

CHURCH AND TOWER:
GRADUATE STUDENT NEGOTIATIONS OF
FAITH AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

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This project is a practice in telling a small part of a less common story: one about negotiating commitments to academic and church communities when the stories told across those communities don't always line up or are incomplete. Through the stories of my three participants as well as my own experiences, I will describe this in-between space and the individual negotiations we perform to explain those spaces to ourselves and to rest in them. In telling these stories from the in-between places, I use cultural rhetorics to permeate boundaries some scholars continue to hold between academic and community learning. Through the stories of participants and myself, I demonstrate that holding, challenging, and shifting community rhetorics is a complex process of critical thought and individual experience that carries religious rhetorics into the realm of belief and practice and beyond.

Using methodologies and mixed methods from cultural rhetorics, Indigenous rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, and grounded theory, I emphasize practices of relationality, listening, and storying to share stories from three participants who participated in an Evangelical church community, pseudonymized here as "Hope Church," while completing graduate studies. Through a thorough exploration of these stories as well as my own, this study finds that individual negotiations of academic and Evangelical communities come out of and create a rhetorical space of faith and learning that allows them to hold multiple knowledges in constellation while shifting narratives across spaces.

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CHAPTER 1: A STORY OF BEGINNINGS

This is a story about going to church. Please don't leave yet.

My lifelong involvement in Evangelical communities is important to me, but it's also caused a lot of internal conflict. This feeling came to a head several years ago when I was working on my master's degree in Literature. As is true for many students throughout their learning, studying in an advanced program caused me to encounter some questions that no one had asked me to answer before. This was exacerbated by the fact that I had graduated from a religious college and been part of a seminary community for the several years previous, meaning that I was studying in a secular environment for the first time since high school. In addition, at this time in my life, I was more intimately involved in a church than I had been in a long time—something that will become particularly relevant in just a moment.

Going to church during college, and even while my husband was in seminary, became something of a rote practice because I was so wrapped up in Christian communities during the week—daily chapel; theological studies; Christian friends; etc. Then we left seminary and moved to another state so I could start my degree and my husband could use his training for the pastorate. Now, not only was the church Ben's job, but it became our primary community of Christian fellowship and theological enrichment. This stood in stark contrast to the University where I was studying—here I was immersed in a department where Christianity was rarely acknowledged and even less often understood in the same way that I experienced it.¹ Instead, our discussions centralized a strong belief in social justice as a sort of academic equivalent to faith. In light of this shift—and for perhaps the first time in my adult life—I had to confront my

¹ This is not to say that there were not individuals in the department who did not hold religious beliefs of their own or that they were hostile toward mine. Rather, this moment stands in sharp contrast to educational environments I participated in previously in which there was a common understanding of the Evangelical faith and how that ought to be practiced in scholarship, Christian fellowship, and in daily life.

participation in a church community as an individual choice rather than something expected of me in my daily surroundings.

At the University, I took courses from faculty members who were heavily invested in teaching literature from marginalized communities and studying narratives of oppression and resistance. I worked closely with Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, who first introduced me to decolonial theory and Indigenous rhetorics. For my MA thesis, I specifically studied Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*, which directly addresses some of the ways organized religion (specifically the Catholic missions in California) has been used to not just *oppress* California Indians but displace, enslave, and murder them. Simultaneously, in the decolonial literature I was reading, I constantly saw echoes of the Gospel as I understood it and had difficulty reconciling this understanding when the same religious texts were used to support the heinous actions of both Catholic and Protestant leaders throughout U.S. history.

My initial interest in American Indian literature came from literature I had read in college that I found interesting: primarily Leslie Marmon Silko's (1977) *Ceremony*. I was fascinated with the way Silko understood and wrote about the power of story, and I was beginning to recognize the Bible as one powerful story that could be used in many ways. Then I met Andrea and started taking her classes. With her help, I started to understand that if I wanted to keep thinking about the power of story and how it could be used to both liberate and oppress, I needed to keep reading Native authors. She introduced me to the works of people like Deborah Miranda, Thomas King, Shawn Wilson, Louise Erdrich, Malea Powell. As I continued to take Andrea's classes and read for my thesis, I started learning about sovereignty, survivance, and decolonization. I started to understand and grapple with the role I played in an ongoing colonial system of oppression as a white woman and as a Christian.

Decolonization is not only the project of the “other” or the “oppressed,” although their role in this project looks different from my own. I live on this land; it is my responsibility to know who it was stolen from and how it is affected by a history of colonization. I benefit from and participate in colonial systems and institutions; it is my responsibility to know this and do something about it.

And that’s where this project comes from. No, it isn’t directly “about” Native authors or Indigenous rhetorics. It isn’t even directly addressing colonization and decolonization. But it is my responsibility to my reader and to the Native scholars, authors, mentors, and friends who have helped me along the way to tell you this. This is my start to holding myself responsible. To knowing the church as a system of oppression, to acknowledge its role in ongoing colonization, and to imagine ways of breaking from that into other possibilities.

Stories of Practices and Practicality

This chapter—this whole project, really—is a story of constellating.

The constellation of knowledge and relationships is a cultural rhetorics research orientation as defined by Malea Powell and the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab ([CRTL], 2016). According to the CRTL (2016), the making of cultures is relational and constellated because it involves people, their knowledges, and their practices: “All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief” (Act I, Scene 2 section, para. 2). The CRTL (2016) includes and draws upon Indigenous scholars like Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014), Malea Powell (1999, 2002), Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) and Shawn Wilson (2008), who demonstrate that research and theory are similarly constellated and relationally-built knowledges, whether those relationships are with texts, research participants, mentors, colleagues, or all of these.

Thus I begin this research by situating myself as a researcher. Doing so includes my relationships to methodological ideas, theories, texts, and people who have influenced my way of looking at the world and my orientation to my work in this particular moment. In this chapter, I will lay out some of the methodological concepts that are woven throughout this project: Relationality, Listening, Storying, and Critical Imagination while also showing how constellating works across all of these. In the chapter following, I will introduce my participants and begin the story of my relationship with them and our relationships to our academic and Evangelical communities. This is a story that will take some time to tell and continues throughout three more chapters before coming to a temporary “conclusion” in Chapter 6.

Relationality

A decolonial or cultural rhetorics approach to scholarship puts researchers in direct relationship to their work in a number of ways: to the texts and theories we use; to our own experiences; and to participants in the research. Cultural rhetorics scholarship begins from the premise that cultural practices, including intellectual ones, are rhetorically built. To understand how that building takes place, we must consider how it is done through relationships, not only to place, time, history, etc. but also to people. It is people who make culture, which means that it cannot just be, even when colonial systems of power claim that this is so (Act I, Scene 1 section, para. 5, CRTL, 2016). Understanding academic research as being connected to and conducted by people in real-world contexts shifts our orientation to the academy and what research does. As Daisy, a member of the CRTL (2016), says, understanding cultural rhetoric as a space for building relations both inside and outside the university “allows us to make scholarship—to develop frameworks—reliant on growth and sustainability, instead of negation and destruction” (Act II, Scene 1 section, para. 10). I take this to mean, in part, that the decolonial practice of

cultural rhetorics work asks us to build instead of deconstruct; to consider sustainability; to think about the people within the research rather than only institutional goals. In addition, when we understand that theory is built by people, we dismantle the colonial practice that elevates certain theories or knowledges over others.

The cultural rhetorics practice of building puts me in direct relationship to my work in a way that is different from the literary theories I have studied in the past. Theoretical constructs like postmodernism or postcolonialism tend to emphasize deconstruction almost to the point of chaos. In light of this shift to culture-building rather than dismantling, studying decolonial theory has very much been a spiritual practice for me, particularly when laid out by Indigenous thinkers. I often find that decolonial rhetoric is giving me words for how I think about my spiritual or faith journey that seems different from “typical” American Christianity because I have more knowledge with which to constellate the practices valued within that faith.

I remember reading Walter Mignolo (2011) one time—not my first encounter—and suddenly finding it very strange that, when he talks about options for viewing history and moving into the future, he separates a “spiritual” option from a decolonial one. This separation seemed odd because I had so often been thinking that “spiritual” and “decolonial” were somehow one and the same. Decoloniality seems to me to be a very spiritual practice; and, I really think that Christianity—at its core, when we untangle it from the American nationalism that it has become so deeply enmeshed with—is decolonial.

An important part of a cultural rhetorics research orientation is for a researcher to recognize their relationship to the participants and constellate that relationship with other knowledges. This emphasis on the orientation of researcher to participant is also present in other research contexts and theories, such as feminist work. In the last chapter of her book *Traces of a*

Stream, Royster (2000) discusses some of her reasons for doing the research that she has taken on in her project. She highlights her own identity as an African American woman scholar whose work is continually questioned because of her positionality. Royster's personal connection to her subject of research makes her feel a particular responsibility to a community of literate African American women, which in turn affects her methodologies as an afri-feminist scholar. Royster's relationship to her work is an important one for cultural rhetorics scholars to notice, in part because she allows her own cultural and community commitments to affect the questions that she asks and the way she tells the stories of the women she writes about. Indeed, the members of the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2014) notice the importance of this early piece. They particularly draw upon the way Royster (2000) states her position and purpose as a researcher who examines the work of her subject as already relevant rather than maintaining a narrative of defense (p. 13). Royster is up front in discussing the ways that her own position impacts her decisions about how she conducts her research and writes up her results. Her demonstration of positionality in academic work is something that cultural rhetorics scholars intentionally build upon, especially when doing research in and with communities.

Similarly, the research presented in this dissertation is not only a project that allows me to tell the stories of a few participants, although this is certainly an important part of it. This project grew out of a need for me to understand my own story; a story that I've told to myself and to others over and over but that isn't complete. This work is ultimately about my own relationship to theories, to the church community, to my academic communities, to the people interviewed in the following chapters, and to the stories that they tell.

An Embodied Story: Silence

I sit toward the back of the auditorium, tight-lipped and silent as the men on stage speak and the men in the audience shout. This special meeting has been called by the church elder board, apparently to answer questions about a controversial shift in pastoral leadership. As the questions become more heated and the answers increasingly vague, I am intensely aware of my own body that seems to be both inside and outside this cavernous room. Heat rises to my face; my palms sweat; tears threaten to spill from my eyes. If I were to speak, I know my voice would shake in that way it does when I burn with something to say in a crowd. I long to raise my voice. I want to shout at them all to Shut. Up. To stop being petty. To take just one second to listen to one another. To try and understand. But I keep my lips tightly pressed together. I know my voice is not one that will be heard here. Instead, to raise my own voice would be a threat to myself, to the livelihood and credibility of my male partner. So I sit. Silent. Inwardly screaming: about my mom's recent cancer diagnosis; about their actions and incomprehension; about my own silence...until the tears overflow and my feet carry me from the room.

Listening

I conducted one-on-one interviews with three participants who are or have been committed to the same local church while completing all or part of their graduate studies at the same school. These interviews grew out of a shared community practice and established relationships as I was also a part of both these communities myself, a relationship I will discuss further in Chapter 2. All interviews were conducted individually online via video chat services like Zoom or Google Hangouts because two participants and myself no longer lived in the area. I framed the interviews around a few key questions about what defines church and academic

communities, why those communities are important, and times participants felt supported or conflicted about those communities. I also asked participants to tell me about a time their participation in one community affected her participation in the other. I allowed these questions to shift and change based on the current conversation as well as my interactions with other participants as I moved through each interview. In this way, I invited participants to share their own stories in relationship to myself, the other interviewees, and the things they found important when hearing more about my study.

I transcribed the interviews and then sent them to the participants so they could correct or retract any piece with which they were no longer comfortable. One participant chose to retract an anecdote to protect a student, but otherwise transcripts were approved.

I chose to transcribe the interviews myself because doing so allowed me time to listen to my participants in keeping with a cultural rhetorics orientation of dwelling (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014) and grounded theory methods of teasing out common themes in participant stories (Creswell, 2013). A practice of rhetorical listening as defined by Krista Ratcliffe (1999, 2006) emphasizes listening as a rhetorical move that requires work toward understanding and altering one's own perceptions. This emphasis on hearing new knowledge and constellating it to change the knowledge I already hold is also an important cultural rhetorics research practice.

As I listened, read, re-listened, and re-read, I was looking for commonality and drawing upon those themes to write around. The entire process of listening and writing, re-listening and re-writing, led to the theoretical implications that emerge throughout the following chapters and in the conclusion of this project. In this practice, I relied upon feminist and cultural rhetorical practices of listening and dwelling with the stories to return to the matters that participants find

important, allowing those themes to shift my research questions and therefore the results of the study.

This particular approach to analysis requires time as well as careful and thoughtful reflection. In the following chapters, I work to contextualize participants' stories while also allowing them to speak for themselves. At times, this means that excerpts from their interviews are quoted at length. As I listen to the stories participants tell and place them in relationship to my own, I invite you as the reader to do the same: to think carefully about their positionality and the stories they tell from an in-between place; to consider your own biases, experiences, and relationship to religion and learning. As participants story their participation in academic and religious spaces, sometimes they speak from one community or the other, but at times they theorize their stories from a no-place, or a place where they question their commitment to either space to make something of their own. While I too have dwelt in this space, my relationship to it is not necessarily the same as theirs. Thus, I listen for understanding. I listen for the story-theories that they are forming and attempt to introduce them to you as such.

Malea Powell (2002) calls the stories that aren't typically heard by the academy ghost stories:

For me, ghost stories are both the stories of material colonization and the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, under, beneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of 'scholarly discourse.' (p. 12)

These ghost stories are thus not entirely separate from an academic perception of "theory," but they are not often recognized as such. Powell goes on to talk about the work of honoring these stories through the knowledge they hold but also making them recognizable in an academic context (p. 12). In this study, I operate from the unique position of knowing that participants

have and do tell “academic” stories. At times, they reference these theories. However, they also tell “ghost stories” about their own embodied and relational experiences that are both “academic” and not.

In this project, listening is not only a method but a methodological practice. It is a means of interpreting and organizing my data through common themes and my own relationship with the participants. In addition, listening is reciprocal and ongoing, making it a methodological commitment that asks me to hold space for new themes and stories to emerge as I listen and re-listen to recorded interviews, have continued conversations with the participants, and pay attention to my own developing story about faith and learning. Thus listening is an embodied method intimately connected to theories of storying and relationality.

An Embodied Story: Knitting Stories

I’m sitting here at my desk on a gloomy November morning knitting and re-listening (again) to my interview with Clara. It occurs to me in this quiet moment that I started this knitting project almost a year before these interviews. I started shortly before I found out I was pregnant—eight months before proposing the project to my committee. I’ve been working on this knitting project through this entire writing project, and while the complex double-sided cowl is almost finished, this dissertation is far from.

As I weave two contrasting strands of yarn together, I’m reminded that these interviews are similarly woven out of contrasting things. Originally I wrote the questions and conducted the interviews for the purpose of writing this dissertation. But in re-listening—rather than re-reading—I’m reminded again that my own relationship with these women is woven into this practice along with the things I am learning from them.

I'm thinking about the book-ended conversations that aren't part of the recording but stick in my memory. With every interview, we started by talking about research. Each participant shares her own dissertation research "horror" story about losing data, struggling with coding, finding weird sources, etc. In speaking with two of the participants, we end our conversations by talking about what it means to be a mom and an academic. They listen to what I'm going through at the moment—starting research with a newborn—give kind advice, and encourage me to push through the dissertation while balancing time with my baby. Both of them reassure me in different ways that I am making progress on the project by conducting the interviews, also expressing understanding that it never feels like we're doing enough. They both offer up further conversation about this balancing act. They tell me that they want to hear my stories too.

Storying

My questions and my methodologies are made of stories—stories I have learned from my upbringing and continued participation in church communities; deeply embedded stories of Scripture and from Evangelical teachings that have to be painfully and carefully uprooted in order to shift and change; stories of theories that are constellated together as I work to tease out what it all means. And this is why cultural rhetorics provides a useful and necessary framework for both my methods and the methodologies that inform them.

Cultural rhetorics allows me to draw upon constellated knowledges that—on the surface—don't belong in the same categories: church history, Scriptural interpretation, decolonial theory, the discipline of rhetoric, Native studies, the reality I live in my body, and my relationship to others' and their realities. In her 2012 CCCC address, Malea Powell warns against ignoring the embodied and lived aspects of the rhetorical work and research that we do: "This is the biggest colonizing trick of them all—erasing real bodies in real conflict in the real world by

separating mind from body, theory from practice to keep us toiling away in the service of a discourse that disadvantages almost every one of us” (p. 401). I have heard some broad stories told in academia about Christians, but these tend to erase the stories that actually hold my body and mind together by removing spiritual practice from theories, arguing that they *cannot* hold together. There are also broad stories in Christianity that similarly separate mind from body, and these discourses have been used to violent measures. As Powell (2012) says, this “colonizing trick” discourages scholars from looking at real bodies in real conflict in the real world. Studying this reality is my own move toward dismantling this trick (p. 401).

Thomas King’s (2003) text *The Truth About Stories* is central to my understanding of story and story as theory. King warns his readers to be careful with stories because they can define our whole world and the way we move in it. Speaking specifically about creation stories, King says, “contained within creation stories are relationships that help define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world within which they exist” (p. 10). King goes on to demonstrate how stories like these affect events and epistemologies and even describes how stories told can change what “story” means. However, there is a part of me that resists King’s narrative about creation stories as he tells it. To demonstrate the power of creation stories, King compares the Christian story of Adam and Eve to an Anishinaabe story about the Woman Who Fell from the Sky. He seems to assume that his readers believe either the Christian creation narrative, and therefore fully buy into those ideologies, or they are willing to accept a creation narrative that centralizes something else. King’s interpretation of the Genesis story as a hierarchical story about power and individualism doesn’t leave much room for an alternative reading of the Christian creation narrative.

What if, instead of a story of dominance, the creation and fall narrative is one of broken relationships that Christians are supposed to strive to heal? But instead they are always getting hung up or tricked, so they end up just making a bigger mess of things? What if this understanding can alter the way Christians, particularly white Christians, see colonialism and their responsibility for resisting it? Isn't that liminal space important? Can't those incommensurable stories actually create a new story? Something that is acceptance but also resistance? Something that accounts for both taking responsibility for the past but working to move forward into a different kind of future?

Upon reflection, I have come to realize that this is *exactly* the point (a point) of Thomas King's work. I am bothered by his re-telling of "my" story because I see alternatives in the way I want to tell, live, embody that story. When someone takes that story from me and makes it into something I don't agree with that tells a larger story about who I am in the universe and in relationship to other stories, I become defensive. This is the power of story, and this is why I am so interested in knowing more about the ways other people (like my participants) use and negotiate various discourses. This power is also why it is dangerous to outright refuse to listen to those stories and listen for the way people navigate them.

In her chapter "Where the Wild Things Are," Elizabeth Vander Lei (2015) warns composition instructors against "walling off" the composition classroom from issues of religion (pp. 71-72). The reasoning she gives is that doing so discourages students from engaging with this spiritual and cultural aspect of themselves in their writing. Vander Lei makes excellent points about the dangers of excluding religion simply because instructors can't imagine that Evangelical students have the ability to "think critically" about their religious beliefs. Cultural rhetorics allows us a way to talk about what relationality could do in order to help to cross the

cultural boundaries between these instructors and their students. In addition, cultural rhetorics asks us to listen for spaces where Christian students are encountering and evaluating the ways they inhabit their world. To truly listen in this way requires acknowledgment of the stories Christian students embody as legitimate theory. Students aren't just "hearing stories" in the classroom and refusing to engage with them. Religious students, including Evangelical students, embody the stories coming from their communities as lived theories, and some of those lived theories at times ask them to reject viewpoints the instructor would like them to have. And that is not something to be taken lightly.

