being privileged here—as mobile and susceptible to evolutions and contradictions. Liminality is

defined as the state of being, "neither here nor there...betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law custom, convention, and ceremonial (1975, 95). Communitas, exists in these liminal spaces as the "model of human interrelatedness...of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus,* community, or even communion if equal individuals..." (1975, 96). With these two theoretical understandings we can consider fluidity as inherent to religious identities, both in their amalgamating properties, and through an understanding of identity that is transient and continually changing. So, primarily, through both the solidity and the flexibility inherent in these rituals, First E is structurally fluid, and its spiritual content is necessarily multiple, as multiple as there are members. It is continually a liminal space, allowing for movement, individuality, creativity, while maintaining the integrity to the group.

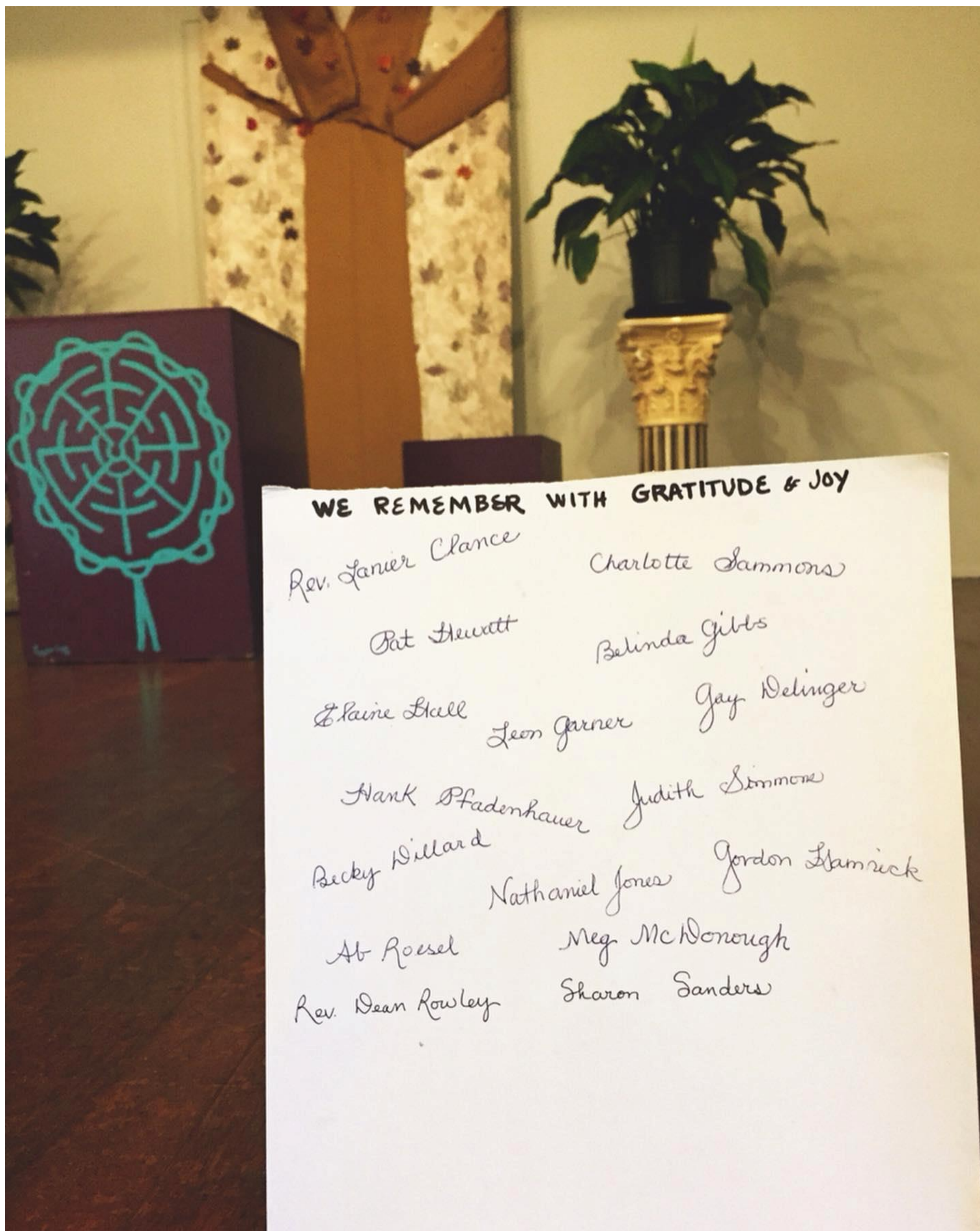
It is also helpful to perceive of these rituals as purposeful and useful in maintaining cohesion amongst fluidity. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim is especially interested in rites and rituals as operative in the formation of the and the cultivation of the sacred. In that last section of the work, Durkheim discusses what he deems piacular rites, which are the lamenting rites of the society, those sad rites and rituals that Durkheim views as equally as important as the joyous (1995, 392). Through a series of ethnographic descriptions, Durkheim comes to understand these emotional displays as just that, displays. The specific mourning behaviors of the society obligatory, and thus they are constructed and ritualized. Form this assumption, Durkheim then seeks to explain the function of these rituals—form what purpose does the obligation stand. Ultimately, Durkheim writes, "When the individual feels firmly attached to which he belongs, he feels morally bound to share in its grief and its joy. To abandon it would be to break the ties that bind him to the collectivity, to give up wanting collectivity, and

to contradict himself" (1995, 403), and later, "to commune in sadness is still to commune, and every communion of consciousness increases social vitality, in whatever form it is done" (1995, 405). In his larger project of categorizing rituals throughout the work, Durkheim defines these, the piacular, as inherent emotional and inherently communal. Through obligatory collective emotional displays, the society embodies the emotions of the individual, and vice versa. In so doing, the individual and the collective become one. Expounding on this theory in a piece entitled the *The Obligatory Expression of Feelings,* Mauss, "It is not only crying, but all kinds of oral expressions of sentiments which are essentially, not exclusively psychological phenomena, or physiological, but social phenomena, eminently marked with the sign of non-spontaneity, and of the most perfect obligation" (Garces and Jones 2009, 298). However, beyond Durkheim's analysis, he states, "[the] considerable category of oral expressions of sentiments, feelings, and emotions are nothing if not collective phenomena, in a very great number of populations, and spread all over the continent. Let us mention straightaway that this collective character does not in the least diminish the intensity of feelings, on the contrary" (2009, 302). While Durkheim denied the truth value of these emotions, Mauss accepts their validity as a psychological phenomenon, and is more concerned in their collective purpose. In more contemporary scholarly work, by Asa Trullson in the *Journal of Ritual Studies*, ritual and emotion share a much more coalesced framework. Emotion in this dance is obligatory as a means of performance. Through the ritualization of the dance, and the shared emotional atmosphere created by the audience, emotions are processed by the practitioner in a space of share meaning (2014, 60). Emotional ritualization, then, is deeply functional. In performing these emotions through chains of obligation and catharsis, these rituals develop a common mood, they perform and affirm emotional oneness, and thus solidify the experience of both the individual practitioner as well as

the whole congregation. Especially in the case of the Sorrows and Joys, the communality of emotions and synchronicity of actions builds a sense of social cohesion within the sanctuary walls. While rituals exist that embrace all spiritual experiences, still there are key others that solidify oneness. As we will continue to find in the discourse and spatial construction of this congregation, there is a deeply seeded mission of acceptance in this congregation—acceptance of belief, practice, identity, and ability. Still in its vastness, as we have seen in the above examples, ritual is a primary way through which congregation is constituted

Photo Essay: Sensory Existentialism

Founders Day


WE REMEMBER WITH GRATITUDE & JOY
Rev. Lanier Clance
Charlotte Sammons
Pat Hewitt
Belinda Gibbs
Elaine Hall
Leon Garner
Gay Delinger
Hank Pfadenhauer
Judith Simmons
Becky Dillard
Nathaniel Jones
Gordon Hamrick
Ab Roesel
Meg McDonough
Rev. Dean Rowley
Sharon Sanders

FIRE

Bill: friend, hippie, pianist, accordionist, scholar, existentialist

We Gather Together

WE GATHER TOGETHER

Words by David Arkin
Music: Kremser, a Netherlands folksong

1. We gath - er to - geth - er to build in the morn - ing A
2. We gath - er to - geth - er the form and the sub - stance This
3. The hand of the point - er will cap - ture the rain - bow To
4. We gath - er to - geth - er to give to each oth - er The

house where the spir - it of all can be free. We'll
hand - i - work brought forth shall grow and in - crease; And
light up our gath - er - ing place with its glow, And
strength that we nev - er could mus - ter a - one. And

lay the foun - da - tion with each and ev - 'ry na - tion, And
all of cre - a - tion will join in ad - mir - a - tion To
here we will treas - ure with mus - ic and with meas - ure The
in this com - mun - ion we'll ded - i - cate a un - ion: The

it will stand as tall and as firm as can be.
see the shin - ing won - der of la - bor and peace!
all in all of art and of na - ture we know.
fel - low - ship of all com - ing in - to their own!

