
Africana Borderlands: Ways of Knowing

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This essay examines the Black church in New Mexico's borderlands as an essential yet largely unacknowledged site where the Africana ways of knowing are lived, carried, and enacted through practices of preaching, ritual, and communal pedagogy. Regional narratives of "tricultural harmony" have denied analytic space for Black presence, producing conditions of structural erasure that often remain unnamed. Centering Black ecclesial life in this context does more than correct an omission; it reframes how knowledge takes shape where geography itself withholds recognition. Drawing on Africana studies, Black liberation theology, and decolonial spatial thought, the essay theorizes "Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing" as an orientation grounded in faith, memory, and place under conditions of marginality. Read in this way, New Mexico's borderlands do not emerge as peripheral to Black diasporic life but as a terrain where Africana presence unsettles dominant borderlands narratives and reorients how knowledge is sustained amid erasure.

KEYWORDS: Africana Borderlands; Black church; Knowledge practices; New Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

This essay begins with tension rather than a settled claim. The Black church is widely recognized as a vital ethical and intellectual institution in African-descended communities, yet it remains largely absent from dominant narratives of New Mexico history. The region is often described through what Chris Wilson calls "tri-cultural harmony," a narrative that privileges White, Hispanic, and Indigenous culture, while leaving little analytical space

for Black presence.¹ As Katherine McKittrick names it, this disappearance is produced through *demonic grounds*, geographies that actively organize Black existence as spatially illegible, out of place, and excluded from the region's dominant ways of knowing.²

McKittrick's framework insists that Black geographic displacement is not a neutral consequence of settlement patterns, but a condition engineered through the very categories by which space is named, claimed, and made legible. In New Mexico, the tri-cultural harmony narrative performs exactly this work. It does not simply omit Black presence. It organizes regional geography in ways that make Black presence difficult to locate, document, or sustain. Harmony, as it is commonly invoked, depends on this omission. I argue that the Black church in the New Mexico borderlands refuses that omission, functioning not only as a site of worship but as a site of Africana knowledge production, where preaching, ritual, and communal pedagogy forge ways of knowing under conditions of spatial and historical denial.

I write from within this tension as an Africana pastor-scholar living and working in the United States-Mexico borderlands. Here, the Black church serves as a site of learning and ethical formation, functioning as a living text that teaches through practice rather than formal instruction. In a region where the myth of tri-cultural harmony and border geopolitics has long erased African presence from public memory, the fact that the church must do this work at all, insisting on its own presence within landscapes that render it invisible, is precisely what makes it an epistemological site rather than only a religious one.

This argument takes shape within the intellectual terrain of Africana Studies, Black liberation theology, and decolonial spatial analysis. Africana Studies frames knowledge as a world-making practice forged through struggle, refusing the separation of knowledge from the historical and material conditions under which it is lived, while Black theology grounds that

¹ William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *The Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David R. Maciel, eds., *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2000); Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 8.

² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

practice in ethical accountability to Black life under constraint.³ Decolonial approaches to space clarify that geography does not operate as context but as a structuring condition that shapes what can be known, remembered, and recognized. Within this convergence, *Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing* names a mode of knowledge production accountable to place, history, and communal practice that clarifies how Black ecclesial life generates meaning where dominant narratives deny its presence.

BLACK THEOLOGY, LIBERATION, AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION

Black liberation theology commands a critical ethical grammar for understanding how knowledge is produced under conditions of racial domination. Emerging from concrete struggles against anti-Black violence and exclusion, Black theology insists that theological reflection remain accountable to lived experience.⁴ In this tradition, knowledge is neither neutral nor abstract but bound to the moral demand of liberation. I come to this tradition not only as a scholar but as a pastor working in a region where that demand for accountability has no institutional infrastructure to rest on.

Before the systematic theologies of the twentieth century, Black theological reflection was already being forged under the most extreme conditions of constraint. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, understood that a Black institution of worship was inseparable from a Black claim to dignity, self-determination, and interpretive authority over one's own condition beyond the limits of white ecclesial control.⁵ Henry Highland Garnet, preaching and writing in the shadow of enslavement, insisted that accountability to God required accountability to the suffering of Black people, and that silence in the face of that suffering was itself a

³ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (African American Images, 2003); Lewis R. Gordon, *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2021); Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁴ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (Orbis Books, 2010); Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Scholars Press, 1988); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Orbis Books, 1999); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1999).