For instance, I have encountered first-year writing students who, when asked to write a learning narrative, often describe a missions encounter from high school: an experience traveling somewhere in the world to "help others" and in the process being changed themselves. I recall conversations with one particular student in which I encouraged him to think about what kind of white savior narrative was wrapped up in his story. I asked him to consider more closely the perspective of those on the receiving end of his Christian benevolence and their own resources and relationship to the world. While the student still struggled to reshape the story to the extent I may have liked, he was horrified at the thought that he may not have been seeing people as fully human and autonomous communities in their own right. I did not attempt to "talk him out of" missions, which are an important embodied practice in Evangelical communities that are often defined by "reaching" others with the Gospel. However, he was willing to shift his perspective about the theory of missions and concede to some of the dangers of the mission trip rhetoric in order to reconsider his own role in this common community story.

I sincerely hope that this was not the last time during his college education that this student was asked to confront some of his own assumptions as they are drawn from Evangelical

communities. Similarly, I see myself and other Christian graduate students constantly shifting our relationships to stories around faith as we continue to encounter academic stories and theories. Sometimes this means a rejection of those stories, but sometimes it means that we shift our relationship to the stories, our participation in the communities they come from, and the way that we use them. This willingness to shift is reflected in Royster and Kirsch's (2012) idea of critical imagination in which they call for scholars, particularly feminist scholars, to draw upon participant or community discourse and reimagine possibilities that they may not have seen before when it comes to shared knowledge. I am reminded of this important practice in sharing this story about this student because, as an educator and a researcher, it is vital that I allow participants and students to "surprise" me or shift my relationship to the knowledge I hold and the knowledge they share, just as hearing "new" stories has done for me. Both of these knowledges are important and create a new constellation together. Without my own relationship to missions and what they mean to Evangelical communities, and particularly young people, I would not have had the conversation I was able to have with that student. By critically engaging with that narrative while also understanding its importance to his understanding of himself, I was able to employ a cultural rhetorics approach of constellating stories to encourage that engagement and perhaps even imagine new ways of embodying those stories.

An Embodied Story: Living Stories

This morning, as I drove my 7-month-old home from yet another doctor's appointment, I was casually listening to NPR when something caught my attention. I felt my heartbeat pick up as I turned up the volume. My fingers tightened around the steering wheel and my whole body tensed at the phrase "white evangelicals who voted for Trump."

I know this story.

The liberal-leaning newscaster would tell a story about a backwards group of fundamentalists who are at fault for electing a candidate who only proves their hypocrisy. The story would be reinforced by going after the demographic with leading questions, and I knew how the accused would respond. I would find myself annoyed with both sides, finding both the attack and the response foolish and polarizing. I have my own views about Donald Trump and the things he represents, and I know other Evangelical Christians who share them. But it isn't the "common" story. It's easier to "know" that it doesn't exist.

Myself in this Story

All of these values of cultural rhetorics scholarship—storying, listening, constellating, and relationality—play a role in my decision to include myself as both the researcher and a sort of fourth participant in this work. Scholars who do work on or with communities have long understood the importance of defining a researcher's relationship to that community (Royster, 2000; Grabill, 2010, 2012; Halbritter and Lindquist, 2012; Epps-Robertson, 2016). Cultural rhetorics work requires an additional responsibility in its theoretical and practical commitment to decolonizing academic scholarship. By this I mean that cultural rhetoricians tend to follow the example of scholars who, when they work with cultural communities, write about them in a way that is clear about their own presence for the purposes of decentralizing colonial discourses. Beyond considering how their presence alters the community for the purposes of research, cultural rhetorics scholars are careful to recognize their own embodied presence and the experiences that they bring to the narratives presented from that research—such as this one.

According to the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2014), one of the ways scholars can highlight positionality in academic work is by recognizing the ways that people make things,

relationships, and culture, using constellating as a practice to pull these things together into all “possible realities” (Act I, Scene 2 section, para. 2) This is also a decolonial practice in that researchers place themselves in relation to multiple discourses, some of which may even perpetuate colonial power. Thus, cultural rhetorics scholars make meaning from the ways that people—including themselves—negotiate and participate in power-structures and cultural communities. It follows, then, that a researcher also must consider particular ways of being in the world, including their implication in communities that they simultaneously question and participate in when doing their work. Recognizing and articulating this positionality can be particularly difficult in the academy, which often maintains colonial discourses and power structures in its very essence and the ways it asks us to do research (Powell 1999). To make ourselves present in our work through our own stories is to be vulnerable and invite criticism that the work is somehow less valid.

My choice to include myself and my stories in my work draws upon the example of several Indigenous and/or cultural rhetorics scholars such as Shawn Wilson (2008), Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014), and John Gagnon (2017). While telling one’s personal story is not *always* a factor in cultural rhetorics scholarship, these particular scholars use their positionality and their stories to help their readers understand their role in the discourse as researchers, community members, and human-beings deeply affected by and even implicated in systems of power. My work across church and academic spaces indeed implicates me in colonial systems. Thus the stories that I tell about my own experiences are not *only* meant to help you, as the reader, to better understand the communities themselves but also to have a transparent (if incomplete) experience of who I am as a researcher asking the questions that I ask and coming to the conclusions that result.

Exigency

There are two relatively recent conversations happening at the intersections of rhetoric and writing and religion that are especially relevant to the work I undertake in this project. In the first conversation, teacher-scholars seek to better understand the ways students use religious rhetoric in their writing and discourses around knowledge. In the second, scholars tie together discourses in social justice and religion to see how religious discourses have perpetuated but also resist things like racism and homophobia.

The first conversation is tied to religious practice by way of the classroom. In this work, composition instructors recognize that students bring their religious views to their writing, and they discuss various means of handling these views in educational settings. Several scholars argue that religious views should be more welcomed in academic work as a part of student identity (Browning, 1999; Buley-Meissner, et al. 2000; Rand, 2001; Trelstad, 2008; Antlitz, 2010). Others, however, treat religious dogmatism as something to be “dealt with” or as a challenge to intellectual thought (Anderson, 1989; Perkins, 2001; Downs, 2005; Hansen, 2005; Montesano and Roen, 2005). This conversation is an interesting one in that it may encourage instructors and scholars to recognize religious ideologies as relevant to writing practice. However, it continues to focus largely on individual student knowledge rather than their participation across communities.

The second conversation has both emerged from and is especially relevant to the current political climate in the United States that tends to polarize religious vs. secular; conservative vs. liberal; etc. Scholars in disciplines like sociology have already been focusing on race-relations in the U.S. as tied to Christianity. (Emerson and Smith, 2000; Lindsay, 2007; Jones, 2016). Now, scholars in rhetoric are beginning to take up a conversation about religious rhetoric that is connected to race and other social issues. This emerging scholarship has become particularly

poignant in the last several years as the discussion is also a political one². The political tensions that currently run high in the occupied U.S. are also present in evangelical churches and communities and manifest in a variety of ways. Stemming from the blog “Rhetoric, Race, and Religion³,” current edited collections emphasize political matters like religious freedom (Miller, 2018) and Christian culture in a multicultural context (Banjo and Williams, 2018). I find this conversation to be an interesting one because it has potential to ask questions of community commitments in faith-based and/or political practices as well as around individual roles in communities.

What I notice about these two conversations is that there is a lack of crossover between the two. Work around religious rhetoric in student writing is largely focused on undergraduate and first-year writing practices. In addition, it accounts for individual discourses but less often focuses on religion as a cultural rhetoric and cultural knowledge that belongs to those students. I propose that people who are invested in social justice work in and through their faith communities also continually question their knowledge of and participation in those communities.

Thus this project is a practice in telling a small part of a less common story: one about negotiating commitments to academic and church communities when the stories told across those communities don’t always line up or are incomplete. Through the stories of my three participants as well as my own experiences, I will describe this in-between space and the individual negotiations we perform to explain those spaces to ourselves and to rest in them. Cultural

² Some of these conversations around religion and race were happening at the Religious Rhetorics SIG meeting at CCCC 2017 which I attended. In this SIG, the group reviewed a conference call that addressed the 2016 election and the response of faith communities. However, to my knowledge, many of these conversations remain unpublished at this point.

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rhetoricraceandreligion/>

rhetorics allows me to constellate stories between and across communities through their commonalities as well as their differences to create a new story of negotiating spaces in-between. At the same time, cultural rhetorics tied to grounded theory provides a framework for allowing participant stories to inform my questions, my responses, and my own practices throughout the research and reporting of my findings. In telling these stories from the in-between places, I use cultural rhetorics to permeate boundaries some scholars continue to hold between academic and community learning. Through the stories of participants and myself, I demonstrate that holding, challenging, and shifting community rhetorics is a complex process of critical thought and individual experience that carries religious rhetorics into the realm of belief and practice and beyond.

In the following chapter, I will introduce you, the reader, to my participants. I will tell a story about my own relationship to the participants and to the church we shared in common during a portion of our academic experience. In Chapter 3, I introduce some key areas of community expectations that participants discuss in their interviews. Chapter 4 is where I begin to explore “Faith and Learning” as a rhetorical value that participants find important when navigating between their church and academic communities and forming their own rhetorics of belief and practice. In Chapter 5, I refer back to community expectations to explore the ways participants (and myself) use “faith and learning” to address and personally navigate expectations that come out of communities of faith and learning. Introducing and threaded throughout each of these three data and analysis chapters are my own narratives that work to story another part of my own relationship to this work, to Evangelical communities, and to my own histories. I include my stories in this way because they are both separate from and intimately tied to the research itself. These stories represent (in part) my own working in the in-

between and the practice that continues to take place there. In the final chapter, I continue my own story and revisit those of my participants to call for rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers to imagine possibilities for crossover between academic and religious discourses.

CHAPTER 2: AN INVITATION, A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE AND PLACE

To enact a cultural rhetorics methodology built on practices of relationality and constellating, we must first understand who the participants are and their relationship to their communities. It is equally important to position myself as the researcher by telling my own stories about my relationship to the participants, to the church community, and to my scholarship as introduced in Chapter 1. To this end, in this chapter I first introduce each participant with a brief history of their commitment to church in general and the specific church community in this story. I also briefly introduce their academic commitments and roles within academic spaces. I want you, as the reader, to first know these women as individuals with particular backgrounds and commitments to faith and academic work. While my own relationship to these women has primarily been through the church community, understanding them as individual people within and beyond that community helps me to tell their stories in their own words. I then introduce the church community in both a global sense and the local community specific to Hope Church. I find it important to start with some broad brushstrokes over Evangelical church history to contextualize the Hope Church for those who may be less familiar with the ways Evangelical churches are structured. I use participants' stories along with my own to build an image of Hope Church (its structure, history, core beliefs) as well as the role that church as community plays in the lives of participants and myself.

Introduction to the Participants

In this section, I introduce each of my three participants as individuals in different disciplines with their own stories about their personal connection to Church as an organized community, coming to Hope Church and their roles therein, as well as my own connection to each of them. Each of the three women interviewed initially moved to the small midwestern

town for their graduate studies (Master's and/or PhD). While all participated in different academic programs at the University, their time at Hope Church overlaps along with my own. Thus, they at times refer to one another in their stories here and throughout, and I also speak of my relationship to each of the participants. I refer to all participants as well as the church, town, and University using either pseudonyms or in general terms. This decision to some extent protects the identity of my participants and allows them to speak more freely about their experiences.

Nicoletta

Nicoletta is a scholar of theatre and performance studies who specializes in critical research theory in theatre history, theory, and dramatic literature. She likens her PhD program in performance studies to communications as an interdisciplinary field that stretches from theatre in a more traditional sense to performance in everyday life. For her dissertation, Nicoletta studied “the grotesque” as performance and theory in plays about the Christian cross as it pertains to Christ's death.

Nicoletta was raised by missionary parents from India who served Protestant churches in Oman. She mentions this as being relevant to the way that she sees both the global church and some of the nuances of her own belief system. For instance, in our interview she notes that Protestants in India are particularly wary of Roman Catholicism. This suspicion was something that was called into question when Nicoletta attended graduate school and was often in community with Roman Catholic Christians in her social networks while also studying thematic threads of Catholicism in her work. At this time, Nicoletta started to recognize the value in Roman Catholic practices as a way to better understand not only her research but also her own faith. She notes this as running contrary to her upbringing but produces it as one example of

being open to having her thoughts about faith changed through academic and social relationships.

Nicoletta was advanced in her PhD program at the local University when I first got to know her. She was already deeply embedded in the church community at the time, having started attending the church while completing her MA degree at the same university. She had built a broad network of graduate students: other Christian grad students, people in her program, and people who were both or neither. Nicoletta initially was introduced to Hope Church through a group of Christian graduate students and their advisor, who also attended. She cites the pastoral leadership as one of her primary reasons for attending Hope Church as the pastor at the time held a PhD himself. As someone invested in intellectual practice, the pastor preached deeply researched sermons and engaged young adults in extracurricular activities such as watching popular and cinematic films and discussing their social and theological implications.

One of my favorite things about Nicoletta as a friend is that she takes hospitality seriously, which was something she taught me much about. She and her housemates kept a cozy home that was constantly open to drop-ins and chats over coffee, and they frequently organized parties that blended together a wide variety of “friend-groups” to overlap networks and encourage their friends to develop new relationships. As one of the few unmarried adult women in the church community, Nicoletta often took it upon herself to build a community of young people that was inclusive of everyone by including friends from all her circles in social events—a labor that often went unnoticed but should certainly not be undervalued.

Clara

Clara finished her PhD several years before I met her and was already a well-established practicing clinical psychologist when I came to Hope Church. Clara is unique as a participant

because she practices in a professional field outside a university setting, but she still maintains ties to her academic discipline as she often mentors current students through their internships and clinical hours.

Clara sees her faith as an important part of her clinical practice. She primarily studied weight-loss and health psychology in her graduate work, but now Clara works largely in trauma and anxiety disorders. It is Clara's belief that her patients' spiritual practices—no matter their faith background—are part of what makes them human, and she emphasizes that she treats the whole person rather than focusing on the disorder. This is not necessarily a universally held strategy in her field, and Clara at times finds herself pushing back against those who might say that treating spirituality as a component of psychology is “unscientific.”

Clara describes her own spiritual history as someone raised in a nominally Christian home where most of the family would attend church on a regular basis, but spirituality was not discussed much in between weekly services. She says that in college she maintained personal spiritual practice, but attending church became a less important part of her life and took a backseat to work, studies, and friendships.

Clara came to the Hope Church community as a graduate student seeking other people of faith and friendships as she was living far away from her own family for the first time and recognized church as an important aspect of her life that had been missing for the past several years. Clara describes her initial contact with the Hope Church community as a sort of happy accident when she started attending with a couple of colleagues and fell into the community rather than seek out other churches in the area. While Clara didn't initially foresee herself remaining in the area after graduate school, she met her husband there. Now he and their children

are also deeply involved in the church community and see it in many ways as an extension of their family.

Clara describes the church as a “home base” that had been missing during her college experience when she was too busy to become involved with a local church and says that it was something she intentionally sought out to be a “healthy human being” during her graduate education. She says that maintaining a spiritual life on her own was possible but incomplete without the spiritual guidance, mentorship, and friendship that can be found in a church community where people practice their faith similarly to the way that she does.

I first got to know Clara as part of a circle of friends who had all been part of the church for some time. While I was not as close to Clara as some other women in the church, we had many friends in common, and I frequently interacted with her on Sunday mornings and at church events. Interestingly, it was when I began my PhD program and was no longer as deeply involved in the church community that Clara and I began to have conversations that revealed some of our common thinking on issues that had not arisen before. Upon one brief visit back to the town, Clara and I had a brief conversation about the direction of my research. She showed a lot of interest in the topic, which led to my request for an interview and further connection over graduate studies.

Laura

Laura earned her doctoral degree in Communication with a focus on communication in society, specifically from a rhetorical and critical perspective looking at power and ideology. Her dissertation work homes in on power dynamics and whiteness in sport communication and media.

Laura described herself as deeply involved in campus ministries during her undergraduate and master's education. During this time, she took on many service and leadership roles and worked hard to build into the ministries. Over the course of our interview, she mentions that the many missions trips she participated in and led played a large role in her academic interest in social justice.

Similarly to Clara, Laura describes her reason for looking for a church upon her move to the town as being about making a home and finding a place where she could meet people who held faith values similar to her own. She and her husband found the church's website, attended for a few Sundays, and were drawn in to stay when a long-time member reached out to Laura and specifically welcomed her to the community. Laura says this was important because she wanted to be in a church that valued "outsiders" rather than only focusing on themselves. She says that when she came to the church community, she was looking to step back from leadership for a period and be fed by the church while she completed her PhD and figured out motherhood.⁴ Thus her relationship to the church was largely about being mentored and finding pockets of commonality where she could address life's struggles with people—particularly women—who shared those roots.

Like myself, Laura attended Hope Church for only a brief few years, completing her PhD before moving on to full time faculty positions in other cities. Laura's first child was born during the first year in her program, which she says made her perhaps slower to get involved in both the church and her academic department. While this additional time commitment may have made

⁴ To "be fed" is a common phrase in this type of community that indicates a desire for spiritual learning that is often done in collaboration with people who are actively encouraging you to study and live in keeping with Biblical values.

initial relationships at the church slow to get off the ground, Laura cites spiritual commonalities as leading to deep relationships quickly when she was able to focus on them.

My own relationship with Laura is the most peripheral of all the participants. The first time I remember officially meeting Laura was when her baby was born and I took a hot meal to her family—a practice that was common in the community. Laura was probably the first person I ever knew who was brave enough to have a baby during grad school, and we talked about this dynamic at length during our interview. At one point towards the end of our time at the church, Laura sent an email to my husband, confronting him about a Scripture he quoted from the pulpit that was inaccurate and sexist in its English translation. I greatly admired her for doing this (as did Ben) and deeply wish she was someone I had engaged with more while we were both in that community.

An Invitation to Church

Among several commonalities between these three women and their religious involvement, the most obvious and relevant to this study is their connection to and participation in the Hope Church community. To understand Hope Church as a community and the specific purposes it serves for my participants, it is first important to define what I mean by an “Evangelical” church as opposed to a broader definition of “Christian.” To include a full description of Evangelical church history and theological beliefs would be far beyond the scope of this project. Entire books and careers are devoted to these topics, and scholars are frequently in disagreement on details (Balmer 1999, 2002, 2010; Noll 1986, 2000, 2004; Larsen 2012; González 1999, 2002; McNutt 2017). However, I would be remiss to not brush some broad strokes across Evangelicalism as I have come to understand it through my personal history and

study and for the purposes of this project in order to situate Hope Church within an Evangelical context.

A Brief Primer on Evangelical Denominations and Core Beliefs

Evangelicalism is a movement within the Protestant tradition that is defined by several core beliefs that differ from those held in the Mainline Protestant or Catholic churches that are also associated with “Christianity” as a whole. These differences in what defines “Christian” may appear minimal to lookers-on, but the core theological stances deeply affect each branch’s faith, practices, and communities. Within the Evangelical tradition itself exist a number of denominations that further differentiate theological and social nuances. For instance, Baptists and Wesleyans—both denominations in which I have participated as a member—are both considered Evangelical and hold to similar core beliefs about the path to salvation, who God is, etc.; however, they differ in theological nuances like the role of grace in someone’s life or the permanency of conversion.⁵ While some Evangelicals hold staunchly to their chosen denominational beliefs, many others—like myself—find that those denominational differences often reflect preferences that don’t deeply influence the core of individual Evangelical faith. We might even further break down denominations into churches or individuals who don’t always adhere to the denomination as a whole.