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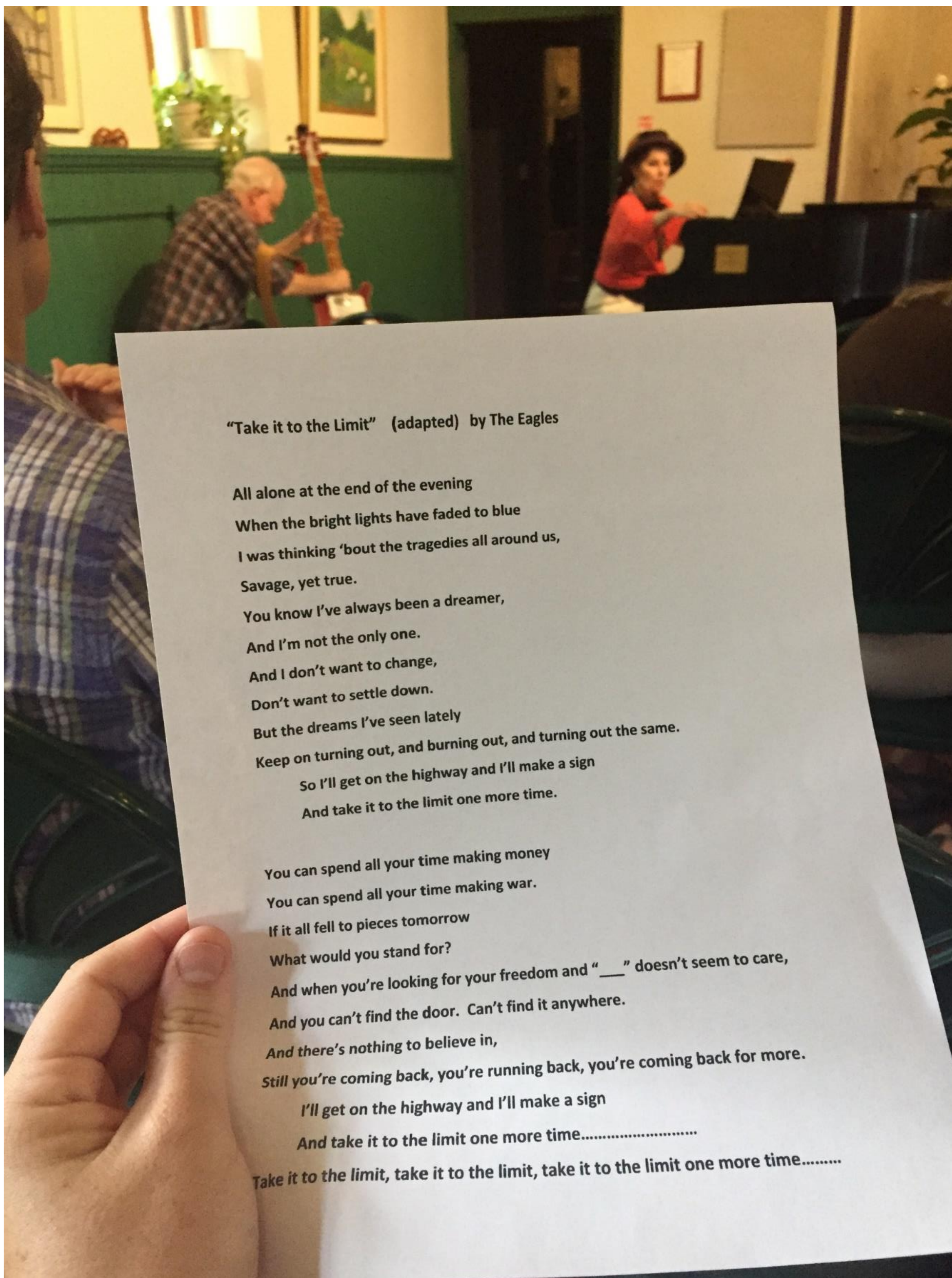
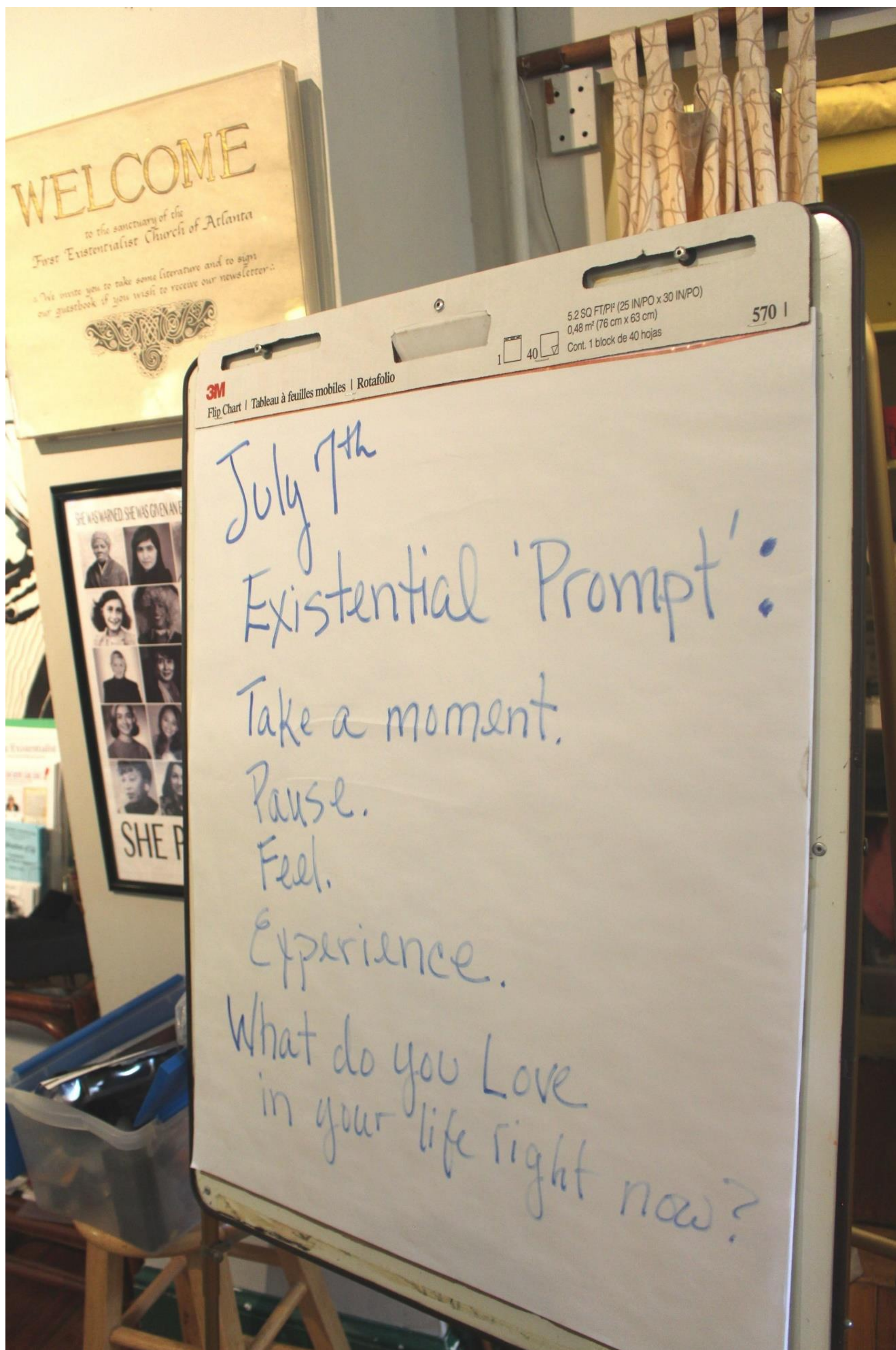
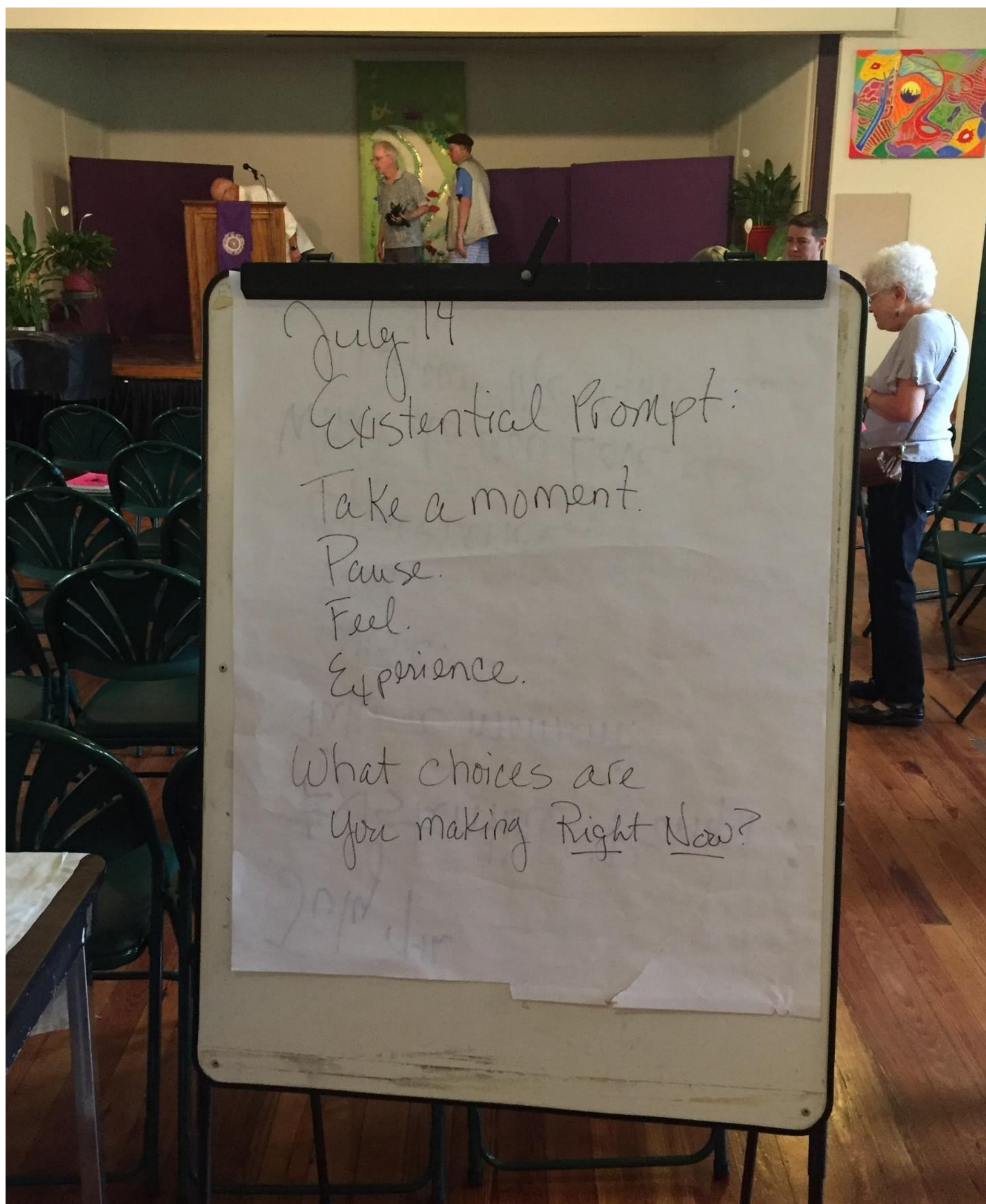