⁵ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Philadelphia, 1833), 6–9, National Humanities Center, excerpted text.

theological failure.⁶ What Garnet and Allen share, and what connects them to the argument I am making here, is the conviction that theology produced at a distance from Black suffering has already compromised itself. Cone inherits this insistence. So does the Black church in this region.

James Cone's work grounds this ethical orientation by locating God's self-disclosure in the historical suffering of Black people. For Cone, theology is inseparable from the struggle for freedom, and claims about God must be tested by their ability to confront injustice.⁷ What I find most generative in Cone is not the systematic argument but the insistence that theology that cannot account for Black suffering in a specific place has already failed its most basic test. In the borderlands, where Black presence is often erased from regional memory, Cone's insistence on accountability clarifies why theological knowledge must emerge from situated struggle.

Womanist theologians extend this ethical demand by foregrounding how race, gender, and sexuality shape the Christian theological imagination. Kelly Brown Douglas shows how theological narratives reproduce exclusion when they fail to reckon with embodied difference.⁸ This expansion of Black theology complicates the liberation project by refusing to offer a singular account of Black experience. This is not a complication I hold at arm's length. It is one that shapes how I read both the church and the region I am writing from. Ethical knowledge, in this frame, emerges through sustained engagement with intersecting forms of vulnerability and power.⁹

What Cone, Douglas, and the womanist tradition share, and what I find irreplaceable for this project, is a refusal to let theology settle before the suffering has been named. Liberation is not imagined as a completed task but as an ongoing ethical charge. Theology, therefore, becomes a practice of discernment shaped by historical memory, communal responsibility, and refusal of closure. This focus aligns with the conditions of the borderlands, where Black communities negotiate belonging within landscapes marked by prolonged displacement and denial.

⁶ Henry Highland Garnet, *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1843), 1–2 (on the silence of the church) and 2–3 (on moral duty and resistance).

⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

⁸ Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.

⁹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010); Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress Press, 2010).

Within this borderland, Black theology's emphasis on ethical accountability acquires a spatial dimension. Questions of liberation are inseparable from questions of land, movement, and recognition. The moral imagination cultivated by Black theology thus prepares the ground for understanding how space itself conditions what can be known, remembered, and practiced. This is the intersection I am theorizing from. Not ethics alone, not geography alone, but the pressure they place on each other in a region where Black communities have had to build knowledge out of what remains after erasure.

BORDERLANDS, DECOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES, AND THE SPATIAL PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

I am not bringing borderlands theory to New Mexico from the outside. I live and pastor in this terrain, which means the scholarship I draw on here also describes the conditions I navigate weekly. Rather than treating space as a neutral backdrop, this body of scholarship insists that land, movement, and boundary-making actively shape social life.¹⁰ Knowledge emerges unevenly across these terrains, often amid displacement, surveillance, and control. For Black communities in the US-Mexico borderlands, spatial marginalization is not incidental but structured—what can be remembered, claimed, and sustained.

Black communities did not arrive in this region by accident. Their presence is the product of specific and overlapping migratory histories shaped by both constraint and aspiration.¹¹ Buffalo Soldiers, assigned to frontier posts across the territory in the decades following the Civil War, brought Black military presence into the region under conditions that combined service with surveillance and sacrifice with exclusion.¹² The Exoduster movement

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2012); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000); McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007).

¹¹ Timothy R. Nelson, *Blackdom, New Mexico: The Significance of the Afro-Frontier, 1900-1930* (University of Illinois Press, 2023).

¹² Monroe Lee Billington, *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900* (University Press of Colorado, 1991); see also C. E. Becknell, Jr., "Reimagining the Southwest Borderlands: Black Sovereignty and Endurance in New Mexico," in *The Discipline and the African World 2025 Report: An Annual Report on the State of Affairs for Africana Communities* (National Council of Black Studies, 2025), 125-126.

of the late nineteenth century carried Black families westward in search of land and self-determination beyond the terror of the post-Reconstruction South.¹³ Wartime migration in the twentieth century drew Black workers and their families to military installations and defense industries across the Southwest, including in New Mexico, where economic opportunity and the promise of distance from Jim Crow converged, however unevenly.¹⁴ These are not separate stories. They are waves of a sustained Black effort to find ground that would hold. That the tri-cultural harmony narrative has absorbed none of this into mainstream regional history is not an oversight. It is a structural condition, and it is precisely what makes the Black church's knowledge work both necessary and largely invisible to the dominant regional account.