While there are many differences between denominations, churches, and individuals, most hold a few key concepts in common. These concepts define certain denominations, churches, and individuals as “Evangelical.” David W. Bebbington (1989) popularly describes four main tenets of the Evangelical tradition as biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and

⁵ For instance, some denominations focus on God’s grace as forgiving all past and future sins whereas others might place a stronger emphasis on doing good as evidence of forgiveness. Similarly, some denominations see salvation as a one-time conversion event whereas others might perceive it as ongoing change with a range of theories existing across those two ends.

activism. The first two of these have to do with theological beliefs about the Bible being central to essential spiritual truths, the most important of which is Christ's crucifixion and the resurrection that liberates all those willing to follow his example from eternal death. The second two tenets are more "action-based" as followers convert from nonbelief to belief and then actively represent the Gospel through their lives. D. Michael Lindsay (2007), another prominent Evangelical scholar, makes a similar list, citing three main factors of evangelicalism: seeing the Bible as the primary and ultimate authority for religious belief and practice; holding a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; and a "transforming, activist approach to faith" (pp. 3-5). However, different denominations within the Evangelical tradition may emphasize some of these core beliefs over others, reach for or extend those premises into additional theological principles, or practice these core beliefs in slightly different ways.

At its center, I personally understand the message of the Gospel to be one of liberation from oppression whereas the reality is that Christianity as an organized religion has been and is often used toward violent and colonial purposes. Like any theoretical structure, the Gospel can be and often is manipulated and interpreted to favor those who hold social and political power. To an extent, denominations have grown out of this human tendency toward disagreement in which people want to interpret and use theology toward different means. Many of these interpretations are directly related to the way that Christians are meant to engage with the world around them, both with other Christians and those who do not practice.

Even though denominations may appear to be extrafluous or even contentious as a means of structuring belief, they make sense considering that Evangelicalism emphasizes daily practices and living one's life in a particular way (Lindsay, 2007). Lindsay credits an individualistic component of Evangelicalism—which stems from a personal commitment and relationship with

Scripture—as being responsible for the relative flexibility of the Evangelical faith (p. 4). This flexibility allows individuals to accept the guidance of their church leaders but ultimately act on their faith in a way that relies on their own interpretation and context. At the same time, the way one interprets their faith or constructs their worldview is built and supported by fellowship and study with other Christians. Thus in many ways, denominations are simply groups of people who wish to interpret the Gospel and practice their faith in similar ways. Within those denominations, individual churches support local believers who can worship and practice in community with one another while sharing a common understanding of essential beliefs and practices held within the denominational structure.

Thus denominations can provide a helpful and practical way of delineating theological leanings and structuring churches as organizations, but Hope Church is self-identified in its description and doctrinal statement as “nondenominational.” In Evangelical circles, this means that the individual congregation creates and selects its own leadership team and bylaws rather than answering to a larger institutional structure. Theologically speaking, nondenominational churches theoretically answer directly to Scriptural truths rather than those defined by a larger denomination. In practice, this can become difficult as each church often interprets Scripture differently depending on factors like the vocal leadership at the time or prominent social leaders in Evangelical circles. While churches that operate under a denominational structure can channel their time and energy to serving the church members and local communities, it is my opinion that nondenominational churches run a higher risk of getting bogged down in the minutiae of deciding the “correct” way to do things. On the other hand, non-denominational churches or churches in denominations that don’t have official hierarchical structures (like Baptist) are more democratic as local denominations usually bring decisions to a vote or rely on their elected local

leaders. While this nondenominational structure can appear to be liberating in itself, these believers often still rely upon established church history, central theological interpretations, and even a canon of texts beyond Scripture that dictate the beliefs and practices to which many communities hold.

It is important to acknowledge here that these brief stories about Evangelicalism leave out the complexity of historical and ongoing factors of oppression and trauma that are often associated with religious institutions. Like many communities and institutions, churches are deeply affected by what Walter Mignolo (2011) calls the colonial matrix of power, which manifests in many different ways, from racism to homophobia to gender discrimination to physical/spatial/emotional violence and more. However, there are individual congregations, groups, and people who see the danger of these patterns and imagine other possibilities, drawing upon their faith and community practices to disrupt and challenge that matrix. It is not my purpose in this project to convince the reader that Evangelical Christianity is not actually an oppressive religion as a whole. To say that it is or is not is too simplistic an answer. In many regards, the story of the Gospel is simple—but Evangelicalism is deeply contentious and complex, as is my relationship to it and, I would venture to say, the lives of my participants. Instead, my purpose here is to tell the stories of a few people from a specific community who have begun to problematize the oppressive factors within that community and are finding ways to rhetorically negotiate that space when their own beliefs have broadened and shifted into something different.

Hope Church

Hope Church is located in a small, midwestern college town of approximately 31,500 people, according to the 2010 United States Census. For comparison, the local University enrolls

approximately 15,000 undergraduate students, not including graduate programs, faculty, staff, etc. In the 1970s, a small group of college students began meeting on campus to study the Bible, pray, and worship together. The first meetings of this group coincided with “The Jesus Movement,” an Evangelical Christian phenomenon that occurred across the United States throughout the 1960s and 70s and attracted large numbers of youth and college-aged people to the Evangelical faith. I understand this movement to be both a reaction to and incorporation of the “hippy movement” in the way it espoused a level of moralism that in some ways ran contrary to a hippy emphasis on freedom of choice but also incorporated a level of mysticism into the Christian faith. The Jesus Movement is also credited by some as influencing the beginnings of the “Religious Right,” the strong Evangelical influence on the ideologies and politics of the Republican Party. Thus it follows, as I will explore later, that Hope Church and its congregational history would be deeply tied to right-wing social and political practices further complicated by its ties to a regional university community.

As the group grew and became more well-established as a community, they eventually gathered the funds to build a meeting space on the edge of town where they could hold their services. This also meant that they had the financial resources to hire full-time staff, primarily a pastor. However, the pastors hired throughout the church’s history (all men) each stayed in the position for only a few years. Some of their terms ended amicably, but others left in varying degrees of scandal that were often highly visible in such a small community. In spite of shifts in leadership, the congregation as a group remained resilient. In the interim pastorless years, the church would once again be a gathering of people without professional leadership who met together to grow in their faith. This high rate of turnover meant that, while the community as a

group of people was relatively stable, their leadership and ideological structures were sometimes less so.

The pastor who was leading the church upon my arrival had been in the position for nearly ten years as the longest-standing pastor in the church's relatively short history. In addition to the pastor, the church is currently led by a group of elected male elders, although the structure of their choosing and tenure was nearly nonexistent when we first came there. In this particular church at the time I was there, the elder board tended to hold a significant amount of power, taking an interest in most matters both large and small. While this board of elders is one institution that holds the church together, the tightness of the community itself in terms of relationships and mutual faith commitments also plays a role in the church's survival in times of distress and/or change. This is evident throughout the history of pastoral change as well as in the leadership turnover that the church underwent when I was there. While that particular situation was messy and there were people who left the community, there were others who found it important to remain through levels of disagreement because the church was both their legacy and their closest community.

The church body—made up of regularly attending people and officially documented members—was largely white and upper-middle class, reflecting the demographic of the town itself, excluding the University. Hope Church was also known as the “educated” church in town, meaning that nearly all of its members held bachelor's degrees from the local university and several were either current graduate students or already held master's degrees and PhDs. Since several church members worked at the University as faculty and staff, they tended to draw in additional students, particularly those doing graduate studies. In fact, the church did not draw many undergraduate students, which I attribute largely to factors such as the distance from the

University, the vigorous on-campus ministries that were local to and attractive to undergraduate students, and the age demographics of the church, which was mostly comprised of young families and “their parents,” or the generation that had been involved in the early years of the church.

Thus the church, in a sense, was made up primarily of two groups of people, though these often would evolve and overlap: the core families who grew up in the town or made a home there as young adults, and university graduate students who tended to be transient but would remain part of the community from approximately 2 to 7 years before moving on. Not infrequently—as we see with participant Clara—by the time a graduate student completed their degree, they may have married and/or started a family, began their career locally, and settled into both the town and the church in a more permanent way. Similarly, young adults who had been raised by permanent members of the church often desired to “escape” the small town life and leave to pursue education, military or professional careers, or simply to make homes elsewhere. While these groups bring some fluidity to the community, enough families are permanent fixtures that many of the day-to-day practices and structures remain consistent or only change slowly.

My Seat in Church

Before looking more closely at how my participants define the church community for themselves, it is important to note some of the complications of my own role there for the few years we—my husband and I—resided in the town as I earned my master’s degree at the University. Though we moved to the area for the purposes of my education, through a series of circumstances Ben, my husband, was on staff at the church within a span of months. He began as a youth pastor, but his position eventually grew into a full-time associate pastor and then, for a time, interim lead pastor and preacher. Suddenly, this made me “the pastor’s wife.” Concurrent

with this evolution of his career was a messy transition in the leadership of the church, which led to hurt feelings on the part of many involved. Although the macabre details are mostly superfluous to my purposes here, I was often privy to some of the more unsavory workings that are present behind the scenes in most organizations but not always visible to all of its members or the outsider public. I mention this because I think hearing those things at times colored my perception of the church as a community, particularly the knowledge that the community was not only imperfect but, in some ways, tenuous. On the other hand, with the perspective of time and distance, the events of this time allowed me to see the community as something beyond the current leadership of the church or its institutional structure.

This learning curve about what truly defines a community and community practice was a formative time for me, made more so by my concurrent studies, hence my academic interest in this space as a rhetorical, knowledge-making one. My time at Hope Church was perhaps the first time I was deeply involved in a church in my adult life. As a result, learning some of the more complex aspects of what goes into and comes out of a community of people at times led to cynicism and frustration, even though the community was and continues to be precious to me through friendships, personal growth, and my memories of my time there. I reveal these things to say that, while being an “insider-researcher” comes with advantages of knowledge, there is also a risk in my obvious inability to be “objective” in my insights. To compensate for this position—and hopefully use it to the advantage of understanding—I focus on the participants’ individual stories about the community as well as my own so that you (as the reader) and I (as the researcher) might draw some tentative conclusions about community rhetorics but primarily gain further insight into the complexities that individuals experience in these spaces. Thus I begin in

the following section by telling participant stories about what Hope Church as a community means to them personally as I have done so in regard to myself here.

Participants Define church community

In my interviews with participants, I first asked them to describe what they perceived to be their “faith community” during their time in graduate school. As a former active member of Hope Church and other church communities myself, I started the project with my own idea of how that community might be defined: a church body that housed close relationships. I assumed those relationships would be with people who share a common faith and “do life” together, as is a common phrase employed at Hope Church when talking specifically about personal connections and friendships within the church. I suspected that my participants would have a similar experience to my own but also wanted to be sure I understood the purpose of the church community as they did. I was also interested in stories about why the community mattered to them in order to gain a fuller picture of the role their faith community played in everyday life and why that sometimes felt complicated. Thus in this section I draw from participant stories about their faith community to build a fuller picture of what that space means to them, allowing me to introduce factors that complicate the definition of church community for participants in Chapter 3.

While questions about defining the church community and describing its importance were initially separate topics when I crafted the questions, I found that participants often merged the two topics in their responses, being unable to separate what the community is and does from why this matters. I found that participants told stories that spoke to three key areas when thinking about church communities: church as place-making, church as family, and church as spiritual guidance. Here I define those areas by combining some of their stories as well as my own. Later,

I will take a closer look at some factors that complicate participants' ideal perceptions of what the Hope Church Community ought to be and what it means to them on a personal level.

Church as place

When asked about the definition of church community, Nicoletta made an important observation about the way she considers herself part of both the local and global church. This distinction is one that many Evangelicals would recognize. The global Evangelical Church is a term that encompasses Christian believers who are connected through their faith beliefs and practices across the world and often across denominations. The local church is similarly connected but is made up of a more immediate community, likely within a geological location and with common goals in mind. The global Church often refers to Evangelicals of all denominations or even Christians more broadly while local churches tend to be denomination-specific groups of individuals under common leadership, likely meeting in a consistent and central location within their community. When searching for a local church to attend and participate in, individuals will often find commonalities with denominations that they have participated in before or that suit them more or less socially and theologically. At the same time, there is some flexibility in that they will often hold core beliefs and practices in common with several local churches and can find one that best suits their needs or desires. Individuals might look for particular worship or preaching styles, congregation sizes, or specific programs beyond a Sunday morning service. This element of choice is particularly true of “Bible-belt” towns or the midwestern U.S. where Evangelical churches are abundant, making it easy to find one that suits individual preferences.

All three participants in my study spoke about their introduction to the local church community—Hope Church—as part of a larger effort toward making a home when coming to the

area for their graduate education. In each situation, the participant was leaving a familiar space to enter into a new one for the purposes of their education. Though they were joining academic communities through their disciplines and programs, which we will explore further in a moment, they each felt that they needed a church community as well to feel a sense of belonging in the town. My own experience was similar: for the first time my husband and I were moving to a place where we knew no one and were not already part of a Christian community through religious education. Thus finding a church was as important for developing friendships and creating a home as it was for spiritual development. The Hope Church community was, in varying degrees between participants and myself, a place where we could find commonality and friendships, serve the local town community, and also benefit from the church socially, intellectually, and spiritually.

According to Clara, the church as part of “home” is important to the well-being of a person: “I was missing that home base that I had had all my life at church and felt like I really needed to [find one] if I was going to become a truly healthy human being.” Like the other participants and myself, Clara indicates that church had been an important part of her life growing up, which makes it part of the way that she defines her personhood and home. Laura tells her story of coming to Hope Church similarly:

When I moved to [town] with my husband, we didn’t have any children yet, but we kind of knew that one of the things we needed to do right away to make [the town] our home for the next four years was to find a church. And so that was one of the first things we did when we were there.

In both instances, the “finding” of a church is not only about creating relationships but about placemaking. Church community is an important aspect of creating a home out of an unfamiliar

place. Talking about finding a church in terms of building a home is rhetorically important when we consider some of the embodied aspects of placemaking. In each case, participants relocate their physical space for the purposes of their education. In order to make that physical space one that is also emotionally and spiritually fulfilling, they seek out certain communities who share it and can fulfill some of those familial and spiritual elements left behind. As Clara says, the church becomes part of what makes the whole person.

Church as family

It is common parlance for many of the regular church attenders that I know to refer to one another as their “church family.” In fact, this term is probably used much more often than others that indicate a similar meaning, like “parishioners,” “members,” or even “church community” or “church body.” While family is something that can also be tied to home-building or placemaking such as I have already mentioned, there is something more here when we consider the nature of chosen familial relationships. When talking about finding her place in the church community, Clara expresses that Hope Church serves as some kind of replacement for the family she has left behind in her hometown in order to pursue education. She says that fitting into the church allowed her to form bonds so close that she felt as though she in some way filled the void of parental—and especially maternal—relationships:

I had moms! I had extra parents! I had all these people that were there to walk alongside me and help out. That part of it was just really kind of comforting to me, where I had left EVERY single person that I loved, and I had a community who was saying, we welcome you in, we love you, you are a part of us.

In these relationships there is validation but also processes of learning, growth, and giving of oneself that makes them reciprocal and an important aspect of whole personhood. In describing

these relationships as such, Clara is not replacing her born family but is choosing to embody a similar closeness that may not be present in all communities in which she takes part.

While Clara is adamant that the church body is family, the other participants talk about it a bit differently while still referring to a unique type of relationship that is found in spiritual connection. Laura says that she tended to connect with other people in the church quickly over their shared commonalities, but she doesn't see those relationships continuing since she has moved on spatially from that community. While some of these "commonalities" have to do with things like life stages and careers, Laura also says that these relationships were also built around talking about issues of faith. In Laura's case, the space of the church was a more temporary one that served a similar purpose as it did for Clara but was tied to time and proximity. At the same time, commonality of belief allowed her to be more immediately comfortable in that space and those relationships than she might have been otherwise.

It's important to note here that the metaphor of the church as "family" and the definitions that "family" implies could also be exclusionary. For Nicoletta, the emphasis on family in the church was at times isolating for her as a young, single woman in an academic program as part of the church body. She indicates that singles—maybe especially women—were often left on the outskirts of the church family structure. They were expected to serve heavily in the church because, without partners and children of their own, it was assumed they had the time. However, activities that they served in often emphasized family as their primary audience. While she was often happy to serve, this also "felt like we [singles] were the most excluded from the most thriving and vital parts of the church activities and how the church thought of itself and functioned." In this statement, I see Nicoletta suggesting that without a nuclear family of her own, she could not be fully accepted as a member of the Hope Church family. Thus the emphasis

on the nuclear family at times allowed for certain people to be overlooked, a fact which is made perhaps all the more painful within the common rhetoric that church is meant to be a sort of placeholder for or extension of family institutions that may be left behind or delayed for the purposes of higher education.

Church as spiritual guidance

Finally, participants see the church as one of their primary opportunities for seeking spiritual guidance, mentorship, and knowledge. While this may seem an obvious function of the church, participants name several ways in which the church functions as a community that helps them to grow as people in ways that are relational and reciprocal as well as intellectual.

Clara talks about her need to find a church being not only about finding family but also finding spiritual guidance that she felt she'd been lacking. She says that during her undergraduate years, she didn't have a church or even a well-defined place of Christian friendships. She talks about this as a "spiritual piece that was missing" when she started graduate school, indicating that she wanted to get that piece back:

My friends in undergrad were lovely friends, I enjoyed them a great deal. Most of them were not spiritual in any way, so that was actually super probably not healthy in the long run. So part of that was that I wanted a peer group that had similar values as I did. I wanted to kind of walk through life with people and build my faith with people as opposed to the one-sided thing. I struggled with that.

Thus finding a church was a way for Clara to grow in her faith, learn more about Scripture, and be supported by other people with the desire to do the same. Clara feels strongly that her growth and spiritual development was less effective when she was attempting to do it on her own rather than surrounded by community.

Laura talks similarly about participating in small groups organized within Hope Church, using language like “being a better person in community” because that is what “God calls us to.” She finds that being a member of a small group of women who could talk about their faith helped her to learn how to incorporate those values into her life, her work, and her family. Even though Laura indicates that the relationships she formed at Hope Church may not continue now that she has left the area, she still talks about them as being important to her faith commitments during her time in graduate school. Like Clara, Laura indicates that being part of the community involves a learning process and continued community knowledge to be manifested in daily application.

Nicoletta tells a similar story about delving into the church community during graduate school in order to maintain a spiritual knowledge base. In this story, Nicoletta is talking about a faculty member and advisor of a student organization she participated in who was also one of the central members of the church when she first began graduate school:

I remember him saying [graduate school] could be a hiatus from life, especially the spiritual life. And that struck me because I had just gone through orientation. I had just processed how busy the next two years of my life were going to be, and I could already sense this temptation to say okay I’m just going to do school for the next two years of my life and then things can go back to normal and I can be a normal human being again. And I just thought of that word hiatus and being in limbo for two years, and I felt in that moment, no I’m not going to do that.

In this statement, Nicoletta recognizes a temptation to focus only on the kind of learning she is doing in school, but she does not see this separation as a positive thing. Instead Nicoletta focuses on tying the two together, as we will explore more specifically in Chapter 4. As a result, she

decided to foster relationships in a Christian graduate student organization as well as the church, which were both places where she could grow spiritually. In one, she could have conversations about what it means to be a person of faith in an academic discipline. In the other, she could learn more about spiritual practices and theology, especially from preaching. She indicates that it was important to her that the pastor of the church at the time was also an academic who would often exposit Scripture from a critical approach in his sermons. Thus she sees the sermons and teaching from the church as part of her growth as an individual just as her academic studies were.

In these stories, all three participants talk about church and faith communities as being intellectually important in terms of their spirituality as well as providing a place of belonging and deep relationships. At least two participants, Clara and Nicoletta, found that having this kind of community was particularly relevant during their graduate education. Clara puts it this way:

I think when you're in grad school you're being educated by these really well-educated people and these experts in the field all the time and I'm like I could probably really use that in my faith—I need someone who has actually been trained to tell me what is actually meant here.

Thus spiritual growth within the church is not dissimilar from the intellectual growth individuals undertake in their graduate education. In fact, many Christians see these things as equally important. Herein lies the question of how those two areas—Spiritual commitments and academic intellectualism—influence one another as individuals participate simultaneously in each community.