"Take it to the Limit" (adapted) by The Eagles
All alone at the end of the evening
When the bright lights have faded to blue
I was thinking 'bout the tragedies all around us,
Savage, yet true.
You know I've always been a dreamer,
And I'm not the only one.
And I don't want to change,
Don't want to settle down.
But the dreams I've seen lately
Keep on turning out, and burning out, and turning out the same.
So I'll get on the highway and I'll make a sign
And take it to the limit one more time.
You can spend all your time making money
You can spend all your time making war.
If it all fell to pieces tomorrow
What would you stand for?
And when you're looking for your freedom and "___" doesn't seem to care,
And you can't find the door. Can't find it anywhere.
And there's nothing to believe in,
Still you're coming back, you're running back, you're coming back for more.
I'll get on the highway and I'll make a sign
And take it to the limit one more time.........................
Take it to the limit, take it to the limit, take it to the limit one more time.........


WELCOME
to the sanctuary of the
First Existentialist Church of Atlanta
We invite you to take some literature and to sign
our guestbook if you wish to receive our newsletter.
SHE P
3M
Flip Chart | Tableau à feuilles mobiles | Rotafolio
570
July 7th
Existential 'Prompt':
Take a moment.
Pause.
Feel.
Experience.
What do you Love
in your life right now?


July 14
Existential Prompt:
Take a moment.
Pause.
Feel.
Experience.
What choices are
You making Right Now?

Stand in body and spirit as you are willing and able.

Tables and Altars

First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta
Celebration of Life
"Making Amends"
August 4, 2019
Speaker: Rev. Joan Armstrong Davis
Fellowship Minister: Rev. Marsha Mitchiner
The Existentialist
The Dog Days of Summer . . .
!! COME VISIT US !!
First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta
Dedicated to Human Liberation
and
Protection of the Natural Environment

FOOD
DRIVE

2. Gendered Discourse: Narratives of Conversion and Feminist Politics

In my attempts to better understand the experiences of the individuals of First E, I conducted numerous interviews with the members I had become most acquainted with. In these interviews I began by asking about the religious upbringings of each person. Eventually, though, I would ask about how they each heard about this congregation, their first memories of the congregation, and what elements ultimately kept them coming back. What became of these questions was a collection of diverse conversion narratives. In the following pages, I underscore my conversations with two women: Marsha Mitchiner, the Fellowship Minister of the First Existentialist Congregation, and Hello Kitty, a longstanding member and the person I've become closest with throughout fieldwork. While one woman places the emphasis of her narrative on a deconversion from the religion of her childhood, the other understands her conversion in a much more nuanced way. In comparing both stories, it is my goal to highlight the range of means by which individuals find themselves at First E as well as the diversity of religious selves that make up the congregation. Secondly, I hope to look in this chapter at the larger conversations being had at Sunday COLs and in more specific community gatherings, such as book clubs and guild meetings. Specifically, I am interested in the ways in which the people of First E communicate about themselves and their beliefs. Following an analysis of these conversion narratives, I will look more broadly at what I have found is the centralizing ideology of the congregation, specifically the belief in and value of feminism. This second section of the chapter will explore the multiple valences of feminism that inhabit the congregation and how these varying discourses serve as the foundational system upon which this community rests.

Narratives of Conversion

Hanlon: Hi, Kitty. Can you begin by just telling me a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, and how you were raised?

Kitty: Hi, Emma. Yes, I'll be happy to tell you those things. I grew up in Mableton Georgia, which is an unincorporated town, about twenty miles west of Atlanta. I went to church as a child, and my dad was a deacon of the church and my mother was the church clerk, so she took minutes of all the services and business meetings in shorthand. That's another language that some people used to do. And her handwriting was gorgeous, even in shorthand. It didn't look like handwriting. And my dad—one time he was a shepherd in the Christmas play and he wore a bath towel around his head, and it was so funny. And, yeah I went to church all the time, Sunday school and church. I didn't pay attention to it, but it was something to do, like playing in the sand box or whatever. But yeah, I grew up there and it was a Baptist church, the only game in town, so that's where I went.

Further in the interview, I revisited her earlier childhood.

Hanlon: Would you say that you really believed in what you were learning as a kid in church? How did you relate to God and spirituality growing up in a Baptist church?

Kitty: Oh, let's see, it was just an activity for me. I don't think I recognized that it was spiritual, but it was something that I did every week and I liked it, and I heard stories and I liked that, too. It didn't register with me about God.

Hanlon: You didn't ever like you needed to leave or dissociate yourself from the church because you didn't really believe in God?

Kitty: Nope.

Kitty: Well, I wasn't so attached to the Baptist thing. Again, it was the only game in town. I liked more the social aspect of it. But now, I'm real sure the God doesn't like me, whatever form she comes in because, you know, I've had a lot of weird stuff go down the pipe. I church around. I like to go to different entertainments and music and dinners at different churches. There are a lot of them. This is the south, oh my god its the Bible Belt, tightened to the hilt. Anyway, I like to church around because I like all those activities. They're close, they're easy to park, and they, for the moment, make me forget all the weird stuff. Do I think there's a

> God? I have no idea. Do I think there's a rainbow? I guess I see it sometimes. I try to watch *Touched by an Angel,* it gets to churchy for me pretty fast. Like Raymond was saying, "Oh, lets go to all these things for Christmas," and I said, "No, those things are really too churchy for me" …
> I didn't have to break away because I wasn't ever attached, and I've learned not to be attached to anything.

Lastly, in finally asking Kitty about how she began attending First E after being raised Baptist, her understanding of church became clearer to me.