The borderlands have been theorized as sites of hybridity, conflict, and cultural negotiation, most prominently in Chicana feminist thought. Gloria Anzaldúa's work identifies the border as a space of rupture and creativity, where identity and meaning are forged through contradiction and struggle.¹⁵ Yet dominant borderlands narratives often center Indigenous-settler and White-Latinx relations, rendering Black presence peripheral or invisible.¹⁶ This omission is not merely demographic but epistemological, limiting which histories and forms of knowledge are recognized as belonging within regional accounts of place. I want to press that word epistemological, because what is at stake is not representation but the terms by which Black presence in this region is allowed to count as knowledge at all.

Decolonial theorists extend this critique by foregrounding how space is produced through colonial power rather than inherited as neutral ground. Walter Dignolo's account of coloniality explains that borders operate as epistemic as well as territorial regimes, organizing not only movement but also the authority to know and name. This means that the border is not only a line that restricts physical movement, but also a mechanism that determines whose knowledge counts as knowledge at all. For Black communities in the

¹³ Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

¹⁴ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (Norton, 1999).

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

¹⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

New Mexico borderlands, this epistemic dimension of the border operates alongside the territorial one. Black ways of knowing are not overlooked in dominant regional accounts because they are absent. They fail to appear because the region's epistemic architecture was not built to accommodate them.¹⁷ Mignolo helps me see that the border I cross to reach my congregation is not only a territorial line, but a regime that determines whose knowledge arrives with authority and whose does not.

Attention to power further sharpens this analysis. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on racial capitalism underscores that space is actively produced through state violence, economic abandonment, and carceral expansion.¹⁸ In these borderlands, these dynamics converge with the myth of tri-cultural harmony, positioning Black presence as uncommon and perpetually out of place. Given these converging pressures, I argue that the Black church operates not merely as an institution located in space but as a spatial practice that contests the terms by which belonging is organized and denied.

For Black communities in New Mexico, the physical presence of the Black church is an act of knowing and claiming place. Gathering, worship, and ritual assert belonging where absence has been presumed, reconfiguring space through collective memory and embodied practice. Space is not merely inhabited but interpreted and reshaped in relation to historical erasure and ongoing struggle. In the congregations I know, this interpretation happens in real time. A Sunday sermon that names the land, names the absence, names who is not in the room, is already a spatial act. Through this work, spatial practice becomes a site of knowledge formation, generating ways of knowing grounded in place without reducing place to a static identity.

The Black church does not choose between these conditions. It works within them, and that working is where knowledge gets made. The ethical and educational work of the Black church unfolds in contested landscapes, shaping the forms of knowledge that emerge, and the practices through which they are sustained.

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Knowledge Diversity* (Ohio University Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

TOWARD AN AFRICANA PEDAGOGY OF LOCATION

Pedagogy within Africana intellectual traditions has long emphasized that learning is inseparable from the conditions of people's lives and struggles.¹⁹ This is not an abstract principle for me. I teach in a university where Black students regularly encounter curricula that were not built with their presence in mind, and I pastor a congregation that has been doing its own pedagogical work long before I arrived. Knowledge is not produced in abstraction but emerges through situated encounters with history, place, and power.²⁰ For communities navigating racial marginalization, pedagogy serves as a practice of survival as much as instruction.

Paulo Freire's account of critical pedagogy provides an essential foundation for this orientation.²¹ Freire insists that education must be rooted in learners lived realities and cultivate critical consciousness through dialogue rather than transmission. In this frame, knowledge is produced collaboratively through reflection on the concrete conditions of oppression. Freire's silence on the borderlands is instructive. Praxis without geography remains an abstraction, and these borderlands demand more specificity than his framework alone can provide.

bell hooks extends this pedagogical vision by foregrounding embodiment, affect, and community in the learning process.²² For hooks, teaching is a practice of freedom grounded in mutual recognition and shared vulnerability. Her work underscores that pedagogy is not only cognitive but also relational, shaped by who is present and whose experiences are acknowledged. I want to be careful here. hooks is not simply applicable to the borderlands. Her insistence on mutual recognition and shared vulnerability asks something of pedagogical spaces that many institutions in this region are not yet willing to give.