Church and Tower

Throughout the following chapters, I tell many stories from my own experience and from my talks with Clara, Laura, and Nicoletta. My initial purpose in collecting these stories and in

sharing them with you was and continues to be one of understanding a limited perspective on what it means to be part of academic and faith communities simultaneously. At the same time, I remain aware that these community spaces and relationships are developed out of institutions and all of the assumptions, power structures, and messiness that comes out of them. Thus in the title of this project, I intentionally separate the structural perceptions of the steepled Church and the Ivory Tower of academia while simultaneously placing an intense focus on the individual people who permeate and shift the boundaries of those spaces.

In their discussions of Hope Church, it is important to note that “spiritual guidance” was not necessarily the primary focus of participants when talking about church as a community. While this factor certainly comes into play, all three participants house spirituality or religious knowledge as only one piece of church alongside things like relationships, service, place-making, and a central piece of their identity as Christians. This stands in contrast to participant descriptions of their academic communities, which don’t discount relationships but emphasize things like collegiality, professionalism, and disciplinary knowledge. While friendship is certainly not precluded in academic spaces, an emphasis on academic learning is emphasized here whereas relational connections are the primary focus when discussing church community.

In addition, participants see overlap between their personal learning and their faith, as we will see in later chapters, but also tell stories of separation between the two communities that are important to pay attention to. At one point in our interview, Laura describes her ideological position between academic and church communities in terms of her spatial position living between the physical church building and campus. In such a small town—no more than a few miles wide in any direction—this spatial proximity was one that allowed her to keep the communities somewhat separate but not without inevitable overlap. This is true of my own

experience as well: seeing people from campus at church and vice versa, Christmas services held in a large rented space on campus, fundraiser dinners for college organizations hosted on campus by members of the church, etc. The physical boundaries existed, but they often blurred or shifted.

Because of the close relationship between Hope Church and the University, participants' stories about holding space in between or in both communities are particularly complicated.

When participants describe the church as a community, they are mostly positive in their responses, as one can see in their provocations of things like home, family, and learning as valued factors. However, no community comes without conflict; and, in the following chapter, I show how participants define some perceived community expectations that, at times, contrast with how they describe the ideal purposes of the community here.

CHAPTER 3: COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

I was born in the church.

Not literally, but my family has been deeply involved in Evangelical churches since before I can remember. Faith is a core principle in the structure of our family, and so is going to church. My maternal grandmother, at 96 years of age, is currently the oldest living member of her church—the same church where my parents met, married, and currently attend. My late paternal grandmother was recently celebrated as the longest standing member of the same church as she had been a member of the community for more than 80 years—since her own childhood.

Like my own parents, I was raised in the Baptist tradition, primarily in two different churches, both of about 50-150 members at the time. We were at church faithfully Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, Wednesday evenings, and often at other fellowship or outreach functions during the week. Many of my closest friendships and social interactions took place at or around church and youth group. Still today, friendships that I've developed in the church communities I have participated in over the years are those that stick with me and follow me from place to place.

These church communities were a core aspect of my social and intellectual development throughout my formative years and into adulthood; however, growing up in the church also comes with its fair share of baggage. The more I experience in this world, the more I realize how much work I have done and have left to do to reshape my own experience following church community expectations around gender, sexuality, social ideology, theology, friendships, romantic relationships, parenting, and countless other matters that affect daily life.

Clara, Laura, and Nicoletta all define the Hope Church community as a vital component of their lives, both during graduate school and at other times. At the same time, participants indicated that a high level of commitment to the community does not preclude a disconnect between their deep connection to that space and some of the expectations that come out of their relationships there. Participants said that they are often assumed to hold values and knowledges in common with other members of the Hope Church community; however, those assumed values at times conflict with participants' intellectual communities and the ways they have defined their faith for themselves. Since we see in the previous chapter that participants value not only the place-making and relational aspects of Hope Church but also ways of knowledge-making, it is important to understand some of the key areas in which they have diverged from or redefined those knowledges while still working to maintain the relationships.

In the rest of this chapter, I explore two subject areas that emerged from participants' stories as holding particularly salient tensions in negotiating their church and academic communities: political leanings and gender roles. Drawing upon participants' understanding of Hope Church as personally important to their development of home, family, and faith as seen in Chapter 2, I work here to demonstrate some of the ways in which community expectations around political policy and gender identity complicate those connections. I end the chapter by returning briefly to why participants see relationships within the Hope Church community as important enough to preserve their function in that space in spite of ideological differences. In the following chapters, I explore in more depth how participants negotiate those tensions in their personal faith and ideologies and as members of their church and intellectual communities.

Political Assumptions

I don't think I knew until college that there were Evangelical Christians in the U.S. who voted Democrat.

At the end of my freshman year, I largely considered myself “a-political.” In hindsight, I believe this was a reaction to no longer being able to reconcile Republican politics with the growth in intellectual thought and freedom that occurs for many college students. However, I was unwilling to concede the Republican “principles” I imagined belonged to me after being raised in churches where members and ideologies were primarily (and unquestioningly) conservative.

I was still in college during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. By this time, I was dating someone whose entire family supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries and then enthusiastically voted for Barack Obama when Hillary lost the nomination. As the November poll results were coming in, I sat with friends on the unofficial “Democrat side” of the room in the Student Union where newscasts were being live streamed on projectors usually used for Bible lectures and donor presentations. The excitement among my friends was tangible, and while I am sorry to say that I did not vote that year, I found myself hoping for a Democratic candidate and able to articulate that hope for the first time.

By the time I started graduate studies, my political views had shifted dramatically. It was my first time in a public academic institution, and I was excited to pursue knowledge with “like-minded” individuals in a program that was largely “liberal” in its philosophies. Instead of seamlessly participating in conversations, however, I found myself often balking at what I saw as equally dogmatic perspectives about how the world works and harsh judgment upon the character of anyone who thought differently. It seemed that people could only draw upon one of a handful of options in negotiating the world and its social issues.

One of the primary differences between many white Evangelical faith communities and many academic communities—and perhaps one of the most difficult to navigate—is the stark contrast in political ideologies that are typically assigned to those communities. As one participant noted, the familiar story that emerges from both spaces and outsiders is that many academics in the U.S. espouse democratic or liberal ideals while church members in primarily white Evangelical denominations often favor a more republican or conservative party line (Jones 2016)⁶. In today’s political climate, each group seems to fear the other, and the idea that there could be any crossover between the two communities is often overlooked or dismissed.

These stories around political factions are further complicated when we understand some of the ways in which churchgoers deeply associate their political ideologies with their spiritual practice and sense of morality (Jones, 2016; Lindsay, 2007; Crowley, 2006). I might argue as well that many academics do something similar when they tie their political sensibilities to their intellectualism, which can also play a large role in self-worth. Thus an individual who inhabits both communities may find themselves in a precarious position of needing to justify their political and/or faith commitments to others who participate in that space. In addition, this negotiation can create something of an internal crisis as one struggles to define their place in each ideological space without fully participating in either community narrative.

Laura spoke at length about discovering areas of deep political and ideological disagreement through the 2016 election that have forced her to think more carefully about her political beliefs in light of her faith and commitment to a church community. She says that more

⁶ In his 2017 Chronicle of Higher Education article “[Professors and Politics](#),” Scott Jaschik cites several studies that indicate that the majority of professors in higher education identify as moderate, partially, or fully “liberal.” However, findings are dependent on many factors, such as age, discipline, location, and even whether or not they teach graduate students. In addition, most of the cited studies were concluded prior to the current election cycle.

recent conversations around politics have affected her view of the church, and she sees this as a key area in which she comes up against community expectations with which she disagrees. Laura said that she had known that church members often hold conservative views, but she indicated surprise at finding those would be extended to support someone she finds so objectionable as a conservative presidential candidate as Donald Trump. Talking about her close Christian family members, Laura extended this discovery to similar views found within Evangelical churches such as Hope: “So if these amazing Christians that I love and respect voted for Trump? What about all these other Christians that I don’t know? That vote for me is symbolic of a lot of things.” Within this statement, Laura expresses surprise not at the fact that Christians might vote Republican but that they would actively support the views of someone who has been so publicly divisive and vocally supportive of what many see as oppressive policies. Not only does a vote for Trump indicate a level of acceptance of those things, but Laura’s statements demonstrate surprise that individuals in her family and the church start to vocalize similar opinions.

In addition, Laura stated that she often doesn’t understand why other people in her community who claim to share her faith don’t feel about political and social justice issues the way that she does. She credits her understanding of Christian faith as playing a large role in her desire to study and work toward things like gender and racial equality, but while Laura’s individual understanding of her faith solidifies her commitment to her work, it also brings a tension to her relationship with other Christians who do not understand the importance of this work in quite the same way. When Laura’s commitment to racial justice is reflected in the political policies that she supports, they often run contrary to the expectations of those people in the church that she attends.

Laura indicated that she is more willing to approach political conversations in academic circles where she can be more confident in her colleagues holding many of her political views in common. But even in academic spaces, there are certain issues in which she does not hold the party line and thus avoids as topics of conversation. One area of potential disagreement that she named is the issue of abortion. Laura has complicated feelings about the morality of abortion and the legislative policies around its legality. Drawing upon my own experience of similar feelings, I take her hesitation to bring up the topic around her colleagues as reflecting an assumption that she would immediately be seen as “conservative” and not given the chance to explain those opinions. She talked about not having the time or emotional energy to enter conversations in which she knows (or assumes) that there will be disagreement. Within this statement lies the idea that others will not necessarily be open to hearing ideas different from their own, and Laura admitted (with a laugh) that she’s not open to changing her mind on certain things either.

Clara similarly expressed frustration with political views that feature prominently in the Hope Church community. Clara spoke specifically about being approached on the way into services by individuals encouraging a political vote, incorrectly assuming that because she is at the church, she supports a particular political party:

I have been at church, I have been, I kind of laugh, but not accosted, but on the way into service you know—you need to vote for this person! Because this person isn’t, you know, they’re not Right enough and this and this and this. And I’m like, I’m just walking into church! You know? And I’m not voting for any of these people because none of them are congruent with my belief structure. But there’s almost this sense that if you’re here, you believe it.

Clara expresses in this story a level of disbelief that church would be a place where people would make such strong political statements while at the same time indicating frustration with the assumption that she would hold the same political line. Clara went on to say that she is willing to have political conversations with people who really want to talk and to listen, but when it comes to addressing political opinions in a church setting, she tends to avoid the issue unless she sees direct harm coming from someone's statements.

While the members of the Hope Church community may be more forward about their expectations around political beliefs, members of academic communities can be similarly uncritical about their own assumptions regarding Christians. Laura talked through some of these assumptions she has experienced in academic spaces:

Just like anything [my colleagues] have kind of preconceived ideas of what that means to be a Christian or what it means to go to church. So there will be comments every now and then about Bible-thumpers or associating Christians with the alt right. In the whole Trump era I think especially Christians are kind of getting associated with—and some of them rightfully are associated with—these racist ideologies and so it's interesting to kind of associate myself as a Christian and a liberal—not a Christian conservative who supports Trump and all these other things. So that gets really messy really quick I think. [pause] It's something you have to ease into. To let people know that you are a Christian. And it's not that I'm afraid to say that I am a Christian—that's who I am. But I do think it's important to approach claiming that identity and talking about that with other academics in a way that isn't throwing it in their face because that is what they'll feel like if they're not Christians. [You also have to] make the connection between, as a Christian I believe in racial justice, and I believe in gender equality and I believe that because I

know that God has created me and everyone around me as children of God that he loves, and that's a big part of why I want to do racial justice research. And so when I can make those connections for people I think it's easier to talk about my faith with people. Some people are just really put off by the church to be completely honest. They've had bad experiences with it; they've had bad experiences with conservative Christians critiquing their research.

I quote Laura at length here because in addition to expressing assumptions academics hold about Christians, I see her working through some of her own assumptions and frustrations around Christians who support conservative parties without considering some of the larger ideological issues at stake. She struggles to find a way to be confident in her role in a Christian community while also seeing their expected political beliefs amongst academics as a major flaw from which she seeks to separate herself. Instead of resenting the way academics see Christians, she takes on the task of explaining herself and her beliefs as a member of a Christian community.

Clara also said that while she does not always agree with her colleagues about political issues, she is more bothered by the ways church members expect her to vote—supporting the parties they support based on ideological assumptions. While Clara was able to skillfully support her political ideologies in connection to her faith in conversation with me, she also said that she struggles with how to represent her politics to other members of the Hope Church community. Based on similar struggles of my own, I speculate that this feeling is in part because of the intimate connection between faith and politics in some faith communities like Hope: to question a conservative stance can open one up to having their personal faith and connection to God questioned in turn. Simultaneously, Laura's story about Christians being seen as "Bible-thumpers" indicates that her identity as a Christian can lead to questions around one's

intellectualism in some academic spaces. In the following two chapters, I will explore in more depth how participants negotiate these differences by understanding their liminality and finding ways to reconcile their personal belief systems across community discourses.

Gender Expectations

When Ben and I were talking about getting married, I worried about the fact that he wanted to be a pastor of a church. We were still in college at the time, and my newly formed sense of feminism caused me to balk at the idea of being “The Pastor’s Wife.” My experience in Baptist churches both growing up and at the time told me that “Pastor’s Wife” was largely a faceless individual who dressed modestly, stayed home full time with her children, and graciously played piano or ran the nursery on Sunday mornings while ceaselessly supporting her husband’s career and protecting his morality. While this view was somewhat cynical and not entirely in keeping with reality, I had also seen that pastors in the faith traditions to which I was accustomed are subject to a kind of scrutiny that leaves not only their lives but those of their families open to judgment not often seen in other professions. In my mind, this made my own hopes for a career either untenable or subject to an uphill battle that I wasn’t sure I wanted to take on.

We did get married. I have been the wife of a seminarian. I have been The Pastor’s Wife and likely will be again. I have been the wife of a grad student and a career academic because all of these expectations for ourselves and our futures constantly shift and change. Gender expectations in all of these roles and my own decision-making are each a study in themselves.

In interviewing three women, and as a woman myself, gender roles quickly emerged as a common theme in the interviews and therefore a relevant topic of discussion. Women’s roles

continue to be a salient topic in Evangelical churches as they are continually shifting, and at times the topic causes great division. Gender also continues to be a topic of discussion in academic circles as women across disciplines continue to be asked to take on more (and different) responsibilities than their male counterparts while receiving less promotion and compensation (Hatch, 2017). Two of my participants self-identified as “feminists” and contrasted that identity with gender roles as they perceive them in the Hope Church community.

There is a common story in Evangelical communities that associates women with roles of nurturing that are connected primarily to family life and “taking care” rather than sharing knowledge. At Hope Church, this story has been presented directly through church doctrine and organizational documents that forbid women from holding the position of head pastor and restrict the roles they can play as leaders and teachers. Someone willing to speak up in favor of women’s leadership or pastoral roles would likely have been met with the response that the official stance of the church leadership is that pastoral and eldership roles are ordained only to men. Women, then, are left to negotiate their roles in the background. This separation of genders is, in large part, supported by interpretations of Scripture and church history; however, I see participants drawing upon core concepts of their faith in tandem with their experience of feminism to resist these same stories.

Clara responds to a question about remaining in both academic and faith communities and conflicts therein by speaking directly of her role as a woman at Hope Church:

I think most of the time those worlds are very separate from one another. I guess another piece, to add it in, is the church’s perception of women as well. I would be a feminist. So that doesn’t necessarily fit in historically with the church’s perspective.

Here, Clara finds that her participation in the Hope Church as an educated woman and professional is sometimes hampered by the community's perception of gender roles. In addition, Clara chooses to separate herself from the "church's perception" by identifying as feminist.

I have encountered the word "feminist" in other ways within Hope Church that seem to make feminism a story that is incongruous with the community's perspective. I recall a conversation with a woman friend in which we were talking about our dissatisfaction with the lack of female leadership and the expectations for women's roles within their families. While we mostly agreed on the issue, this friend began her thoughts about her own role as a working mom with a caveat: "I'm not a feminist, but..." Within Hope Church—a church that was also politically conservative in much of its leadership at the time—the identity of "feminist" has been something of a dirty word, an identity spoken only in whispers or with like-minded people. Thus simply by taking on and admitting to this identity, Clara and Laura resist the community's perception of who women ought to be and what roles they ought to fulfill.

Clara spoke at length about how her presence as a woman in the church complicates her role in the community and at times leads to frustration and feelings of being invisible. She says that her position in the church is often assumed to be one that is largely associated with the family, indicating that she is not often credited for her professional expertise. Clara says that she is rarely asked about her work at church because it may be largely assumed that she is a stay-at-home mom or does not maintain an active professional career:

What I think is fascinating, I tell [my husband], you know I'm educated, got my PhD, work full time, right? I have probably been asked by men in our church what I do for a living maybe once or twice. I've been there for maybe...13 years? So I actually have a pretty big disconnect because people don't actually know or choose to view me as a

worker. They view me as a mom, they ask me how my kids are. I can teach in Sunday School, you know? I can offer trainings for women [laughs].

In this statement, Clara emphasizes that it is men in the church who do not acknowledge that she may play a role in the world outside of her home and family. Similarly to Laura's comments on her discomfort with the primarily-male leadership, Clara seems to say that those who hold power within the congregation (men) make the assumption that women don't play leadership roles in any area, both within the church and without. She went on to broaden this perspective to a pervasive disenfranchisement of many people in the church:

We have a lot of really, really high levels of education at the church, or at least start at the church, and to discount all of the knowledge and expertise that those individuals bring, in part simply because of their gender, I'm not okay with that.

While Clara's statement speaks to many individuals in the church not being valued for their expertise, she takes issue particularly with the reasons around gender. Clara directly links the ignored aspect of her expert position to her role as a wife and mother, emphasizing that her gender plays a key role in how she is typically perceived within the community.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, some of Hope Church's leadership forced the resignation of a beloved long-time pastor in a tumultuous moment during my time there. Clara said this time was especially painful when men in leadership discounted not just her voice but the ability of all women to contribute to a conversation that affected everyone. Clara joked that if there had been women elders on the board, the whole situation would have been handled differently:

On a lot of levels. Had you consulted with one or two females, it wouldn't have gone down that way, because they would have said stop! I tell [my husband] that all the time:

you cannot communicate that way! You cannot interact that way. Think of these things, and I think it would have gone a whole lot better.

Here Clara indicates that the rhetorical choices made by the men in leadership resulted in a lot of hurt feelings and unnecessary conflict. From her statement, I gather that she feels as though—even if the end result of the pastor’s resignation had remained the same—if the things women in the church were saying had been heard, the process could have involved more openness and dialogue. Things would not have been communicated or decided in the same way, and more compassionate responses may have spared some relationships. Instead, by discounting the voices of half the church, the male elders chose to enact their own leadership styles and ignore the consequences of their rhetorical choices rather than being open to multiple possibilities when others—mostly women—noted the ways their actions were hurting individuals and families.

Clara’s frustration in the matter of transition is yet another reminder of what is lost when women are tied to family but not given other value. At the same time as the church community’s emphasis on family can lead to married women not being recognized for the other roles that they play, it also holds implications for single women negotiating their identity in that space.

Nicoletta talked about being a single woman and a scholar in a church where families are highly valued and women are valued for their association with family:

One thing [I and other singles] noticed was that singles were called to do a lot because we supposedly had margin because we didn’t have children or families, but at the same time we it felt like we were the most excluded from the most thriving and vital parts of the church activities and how the church thought of itself and functioned.

Without the commodity of family life, a single woman is reduced to “available time” that can be used to serve those families via such activities as cooking meals, providing childcare, and

serving in spaces where those with family commitments have “less” time. Rather than being valued for such skills as research and public speaking, a woman academic without a family is expected to contribute to the community while remaining on the margins as an expert. Later, Nicoletta mentioned her experience at a church she attended after graduating and moving to another city. Here, Nicoletta said, she was hardly ever asked to cook a meal. Instead, she was able to serve in ways that better used her skills as related to her expertise—such as public speaking and leadership roles.