At a fundamental level, Kitty's understanding of church is separate from her understanding of belief. Church, to Kitty, seemed to shift from something *one does* into something *to do*. In her childhood, her Baptist church was neither a negative force, nor a place of deeply felt loyalty. Instead, it was a motivation, to use Geertz's term, that was embedded in other aspects of her existence. It fit well with college life, it was a structuring presence in her family, and yet it was an institution she felt free to move in and out of. And while she still attends the activities and sometimes services of other Christian churches, she simultaneously carries a disdain or disinterest in "churchy" things. Further in this interview, she talks a bit about loneliness and how in her old age, First E is a place to go where she has community and feels belonging. She was draw to the building because it looked like a church, that symbol that had been constant in her life, and it provided, and still provides her with the necessary community for a fulfilled life.

In Marsha's interview, we see a different perspective on how one becomes a part of First E and a wildly different understanding of her religious selfhood.

Mitchiner: I'll say that I always felt that I was different. I didn't have a name for it. At the point that I was in high school, and I realized that I was attracted to the girls, then that was a big no-no. And, it was a real struggle within me that I was doing something that was against what God wanted me to—the person God wanted me to be. And at the same time, I couldn't feel like god hated me, or though that that was a bad thing. But of course, this was on the 1960s, in middle Georgia. So, being gay was not an acceptable thing. So, that was another thing that began to take me away from the church, from the Christian church.

From this first section, in which we discussed her upbringing in Southern Baptism and how she began to question the church as she grew up and sought answers for the problems that she was witnessing and the dilemmas within her own identity, she describes her de-conversion as a gradual growing-away-from. And, in discussing her early interactions with the First E, it is clear that First E became a means of answering some of those questions for her.

Mitchiner: Along that path and during that time, I met my current partner. She and I had been together for two years, and I was in therapy then, too. And I talked to my therapist about the idea that she and I, Chancey and I, wanted to have a ceremony, a marriage ceremony. Now, this was 1970. It certainly wasn't legal. So, my therapist happened to be Pauline Rose Clance. She said, "Well I have just the person who would be willing to marry you," and that was Reverend Lanier Clance, who was the founder of the First Existentialist Congregation. So, Lanier married us in 1977. I did not initially go—that gave me information about the congregation, but at that point, it had only started in '76. It was still not—it was a bunch of people who got together at Lanier's home. So, I didn't attend that. But, in 1980, there was a person who worked in the same office as me at the federal government, she was a lesbian, and she said, "Y'all really ought to go to this church in Candler Park. It is so cool. Gay people are there and it's okay, and the minister, he talks about things that really matter." So Chancey and I went, and I never left. It was exactly what I was looking for.

In my initial transcribing of this interview, I was much more interested in the role of sexuality in Marsha's landing at First E, and in reassessing the interview for this paper, I spent a long time attempting to find a new angle. However, it seems as if sexuality and identity are still central themes to an analysis of conversion. In reflecting upon her early life, Marsha understands herself

as having been "steeped" in Southern Baptist ideology, and recognizes that there was a version of herself, as a child, who understood that as her religion. However, as she grew and as her own knowledge of her identity came to the fore, Marsha's identity didn't align with that same God, to use her phrasing. It was her marriage to a woman that ultimately introduced her to the congregation of First E, and it was their embracing of queer identities that ultimately brought her back. However, central to her conversion are two intriguing elements. The first is that Marsha only began attending after the group purchased the Old Stone Church and took its more institutional form (as opposed to the discussion groups held at Lanier's home). Thus, it was not necessarily the people, nor the philosophy that hooked her, but more so the fact that the people and the philosophy were part of a larger institution. Secondly, central to her conversion was the fact that this larger institution did the things that Southern Baptism did not, as far as answering her questions in a way that "fit" her God. As opposed to Kitty's understanding of First E as a space for community, and as one of the many church "entertainments" to attend, Marsha views First E as that which she had been searching for. Kitty's narrative can be read through Gloria Anzaldua's work in that she exhibits a "tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldua 101) in both identity as well as her religious beliefs. Kitty takes solace in the multiplicity of and staunchly reaffirms that she continues to return to First E, after all of her years of attendance, for the community, for the friendship, for the belonging. Marsha's narrative is much more Jamesian. By that I mean her story echoes a progression of a self that echoes what James terms the "sick soul". Her yearning for an alignment between the God figure she was taught and the beliefs of her religious upbringing can be seen as the anguish James describes that partakes of "various characters, having sometimes more the quality of loathing; sometimes that of irritation and exasperation; or again of self-mistrust and self-despair; or of suspicion, anxiety, trepidation, fear" (James 147).

She finds, in First E, the alignment she seeks and the belonging that heals this sick soul. In my time knowing Marsha, she always underscores the fact that First E is her spiritual home. Here she is fulfilled in a more significant way than simply through community belonging. It is through the belonging that she accesses a higher significance at the Old Stone Church.

These two narratives I am calling narratives of conversion. One is much more typical of the conversion we have come to understand in the study of religion. Marsha left one spiritual engagement because of internal strife—her queer identity—and realigned with the congregation of First E when her selfhood was affirmed and embraced by this community. Marsha converted *from* her Southern Baptist roots *to* this unique existentialist congregation and furthered her commitment to this new path by rising to a position of authority. This is the model of conversion given to us by Augustine's *Confessions,* and that kind of conversion. My use of conversion, however, is tied to the work of Devaka Premawardhana and his work on reconceptualizing conversion, *Faith in Flux: Pentecostalism and mobility in rural Mozambique*. In this ethnography, Premawardhana uses conversion as to understand the mobility he sees in his interlocutors between pentecostalsim and traditional religions. He writes of these changes, "Discontinuity is a continuous affair, a series of oscillations and alternations, a bidirectional process rather than a one-off event… For the Makhuwa, leaving and entering (*ohiya ni ovolowa*) discrete traditions—like moving between river and road, village and bush—is similarly neither jarring nor traumatic. Nor is it irreversible. (2018, 106-107) And religious identity is seen as much more circular or fluid, and as existing beyond categorical ways of knowing. Kitty, then, allows us to see this kind of selfhood. She is constantly between communities, although she identifies fully with the community of First E. Thus, there are multiple way of being in this congregation. Identity as an existentialist is not an obligatory badge one must wear in the

congregation. Rather, allow these narratives to show that multiple tiers of identity and multiple trajectories of conversion are accounted for in this space.

Many Feminisms

On a recent rainy day, after my classes had finished, I drove the 20 minutes through downtown Decatur, Georgia to Kitty's house. Kitty's birthname is still unknown to me, as she first introduced herself to me as Hello Kitty, after the popular white cat from artist Yuko Shimizu. She's since told me that many she "[goes] by many different names around this town." When I arrived at her home, I found her carport covered in animals; stuffed animals, that is, and mostly snakes and large animals of the jungle. I rang the chimes on her door that served as a doorbell and found the inside not any different. Kitty self-identifies as a hoarder, and explained to me that the stuffed animals, much like First E, help to quell her loneliness. She puts the scariest ones outside to ward off intruders. I tell this story of Kitty because I find her conversion narrative to First E to be particularity unique, mostly because it is not quite a narrative of conversion, but more of coincidence.

Hanlon: When did you first find First E?

Kitty: It was a drive by. It was in 1988, I think. I just drove by and said, Oh, that looks like a church. And it sure does. Since I was flying, I didn't always go to church because I was working. The sky was my church. I went to the door and there was a party going on. I opened the door and this girl said, "You can come in but the one with the beard cannot." And I said, "Oh, why?" and she said, "Well it's all lesbians," so I said, "Oh, okay, I'll come back another time." And I did. I went back the next time and went to the door and I said, "What's going on here?" And they said, "It's a healing circle" or something like that. And I said, "Oh, this is really cool, can I come in?" I was by myself. They said, "Oh, yeah!" and it was Franklin Abbott and Beth Yorke. Beth York has gone on, but Franklin Abbott is fabulous, and he was leading this healing circle. Maybe it wasn't really a healing circle, but it was a bunch of people and they were being—you know, they had incense burning and all kinds of stuff. So, it was about just life in general, and it was nice. And I thought, Well I'll come back; It's a beautiful place.

There are three elements of this excerpt that are most interesting. First, the notion of an exclusively lesbian sacred space. Second, the pluralistic religious symbols and materials that emerge from the narrative. And third, the fact that Kitty was not only invited back but indeed returned and eventually became a long-standing member.

The First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta is, of course, not an exclusively lesbian space, but it does not surprise me that they would host events like the one Kitty recounted. The purposes of this section are to understand the contours of gender that operate in this congregation. Specifically, I am most interested in the feminism upon which the community is based and the way that feminism is discursively constructed and communicated. At the beginning of every Sunday Celebration of Life (COL), the facilitator begins by announcing that First E is a spiritual community based on the principles of existentialism and feminism. Thus, this project asks: how is feminism defined by the congregation? How is feminism, as a political project, employed in this space? And in what ways has feminism come to bare religious sentiments? To answer these questions, I will look primarily at the field of discourse used within the sanctuary by members of the congregation, invited speakers, and on board-sponsored marketing material. I will argue that feminism takes three primary forms: feminism as an uplifting of women, feminism as a politic of equality, and feminism as a religious element.