In these borderlands, location itself becomes a condition shaping how knowledge is formed and carried out. The histories of conquest, migration,

¹⁹ See, for example, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (Continuum, 2000); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994); Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

²⁰ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

²¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

²² hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

and racial ordering that shape the region structure what can be taught and learned. Black students and congregants encounter educational spaces that often presume their absence or treat their presence as uncommon. I sat with students who did not know there was a Black church in this region. That absence of knowledge is not accidental. It is produced.

The Black church serves as a primary site for practicing this pedagogy. Through sermons, Bible study, testimony, and communal reflection, congregants learn to interpret their lives within broader narratives of struggle and faith. Teaching here unfolds through repetition, interruption, and shared discernment rather than through a formal curriculum alone. When I preach, I teach. When the congregation responds, they are teaching back. The curriculum is the encounter itself, and it cannot be standardized without destroying what makes it work.

This pedagogy does not aim at mastery or finality. It forms participants to navigate uncertainty, contradiction, and unfinished histories. Learning is concerned with ethical formation rather than credentialing. What I am calling an Africana pedagogy of location is not a new theory. It is a name for what Black communities in this borderland have already been practicing, often without institutional recognition or scholarly attention.

THE BLACK CHURCH AS AFRICANA PRACTICE

The Black church functions as a complex practice that sustains ethical formation, collective memory, and interpretive labor. Within this tradition, knowledge is not housed solely in doctrine or text but emerges through repeated acts of gathering, testimony, and discernment. Thus, the Black church does not appear as a static institution but as a living practice shaped by historical struggle and communal need. The congregation I serve does not theorize itself into existence. It gathers because gathering is necessary, and that necessity is a form of knowledge.

Africana Studies has consistently emphasized practice as a mode of world-making forged in dispossessions. From maroon communities to freedom movements, Africana life has produced knowledge through improvisation, ritual, and collective care. The Black church participates in this lineage by cultivating spaces where Black communities interpret their lives in relation to history, faith, and power. Its practices carry forward traditions of survival

that reject the separation of the spiritual from the intellectual. I find this lineage generative precisely because it refuses the terms that would make the Black church only a religious institution and therefore easier to dismiss as a site of knowledge production.

Preaching carries a particular weight in this knowledge work. Sermons do not simply transmit theological claims. They interpret contemporary conditions through scriptural imagination and historical memory, which means the preacher is always also an analyst, reading the world the congregation lives in and naming what dominant narratives will not. Call-and-response, testimony, and song create dialogic spaces where meaning is collectively negotiated rather than imposed. Knowledge here is generated through participation, repetition, and shared judgment, binding ethical reflection to lived experience.

Sound and rhythm are central to this process. Musical practices, vocal affirmations, and embodied movement transmit memory across generations, carrying histories beyond written archives.²³ These practices function as pedagogical forms, teaching participants to inhabit faith, history, and place through the body. I would not say this embodied knowledge is always coherent. Under conditions of erasure, it is sometimes fragmented, sometimes contested across generations. What it preserves is not coherence but the thread. Enough continuity to keep interpretation alive.

In these borderlands, Black church practices take on added significance. Regional narratives of tri-cultural harmony render Black life invisible, leaving the church without a clear place in public memory. Within these specific conditions, ecclesial practice becomes an act of spatial and historical assertion. Coming together itself becomes a claim to presence. I have watched this happen in rooms where Black families drove distances that should not have been necessary just to worship among people who recognized them. Its forms of learning are shaped by denial and improvisation rather than abundance and stability alone. Theology, pedagogy, and politics intersect here without settling into neat alignment, producing knowledge that remains responsive to changing conditions. “Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing” does not begin in the library. It begins in the gathering. The library is where I bring what the gathering already knows.

²³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

SPATIAL THEOLOGIES: PREACHING AND RITUAL

Black theology has long insisted that claims about God arise from concrete historical conditions rather than abstract reflection.²⁴ In the borderlands, this insistence takes on a spatial dimension. Theology is shaped not only by suffering and resistance but also by land, movement, and the politics of presence. Preaching and ritual thus become sites where space is interpreted theologically, making geography an active condition of meaning rather than a neutral backdrop. I preach in these borderlands. That location is not incidental to the theology I produce. It is the condition under which every claim I make about God gets tested.