When asked to discuss differences between her academic field and Hope Church, Laura also quickly identified women’s roles as one of the areas she experiences discomfort in her church community:

I think that it’s hard as an academic and a feminist to go to church and not pick up on some of the elements of imbalance between power afforded to women and men in the church. So you go to [Hope Church] and you look at who is in leadership there—they’re all predominantly white men. Women don’t really have a speaking role there in the service, which bothered me a lot. Other than maybe making some announcements or singing in the worship band. So that always bothered me a little bit.

Laura notices here that women seem to be discouraged from certain roles in the congregation as evidenced by where they are present and where their presence seems to be lacking. Within this statement is an assumption that women *would* take on those roles if they were encouraged to do so. Laura goes on to say that she understands that the global Evangelical church is still predominantly led by men. Because of this, and based on her past experiences, she has come to expect mostly men to be in leadership. Regardless, she says she is still bothered by the fact that

there were no women on the elder board that made administrative decisions, let alone standing in front of the church to lead worship or preach a sermon.

While participants primarily talked about their identity as women within the church during the interviews, it is important to note here that I had further conversations with both Clara and Laura about new motherhood as an academic. At the time of these interviews, I had recently given birth to my first-born and was navigating the difficult transition of caring for an infant while continuing roles of teaching, research, and service as a graduate student in a robust department and growing field. Both Laura and Clara had similar experiences and were well aware of the complications around working and studying as a mom. They offered advice, checked in to see how I was doing, and expressed understanding about my own conflicted feelings about how to split my time and energy. Woven into these conversations was the topic of the heavy expectations of academic work and the decision-making we encounter as women who continue to be burdened with the majority of caregiving roles at home. We also talked about what it means to be committed to our families in a culture that sometimes expects women academics to give more to their work than their children. Here, the word “feminist” came up again—this time as an expectation from academic spaces that women dismiss love of family in favor of work to be “true” feminists. I include this story to indicate that, while “The Academy” may be outwardly more progressive about women’s roles and gender equality, expectations of both family and intellectual work continue to create imbalance that makes discussions as and around women vital to our success and wellbeing.

While Clara and Laura’s emphasis on women’s roles in the church and self-identification as feminists could also be considered “political,” there are nuances that make this issue both related to and separate from expectations around political beliefs. As women who are pushed to

the margins in a community so essential to their faith identity, Clara and Laura experience uncertainty about their roles in that community in a very personal way. I, too, felt this acutely being married to a member of the all-male leadership but not having the ability to speak into that leadership except through my partner. Furthermore, as women, we discussed our understanding that pushing on those boundaries as women would at times risk relationships within Hope Church that we were not always willing (or able) to lose

Risking Relationship

Never before and never since have I been to a church that likes to party like people partied at Hope. While church-people parties are far from the drunken frat-house revels one might picture, people were constantly meeting up for a beer, hosting potlucks and wine-tastings in the winter, grilling on the deck in summer, and generally just having fun together.

Frequently, these parties included alcohol, and almost always I felt a level of comfort among friends that I didn't always find in other places—like with colleagues. At the same time, this level of comfort shifted depending on who was in the group. Often, those who held power over Ben's position as interim pastor were not only present but hosting. Thus, we would often review our conversations together following these social functions to be sure that neither of us had said anything "objectionable." Most of the time, we were fine. Sometimes, one of us (usually me) had become too free in their political or social opinions and we would worry about what might come of a flippant comment or turn of phrase.

These parties were some of the best moments of the three years I spent calling that town "home." As a pastor's wife in a culture of intense pastoral scrutiny, they were also exhausting.

In all of my interviews, participants indicated discomfort in disagreeing with members of their church community. Often, they cited common beliefs as one of the foundations of their relationship to that community, and disagreement often feels like a loss of that commonality. At the same time, they expressed that difference of belief is oftentimes respected by academic colleagues, if not always understood. In the rest of this chapter, I propose that the difficulty of navigating ideological differences within the church community comes in large part from a desire to maintain relationships—a desire that conflict may threaten. Laura indicated that part of the reason she was able to build in-depth relationships quickly when she first came to Hope Church is because of a shared system of beliefs and practices. It is this kind of unity that makes the church community unique, and introducing a threat to that unity is a risk to the relationships she and others depended on.

In my interviews with participants, political leanings consistently arose as a topic that provoked some of the most complicated feelings in connection with Hope Church. While all three participants expressed concern about the way they could represent themselves as Christians in their academic environments, an even more prominent concern was that of their relationships, particularly with other Christians. While those relationships are often built upon and solidified by shared beliefs and values, they can be threatened by an outward expression of those values that takes shape in political commitments.

Laura in particular focused on the current political climate and her relationship to other Christians in light of such, speaking at length about the 2016 election as placing a strain on her relationships with other Christians, including family members. She indicates that maybe she never really realized before the power that politics have in faith communities and “the way they influence our relations with each other.” In this instance, Laura speaks of her Christian

community as not only the church but also her family. In her case, she said, the recent election cycle started many conversations with family members that were surprising to her, causing some strain in familial bonds that are also characterized by shared faith.

When relationships built on a shared faith are called into question because of political commitments, there seems to be an especial sense of betrayal. I posit that this comes from finding that the values you assume you share as a Christian—many of which are learned from family members—are suddenly deeply shaken, which makes one wonder if those bonds can hold. Laura says she would sometimes hear Christian family members make certain comments to which her only response would be “We completely disagree with that!” or “How can you not see it this way?” She talks about her family members as being people who have influenced her faith and who she loves and respects, but political conversations can reveal that some of those core values are in fact drastically contrary in practice. This means that she has to find new ways of being in relationship with people who on the one hand are aligned when it comes to core principles of faith but in social practice are deeply opposed.

On the other hand, Laura admits that she often makes similar assumptions of her own, finding that she assumes most Christians vote a certain way and therefore will not be interested in the social justice topics that she finds important. While relationships in a church can encourage openness and vulnerability in some matters—as in Laura’s small group study when talking about family commitments or negotiating daily life—there are other matters that may be carefully avoided because individuals are unwilling to approach potential areas of strong disagreement. Laura indicated that she would have political conversations with some church friends, but they were when she knew that those friends would share some of her frustration and anger with the current political situation. Interestingly, she indicates that in those situations

where she felt she could share political views at Hope Church, at least one of the spouses in those couples was also an academic.

While explaining her faith commitments to colleagues can also be complicated, it is in an academic setting that Laura (generally) felt she could freely express her political beliefs. Laura is able to build relationships with colleagues who also express frustration with conservative friends and family members and finds a safe space among fellow academics to talk about navigating those relationships. Laura talked about sharing stories in the office workspace in which colleagues would vent about social issues as a community when she would not share similar concerns in a church community. Thus her academic community becomes a space to talk about political ideology similar to the way that Laura's small-group faith community is a space to talk about faith, family, and prayer, but the two seem to remain largely separate.

Clara admitted that she takes a "quiet perspective" on many political issues because speaking about them doesn't seem to change anything on either side. However, she does find that she can have more productive conversations with church members who she considers close friends, and she says that she will speak up when she sees direct harm coming from certain comments. One person Clara feels she can speak to about controversial issues in a productive manner is her husband. Clara indicated that because her partner listens to her with the intention of asking questions and holding dialogue, they often meet in the middle on issues, or at the very least can respect each other's viewpoints. Similarly, she finds that she does have some friendships within the church that support dialogue and a genuine desire to know another person. Thus it is often the deep relationships that can grow from common faith that allow space for challenging ideological beliefs rather than the larger organization of the church.

While certainly relationships in any form are important in forming a community, stories about relationships with other women emerged in interviews as being especially salient to the participants' experiences of church community. Both Laura and Clara spoke specifically about small groups of women or experiences learning from women that have formed the way they think about their church community and affect their spiritual wellbeing. They tell these stories in contrast to the common narrative that instruction in Evangelical church spaces is dominated by male leadership as well as a way to push back against the reality of that narrative.

Clara also talked about the importance of her relationships to women in the church in light of her experience learning from them in “acceptable” social venues—such as women’s Bible studies and one-on-one friendships. She said that she wishes that the church community as a whole would be more willing to benefit from such wisdom. I note this as something in my own experience as well, where church is one of the spaces in which most of my mentorship and learning comes from other women, but these opportunities are mostly relegated to smaller spaces or informal relationships sought out on the part of the individuals rather than as an organized aspect of the faith community. Laura also mentioned learning in the space of a women’s small group as an important relational aspect of the community. It was largely here that she found space to discuss matters of faith, marriage, and family. She says that even when she disagreed with these women on ideological or political stances, this community was one that contributed to her growth and wellbeing as an individual. In these stories, I see Clara and Laura showing some frustration with Hope Church’s patriarchal leadership structure that doesn’t always account for the relationships they find most valuable. At the same time, they are sometimes unwilling to risk those relationships over ideological differences because they are some of the most important aspects of the church community.

In and Across

One of the things that all participants cited as important to their relationship with their church community is the fact that they share something in common. While having commonality itself is important, those things that are actually shared can shift and change. At times, participants expressed discomfort with the idea that sometimes their views drastically differ from those held by other Christians. In these instances, participants have to do the work of finding spaces of commonality, especially when it comes to politics. On the one hand, they find that their political views are not always in keeping with the common views of other church members. On the other hand, their political perspectives may differ from their academic colleagues because of the faith-related reasons they have for holding them. Thus, an individual's political stance becomes a complex area of liminality where some participants had trouble pinpointing a place of "belonging" in either community.

In terms of gender, participants indicated frustration with a patriarchal leadership structure at Hope Church where men hold the "official" leadership positions and women's roles are often relegated to family functions or relationships with other women. Nicoletta and Clara in particular expressed that their expertise is not always valued as women at Hope Church, and Clara wishes that more members of the church could benefit from the wisdom she has found in other women. In spite of—or perhaps even because of—these frustrations, participants highly value their relationships with other women in the church and are not always willing to risk those relationships over political or ideological disagreement. They find that common belief structures are foundational to relationships and that navigating difference at times requires a light touch as they continue to hold those relationships dear.

Across political expectations, gender roles, and valued relationships within Hope Church, participants hold a tricky balance in which they seek to remain true to their own beliefs while also functioning in spaces where people might find those beliefs surprising or even objectionable. In the next chapter, I explore “faith and learning” as a rhetorical practice that helps participants to reconcile their experiences and views from both their church and academic communities while finding a way to constellate relationships across multiple kinds of knowledge. In Chapter 5, I will tell some stories about how “faith and learning” as a rhetorical and individual practice allows participants to build and hold this precarious space.

CHAPTER 4: INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING

My research process and my stance in it, the research origins and my own, the representations that invariably include my presence have always been entwined.

Devika Chawla (2007) “Between Stories and Theories,” p. 17

It's May of 2010: Athens, Greece. My companions and I walk through the late morning heat of the eerily quiet Syntagma square, our steps echoing on the warm stones. Flyers still litter the walkways, and the smell of teargas lingers in the air, making my nostrils prickle and my eyes water.

On May 5, 2010, protests against the Greek government's proposed austerity measures turned violent. What started as strikes and demonstrations turned into a push on the parliament building where riot police responded with tear gas and smoke bombs.

On our walk to the square, we pass the burned-out wreckage of a bank and several cars. Windows are smashed, and glass glitters on the sidewalks.

In Athens for a college study abroad trip, our professors and chaperones struggle to explain to us the political significance of the protests while also trying not to let on just how dangerous the city is in this moment.

Old men sunning themselves in front of their tourist-serving shops wave their hands and laugh, saying that everything will come around again in the end. Young people hooded in black crowd the subways, cheerfully furious at a government that had taken advantage of the country's prosperity in the early 2000s and is now making their citizens pay as Europe's economy collapses with that of the rest of the western world.

A few days later, we've gathered on the Areopagus—an open rock on the side of the hill topped with the famous Parthenon of Athens. The New Testament professor opens a small Bible to the book of Acts and reads a sermon delivered by the Apostle Paul in this spot centuries before. The voice of this small, aging man carries clearly over the open space in spite of a stiff breeze and crowds passing up the steep road to the ruins above.

In her essay, Chawla talks about needing to find the “limens” between story and theory because both story and theory are lived but are named differently when it comes to identity, history, family, and academic research. She says, “To be apart from what I do is alien to me” (17). The deeper I sink into this writing, the harder it is to separate the ideas of “theory” and “theology.” The terms start to be interchangeable to some extent. To me, theology is a theory of Scripture and interpretations of living a life that comes of those understood truths. Thus all stories and theories that I learn are also theological: they influence and are influenced by my understanding of Scripture. These things are thus also intimately tied to my personal sense of morality: as a person, in relationships to people and ideas, and as a researcher. All of these things thus affect my daily “testimony.” Once they are understood, they must be lived. This doesn't mean my understanding of theology, academic theory, or stories can't shift and change, but it automatically must and does affect the way I live day to day. To me “wrestling” with theory is higher stakes than simply being able to understand; I must understand knowing that I also must make decisions about how it will change me as a person; how it will alter the way I relate to those around me spiritually.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, academic and faith communities both come with stories—expectations about ideologies and the rhetorics that are employed in each space. Members of academic communities tell a story about engaging in “critical thinking,” which can lead to a certain set of ideological beliefs that is often seen as running contrary to the stories told in a Christian community such as a church. In this chapter, I borrow a phrase from Nicoletta to show that there are indeed ways participants employ critical thinking and disciplinary knowledge to understand and explore their personal faith. By connecting “faith and learning,” participants build new knowledges that help them navigate areas of disconnect between their church and academic communities. In the first part of this chapter, I will explore what Nicoletta means by the phrase “faith and learning.” In the second half, I will demonstrate how I see this practice of faith and learning expressed across participant stories as well as my own.

As indicated by the name of the cultural rhetorics flagship journal, *constellations*, constellating is a central tenet of much of the cultural rhetorics work people are doing. In their “Welcome” to the journal, Malea Powell and Alexandra Hidalgo talk about building “constellative spaces” as a practice in co-creation in responsible and reciprocal relationship. In their introduction to a cultural rhetorics-focused special issue of *enculturation*, Phil Bratta and Malea Powell say that “Constellative practice emphasizes the degree to which knowledge is never built by individuals but is, instead, accumulated through collective practices within specific communities” (par 12). They go on to draw from the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2014) to say that constellating allows for “multiply-situated subjects” to draw upon their multiple knowledges, practices, and discourses to make meaning that can shift and change as those relationships continue to develop (Act I, par. 2). When building rhetorics of faith and learning, participants tell stories that constellate many practices, ways of knowing, and

ideological commitments. In the second part of this chapter, I share participant stories about how difficult it is to engage in conversation that brings together community practices and ideologies from both academic and church contexts. At the same time, participants' constellations demonstrate that it is necessary to do this work to better build a concept of personal faith and practice.

In their responses, I see participants crafting rhetorical strategies and spaces to bring together academic and faith communities and the ideas they represent in their own knowledge, practices, and belief systems. Here I use participants' constellations of those knowledges to demonstrate that rather than fully separating these worlds, they use them to explain their unique ideologies, bringing together the stories that are centered in each community to create stories of their own. To better understand those stories, in this chapter, I explore the concept of "faith and learning" as a rhetorical practice of using critical thinking strategies valued by academic communities to both question and solidify faith commitments. Simultaneously, I show how participants use their commitment to their faith to explain and understand intellectual moments. It is not my intention here to create a binary between critical thinking as an "intellectual" practice and faith as a purely "spiritual" practice. While I borrow this binary temporarily to differentiate between these communities, this chapter will demonstrate how there are overlaps and grey areas in rhetorical spaces between faith and learning.

Faith and Learning: A Relational Theory

Paul's sermon addresses the crowd who gathered to hear and to judge the new information he was presenting about a God he claimed is more powerful than the gods represented in countless shrines and altars throughout the city. The citizens (men) of Athens in this day were known for their commitment to both spiritual and intellectual rigor, and Paul's

sermon reflects this as he acknowledges their thirst for learning and desire to know Truth. While Paul was attacked and chased out of other cities, in Athens he was invited to address this audience at the Areopagus (High Court) because his message of faith in the Highest power was not a matter of religion but of intellect and learning.

Nicoletta talked at length about the concept of “faith and learning” and the integration of academic theory with theological understanding. I borrow the phrase from her in this chapter to discuss a fusion of these two worlds: church and academia. While this phrase is often employed in religious academic spaces—such as Evangelical colleges, universities, and seminaries—Nicoletta uses it to talk about finding and creating resonance between her experiences in graduate school and those in the church. Other participants did not mention this phrase specifically, but I also see them talking about ways that their faith and disciplinary learning influence one another, thereby creating rhetorical strategies that fall somewhere between the narratives that might be “typical” of these two worlds. I call faith and learning a relational theory because in tying these two words together as a phrase, Nicoletta indicates a close relationship between academic and religious narratives. In addition, Nicoletta talks about faith and learning as a practice that affects her relationship to her communities as well as to her research. As a researcher doing work in my own church community, faith and learning takes on an additional importance to this project as a means of storying the in-between spaces that often go unseen.

According to Nicoletta, one of her primary reasons for participating in faith communities while doing her academic work is that the relationships built therein help her to integrate her faith knowledges with her academic learning. Nicoletta described the integration of faith and learning as central to not only her academic work but also her values as an individual and

member of several kinds of faith communities that may be both academic and spiritual in nature. According to Nicoletta, the “integration of faith and learning [is] an intentional application of the Christian worldview and the Christian lens to the study that you do.” She went on to describe this integration as taking on two forms, one of which is about your reasons for doing work as a scholar and artist and the other being about crossover in subject matter. For Nicoletta, this means that she brings concepts from her faith into her work and the things that she studies. For instance, not only will she ask about histories and cultural contexts around a particular play she might be reading, but she will also consider the way that play alters, integrates with, or calls into question her Christian worldview. Similarly, Clara described her practice in psychology and trauma therapy as incorporating spiritual elements because of the qualitative research that she values. While some in her field devalue qualitative scholarship and spirituality, Clara sees them as working in tandem and strengthening her clinical knowledge. Both women see their academic and professional work in context of the faith practices that they have learned within church communities and actively tie the two together.

Nicoletta also said that her presence as a Christian in an academic community directly influenced her graduate research as well as the way she approached relationships with her colleagues. She said that she was often careful to not be seen as “one of those Christians,” indicating that she does not want to be seen as close-minded but rather as someone who is open to questioning her religious beliefs in light of new information. Laura also told stories about being aware that her academic community perceived her as a person of faith, which at times caused her to shift the way she talked about social justice as an academic practice connected to her spiritual beliefs. Laura couched her reasons for doing the academic work that she does in elements of faith, and for Nicoletta, specifically bringing her faith into her research allowed her

the opportunity to discuss how academic and theoretical work both shift and define her spiritual views. Rather than seeing her faith and learning as diametrically opposed, Nicoletta finds it almost natural to be continually crafting a rhetoric that accounts for both.

As we were talking about faith and learning in our interview, Nicoletta asked me if I can pause the recording so she can get something. On my screen, I watched her push her chair back, rolling to a tall bookshelf in the background. She returned with a bound volume: her dissertation. She quickly thumbed through the final pages, taking only a few moments to land on the passage she was looking for. As she read, she told me about the research and theories that led her to the conclusions in her study, tying these directly to her personal understanding of her faith:

I study the grotesque in history and the grotesque became one of the ways in which I kind of resolved or worked around my thinking of the conflict between Christianity and theory and the postmodern, and I was drawn to it because of why metanarratives need to be dismantled as far as hierarchies of oppression and systematic or systemization of who's in power and who's oppressed. I see that also as a theme in Christianity, right? So the grotesque allows for both to somehow exist, which is why it became more solicitous than postmodernism for something to have a metanarrative but even within it be full of rupture, full of the carnivalesque, full of systems being struck down.