I believe it is necessary to begin by situating this project within the larger theoretical conversations surrounding gender and religious experience. As scholars of religious studies further expand what counts as religion and continue to adapt their definitions of religion to include those systems of meaning-making that are not always recognized, it has become increasingly important to acknowledge and attend to the intersectional experiences of religious practitioners within diverse communities. This understanding of intersectionality, of course,

derives from Kimberlee Crenshaw. In defining her theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw levies first a critique of identity politics, stating that the framework, specifically as it pertains to antiracist and feminist projects, allows for ignorance of intragroup differences (1996, 1242). This is ultimately used to support her argument that "race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (1996, 1244). Because I study First E as simultaneously a community and a congregation, this theoretical model has recurrently allowed me to see the different nuances of individual experience within the whole. More specifically, however, I am interested in Crenshaw's perspective on feminism as a political category, one that is dependent upon the construction and maintenance of the white woman identity. Through her analysis of feminism, Crenshaw comes to understand feminism as an essentializing project, that exerts and accumulates power through both its construction as well as its ability to cause social and material consequences (1996, 1297). While First E is a largely heterogeneous community, is was borne, in part, of the feminism Crenshaw critiques and, at least historically, it was institutionalized in the same moment as the rape crisis movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Using intersectionality, less as a theoretical lens and more as model with which to measure the success of this congregation, I ask here: To what extend is the feminism of First E comparable to, influenced by, or actively challenging of Crenshaw's analysis?

Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús further critiques identity thinking in reference to religious studies. Of feminist scholarship, she writes, "Even the description of certain practices as "feminist" creates a problematic within critical social theory," and in reference to the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, states,

> This type of scholarship has tended to seek out women's agency and construct a singular feminist humanism modeled after White cis-gender women…A decolonial stance

> towards scholarship must recognize how different feminist and queer liberation projects can also conflict with each other and produce new transnational normativities. (2018, 321)

From this theoretical ground, I take up the task of not ascribing certain theoretical feminism upon First E, but instead looking at the ways in which they define and behave their feminism. In Joyce Flueckiger's *In Amma's Healing Room,* Amma's identity as a Muslim woman healer is formative in the creation of certain fundamental actions and elements of the healing room. Because notions of feminism were not privileged from the "indigenous" perspective, and the category of women was not politicized towards a project of resistance, Flueckiger's understanding of gender was informed wholly from Amma's theorization of *Jati* defined by the dichotomy of men and women (2006, 8). Thus, gender and religion were intricately tied in this vernacular tradition to create the specific and contextualized religious experience. Flueckiger looks not to Amma as a figure of resistance to patriarchal norms, but instead sought to understand how gender and religion co-constructed one another and how Amma's non-normative position made sense in context. First E similarly develops its spiritual mood as part and parcel of a political apparatus, one that allows for congregational togetherness, one that unites. Here my task is to understand what these sanctions of gender are, how feminism is defined, and how it is worked into the spiritual frameworks of the congregation

Feminism as womanhood

At its most basic level, the feminism of First E is concerned with a centering of women. An obvious example of this concern is in the strategic linguistic shifts made by the congregation to center the female gender. Songs, particularly folk songs, secularized hymns, and the

occasional classic rock tune of the 70s, are central to the ritual of the Sunday Celebrations of Life. Inside the bound, bright pink song book, many of the lyrics to these songs have been altered in some way. The changes are usually apparent, as they have been handwritten in in black ink. The most common alteration is the switching of pronouns from the male to the female. I have come to understand this as a linguistic strategy of rewriting the narratives of certain songs to center women and align with the predominately women-identifying congregation.

Secondly, I am reminded of one particular event in which Crenshaw's understanding of an essentializing feminism can be noticed. Throughout my fieldwork, I attempted to attend all services as well as extracurricular meetings and events. The fall book club book, *None of the Above: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Public Schools Cheating Scandal, Corporate Greed , and the Criminalization of Educators* by Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton, recounts the ongoing legal battle surrounding the Atlanta public school cheating scandal and deals with intersectionality and race and gender as they consequentially impact the trial. While our discussion only vaguely touched upon the intricacies and particularities of Robinson's experience, we did eventually discuss the implications of race in the criminal justice system. I, having just watched director Ava Duvernay's *When They See Us* on Netflix, broached the example of the Central Park Five case and noted how the recent retelling more critically engages race than the initial media portrayal. To this statement, many of the women brought up their personal memories of those years in the 80s. Linda, a former professor of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State, remembered: "At the time, we were all so concerned about the poor woman. And, you know, I felt so sorry for those boys when we all found out." This statement, and the conversation that followed about not knowing "at the time" and about the fight to "believe women" underscored the more commonly held notions of feminism and identity

politics of First E. The transference of the injustices of Atlanta public school cheating scandal to the Central Park Five case was a more difficult association for the women of the book club. I am reminded here of Crenshaw's analysis of the Central Park Five case, and how feminist groups during the rape crisis, often understood Black men as threats to white women (1996, 1267-1270).

The category of women can be viewed through the linguistic alterations of songs as normative and concerned primarily with a binary understanding of gender. It establishes itself as antipatriarchy, as opposite to and if equal to manhood, and as central in the congregation. Moreover, the feminism displayed is of primarily supporting and advocating for the womanhood of First E, which is cis, white, and middleclass. It is historically rooted in the feminism of the 70s and 80s, but is deeply particular to addressing the women of the congregation. Lastly, at a recent COL held on December 8, the musician Bill introduced our last congregational song, Imagine, in such a way that I think is important here and that brings us into our next construction of feminism. The title of the COL was "We Hold These Truths: Human Rights, Blacks, and the Continued Struggle for Equality," and speaker Anthony Knight, the founder of the Baton Foundation, spoke of his experience as a Black gay man, and the history of the Declaration of Human Rights. To introduce the final song after Anthony's talk had finished, Bill said, "On December 7, a day before today, 1941, Japan of course attacked Pearl Harbor and that action led USA into what we now call World War II. We're gonna sing a song whose words are actually written by Yoko Ono, and she's Japanese." Bill often plays Imagine on the days he serves as musician, and each time he introduces the song with the assertion that its words are written not by John Lennon, but by his wife, Yoko Ono. In the past, this introduction has been made with a specific feminist purpose to highlight and give credit to the women, whose erasure is understood as a job of patriarchy. In this occasion, however, Bill emphasized Yoko Ono's ethnicity as well

as her gender. I understand this as both the feminism that supports womanhood as well as the feminism of First E that attempts to reconcile a multiplicity of identities in a mission of equality and inclusion.

Feminism as a Politic of Equality

At the beginning of every COL, the facilitator will say some variation of the following: "We are a spiritually based, philosophical community, founded on the principles of existentialism and feminism. By Feminism, we mean that we believe in the inherent equality of all being and we celebrate diversity. By Existentialism we mean that we believe every individual has the power to make choices." This specific introduction was given at a recent COL by Fellowship Minister, Marsha Mitchiner. Regardless of its exact language, we are recurrently reminded that feminism is defined as the plight for equality and a celebration of diversity. In this second form of feminism, I refer to this philosophical definition with which each COL begins. In many ways, First E practices this feminism. First, through community service projects. First E has a developing relationship with Atlanta Transit Angels, a nonprofit that builds care packages and delivers them to asylum seekers from the southern border at bus stops in the metro area. Quarterly, First E holds packing parties after Sunday COLs, at which we form conveyor belt style packing stations, and fill boxes with care packages. I understand this characteristic of First E not simply as a recognition of equality, but also the self-conscious understanding that the congregation plays an active role in fighting for power disadvantaged communities. Through a reading of Crenshaw, I believe these acts to be the power of this feminist identity not only to construct itself, but to implicate material consequences.