Preaching in the Black church serves as a form of spatial interpretation. Sermons do not simply expound scripture but situate biblical narratives within the lived geographies of congregants. References to migration, exclusion, labor, and survival anchor theological reflection in place-specific experience. In my own preaching, naming the tension between belonging and displacement is not a rhetorical choice. It is a theological necessity. The landscape demands it.

Ritual practices extend this interpretive work by materially shaping space. Prayer, song, and communal response transform ordinary places into sacred encounters. These practices do not escape geography but reconfigure it, creating moments of presence in environments that otherwise deny recognition of Black life. Sacred space, in this sense, is not inherited but enacted through collective practice.²⁵ I have seen a small congregation turn a borrowed fellowship hall into a sanctuary not through architecture but through sound, through the way a room changes when people who have been invisible to each other all week finally recognize one another.

The body is the primary instrument of this theological work. Musical forms, vocal affirmation, and embodied movement convey theological meaning that transcends propositional language. These practices transmit memory and doctrine through the body, sustaining forms of knowing that are affective, communal, and resistant to abstraction. This is not to say that embodied

²⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*; Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*; Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁵ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

theology preserves everything. What gets lost across generations in the absence of archives is real and irreversible. What survives does so because communities choose, repeatedly and often without recognition, to keep passing it on.

In the borderlands, ritual unfolds amid spatial constraints. Congregations gather in landscapes shaped by racialized exclusion and uneven recognition. Ritual practice becomes a means of asserting presence without permanence. These practices do not resolve spatial marginalization. They make it possible to remain within it without being destroyed by it. That is not the same thing as dignity granted. It is dignity insisted upon under duress.

Knowledge of God, self, and community is created through engagement with place rather than abstraction from it. Theology remains provisional and responsive, shaped by movement, memory, and collective discernment. In these borderlands, that provisionality is not a theological weakness. It is the honest acknowledgment of what it means to theologize from a position of contested presence. What I am arguing is that theology done in this borderland cannot be settled; the ground itself unsettles it, and that unsettling is not a problem to be solved. It is the condition under which honest theological knowledge gets made.

LIBERATORY PEDAGOGIES: FROM PULPIT TO CLASSROOM

Liberatory pedagogy within Africana traditions has never been confined to formal educational institutions.²⁶ Teaching and learning have circulated through churches, schools, community spaces, and movement contexts, shaped by necessity rather than credentialing. The Black church has long served as a pedagogical site where ethical judgment, historical interpretation, and collective reasoning are cultivated.²⁷ I am one of those people. What I do in a university classroom on Monday carries the form, the rhythm, and the ethical demand of what happened in a sanctuary on Sunday. That is not a metaphor. It is how I was trained.

²⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.

²⁷ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Duke University Press, 1990).

Dialogical practices embedded in Black ecclesial life anticipate principles articulated later in critical pedagogy.²⁸ I want to be direct about what this means. Freire's account of dialogue and praxis is generative, but the Black church did not need him to know that dialogue produces knowledge. It was practicing that conviction generations before critical pedagogy named it. Call-and-response, testimony, and communal interpretation create learning environments grounded in participation rather than transmission. Knowledge is produced relationally, emerging through shared inquiry rather than individual mastery.

The movement from pulpit to classroom is carried by individuals who occupy overlapping pedagogical roles. Teaching becomes a practice oriented toward formation rather than mere information, attentive to the moral and historical dimensions of learning. For me, that boundary has never been stable. I do not experience ministry and education as separate vocations that happen to overlap. I experience them as one practice with two institutional addresses. Educational work shaped by the Black church often unfolds in institutions that do not fully sanction its aims. Jarvis Givens's account of fugitive pedagogy names this condition, describing how liberatory knowledge is cultivated in spaces structured by surveillance and constraint.²⁹

In classrooms, such pedagogy appears in curricular choices, interpretive framing, and relational practices that exceed institutional norms. These forms of teaching do not reject institutions outright but work within and against them. I recognize this condition from the inside. Teaching Black intellectual traditions in an institution not designed for that work requires a similar negotiation. You work within the structure because you must, and you work against it because you cannot do otherwise.

Pedagogy formed in ecclesial contexts treats community as the curriculum.³⁰ Choirs, congregations, and intergenerational gatherings serve as sites of instruction, transmitting knowledge through repetition, memory, and embodied practice. Learning unfolds through participation in shared life rather than through standardized assessment alone. These pedagogical forms sustain intellectual continuity, even when formal educational pathways have

²⁸ Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Abingdon Press, 1990).