In her research, Nicoletta found that she sees opportunity within Christianity to deconstruct oppressive systems rather than finding the Christian narrative wholly contrary to such acts. However, I see her still thinking through the idea that a Christian metanarrative can itself become a form of oppression. Thus she reconciles this in her research through the “carnavalesque” in theatre studies to explain the “ruptures” and complications of such an idea. Instead of simplifying Christianity as just one thing, Nicoletta found it necessary to recognize the messiness

of multiple systems, perhaps with the goal of finding a more constructive way of dismantling power structures. Nicoletta's practice in building from destructive systems reflects Smith's (1999) definition of decolonial methodology. Thus I see Nicoletta enacting a decolonial practice through faith and learning and recognizing the value of her faith knowledge in her scholarship.

In the end, Nicoletta says that tying her scholarship to her faith was ultimately a positive thing while writing her dissertation. She admitted that it at times made both aspects difficult but strengthened her as both a scholar and a person of faith:

My scholarship was strengthened by the way I thought—the mental gymnastics of trying to hold my scholarship and faith kind of in tandem with one another—and was actually good for my brain... And on the other side, because I went through the intersection of religion and theater scholarship, it brought me to dark and challenging moments in my faith... But I feel like my faith life was strengthened by the choice I made to do scholarship in religion and theatre.

While intentionally intersecting faith and learning in her work at times made that work more difficult and personally taxing, Nicoletta remarked that it also made both of these knowledge areas stronger. Within this, Nicoletta implies that she does not remain unchanged by that work. Rather, she developed a new relationship with her understanding of faith while also learning how to reconcile that faith with her academic studies and some of the tensions between the two.

I have experienced similar disconnects in my work that have asked me to find space to personally come to terms with my participation in Evangelical communities in light of my research. For instance, there was a time I was studying the early California Mission system and its erroneous effects on Indigenous peoples up and down the West Coast. While doing this work, I found myself often angry with The Church in terms of Christianity at large and the practices of

mission. I could not dismiss the actions that are a part of my faith community's history, but simultaneously my experience of spiritual knowledge drawn from faith communities told me that true Christian values should have resulted in a very different practice. Cultural rhetorics offers a practice of constellating that I see reflected in Nicoletta's definition of "faith and learning" as it asks me to hold space for multiple knowledges even when that space feels incongruous or uncomfortable.

Faith and Learning: Constellations

Similar to the connection to faith that "carnavalesque" provided to Nicoletta in theatre studies, cultural rhetorics has allowed me a means for understanding how collective practices from the Evangelical communities I participate in can both run contrary to and support the knowledges around social justice and equity I encounter in academic spaces. Thus the phrase "faith and learning" serves as a way to signal two community knowledges that come together in myself as well as in these three participants as they draw upon stories and discourses to frame their connections to church and disciplinary communities. In storying the faith and learning framework, I use this section to show how participants have built constellative practices as "multiply-situated subjects" in ways that may be overlooked in both academic and religious spaces.

Nicoletta's constellation

Nicoletta shared a story about a time during her master's degree when she was studying postmodernism in a theory class:

I remember one semester I was studying postmodernism and almost at the same time I had my professors talking about the rupture of metanarratives and the breakdown of any totalitarian system—that one of the outcomes of postmodernism or one of the things

postmodernism sought to do was dismantle metanarratives. At the same time, Pastor [M.] at church was talking about the Genesis story of Abraham and how this is a part of the larger story of the Christian worldview and specifically used that language—he said we need a metanarrative. And I just remember sitting in church and being like “NO! Metanarrative is bad!” Because I am even to this day a passionate postmodernist in many ways. A lot of things I’ve tried to look at is how metanarrative and Christianity work or do not work together and how Christianity looks in a postmodern worldview.

As in the story earlier, Nicoletta uses her research around the grotesque and carnivalesque in theatre to help her resolve this apparent discrepancy in which the idea of “Metanarrative” signals a direct conflict in church and academic discourse. While this may have been troubling at the time, she said that she now recognizes that both postmodernism and a biblical worldview involve far more complexity than the concept of a metanarrative being “good” or “bad.” By constellating her knowledge of both discourses along with her own experiences and relationships, Nicoletta came to a new understanding that she can carry into both communities as a continued way of addressing conflicting ideas.

Nicoletta also talked about the integration of faith and learning in terms of her teaching practices as she considers the expectations of certain academic institutions. Since her desire is to work as faculty in a Christian college or university, Nicoletta says that administrations will likely expect her to teach students how to consider their faith in tandem with their studies. One goal in Christian education might be to solidify students’ faith commitments, but it also serves an academic function of asking students to question their preconceived notions that may come from their religious backgrounds when considering new theories. Nicoletta called this kind of teaching a form of “discipleship,” which I understand to mean that it is the professor’s responsibility as

someone who likely shares core faith beliefs and practices with their students to guide those students as they learn within their academic disciplines. Professors introduce students into academic disciplines and act as spiritual guides while students are learning to articulate their spiritual beliefs.

I look back on my undergraduate experience at a conservative Evangelical university with a hint of disgust and a great deal of amusement, but mostly a sense of gratefulness. At the time I attended, the University pushed a rigorous academic curriculum but also placed a great deal of value on spiritual guidance and education. Not only were we required to attend chapel services every morning, every student also completed a minor in Biblical studies in order to earn their degree. This curriculum consisted of several classes around basic theology with titles like “Spiritual Formation,” “Christian Life and Thought,” “Old Testament Studies,” and “New Testament Studies.” In addition, faculty members were expected to weave elements of doctrine and faith throughout their course material and around class discussions.

While this may sound like an attempt at nothing more than deep indoctrination, many faculty members treated this task with a great level of seriousness and emphasis on critical thinking skills. Rather than asking students to hold to Evangelical theology and doctrines without question, faculty members would actively shake students’ faith, loosening the bonds of blind faith and forcing us to define our beliefs.

I recall in particular taking a biology course in my first semester and being greatly shaken by my very first assignment: an essay providing scientific reasoning for why the Great Flood of the Old Testament could not have actually occurred. In another course—one of the Bible minor requirements—the young professor urged us (for the first time in my personal

experience) to indulge and explore our spiritual doubts rather than dismiss them. In a literature course, we talked often about inequity in the U.S. and discussed how/why it seemed the Church failed to address these things.

I recall writing entry upon entry in my personal journal questioning who God was and the hypocrisy of the Christianity I had been raised in since birth. Often these stories were reflected in writing responses and assignments, to which professors responded with understanding, warmth, and further questions.

Clara's constellation

When I asked Clara about possible conflicts with her faith in her academic community, Clara said that during graduate school her department itself was fairly open to spirituality and faith as theoretical concepts held by individuals. She indicated that there were many in her department who even encouraged the incorporation of spirituality into scholarship to some extent. Clara attributes this in large part to the department housing a scholar famous in her discipline for integrating psychology and faith. However, she finds that the psychology field as a whole orients itself a bit differently:

Our field has gotten away from a lot of qualitative research, and I think it's interesting that it has done that, but basically the whole concept of faith is that well you can have faith and it can be kind of part of your own values and moral structure, but we're not going to give weight to that. Because if we can't prove it, then we're not going to count it as valid.

While this is not the only time in our conversation that Clara expressed disappointment with her field's move away from qualitative research, here she directly associates this movement with a lack of acceptance of faith practices. She expresses a problem with the idea that faith must

remain completely separate from academic and professional practice, and went on to emphasize that she finds it important to treat her patients around their sense of spirituality just as much as around a disorder diagnosis. Shortly following this statement, however, Clara also took issue with the church's view that people's problems are products of "sin" rather than psychologically relevant.

Interestingly, Clara seems to resolve what she sees as a gap on both sides by using theoretical underpinnings, or stories, of the other. On the one hand, her faith tells her to see people as complex beings who live in relationship to others and to God and therefore should incorporate spiritual practice into their psychological treatment. On the other hand, she stresses that the church's approach to spiritual practice can oftentimes dismiss important aspects of a person's psychological identity. Clara referenced discussions around sexuality as one example:

Where the church community views [homosexuality] as "this is sin, and we need to change that, and love the person hate the sin." Well, in my opinion that is part of the human-being. It is part of who they are. And so if you are going to love them, you can't have that distinction.

In both her relationships to her scholarly community and to her church community, Clara rejects what she sees as an incomplete view of personhood. She stresses that humans are complex beings with emotional, spiritual, psychological, and physical components that make them who they are. It is important to note here that she talks about wholeness in terms of love—drawing upon a key principle of her faith but stressing that in order to do this, she cannot dismiss or reject any part of a person. Clara rhetorically navigates her reasons for doing her work the way that she does by holding to her core understanding of faith but also rejecting some views that come out of that faith community. Clara creates a constellation of faith and learning when she uses her field's

knowledge to readjust her faith, also carrying her faith values to help fill gaps that she sees in her disciplinary knowledge.

Not for the first time in my life, going to church is a hard and fast rule. At this conservative religious University, not only are we expected to attend daily chapel services during the week, but we are also expected to attend a local church on Sundays as chapel is not a “substitute” for being a member of a local “body.” Every Monday, I submit an electronic form stating where I attended church or my reasons for missing that week. I mostly attend a local Baptist church with my roommate because she has a car, I don’t, and this is where she goes.

Every time I go to church, I am increasingly angry.

I sit in a pew surrounded by white Midwesterners and go through the motions of songs and prayer. Then I sit and stew through a sermon that highlights love and grace for God’s “followers” while everyone ignores all the hurt and trauma of reality and, really, anyone not in the room.

In this whitewashed space, I feel torn apart. On the one hand, professors are asking me to question everything; that it’s okay to have doubts; that there are horrible things in the world that sometimes we just have no response to. But that is not acceptable here: not in the Church.

Every week, I leave exhausted.

Laura’s constellation

Throughout her stories, Laura constellated her work in social justice with her faith practice both intentionally and often. Laura described her academic work as taking a “rhetorical and critical perspective.” More to the point, her work is about “power and ideology specifically in areas of sport communication as well as media and a focus on race and whiteness.” In these stories, Laura directly connects her commitment to social justice to her view of a loving God.

However, she also told a constellated learning narrative that directly links practices from some of her faith communities to an interest in social justice work once she began a PhD program:

I think when you're going through a PhD program you're transformed tremendously in many ways. But for me that was—I went into the program having a real desire for understanding intercultural interactions, having social justice orientation. And a lot of that was from my work with a campus ministry and being able to learn about inequality throughout the world, traveling different places. And so a lot of my interest stems from that. And then when I went into the [Ph.D.] program and continued to learn about how racial inequality is maintained, specifically in U.S. society, and gender inequality and different things like that are maintained in U.S. society, I came to understand obviously how that is completely intertwined with the structures of politics and the decisions that are made by political leaders.

Here Laura says that her ministry work has opened her eyes to inequality and that she continued to learn about the structural nature of inequity in her education. Thus this kind of learning is not completely separated from elements of practices of faith.

However, Laura also told me a story about trying to bring that learning back to a small group faith community at her church during grad school. I share that story at length here to demonstrate just how differently those experiences can play out or reflect on one another:

People [in my small group] asked me what I studied and what my dissertation was about and that can really throw people off when you tell them that you study racial inequality, and I study whiteness. And so they want to know what that is, and when you explain to a group of white women what privilege is or what whiteness is, there can be some real defensiveness, just like with anybody who is learning about it for the first time. One time

[someone] asked me, “well what is whiteness” or something, so I was trying to explain it and people got really defensive. And that partially is my fault. I have to find a way to explain it in a way that people will understand and not be offended by, but at the same time that’s kind of the point, coming to understand whiteness or white privilege is to make people really uncomfortable. So I didn’t mean for people to be uncomfortable, but they asked and so I explained it. And it came up a couple times in other groups you know. For instance I explained to one woman in our group what white privilege was. And I said for instance in a classroom if you’re a racial minority you know that you’re a racial minority. You know that you’re in the minority among white students usually and you might be more cautious to raise your hand or something like that. So the next week this woman came back and she was like “I was in a spin class and I noticed there was one woman who was not white who went to the back corner and didn’t really talk to anybody. And I didn’t know if maybe that was her personality or if she was aware that she was....” I was like oh that’s cool that you picked up on that. But at the same time she was still defensive about this idea of white privilege and stuff. So it’s hard to talk about your research as an academic with anybody, but it’s especially difficult I think when the people you’re talking to might be especially conservative, in a predominantly white community when you study what I study.

In this story, Laura works to bring some of her academic knowledge back to part of her faith community. Because Laura directly associates her faith with her commitment to social justice, it seems to follow that a group formed specifically around commonality in faith practices would also buy into this connection. While there is resistance, I also see members of the group desiring

to learn and grapple with the concepts that Laura introduces because learning and application is one function of that group.

Laura also talked about a measure of openness and uses language to show that she understands where resistance is coming from. Although she doesn't say it directly, it's almost as though she's saying, "I get it because I've been there." While this story could perhaps be read as an "unsuccessful" attempt at combining faith and learning, instead I see Laura constellating her knowledges of both communities in order to define something not fully attached to either. This encounter does not shake Laura's confidence that her faith and the study of whiteness go hand in hand. Instead, she describes some of the work she has done to bring the two together, both personally and in her faith community. While Laura might not call the above narrative a "success story," these stories together demonstrate that there is room for rhetorical movement between ideas of faith and racial justice even when other ideological differences might create resistance.

Learning at Church

Nearly all of the stories I have shared above have to do with participants directly discussing the impact of their scholarship on their faith practices and vice versa. However, it is important to also note that participants talked about the Church itself as a place of learning and acquiring knowledge of a different sort.

Clara and Laura spoke specifically about the small groups in which they participated and about learning from other women around topics of spiritual practice, balancing family life, and building a close relationship to God that is core to daily Christian life. In telling her story about coming to Hope Church, Clara emphasized the church's importance as a place of spiritual intellectualism that might otherwise be missing from her personal life:

I think one thing is just learning with other people. So I don't have a theological background, I never went to college [for it]—I took zero theological classes. My actual knowledge of the Bible is probably down here [indicates with hand] when all is said and done. So I need other people to be able to share their insights with me as we are just walking through life. I think you get more spiritual insight when having a community that does that with you and grows faith that is being taught. You know, when someone who actually knows what they're talking about, I think that's super important. I think when you're in grad school you're being educated by these really well-educated people and these experts in the field all the time and I'm like I could probably really use that in my faith—I need someone who has actually been trained to tell me what is actually meant here. It's really easy, I think, to interpret the Bible as whatever it means to you in the moment, so I think it's important to have that historical piece coming in—what actual Hebrew means, what the language is in Greek, so I know what is actually written as opposed to, well this is what it means in this moment of my life and I'm just going to take it and assume that I'm correct. So I think just having that community to do it with, having that family, I grow more. You know, having that homegroup at the time to integrate in and gain knowledge from people in different stages of life.

In this story, Clara claims that being part of the church community means also learning from and alongside the members of that community, both from leadership and from each other. She indicates that this growth in knowledge is not just a “spiritual” practice but requires rigorous study and intellect. She even compares it to being in grad school: being educated by professionals in the field makes sense academically; so being taught by those more experienced in the practice and study of Christian faith is also important. Nicoletta mentioned something

similar in talking about the pastor of the church during her time there: a man with pastoral experience as well as a PhD in theology who could exposit Scripture academically as well as apply faith relationally. From these stories, I understand that faith is not a simple practice that happens without thought but that learning how to think about and practice one's faith is something participants see as central to the role of a church community.

Existing Spaces

While Clara and Laura did not specifically use the phrase “faith and learning,” I see them creating narratives and spaces in their stories where they tie together their academic fields and theoretical options from their faith practices. They discuss building places of crossover that may seem unimportant or subtle but nevertheless provide them with opportunities for resolving stories from both communities that may not immediately seem to fit together. I see these spaces as providing means of constellating that help participants to shift their knowledges when conflict between the two worlds seems irresolvable.

All participants discussed ways they work to create rhetorical spaces and strategies between their disciplines and faith practices. Nicoletta is the only participant who talked about seeking out one of these spaces that already exists. When asked to define her faith community, Nicoletta began by talking about Hope Church but then pointed out that she was also part of a graduate student Christian fellowship:

The purpose was to bring graduate students together and that was another community that I don't think was exactly my church community but I think of them as my graduate student Christian fellows primarily. And the reason I was motivated to pursue such a thing beyond just my Sunday church activities was mainly because I think faith has been so core to my life that it was a core part of my studies. It was a lens through which I

viewed my artistry, my scholarship. The purpose of why I was doing what I was doing was integrated into my faith because of how I was raised with it being such a core theme in my life. And then I went to a Christian college where we were taught very specifically to integrate faith and learning and to integrate faith alongside learning. So it seemed almost natural, I think, when I got to graduate school to seek out a community that did integrate graduate study with faith as well.

Here Nicoletta describes the ways she was already constellating her faith and her studies and defines the members of this graduate student community as being devoted to doing something similar. Throughout our conversation, Nicoletta continued to reference this group as a place where she could hash out both academic theories and grow in her faith through interaction with others who share similar but not always identical values. She described it as a comfortable space where her personal choices did not require the same justification that they might amongst her colleagues and where she could discuss conflicting issues that arise in her faith and her scholarship.

Nicoletta sought out this community intentionally to dwell in that space of faith and learning. Others, like Clara and Laura, sought something similar but were more often building rhetorical spaces themselves in order to better understand how they can hold their faith and learning community values in tandem. Sometimes this means that they reject or critique an aspect of one community or the other, but they do so in order to build something new that moves them toward a deeper understanding of both in their daily practice. In Chapter 3, participants shared two examples of values that sometimes conflict when they told stories about community expectations playing out specifically in areas of gender and political expression. In the next chapter, I explore more specifically how participants navigate topics of politics or feminism

using some specific rhetorical strategies to hold space between ideologies that reflect their commitment to faith and learning as a constellation.

CHAPTER 5: STRATEGIES ENACTED

For a long time I resisted the idea of doing scholarly work about my own communities: particularly my church community. I continually struggled to reconcile my shifting ideologies that came as part of academic discourse and my affection for and participation in communities that were seen as holding “oppressive” ideologies by my colleagues. But it seemed like a personal struggle.

Then Donald Trump was elected president. And White Evangelical Christians—in large part—voted him there.

As I began to understand cultural rhetorics more and the importance of community rhetorics in the field, I found that I could no longer do that work without confronting my own community orientations. Finally, I started to settle into the idea of delving into my own questions about the community rhetorics I myself was a participant in. In discussing the project with some close colleagues and friends from similar backgrounds, I found more and more that I was not the only one struggling to reconcile my shifting ideologies with what seemed to be fixed ideologies of the church community.

I conducted a pilot interview with a dear friend from college who had just married a man who held leadership in an Evangelical church and was heavily involved in the church’s ministry herself. She was also finishing her master’s degree in literature and considering PhD studies in the future. Even though she was not a participant in the same church community I would be studying, many of the questions I had were still relevant. In particular, this friend reminded me that being part of a church community—in some ways—serves an entirely different function from that of academia. In an Evangelical church seeking to be what they see in Scripture, people are vulnerable in their relationships, eager to uplift their surrounding community, and genuinely

seek to love others in the congregation. She reminded me of how often these factors hold true in spite of difficult ideological differences and the importance of trying to mentally negotiate contradiction. In the end, this conversation served to justify the direction of some of my thoughts and, finally, made me truly excited to pursue this as a study.

In this chapter I explore three rhetorical strategies drawn from cultural and feminist rhetorics in order to look more closely at the ways participants build spaces across faith and learning. Specifically, I return to issues of politics and gender as they appeared in Chapter 3 where I introduced the kinds of community expectations participants navigate. Here, I return to participant stories about gender and politics to show how these women actively craft and build their rhetorical identities between and across communities through strategies of listening, storying, and critical imagination in and through their constellated knowledges.