Another characteristic of First E that I read through this second feminism is a continuous tension between plurality and appropriation of diverse identities. Given my understanding that the feminism of First E is reliant upon the womanhood that is defined by the women in the space—an increasingly self-critical yet ultimately white and middle class feminism—and due to the reading of this feminism as politically powerful in its ability to enact social change, the feminism of First E is imbued with and intersected by certain privileged identities. Many of its manifestations within the congregation attempt to surround and disperse this privledge with the imagery and practices of the diversity it claims to uphold. In his recent work on religious fluidity, Duane R. Bidwell grapples with the increasing phenomenon of religiously plural individuals, but understands this phenomenon as easily tipped to the side of the scale that is appropriation. He understands appropriation in a religious field as that which occurs, "when white people from developed nations turn to religious imagery, vocabulary, dress, and behavior from minority communities in attempts to appear exotic or radical, to claim superior spiritual understanding, or to make a fashion statement" (29-30). In the case of First E, this tension is present in the project of this second feminism. On one of my earliest visits to First E in the spring of 2019, the musician for the week, a white woman, closed the COL with a rain dance. She taught the volunteers the lyrics and the simple steps, most-likely of Native American origin, and the congregation watched and clapped as the three women performed. No mention was made to the cultural or spiritual origins of the dance, nor was there any question about singing words whose meanings presumably no one understood. Rain dances, having longstanding origins in Native American spirituality, are often the subjects of religious appropriation, especially by subversive religious communities in the United States (see Raabe).The context in which this rain dance, and its seeming removal from its cultural origins, makes sense is within the framework of

this second feminism. Religious plurality and a welcoming of diverse ideas is, in my belief, a success of this congregation. However, in this case, stripping the practice of its meaning led to more appropriative and violent consequences.

Feminism as Religious Experience

Lastly, through the continuous construction of the Old Stone Church as a sacred space and through the very philosophies on which this sacredness is formed, feminism in this congregation also takes on a religious sentiment. This interpretation of the feminism of First E is largely inspired by Joyce Fluckiger work. By deeming this congregation, a space of vernacular religious experience, and as a space of multiple and fluid spiritual identities, feminism can be seen as a religiously based motivation and as a thing of sacred significance. In Clifford Geertz's salient definition of religion, motivation is described as a certain "inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling" (Geertz 96). Motivations are those behaviors and beliefs that are based in and formed through sacred symbolism, and that reify that sacredness as well. The walls of the Old Stone Church are decorated in the symbolism of feminism. This symbolism reflects both the first and second forms of feminism. On one wall, hangs a poster of Susan B. Anthony a figure that might uphold white feminism, but is increasingly understood as having rejected Black voting rights. On another wall hangs a framed portrait of Malala Yousafzai and Marsha P. Johnson. On a third altar, sits two statues of the Buddha, and on a fourth hangs a plaque commemorating the BiRacial History Project of First E that recognizes the Black community that built the Old Stone Church. These symbols give the space its meaning. They are

linked to feminist projects and political identities. In a space that understand itself primarily as a spiritual community, embracing many religious identities, feminism is a foundation. It is a feminist perspective that connects the practitioners of First E, not belief, denomination, or scripture.

Adaptation of Discourse

The First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta is primarily a political congregation. While its formation is spiritual and philosophical, its messages and its aesthetics represent a feminist political outlook as its primary base. It is a space of multiple an often overlapping religious experiences, but these religious identities are often blurred under a uniting feminist force. In this section, I first looked directly at the narratives of two First E members, their stories and their beliefs. Evident, here, is the plurality of experiences. I've subsequently outlined the three principle forms that the feminism that unifies individual experiences takes. On a basic level, the feminism of First E is defined as an advocating for women. Womanhood in the congregation is defined by the subjectivities of those women who attend. Thus, as we shift the protagonists of our songs through female pronouns, the women in the congregation see themselves represented in the messages. The gendered category of women is reciprocally defined through this foundational feminism. Secondly, the feminism that is defined in the mission statement of the congregation is one of diversity and equality. This feminism manifests in two ways. First, the congregation is welcoming of all identities and holds in high regard leftist social justice missions. Often, however, this inclusivity of diversity is present only in practices and in symbols, and not in actual human representation. First E tows the line of appropriation. Lastly, through the makeup of the congregation's philosophy and the ornamentation of space, feminism is that force that connects the congregation and allows it its religious structure. The sacred is

located in this ideology, and it is the feminism that is uplifted as the spiritual foundation for the congregation. The feminism of First E is symbolically and linguistically maintained. Thus, it is ever changing. It is this mood of fluidity that allows the congregation to grow. The feminisms I have outlined here are temporal, and so are the retrospective life stories of Marsha and Kitty. They are particular and they are always being reshaped. As the political context of First E changes, and new generations populate the sanctuary, so too will these constructions of feminism and the stories we each tell.

3. Space: Structure, Fluidity, and Aesthetic Auspiciousness

When I first began attending First E in March of 2019, the building did not yet have the four stained glass windows that decorate the congregational space today. These stained-glass windows came as a gift from Antioch East Baptist Church, and were finally installed in August of 2019. In her article that was published in the monthly newsletter, the procurer of these windows, Edi, wrote,

> This June, First E installed four beautiful and historic stained-glass windows that now grace the sanctuary. These windows come as a legacy-gift from the Antioch East Baptist Church, built 100 years ago. The windows also serve to commemorate the 145-year presence of the Antioch East Congregation and families in our Candler Park and Edgewood neighborhoods, now that Antioch has relocated to Ellenwood. First E and the BiRacial History Project ask everyone to join us as conscious community stewards in our effort to honor and care for these treasures.

Each week following their installment, Edi would stand during the Sorrows and Joys section of the Sunday "Celebration of Life" to express her joy at their presence and remind the congregation of the importance of the BiRacial History Project. Through the BiRacial History Project, which has become such a central piece of the congregation's community involvement and action, and through my ethnographic accounts of the numerous decorating and ornamenting projects, it is easy to see how a mood of constant conversion or constant religious fluidity underlies the physicality of the congregation and the space of the Old Stone Church.

Around 1880, the Antioch East Baptist Church of Candler Park built a wooden church structure on Oakdale Road for the purposes of worship and education. In 1916, what First E refers to as a "mysterious" fire, burned that building to the ground. Two years later, the congregation began a four-year project of rebuilding the church, just one block east of the old structure, on Candler Park Drive. That building was purchased in 1977 by the Phoenix Unitarian Fellowship, and in 1980 by First E ("Old Stone Church"). Today, the BiRacial History Project is an ongoing mission by white residents of Candler Park and the descendants of the black former residents of Candler Park, to preserve "the presence of a vibrant African American pioneer community located in and around what is now Candler Park, Atlanta, beginning in the 1870s" ("Early Edgewood"), and document the transition of a working class black neighborhood into the current wealthy white community. Members of First E began this project in 2006 to specifically focus on the history of the Old Stone Church. While it has grown through the years to reveal a larger project of gentrification throughout the community, the first event in 2006 that marked the foundation the project was the Welcoming Luncheon at the Old Stone Church that invited the

Antioch East elders to a Sunday Celebration of Life at First E ("Early Edgewood"). From this event onward, First E has been at the helm of establishing monuments and plaques throughout Candler Park that retell the history of the community and the installation of the four stained-glass windows is the most recent display of monumentalizing this BiRacial History in to the fabric and architecture of the Old Stone Church.

The establishment of the BiRacial History Project and more so the event of installing the four stained-glass windows can be read as both a catalyst as well as product of the mood of conversion or a mood of fluidity that permeates the space. Going back to its beginnings, First E began as a small gathering in basements. Then, through aligning themselves with Unitarian Universalism, this small group was able to claim and pursue ownership of a space that was, on the surface, contradictory to its mission. Though, with a theology tightly interwoven with social justice and liberal politics, the congregation was led to a more critical understanding of its history and of the building that it occupied. Therefore, with a reconciliatory move to embrace Antioch East and monumentalize the racial history of the building, First E uplifted this duality of ownerships between which, and the multiplicity of religious institutions within which the building sits. The space is part Antioch East—so, part Baptist, and part Unitarian Universalist—so, part nondenominational Christian, and part existentialist—so, part individualistically driven and thus splintered into infinite spiritualities. However, it was because of the individualistic philosophy and political purpose of the initial basement-based discussion group that provided the necessary context for this type of fluidity.

The sensory experience of the Old Stone Church is essential to each COL. Along with ritual and language employed in these services, so too are the physical surroundings. The BiRacial History Project and the advent of the stained glass windows reflects the moods of the

congregation as a whole, the building is the canvas, if you will, upon which the congregation depicts its values, goals, and spiritual beliefs. In the space of the sanctuary there are two other spatial dimension that reflect this relationship. Moreover, they can be seen as operative in creating a heightened experience for the practitioners who attend COL. The first, altars, are scattered throughout the sanctuary. The second, wall art, is more deeply and more explicitly tied to the goals of the congregation and the intentions that they have decided upon. Altars, through their presence and purposes within COLs, reflect religious multiplicity while simultaneously rigidifying the religiosity of the space. Wall art, similarly, is a community building symbol. It connects the congregation to folk art from the city, it exhibits art made by congregation members, and it allows for monthly art opening parties while also creating an aesthetic within the sanctuary. It brings color and beauty into our space as we gather for Sunday COLs. Both the altars and the wall art help to construct a space of auspiciousness through which the community becomes a heightened spiritual gathering, a congregation. And yet here too we can see some cracks of resistance, some individualized interpretations of each.