²⁹ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.

³⁰ Joyce E. King and Ellen E. Swartz, *Heritage Knowledge in the Curriculum: Retrieving an African Episteme* (Routledge, 2018).

been restricted or denied. I think of the mothers in Black congregations who have been doing heritage education for decades without a curriculum guide, without institutional support, and without the title of educator.³¹ The question is whether the academy is willing to recognize it as such.

As pedagogical practices move from pulpit to classroom, they extend rather than translate ecclesial forms of knowing. Knowledge remains grounded in place, memory, and relational accountability, even as it enters new institutional settings. What moves from pulpit to classroom is not a method. It is a way of being accountable to people whose knowledge has been systematically undervalued. That accountability is what I am calling liberatory pedagogy, and it does not stay in either building.³²

TOWARD AN AFRICANA BORDERLANDS WAYS OF KNOWING

Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing is a name for something already happening in Black ecclesial life in this region. It is not proposed as a closed system or universal framework but as a situated mode of knowing whose intelligibility depends on proximity to specific histories, geographies, and communal practices.³³ In these borderlands, where Black presence has been persistently minimized or erased, ways of knowing emerge less as abstractions than as necessities. Knowledge takes form because interpretation is required for survival, dignity, and continuity. What follows names the internal logic of this orientation, not as a taxonomy, but as a set of interrelated practices through which knowing is sustained under conditions of erasure.

“Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing” is structured by three interrelated practices: remembrance, re-location, and relationality.³⁴ These practices do not function as stages or discrete domains but as overlapping modes through which knowledge is generated, tested, and carried within Black ecclesial life. What I want to resist is the temptation to make these three practices feel more systematic than they are. They overlap, interrupt each other, and

³¹ Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Broadleaf Books, 2023).

³² Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Beacon Press, 2019).

³³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

³⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

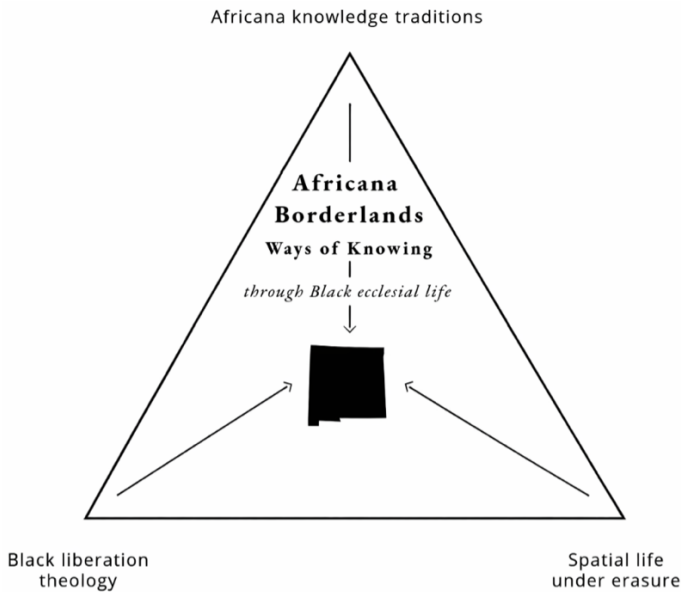


Figure 1. *Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing.* A triadic framework in which Africana knowledge traditions, Black liberation theology, and spatial life under erasure converge through Black ecclesial life as a mediating site. Figure created by the author.

they do not always move in the same direction. That is not a weakness of the framework. It is evidence that the framework is honest.

First, remembrance does not function as retrospection but as pedagogy. Within the Black church, remembrance takes shape through narrative, ritual, and embodied repetition, carrying histories that outlast institutional memory. This excess is significant. What the Black church carries in its preaching, its testimony, its song, and its communal naming of the dead is knowledge that formal archives have not only not preserved but have actively suppressed. Remembrance in this context is not sentiment. It is an epistemological practice that insists on the existence of what dominant institutions have tried to make disappear.³⁵ These practices transmit knowledge of endurance, faith, and struggle across generations. In contexts where Black history is fragmented or omitted from public memory, remembrance sustains interpretive continuity. In the churches I know, this happens through the naming of names: who

³⁵ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

founded this congregation; who kept it open when the building was failing; who drove through unfamiliar territory to be here. The naming is not nostalgia but rather archival work.