As Thomas King (2003) explains, stories contain “relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist” (10). Just as there is power in the telling; there is power in the hearing. King tells the reader in each chapter of his book *The Truth About Stories* that they have a responsibility once they have heard a story because that story cannot simply be forgotten. In this chapter, we will see how participants create their own stories of faith and learning while also holding the stories they hear from their church and scholarly communities. I begin by briefly recontextualizing practices of listening, storying, and critical imagination as rhetorical strategies employed not only by myself as a cultural rhetorics researcher but by my participants as well. I then return to participants’ specific stories around politics and gender to demonstrate how they enact these three strategies throughout their negotiations of church and academic spaces. Using these three strategies to enact a rhetoric of

faith and learning allows them to constellate their knowledges across communities. Through their stories and these practices, participants demonstrate that critical thought deeply informs their understanding of faith and learning as a practice and rhetorical space.

Revisiting Three Rhetorical Strategies

To better understand how participants are building spaces of faith and learning across disconnected community discourses, it is helpful to explore a few key rhetorical strategies they employ to develop and maintain those spaces. I see Laura, Clara, and Nicoletta using three cultural rhetorics and feminist strategies of listening, storying, and critical imagining to understand the in-between spaces they occupy and look for ways of using those spaces to better participate in and across their church and academic communities. I briefly define those strategies here before showing how they work together across issues of politics and gender.

Listening

In Rhetoric and Composition studies, Krista Ratcliffe (1999) is often credited for defining the term “rhetorical listening” as an active process of not just hearing other perspectives but seeking to understand them and allowing them to shift our own view. Cultural rhetoricians have expanded on this idea of rhetorical listening in tandem with constellating to suggest that listening is a practice that helps us to constantly shift and question our relationships to other constellated knowledges. In a cultural rhetorics pedagogy roundtable published in *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space*, Candace Epps-Robertson refers to Ratcliffe’s definition of “rhetorical listening” as being a central aspect of her work toward a cultural rhetorics pedagogy, specifically when it comes to helping students see their home communities as holding valid knowledge that is important to their intellectual work (Cedillo et. al., 2018, par. 6). She encourages students to listen across their home discourses and draw connections while also

listening to the stories of their peers and holding them as equally credible. Thus rhetorical listening becomes a cultural rhetorics practice of building discourse and understanding across cultural communities.

Rhetorical listening toward constellated practice is a difficult thing for anyone to employ, and it is not always practiced within religious spaces because of a high level of commitment to specific ideas, theology, and ideology. Rhetorical listening is also not always practiced in academic spaces for similar reasons. However, in their stories, I see participants holding this practice as not only valuable but necessary if they are to understand the communities they come from while also building their own rhetorical knowledges across, through, and around community discourses. Participating in communities that differ in ideology while building a rhetoric across faith and learning does not necessarily preclude rhetorical listening but rather heightens the practice as one method for holding those ideas together and finding ways to relate to multiple discourses at once.

Storying

In my study of cultural rhetorics, I have drawn largely from Indigenous rhetorics and literature to understand storying as a practice of active reflection used as a way to understand and theorize one's existence (Miranda 2013, King 2003, Powell 2002, Lyons 2000, Maracle 1990). I intentionally use this word to describe my methodology in Chapter 1 because it allows people to see how people tell ourselves and others stories—often over and over again—in order to make sense of the world we inhabit and our place in it. Storying gives people a way to connect our own embodied experiences with those of others as well as the intellectual theories that we know in order to craft something bigger that is relational, theoretical, practical, and more. In this way,

storying is also a practice of constellating as we connect and theorize our relationships to other people and ideas toward greater understanding.

I see participants actively storying their own experiences through our interviews while I do the same with my story in writing this project. In addition, I re-story these things together in order to constellate the theories and strategies that participants and myself employ and introduce that constellation to an academic audience. I see participants using a practice of storying in order to make sense of academic and church discourses within their own experiences. At times, they have already thought through some of the connections across faith and learning that I will discuss in the following sections, but at other times, they use the process of telling me stories to make connections for the first time. Thus we see that—although story can be used to perpetuate unhelpful discourses or narratives—it can also be actively used to counter those narratives and create alternative rhetorical spaces.

In storying encounters with people and ideas in both academic and faith communities, participants rhetorically situate themselves between those relationships. While they sometimes tell stories about not belonging in either place, more often they are storying their place in both worlds simultaneously. This is an ongoing rhetorical project of crafting space where they can theorize their ideologies and figure out how to live them practically in communities that might hold opposing discourses, even as participants draw upon stories from each of these communities to inform their own ideological conclusions. Rather than dichotomize the stories that are continually reinforced in each of these communities, participants find places of commonality through faith and learning that help them to function in each space simultaneously while also accounting for the stories that are in opposition.

By making “story” into a verb, I see it as an active and ongoing practice that is continually employed to readjust understanding through relationships that are also constantly changing. At the end of our conversations, both Laura and Clara thanked me for asking them the questions that I did, indicating that they would like to think about the topic further, especially their role in confronting issues in their faith communities. In this act of thanking me, I see not only a reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant but also ongoing life to the research itself. Through our relationship in this moment, Laura and Clara saw value in the stories they were telling that may not have occurred to them prior to our talk—not because value wasn’t there, but because they hadn’t vocalized the stories yet. By engaging with the stories they already carried within, participants were and are continuing to craft rhetorical spaces that allow them to continually re-imagine their relationship to their stories and the communities that they emerge from and merge into.

Critical Imagination

I borrow the term “critical imagination” from Royster and Kirsch’s 2012 text *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* in which they describe critical imagination like this:

The idea is to account for what we “know” by gathering whatever evidence can be gathered and ordering it in a configuration that is reasonable and justifiable in accord with basic scholarly methodologies. The next step is to think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to speculate methodically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what we have in hand. (p. 71)

While Royster and Kirsch speak here about critical imagination as a feminist research practice in rhetorical studies, combining this concept with the idea of constellating knowledges as discussed in Chapter 1 allows us to see and use critical imagination on a personal level. Both critical

imagination and constellating emphasize the immutability of knowledge as “truth,” seeking possibility based on a plurality of inputs rather than a singular means of viewing the world. In addition, both methodological concepts require the individual to practice community values in coming to their understanding. Royster and Kirsch emphasize an “ethos of care” that is connected to articulating a vision for the future while constellating is a practice in reciprocity and accountability. I understand critical imagination and practices in constellating as pointing toward more equitable futures in a decolonial move that continually builds new ways of seeing the world. A practice in critical imagination allows for shifts in knowledge, and a cultural rhetorics approach keeps one responsible to the communities from which the varying discourses emerge.

As I explored in Chapter 4, integration of faith and learning resists the idea that spiritual and scholarly practice ought to or even can be separated. Nicoletta points out that tying together her scholarship and her faith is at times a grueling practice, but she also sees it as a necessary one in order to maintain and grow her faith and knowledge. Indeed, all three participants move easily between speaking about their academic and professional interests and faith commitments. Although they at times disagree with common ideologies within their church community, their personal spiritual practice plays a significant role in the academic work that they have chosen. At the same time, theoretical and practical implications of their scholarship both alter and strengthen their relationship to the Gospel. While this intimate relationship may be tangible to the participants and to myself, our conversations also revealed a difficulty in explaining this space of faith and learning across communities. This difficulty is particularly true across certain community commitments and expectations. In the following section, I return to participant stories around politics and gender that were introduced in Chapter 3 to show how they imagine possibilities across these issues that draw upon faith and learning to build rhetorical spaces they

can understand and are comfortable with in light of their spiritual beliefs and ideological viewpoints.

Politics and Faith

As I first discussed in Chapter 3, political party commitment is one of the key areas of assumption participants contend with when participating in the Hope Church community. In our interviews, I asked participants to cite some of the key differences in viewpoints between their church and academic communities. Both Laura and Clara cited political views as one of these areas, aligning themselves with more “leftist” politics and defining the church community as “conservative.” Laura and Clara resist dominant narratives that say all Evangelicals espouse the “Christian Right” when they represent their faith through their political ideologies and vice versa. Furthermore, Laura and Clara directly connect their understanding of faith with their progressive political orientations, representing themselves as Christians whose faith is foundational to determining their political ideals while also not aligning themselves with the Hope Church community in this regard. In the following stories, I will explore how these two participants in particular rhetorically negotiate faith and politics by critically connecting them while also practicing listening, storying, and critical imagination to constellate knowledges in those spaces⁷.

Self-Defining

In Chapter 3, Laura spoke at length about assumptions regarding Christians in academic settings, noting that often people will have preconceived ideas of what it means to be a Christian

⁷ I'd like to acknowledge here that many politically conservative Evangelicals *also* use components of their faith and Scripture to support their views. An obvious example of this is the issue of homosexual marriage, which many conservative Christians oppose using the creation story and select Scriptures to back their arguments. A key difference I notice in the stories of my participants is that they take a wider angle: citing the big picture ideals of their faith and social ideologies and connecting them through broader understanding.

or go to church. Among those assumptions she names are associations with the alt-right, racist ideologies, and conservative politics. According to Laura, some of these associations have been earned by Christians at large—both through experiences in church and interactions with Christians in academic forums. Thus she finds it necessary to contextualize what she means when she says that she is a Christian. Laura draws a connection between her faith commitments as a Christian and her commitments to social justice as a way to confront stereotypes about Christians while also listening to and empathizing with those who might hold them. She demonstrates understanding of those who have had bad experiences in the church or with other people who claim Christianity because she has seen similar encounters first-hand. As a result, she finds that she must do a little bit of extra work in her academic relationships to show that it is possible to be a social justice oriented Christian and define herself as such. In addition, as I mentioned previously and will explore further in this chapter, Laura at times struggled to contextualize herself as a researcher within her church community because of the social justice bent of her work. In Chapter 3, Laura told a story about explaining whiteness to a small-group member, seeking to explain her social justice-oriented work and finding that members of the church would try to understand but also become defensive about their own positions of privilege. In this story, Laura listens carefully to this group member and seeks to understand her perspective, saying that she has also been there. Through this act of rhetorical listening and re-storying her perspective based on her understanding of social justice and Scripture, Laura employs rhetorics of both faith and learning to define her political position and reasons for holding that position. In remaining responsible to both communities and practicing rhetorical listening in both spaces, Laura creates opportunities to guide someone toward a new understanding while also not isolating them for their perspective.

Clara similarly emphasized that being an active part of the church community carries an expectation that she holds political beliefs in common with everyone. Like Laura, she indicated that this is indeed not the case, and she is at times surprised by how forcibly conservative political stances are verbalized in the church community. In fact, Clara said that the reasons for her political stances differing from the majority-voiced opinions at the church have to do with her belief structure and are deeply connected to her faith. In theory, it seems that this aspect of her beliefs ought to be similar to others in the church; however, she finds that her own interpretation of Biblical values leads her in a different direction, away from conservative or right-wing voting practices. While this perspective might appear to contradict Clara's definition of church community as a shared set of values, she is indicating the complexity of values that can shift and change in practice. Indeed, these differences can sometimes lead to contradiction, but a shared language around core beliefs and values also allows room for Clara and others to talk about their reasons for political and ideological differences. This shared rhetoric may allow her to make small inroads in understanding amongst other members of the community, albeit slowly. Instead of dismissing spiritual rhetorics as irrelevant to her political position because holding that position differs from others in the community who claim similar faith, Clara shifts the stories to critically reimagine her political position within those narratives.

Re-Storying

All three participants storied rhetorical spaces that come from their church community and academic spaces while also carving out something separate from both. Laura spoke at length about ways she sees her faith fueling her political stance, which is connected to her academic interest in social justice. Laura thus stories her politics as being supported by her understanding

of Scripture and God's desires for humanity while also connecting this faith and political orientation directly to her research:

As a Christian I believe in racial justice, and I believe in gender equality and I believe that because I know that God has created me and everyone around me as children of God that he loves, and that's a big part of why I want to do racial justice research.

Laura went on to say only a moment later, that she finds it difficult to defend this stance at times because there are Christians who use Scripture to support right-leaning policies which undercut the idea that her faith could actually orient her to social justice work that is often associated with a more leftist orientation. Laura told a story about an individual in her field who often vocally supports conservative policies as Christian—policies that are often seen as objectionable by others in the field, including Laura's colleagues. Laura says, "people like that [make] it look impossible to be a social justice oriented Christian, and so I have to find a way to represent myself in a way that's very different from that." Although Laura is confident that her personal faith is in alignment with racial justice and social justice stances, she finds that she often has to do extra work to convince people in her academic field that this can indeed be the case by shifting the "typical" stories about Christianity to show how her faith actually aligns with her political and social justice practice. In doing so, I see Laura taking stories that are often associated with her church community and turning them on their head to create something different. She recognizes the importance of doing so—particularly in academic spaces—and is also comfortable in the "new" stories that she tells.

Re-negotiating

Clara spoke to me about how living in tension between two political spectrums as part of church and academic communities sometimes leads to feelings of isolation as she negotiates a

constellation between multiple narratives. She points out that her academic and professional field is, on the whole, very “left,” while the church, particularly the church in question, is very “right.” Clara said that she often finds herself in the middle as a church-going leftist and looking for someone who shares her perspectives:

[I would often ask] “Where is my home? Where is there somebody who is actually like me?” Because I found myself in the university setting often internally disagreeing but not willing to take on a lot of those battles. In church, often, internally disagreeing, also not really wanting to take on some of those battles because what’s the function of that battle? There’s not a function to that, but finding almost not fitting in either place because I just didn’t. I was in the middle, and I couldn’t pull myself to either end or either side. So I kind of just rocked the solitary.

Clara said that occasionally she would find a “kindred spirit” she could talk to about political and ideological issues in a spiritual manner, but for the most part there was an assumption in each space that you adhere to a particular set of ideological beliefs. Clara points to faith and learning here in the sense that she desires intellectual conversation about politics, but she desires to do so in a way that is supported by her faith knowledge and practice. In her storying of knowledges constellated across faith and academic work, Clara expresses a desire for shared conversation that imagines other possibilities but also acknowledges that discovering those relationships is difficult and, at times, risky.

Laura also spoke at length about this imbalance and her negotiation strategies—or perceived lack thereof—when it comes to navigating the political ideologies of her academic and faith communities. She mentions that one of the first places she noticed the starkness of difference in social principles as related to political parties was when she joined a small group of

women in the church in order to do things together like study the Bible, pray, and talk about topics like raising kids, balancing work and family, etc. Inevitably this group asked Laura about her research as a graduate student. As a communications expert who studies whiteness and racial inequality, Laura often found this difficult to explain, particularly in groups of conservative, white women like this one during a divisive election cycle. She said that she often encounters a level of defensiveness, which she has come to expect when explaining whiteness to any white individual, but indicates that it reaches a different, perhaps more personal, level in a politically conservative Christian group. In my own experience of politically conservative Christians, people have difficulty accepting ideas like systemic racism because they are called as individuals to love everyone, regardless of race, gender, age, etc. However, conservative politics tend to separate this individual response from collective systemic change. When Laura asked members of her small group to confront or reimagine the idea of racism, she may also be seen as calling them out on a spiritual matter and thus encounters a defensive reaction when they cannot reconcile this aspect of their faith with the way that they vote⁸. Since Laura knows another story about what racism means, she is able to critically imagine a rhetoric that constellates across her faith and policies to develop a different understanding of how she should practice both her faith and social commitments in this area.

When asked how she negotiates her communities in light of these political differences, Laura admitted that she often avoids certain issues in both spaces but especially in church communities. She talked about her personal negotiation strategies throughout grad school as “survival” rather than being particularly “good”:

⁸ While the scope of this study does not allow for an extended conversation about Conservative Christians connecting religion to their voting practices, others have conducted extensive research on this topic. See in particular Lindsay (2007).

I think part of being a PhD student and an academic and a mom and all the other things that we are is that we only have so much energy and time to put into things and we have to choose very carefully what we're going to spend our time on. And I've chosen not to spend my time on [laughs] getting into conversations about Donald Trump with other Christians.

Like many PhD students, Laura finds ways to balance her life in order to meet the demands of academic work and starting a faculty career. As a mother, she says, her funds of energy and time are further depleted, thus political arguments with parties who don't agree are not something that ranks highly on her list of priorities. I might suggest as well that when those same communities you don't agree with politically are those who support your roles outside of academia--such as being a mother--there is an even higher emotional toll on entering areas of ideological conflict.

Laura did emphasize that perhaps avoidance is not a great long-term negotiation strategy as someone committed to ideas and practices of social justice. However, she said that instead she has these conversations in spaces where they are perhaps more welcome: such as the classroom. As a professor, Laura encounters students of all different political and religious backgrounds and can use her pedagogy as a way to open up discussions about social justice ideologies. By using that educational space, she exercises her commitment to critical thinking while also being able to understand the kinds of conservative communities students might be coming from.

A Constellated Reorientation

Laura's reluctance to open certain topics of conversation in both academic and church spaces does not preclude the notion that she still finds support within those communities that is important to her orientation as a human and a scholar. Furthermore, she hopes there will come a day when she feels better poised to push on areas she has come to understand differently in each

of those spaces. Laura says that maybe this will happen after “the Trump era,” suggesting that there is something about this particular moment that makes it especially difficult to disagree with people on either end of the political spectrum. She also said that after a recent move, she hopes to put down roots in her current communities that will allow her time and opportunity to do some of the work of reorienting the communities themselves. This might include finding a church where she can use her academic expertise to be more creative about opening up conversations about issues like whiteness, racism, institutional inequality, and social justice. Laura, as well as the other participants, sees the value in constellating across community knowledges and expresses a desire that this become a more common practice, particularly within church communities.

Another area of potential disagreement that I described in Chapter 3 was that of gender expectations. While discussing participants’ political views can address a wide range of perspectives and topics, all three participants spoke specifically about being academic *women* in the church without being prompted to discuss issues of gender identity. Each of them had a story about navigating and creatively imagining their role as a female member of the community, which at times allowed them to strategize their rhetoric but also involves further complications of constellating across their commitment to professional and spiritual spaces.

A couple times every year, as the youth minister and then head pastor, Ben and I would be invited to fundraiser events for various kinds of ministries. Usually it was a dinner for which a church member had purchased a table they then wanted to fill. The two that stick out in my memory were for a campus ministry and a pregnancy center.

The campus ministry fundraisers were pretty par for the course: some silly skits, light banter, student testimonials, and—of course—the ask for funds. My feelings about the pregnancy

center “gala” were a bit more complicated. On the one hand, I resisted some of the rhetoric used to simplify but also politicize issues of abortion and women’s choice both used by the center and by community figures who were invited to attend and/or speak. On the other hand, I knew and loved many of the people in the room for their good hearts and deep desire to truly make the lives of others better.

I remember feeling particularly downhearted at the end of this dinner. I was worn out from working to decipher every word coming from the podium: was it politically motivated? Rhetorically manipulative? Truly seeking justice? Were the testimonials staged? Were the women in the videos telling their whole story and actual feelings? Why should I mistrust that they actually do speak from their hearts?

At one point in my life, I would have been able to say unequivocally whether or not a pregnancy center that stands against rights to abortion was doing “good” work. I know many people who could also unequivocally say that the same work is “bad.” But now, both my involvement in the communities supporting that work and my knowledge gained from those who would oppose it fight for space in my own ideological stance.