Altars

The first altar I noticed at First E was the altar on the kitchen window. I recognized it as an altar because of the man's portrait that sat prominently at the front, decorated by feather stuck into the frame and a nametag that read Nathanial Jones. I asked Patton about this one morning and he replied, "Oh that's our friend Nathaniel. We like to keep him up here to remember and maybe look at when we pass through the kitchen to grab something." Nathaniel was a member who had passed in the 2000s and his picture remained on the sink altar. Along with his picture is a large aloe plant, a few oddly shaped candles, a box of matches, and a wooden box towards the back of the sill. Fake roses also rested near the photo. This altar is rarely interacted with. Only

occasionally does one light a candle that rests near Nathanial's photo. Some weeks, however,

Kitty—or a person who Kitty has captured as her helper—will water the aloe plant.

The second altar I found was on the morning of our *Dia de Los Muertos* service. On this morning, our service was heavy with remembrance of passed loved ones, and passed congregation members. At the front of the sanctuary, just below the stage, was a table altar filled with the images, ashes, and names of the remembered. Nathaniel's picture was removed from his place on the kitchen window altar, and sat beside an old *Atlanta Journal Constitution* obituary for Rev. Lanier Clance. Also on the altar was the ashes of Kathy's cat, an invitation to a passed congregation member's funeral service, and a pair of veteran's tags. This altar was much more intentionally built as an altar. It mirrored those *Dia de Los Muertos* altars of the traditional Mexican holiday. This altar, and the belief of remembrance and communication with our dead loved ones became the intention of the service. As such, this altar falls directly into our conversation of religious multiplicity and fluidity

And the third altar can lead us into our discussion of the wall art. On a Friday evening in the winter, I drive alone to Candler Park for the art opening of Christy Buchanan's folk art. These evening events are parties. A bar is opened in the kitchen, a table is positioned in the center of the sanctuary with light snacks, people form within the congregation and without gather and talk and look at art, and live music is played near the stage. On this particular Friday, the musician for the evening was Paula Larke, a well know Atlanta singer, songwriter, and activist. Paula often serves as the musician for our Sunday COLs and we had met a few times before. After admiring all of the art that covered the walls, and talking with friends, I sat in the green chairs at the center of the sanctuary to listen to Paula. She sat on the steps that stood at the front of the stage with her guitar on her knee and her drums scattered around her. Behind her on the stage was a framed photograph and a candle burning. At a convenient time, I said "Paula, who are you burning that candle for?"

She replied, "This is my sister who passed on the ninth. She was my champion. Whenever I couldn't follow the rules, she would push me through; she pushed through. So, I dedicate this to her. I dropped out in the ninth grade and she pushed through," and she chuckled. This is one of the many personal altars that can take shape and dissolve in the sanctuary. Just as people light candles during our Silent Mediation as a means of remembering or worshipping, so too do people find space and freedom to build altars in this sanctuary. Even at an event like this, which had no explicit spiritual or religious underpinnings, other than its location, Paula found it an appropriate space to build her altar.

Altars in the First E sanctuary reveal something about individual agency and the multiplicity of religious beliefs that make up the congregational body. In the case of Nathaniel's altar, it is clear that not every person who passes through the kitchen knew him, nor do they interact meaningfully with this altar on the windowsill. Nevertheless, to the few who did know him and who do interact regularly with the altar, it is a space of remembrance and auspiciousness. In the second case, the altar was a congregational project, we all came together to add personal things to the collective table. I didn't know Kathy's cat, and Kathy did not know my grandfather. Yet both strangers were allowed to rest on the same table. In that way, the altar

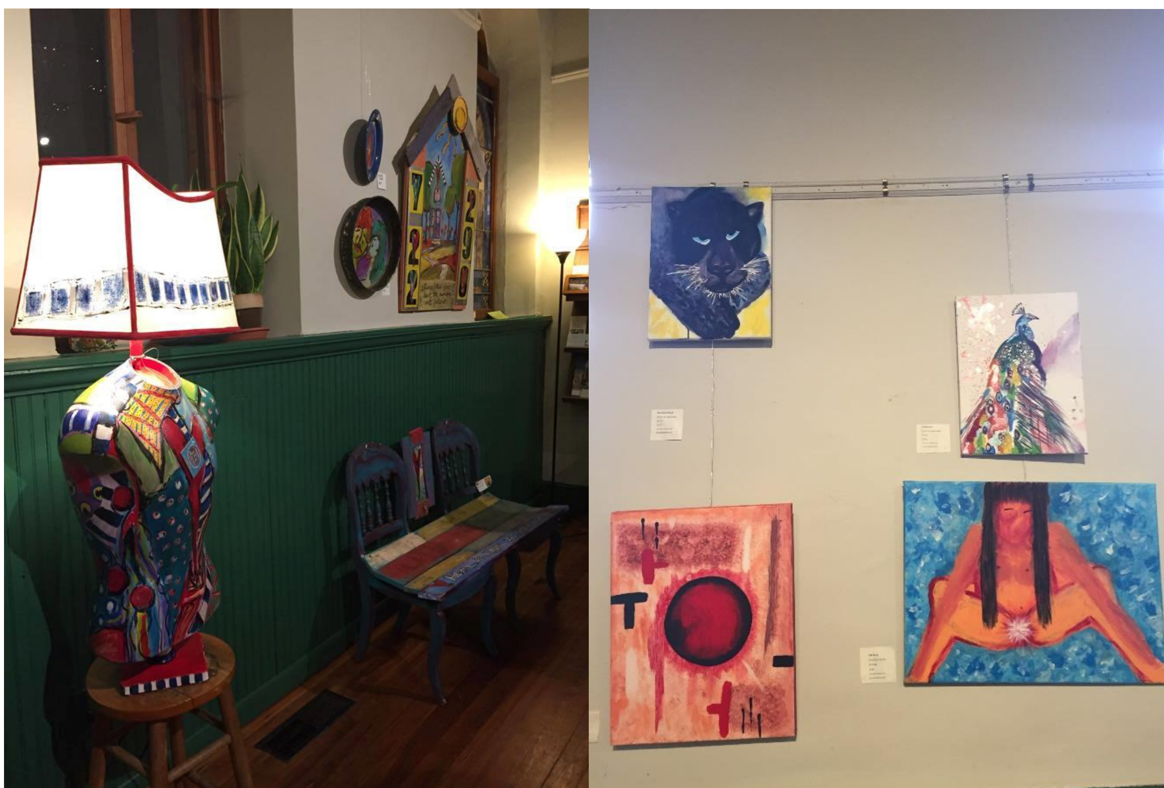
was a physical manifestation of the congregation, a whole made of particulars. Moreover, the use of a *Dia de los Muertos* altar reveals melting of religious boundaries that happens here. Surely few members were raised in a family that celebrated this Mexican holiday, borne of both catholic and indigenous religious traditions. The members of First E, however, have incorporated this practice into their system of belief. It matters little where the practice began. Here, again, can we see this politic of equality feminism that allows for religious multiplicity. And here again do we tow the line of appropriation in picking and choosing which religious ceremonies we practice. Lastly, Paula's altar is an example of the extremely individualized altars that can take form in the sanctuary space. In Kay Turner's, *Beauiful Necessities: the Art and Meaning of Women's Altars,* she understands altars, the materials that go into their construction, and the act of construction itself as a form of language. They are spaces of transformative language that have real effects in the lives of women, and they impart upon these women creative powers (1999, 38-39). Altars are a means of communicating, through space, what we care about and what we believe in, and how we practice. These altars that have been created at the Old Stone Church show the presence of endless creativity and endless individual agency that makes up the spatial dimension the congregation.

Art and Aesthetics

That night of the art opening, on which Paula sang, however, was more importantly about renewing our sanctuary's "clothing" as Nancy, Patton's mother, once put it. The walls of the sanctuary have never once been bare in my year of attendance. Monthly, the sanctuary holds art openings like the one described above to commemorate new artists as they take their place on the walls for a bit. First, the art is often political, if not in explicit images, then in theme or in

motivation. In my first month of attending Sunday COLs, the art on the wall depicted Latino children behind barbed wire fences, and at my most recent visit to the sanctuary, the art upheld, thematically a kind of divine femininity, with images of vulvae entitled "GOD" and other images of the sort. The art is a representation of the collective politics and beliefs of the congregation. It is an outward presentation of what the congregation stands for. From this understanding, the art on the wall serves the purpose of social cohesion, it is a unified message that the congregation project unto itself and unto the outsiders that may enter the space. Secondly, the art is purposeful in that it creates a mood, an atmosphere, of heightened significance. On Founders Day—a very significant Sunday COL at First E, when the founding members who have since strayed from regular attendance come back for a large celebration—Patton announced, "Lanier always wanted the sanctuary to be filled with art and beautiful things, and I believe we have maintained that goal for him." It is with the intention of creating a sacred space, an auspicious space, that art is kept throughout the sanctuary. Plants, too, like the aloe plant on Nathaniel's altar, line the windowsills of the sanctuary, and colored light streams in through the stained glass windows. The sanctuary is a visually pleasing experience. Therefore, even though our COL might be a discussion of climate change, and our words on a particular Sunday may be highly political and very much so mundane, or even profane of content, we discuss these things in an auspicious place. It is my understanding that the construction of a heightened sensory experience through art and color contributes to the spirituality of the congregation. Without any sense of divinity, and

not much sense of cosmology or religiosity, this congregation still identifies as a spiritual congregation. This, I believe, is in part due to the constructedness of the sanctuary's aesthetic.