Second, re-location is the work of situating Black life within landscapes that have denied its presence. Through gathering, worship, and institutional persistence, the Black church redefines space as shaped by those on the margins. Sacred space does not emerge from permanence or recognition, but from collective practice. This is a more demanding claim than it may appear. Re-location does not mean finding a more welcoming geography but rather insists on your presence within a geography that was organized to exclude you. The Black church in this region does not re-locate to a more convenient location. It re-locates the meaning of the ground it already occupies, naming it sacred and inhabited by people whose histories the dominant narrative refuses to acknowledge. I use the hyphen in relocation deliberately. This is not about moving somewhere new. It is about repeatedly insisting that you were already here. That the land knows you even when the maps do not.

Third, relationality grounds these ways of knowing in shared struggle rather than abstraction. Knowledge is produced through collective discernment, care, and accountability within Black communities. These relationships are not framed as charitable outreach but as mutual engagement shaped by overlapping forms of dispossession. What makes this relational knowledge distinct is its accountability structure. Knowledge produced through relationality in this context is not validated by institutional credentialing or peer review. It is validated by whether it serves the community that produced it, whether it helps people navigate conditions of constraint with greater clarity, agency, and dignity. This is a different epistemological standard than the academy typically recognizes and naming it as such is part of what *Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing* is trying to do.³⁶

I want to be honest that relationality under these conditions is not always sustainable. It is sometimes depleting. What keeps it generative is not sentiment but shared accountability to something larger than any single member of the community.

Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing does not seek coherence through synthesis. It seeks fidelity to the conditions under which Black communities

³⁶ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being," 257-337.

in this region produce knowledge at all. I offer it not as a finished theory but as a working account of something still unfolding. The ecclesial life I am describing has not resolved its tensions. Neither should the framework that tries to name it.

IMPLICATIONS

I want to make a specific claim about what this argument asks of Africana Studies. Not a general observation about implications, but a direct challenge to frameworks that treat Africana knowledge traditions as portable across geographies without accounting for the conditions of their production. In regions where Black presence is rendered marginal or unusual, knowledge emerges through interpretive labor oriented toward survival and continuity. Examining these conditions clarifies how Africana knowledge traditions remain responsive to uneven geographies of power.

In theology and religious studies, this argument reframes the Black church as a site of epistemological production rather than solely a locus of moral formation or political mobilization. I am not interested in a theology that arrives after the gathering is over. What I am arguing for, and what my own practice as a pastor has taught me, is that the conditions under which Black communities gather, interpret, and endure are not background to theology. They are their source.

Educationally, *Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing* underscores the importance of pedagogy grounded in place, history, and relational accountability. I bring this into my own classroom, knowing that the institution I work within was not designed with this pedagogy in mind. That friction is not incidental. It is part of what pedagogy is teaching. Teaching shaped by Black ecclesial practice asks institutions to account for what they have presumed absent. Such pedagogy unsettles dominant educational norms that privilege neutrality and disembodiment.

In borderlands and decolonial scholarship, this framework calls for greater attention to Black presence in regional analyses often structured by other racial and colonial binaries.³⁷ Including Black ecclesial life complicates

³⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

prevailing accounts of hybridity and belonging by foregrounding histories of erasure and persistence. I am not asking borderlands for scholarship to begin again. I am asking it to account for what it has been leaving out. Black ecclesial life in this region is not a footnote to the existing literature. It is a condition the literature has not yet fully reckoned with.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this essay that the Black church in the New Mexico borderlands functions as a site of Africana knowledge production amid spatial erasure. That argument is not only scholarly—it is also personal, pastoral, and place-specific in ways I have tried not to disguise. *Africana Borderlands Ways of Knowing* names this process, clarifying how knowledge emerges through lived interpretation shaped by land, history, and struggle.

The ways of knowing described here do not resolve the tensions they inhabit. Black ecclesial life in the borderlands remains marked by displacement, fragility, and uneven recognition. Knowledge produced under these conditions is unavoidably partial. It does not arrive complete. It arrives as what was possible to carry forward, shaped by what was lost and what was not. This refusal of closure is not a weakness but a condition of commitment to lived experience.

The Black church remains a space where interpretation is necessary work, shaping ethical judgment and communal survival. What I know from this borderland is that knowing, believing, and surviving are not separate acts. They happen together, in the same room, among the same people, under conditions that were not designed for their flourishing. That is what this essay has tried to witness.

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