Architectonics, as anthropologist James Fernandez defines it, refers to the "feeling tones that activity in various constructed spaces evokes and that makes them places. Sacred places," he claims, "have an additional quality—an additional evocativeness that is symbolic in nature" (2003, 187). In the Sacred quality places, there is both a convergence and emergence of qualities. …emergent qualities are always complex feeling states in the pronoun brought about by various kinds of synesthesia the systematic bringing together, in ritual experience for example, of various qualities" (2003, 189). Fernandez' theory looks more specifically at three Zulu symbols as architectonic themselves. However, I believe the same theory can be used here to understand the aesthetic experience of First E. The symbolic inundation that happens when one enters the sanctuary, the overwhelming visual experience, creates a symbolic experience and allows for emergent qualities to take hold in the congregational experience. Like Beth Yorke's moving piano piece recounted at the opening of this thesis, or the emotion that arises from lighting a candle during Silent Meditation, or the joyful noise of singing in communion with loved ones and friends, or the warm coffee and sweet breakfast treats each Sunday morning, the art on the walls furthers the sensory experience. It serves as the visual symbol of auspiciousness, and it inscribes this auspiciousness into the very woodwork of our building.

Conclusion

Kitty once said,

> "This is a place to dance, and hug people, and listen to good music, and see my friends, and water the plants, and sometimes we talk about politics, but you know that's not really my thing. My thing is sitting back there in my chair and seeing you and writing my cards and drinking the coffee, too."

And for others it is deeply about politics, it is maybe not about the coffee and more about eating the muffins, it is about standing together and singing and beating our tambourines, it is about lighting candles, learning from our speakers, sharing about our personal lives, making friends, meeting old acquaintances, laughing, mourning, laughing more. If I were to follow this project on a more purposefully individual level, looking into the particular experiences of every member, new and old, my finished work would show this. It would show that no two experiences are identical, and most experiences are vastly different. What ties us together, though, are the things we do, the things we say and celebrate, and the space we inhabit. The congregation is dependent upon an ever changing context, an ever changing ambivalence and an ever changing human community. The ritual each week is contextual. Sorrows and Joys depends on who is in attendance, what has happened in the personal lives of each member, and what the emotional response creates each time. The Silent Meditation is never the same. Movement and sound and the duration are always shifting. Even our Spoken Word each week is never predictable. One week we speak about Mas Incarceration and then next we discuss the beaver habitats in the Candler Park river. The feminism we uphold, too, is continually shifting. In recent years, following her reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, a framed photo of Malala Yousafzai was hung by the entryway. Malala became a new icon of feminism for the congregation. There is

a constant movement of the ideology and value system that adapts with our changing political and social environment. Lastly, this change is evident in our building, too. It is frequently reshaped and redecorated to reflect our changing community. Thus, through its inherently tension-filled, change-propelled, and context-based existence, First E is a vernacular religious community. Again, vernacular religion is defined as that which is "shaped and voiced by individuals in specific context and in different relationships, individuals who change overtime in social, economic, and political contexts that also shift" (Flueckiger 2006, 2). This, I have attempted to show, is accurately descriptive of my experience of First E. Let this congregation be added to a growing understanding of religion as a necessarily particularistic phenomena, one that cannot exist beyond its practitioners. Let it also be added to a movement of redefining religion and questioning what that term means. Let it lastly be added to the human record, those webs of significance that Weber illustrates, those vastly diverse ways that humans create meaning for themselves.

Forward Thinking

On October 8th of this year I was invited to an Action Committee meeting at the home of Patton. In attendance was Robert, a founding member from the basement discussion group, a frequent service musician, and a recurring service speaker, Jeanie, Marsha Mitchiner, and current board president, Susan Rawlston. Needless to say, I was grateful for the invitation. The Action Committee was formed for the sole purpose of "looking forward" and addressing issues of membership, longevity, generational growth. Before I had arrived, the group had discussed a line-up of Sunday speakers, a to-do list of sorts for maintenance of the Old Stone Church, and other business that was concerned with the near future. However, my role in attendance was looking further into trajectory of First E. I was introduced by Patton as the Official Social Media

Administrator. I had been approached by Susan earlier in the Summer and asked if I would contribute some of the “photos I was always taking” to the newsletter and Facebook account. Eventually, I began to run the social media accounts as a means of repaying the congregation for my fieldwork. We discussed in this meeting how I could use social media to tell three stories: the events we were hosting (including advertising for Sunday Celebrations of Life), the political movements and social justice work that we support, and publishing ideas or artwork that support an existentialist view of the world (what Patton called, “A World we Dream About”). My purpose in this role would be to reach those younger people, who use social media more regularly, and attract them to the congregation.

This meeting, my subsequent position, and other conversations I’ve had with members about “bringing my friends” all index a larger anxiety about the future congregational body and the aging of the current members. I understand this stagnation as a function of a continual tension between institutional religion and individual agency. As I have said numerous times in this thesis, a tension exists. There is a tension between community and congregation; there is a tension between First E as a gathering of friends and First E as an institution which exists beyond its current members, an institution with deeply planted roots, and unifying practices, and children to take over. This tension, as I have explored in this work, is evident in the things we do, in the discourse we maintain, and in the building in which we gather. The tension, or the paradox, is most basically between the many individual experiences here and the one congregational experience over time. Both, however, exist at once. The existentialism of First E, while it does not privilege the writings of such existential philosophers as Sartre or de Beauvoir (I may have only heard these names once in my many months of attendance), relies upon the aphorism “existence precedes essence” and it is stressed in the language of the services that the individual

is the primary meaning maker for one's life. Thus, the role of institutions in the philosophy of the congregation are, if not antagonistic or inhibiting to one's freedom, then moot. Nevertheless, it is evident that the individuals in charge of First E feel a need to protect and ensure the longevity of a collective identity that indeed transcends the individual. Both can be true and valued equally in this congregation under its mood of conversion and its state of fluidity. As we have seen in an analysis of ritual, discourse, and space, First E resides in multiplicity. It honors individual freedoms, it allows for cracks of resistance. The mood of fluidity and flux, then, which has been so instrumental in the scaffolding of First E and in allowing a for porous boundaries for the formation of a heterogenous congregation, is also what pulls against the expansion or institutionalization of the congregation. Because most attendees are rooted in individualistic understandings of their participation in the larger congregation, it is lacking in a collective movement to grow, to deepen roots, and to find younger generations to entrust power to.

As I write this conclusion, I am sitting in quarantine in Roswell, Georgia after having been evicted from my Emory apartment due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The First Existentialist Congregation has cancelled all Celebrations of Life indefinitely. As much of the congregation is over 70 years of age, I fear for their safety and health from afar. It is times like these, however, that the institutional First E is tested. And, while I still believe there lacks a movement to rigidify the institutional side of things, intentionally or otherwise, First E has prevailed. Patton immediately moved to Facebook, and Robert took to email, to spread word to our community that we would be moving to Facebook to gather on Sundays. Now, each Sunday, Patton or some other leader in our congregation takes to their computer's video cameras to speak to our online congregation. The ritual and the space and much of the discourse has fallen now into the laps of each individual. From their quarantines they can pick to meditate, to sing, to light candles, to

build altars, to hang art. Only the spoken word remains as a unifying force, as well as our Facebook conversation that follows each video in the comments section. The First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta is adaptable. Its fluidity is in its very foundation—a radical acceptance of all people, all belief systems, all political leanings, all upbringings. In its fluidity, and in its valuation of each individual experience, it is difficult to see its long lasting status as an institution. However, I wonder now if that is my own bias. My own education in religious studies was through institutionalized religions, those with money and power and dogma and text. They were separated and defined and taught as introductory courses. These religions—the vernacular religions, imbued with creativity and ambiguity—never counted as religion until I was already deep into the higher level courses. However, as I have argued here, these kinds of spiritual communities are worthy of study and analysis and academic interest at a very introductory level. They count very much so. Maybe it is in their adaptability, as I have seen these past weeks, that they may last for future generations. Maybe they last through their ability to change.

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