Working (as) Women in the Community

When Laura and Clara talk about gender in connection to their understanding of God, their role in the community as women is troubled not only through the lens of feminism⁹, which can be highly politicized, but by the very core of their faith. Laura and Clara choose to contradict the cultural norms of the Hope Church community by identifying as feminists and then go on to

⁹ It is important to remember here that both Laura and Clara choose to use this word “feminist” as a way to differentiate themselves from their faith communities and talk about their conflicting ideologies, as I described in Chapter 3. In both interviews, Laura and Clara only use this word once or twice and offer no further explanation. From their context, I assume that one of the key aspects of “feminism” that they are referring to is the idea that women are intellectually equal to men and ought to have the same social value. They don’t see these things happening in the church community, and therefore their identity as such sets them apart in ways that are personally important but sometimes uncomfortable.

support this stance with faith-based evidence. In using Biblical principles to argue that women should have more leadership possibilities and a respected voice in the church, Laura and Clara re-story the community's own language to resist what they see as oppressive practices. This is not an uncommon practice in oppressed groups. Michel De Certeau (1984) emphasizes the use of community expectations in everyday interpretation and practice as the oppressed subvert representations to their own ends (p. xii). Gerald Vizenor's (1994) theory of survivance similarly sees Indigenous people working within colonial systems to survive and resist those same systems. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird (1997) call this "reinventing the enemy's language." In the end, rather than finding that their faith contradicts a feminist stance, Laura and Clara imagine potential for using faith to shift the community norms around gender through their own value and interpretation of Scripture in an act of constellating learned knowledges into a different understanding of gender roles.

In the World: Bringing Faith into the Open

In addition to drawing upon faith and their experience of relationships, participants also refer to their academic work and social ideologies when thinking about how women—and people at large—ought to be valued within the church community. Clara told stories about her work as a psychologist and some of the ways this academic and professional orientation affects her view of individuals, particularly around gender and sexuality. In doing so, she draws upon and constellates expertise that she says is excluded from the church and uses it to craft her own rhetoric around why individuals should be socially and spiritually valued.

In a previous job, Clara said, she was strictly held to treating individual disorders and would often become frustrated with the ways she had to circumvent the system in order to

acknowledge the wholeness of a human being. When it comes to spirituality, Clara argued that someone's spiritual health is a critical part of treatment:

Because it's really hard to heal, especially from trauma, without that [spiritual] foundation in your life. And it really rocks that foundation for a lot of people and so kind of looking at how to navigate that. If you have a relationship with God, how do you rebuild that relationship with God when horrible things have happened?

By talking about spirituality as relationship, Clara practices a feminist rhetoric of embodied action based on a person's core values and imagines other possibilities of constellating across faith and academic knowledges (Royster and Kirsch, 2012). Clara rhetorically listens for and sees a person's spiritual or faith commitments as central to their healing because they are central to their personhood. When Clara asks her clients to act on this relationship, she is asking them to link their spirituality to a manifestation of psychological healing, thus presenting a creative solution that accounts for multiple aspects of their being.

Clara similarly mentioned "wholeness" when she spoke about her disagreement with her faith community on issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Where the church finds that homosexuality is a spiritual problem, Clara takes a more complicated perspective about what sexual orientation and gender expression can mean to individuals' identity:

The church would disagree with my beliefs about [homosexuality]. But I think there's enough data out there that it's not a choice, [people are] born that way. Some if it is trauma-driven by far. But where the church community views that as "this is sin, and we need to change that, and love the person hate the sin." Well, in my opinion that is part of the human-being. It is part of who they are. And so if you are going to love them, you can't have that distinction.

What Clara takes issue with here is the way the church community talks about homosexuality as something that can be separated from someone's personhood. She emphasizes that doing so risks an unempathetic view towards individuals who are struggling with their sexual orientation and being told by the church that they are not welcome until it is fixed. Instead, Clara chooses to listen for an alternative perspective and re-story the way spirituality and sexuality can work together.

Clara's perspective would still be seen as highly controversial in many conservative Evangelical churches, including Hope Church. However, she talked specifically about how dangerous this lack of close listening toward understanding in churches can be for young children and teenagers:

[There are] kids that they pray—and we have data that they pray—at night for God to fix His mistake. I don't think that God makes mistakes, right? But they're asking you know, please do this. And when you have a nine year old considering jumping out a window and his parents have to bar his window so that this poor little boy who feels like he is a girl doesn't kill himself!? I have a hard time believing that God is okay with little kids killing themselves. And if we were to love them and support them—doesn't matter if we agree with it.

Similar to what she describes as central to her clinical practice, Clara chooses not to separate spirituality from the wholeness of an individual in this story. Instead, Clara sees a constellated identity in which the individual draws upon multiple aspects of themselves to better understand their spirituality. She suggests that when the church separates faith from personhood instead of embracing it—particularly in areas of gender expression and sexual orientation—they are perpetuating the same problems that occur in the field of psychology. At the same time, twice

Clara referenced data from her field as being a factor that convinces her to think about this issue differently. By constellating her expertise in psychology and her spiritual commitments to loving people, Clara finds a way of storying psychological issues that emphasizes things like empathy, compassion, and relationality¹⁰.

In the story above, I see Clara resisting what might be deemed modernist notions of separating the body from the mind, which she described in our interview as a prevalent mindset in both her church and professional communities. Instead, Clara insists on how important it is to recognize individuals as “whole” people, connecting this to both the church’s perception of gender and sexuality as well as the way her academic and professional fields talk about patients. While Clara doesn’t explicitly call this a feminist practice, from a constellated cultural rhetorics perspective, her emphasis on personhood and wholeness echoes feminist rhetorical practices that treat individuals’ stories, relationships, and embodied experiences as important aspects of their position and value within the cultural community (Anzaldúa, 1987; Powell, 2002; Million 2008). This valued and dialogical inquiry that accounts for multiple aspects of a person is also reflected in Royster and Kirsch’s (2012) ethos of care, which challenges scholars (and maybe psychologists) to seek answers within a larger framing, knowing that knowledge shifts and changes based on multiple factors (p. 21). Thus I see Clara drawing from her experience of spirituality and what she knows about human psychology to emphasize that it is not best to separate these things in either community context. In doing so, Clara connects spiritual knowledge that comes from her church community with her professional community knowledge of psychosis to constellate and story a practice that crosses both but also becomes something else.

¹⁰ Since the time of this interview, Clara has started practicing independently where she is better able to incorporate these values together with and for her clients.

In the Church: Hiding in Plain Sight

I hear participants doing multiple things when they story experiences in the Hope Church community in which their identity as professionals goes unrecognized or dismissed. On the one hand, Clara in particular is able to take on a level of invisibility that at times allows her to fly under the radar and avoid the need to address ways her professional views may clash with commonly held assumptions. On the other hand, this dismissal makes her feel disenfranchised as it “discounts [her] knowledge and expertise.” Thus a woman in the church like Clara who operates within feminist values holds a tenuous position in which she has strong opinions about her role within the faith community but also finds it necessary to sometimes hide those opinions under the guise of being only “wife and mother” if she so chooses. Clara, at times, does choose this silence as her rhetorical strategy so that she can function in both the church space without expending a lot of intellectual energy toward defining that position to others who already hold assumptions about her role as a woman.¹¹ Nicoletta, however, does not have this same opportunity as a single woman. While she can use her role in the church to escape from academic pressures, when her professional expertise isn’t recognized, she is caught in a kind of “nowhere” space that does not afford her purchase as either a wife/mother or academic professional. Thus she sometimes feels she is left on the outskirts of the church community and seeks out faith community in other places where she can critically imagine across knowledges with like-minded friends and colleagues.

¹¹ This is a common strategy not only employed by women but also present in queer scholarship. For instance, Matthew B. Cox (2019) draws upon queer theory, cultural rhetorics, and professional communication studies to develop a theory of “working closets” which says that LGBT professionals often choose or are forced to hide their sexuality in order to be able to function as professionals in the workplace, thus remaining “disjointed and fractured in their identities” (p. 4).

Similarly, Laura talked about being “bothered” by the fact that she didn’t see many women in leadership roles at the church during her time there. While Laura said that her belief in gender equality stems, in part, from her understanding of who God is: “I believe in gender equality, and I believe that because I know that God has created me and everyone around me as children of God that he loves.” In this statement, Laura taps into a common argument for greater gender equality, or egalitarian perspectives, in more progressive Evangelical circles: God created men and women to be equal and therefore they should not be relegated to gender-specific roles. Understanding the Gospel in this way is Laura’s means of storying her faith commitments to include women rather than separate them into caregiving roles. To say that women fill a primary function of caregiving rather than leadership is the story of “complementarism” that says men and women occupy complementary roles, meaning that men and women are suited to particular tasks because of their gender. Complementarians interpret certain passages of Scripture to mean that men are better equipped to make leadership decisions and women are not qualified to direct men through leadership roles (1 Cor. 11:2-16; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Tim 2:13). While many Christians and churches are moving away from this position, it is still the official stance of some well-known denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention ([Resolution on Ordination](#), 1984) and the Presbyterian Church in America ([The Aquila Report](#), 2017). Many Evangelical non-denominational churches also still hold this position, whether explicitly in their doctrinal statements or implicitly within their leadership structures like at Hope Church.

One way this role-of-care manifests is through the service-oriented tasks that women are encouraged to take on in church communities like Hope while being discouraged to take on leadership, unless this is to mentor other women or teach children. Clara resists this limitation

when she talks about her work and expertise as a gift from God rather than something to be ignored in certain contexts:

Jesus gave women very important roles and he respected them. And I don't think that God would have created us to have a thirst for knowledge and to pursue education and to be in a role in our life where we are teaching people, and then all of a sudden hit the church community and be told you're not actually allowed to do that there because of your biology.

Clara notes here an important disconnect between her professional world and faith community. In the former, she is accepted as having expertise in her academic and professional field, but then the skills necessary for her success in a professional capacity are ignored and even stifled in a church community because she is a woman.

It is important to note, however, that Clara and the other participants do not entirely reject or discount the caregiving roles that women *do* take on, often willingly. These roles are also vital to the function of the community, and the work that women often do to fill them is not only valuable to those being served but can fill an important social function for relationships between women in the community.

At times, however, participants do feel the need to make their voices heard in spite of not being invited to do so. One way I see Clara resisting as an intelligent individual with valuable input on church operations is by taking on maleness. While Clara speaks of this need as a frustrating one, I also see it as a savvy negotiation of risk that shows her care for the community during a tenuous time in the church's history. Clara told me a story about her experience during a conflict that occurred within Hope Church during my own brief time in that community. While the details are somewhat superfluous to the research presented here, essentially a long-time

pastor was forced out by the elder board. Several people in the church community, including Clara, were displeased with the ways in which the elders—all men—communicated and felt that a resolution could and ought to have been reached without the level of personal hurt that occurred. This time of conflict also revealed, to some, the depths to which the church's dismissal of women would go.

When speaking with Clara, she admitted that a large part of her reluctance to address issues in the church community where she disagrees comes from this period of time in which she a) was not sure she wanted to remain in the community and b) did not feel heard by her community, particularly its leadership:

And there was a period—probably more for me than for [my husband]—but a period of isolation where I was like—my voice as a woman—I tried a few times to communicate with elders. And my voice as a woman was very quickly discounted. And if I put the words on paper and had [my husband] send it, the response was very different.

Clara points to this situation as a specific moment in which her voice as a woman has been disenfranchised in the church specifically because of her gender. She sees this scenario as a clear indication that male voices hold more power, and while she can use the voice of her husband to communicate her ideas, the fact that she must do so made her less willing to participate in the community and strive for what she saw as its healthy existence. Clara says that it is only more recently, several years later, that she is starting to be more willing to take on some of the work of shifting this culture.

Holding Space

Much like Royster and Kirsch's (2012) concept of critical imagination in which women find multiple possibilities for both inquiry and problem-solving, I see Clara seeking out

alternatives for making her voice heard and imagining futures of the church in spite of not agreeing with their approach to gender roles. By still voicing her opinion through the guise of her husband's email, she pushes for something in the church that she sees as amiss. She temporarily accepts the silencing of her own voice but still seeks to provoke change through other creative possibilities. While this can be seen as a failure of the community, Clara assesses the rhetorical situation, stays involved when the community is rejecting her, and is still present to enact possible futures of taking up more space and being more vocal.

Throughout this section, I see participants storying women-centered relationships and the wholeness of the individual built around multilayered aspects of their relationships to others, themselves, spirituality, and gender/sexuality. I also see Clara and Laura centering their own relationship to the church but extending it into other areas of their own existences. They constellate their knowledges to carve out an understanding of what it means to be professional and academic women in a space that does not always see them as such. In addition, they imagine possibilities for what it can mean to be a woman who is part of a community with all its complexities of disenfranchisement but also empowerment. Because of this complex performance, women embody several means of negotiating and resisting norms and practices, drawing upon multiple aspects of their lives to story an identity that constellates spiritual and professional practice.

I didn't want to tell you this story about the pregnancy center fundraiser.

Attending such an event—whether I agree with all that it implies or not—seems to indicate a complicity in politics that most people in the field of rhetoric and composition would find objectionable. And if you, as my reader, are instead a member of the church who supports

this organization, my aversion to the work it does may suggest that I am breaking not only with the community but with the theological truths that you hold dear. In both cases, my rejection of the politics that we are “supposed” to hold in common may risk more than simple disagreement.

So I didn’t want to tell you this story because it requires too much explanation, and I am exhausted by these explanations. I’m exhausted by explaining to others, but I’m also tired of explaining to myself. I want to rest in the in-between space that is messy but can hold things in tension even if they don’t make sense in either community space.

Staying Power/Power to Stay

In light of the work these women do to negotiate their position within the church community, it is only natural for one to ask why they would remain. While there are many reasons for staying and leaving across individual experiences and negotiations, a rhetoric of faith and learning helps participants explain why the Hope Church community remains important to them. In addition, they are able to story a constellated rhetorical identity that gives them creative means of understanding and participating in their community.

When talking about some of the ways her politics differ from those of other Christians, Laura expressed confidence in her choices and their alignment with her personal faith. Laura explained that she does not feel that these political differences have influenced her own faith in any significant way. Instead, Laura emphasized that it is her relationships with members of the community itself that are affected rather than her relationship with God. Specifically, she said that her perspective of other Christians and the church community is challenged when she hears them speaking about policy in alignment with the current government administration, which she finds especially objectionable. At one point she says, “My relationship with God is still that, but my relationship with Christians is much more complex.” In Laura’s perspective, the issues

surrounding the 2016 election—such as those about sexual assault and sexism or racial violence and the alt-right—are clearly “sinful” and “obviously wrong.” She talked about it being common sense in her mind that Christians ought to treat each other with love and that God desires this. Not only is this confirmed in her own reading of Scripture but also in conversations with other Christians when those conversations are not directly related to politics. The difference, perhaps, is in the way Laura applies this to her political views, and she said that she cannot always understand why other Christians wouldn’t see the connections in the same way. Thus she says that ultimately the issue is “between me and people, not me and God.”

In light of this conflict with fellow Christians, it may seem that the simple solution would be to break off involvement with Hope Church or even church communities in general. However, when asked about this, Laura talked again about God’s calling for the people who follow him to be in community: “I know that I am a better person when I’m in community.” She says that being with other Christians can still provide her with ways of strengthening her relationship with God through avenues like prayer, studying the Bible, and talking about life together, even when she does disagree politically. However, she also finds it important as an active participant in those communities to use a position of service or leadership to work on influencing that community toward what she believes is true and right in areas of social justice as she understands them in the light of her faith.

Similarly, Laura talked about the relationships in the church as keeping her tied to the community in spite of struggles around listening, understanding, and disagreement that come from her own constellated experience. Laura admitted that she thinks she could be more vocal about gender roles in the church, and she went on to say that she “didn’t stir the pot” much while she was attending. Interestingly, both Laura and Clara mentioned each other when speaking

about their roles in the church and disagreements with gender dynamics. Laura said that Clara was one person she could speak to openly about this topic, and Clara said she admires Laura for being more vocal even though Laura herself doesn't seem to feel that she was.

Both women chose interesting language when talking about their own responsibility in transforming the community's perception of women and ideological shifts at large. For Clara, to vocally disagree is to take on a "battle." For Laura, the risk is to "stir the pot." Both of these phrases indicate some sort of engagement in a conflict in which individuals are setting themselves against a larger narrative present in the church community. While Laura and Clara may already feel like they haven't done enough, just by setting themselves in opposition to community norms based on individual practices, they are resisting and looking toward change. Nicoletta, however, resisted the word "conflict" in our conversation and instead offered up the word "alienating" to describe experiences in the church that put her at odds with academic ideas. In this word there is an idea that disagreeing with the community may set her on the edges but does not place her in total opposition. It is a place she can negotiate from. All three women talk about remaining part of faith communities to varying degrees and consider their own roles within those communities and how they shift and change. Instead of choosing to reject the community, Laura, Clara, and Nicoletta find spaces of commonality while also constellating their own knowledges in a way that allows them to maintain that connection and their own spiritual and academic practices, though it is not always easy.

Thus the areas of conflicting ideology participants share in this chapter can offer possibilities for changing the story in church and academic communities. Although being a woman academic in the church can make individuals invisible in some ways, gender dynamics is an area that can also allow opportunity for conversation because it provokes strong feelings in

those who identify as women within the church. Clara explained that even though she finds it difficult to speak up about other areas of disagreement in her church community, what she sees as the disenfranchisement of women is an area she feels passionate about:

I've been working more on the feminist side of [my disagreement with the church] now and choosing battles in that realm. And that women do have value and that, you know, we are able to say certain things. So I think that's probably an easier one that I've started to be more vocal about.

This statement follows from a portion of the interview in which Clara spoke about how she differs politically from much of the church community but finds that it is difficult to address these issues because people are not always willing to listen. In the statement here, however, Clara talks about fighting for women being an “easier” battle than arguments that are perhaps more politicized.

Within these layered existences runs a clear thread of silence: both being silenced and performing silence as one negotiation of communities. In the Hope Church, participants find that they are often not regarded as professionals and thus must make a choice for whether they silence that part of themselves in that space or find other ways of being heard in order to resist. Sometimes, they do both.

Faith and Learning: A Rhetoric

Through practices of listening, storying, and critical imagination, Clara, Laura, Nicoletta, and myself have all found ways of remaining connected to the Hope Church community while also negotiating rhetorics across faith and learning that account for competing discourses. Not only do participants and me find space within this community, but we are also able to story its level of importance in our lives in terms of social connection, spiritual growth, and even

professional development. As participants described in Chapter 2, being part of Hope Church means more than attending services to hear sermons about the Bible. Hope Church is a thriving community that offers not just spiritual knowledge but elements of home and family that have helped participants and me to craft a sense of belonging during graduate studies that might not be found in other places, including amongst colleagues.

As I explored throughout the stories in this and the previous chapters, faith and learning includes several elements that make up a rhetorical space and practice:

- Knowledge-making: not only do participants draw upon knowledges from academic and church communities, but they resist, combine, and use those discourses to create something new.
- Imagination: a space of faith and learning is at times a solitary space, and individuals are creative in their navigation and exploration of knowledges to imagine new possibilities that combine their faith with other aspects of their ideology.
- Negotiation: faith and learning can be a space of tension that individuals use to find resonance between seemingly dissonant ideas.
- Self-orientation: again, because a rhetoric of faith and learning is not always shared across a tangible community, individuals use it to identify their own knowledge and find balance.
- Relationship-building: while faith and learning itself may be (at times) an individual practice, we see participants use it to explain and maintain personal relationships across disagreement in community spaces.

- Constellation: a rhetorical space of faith and learning is built on a practice of experiences across communities and a constantly shifting orientation to multiple knowledges and community relationships.

Thus faith and learning as a rhetoric is a vital constellation across community discourses that allows individuals to story for themselves a space that holds multiple realities while remaining responsible to multiple communities. In the following and final chapter, I will revisit participant stories to demonstrate why this cultural rhetorics practice is an important one to understand in the disciplines of rhetoric and composition as well as writing pedagogy.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Leaving Hope Church was one of the most difficult things I have ever experienced in closing a chapter and opening a new one. Our time there was rocked by turmoil in leadership, ideological difference, and, at times, infighting amongst congregants. It was also defined by deep friendships, service to others, mentorship, and growth. Rarely have I experienced such affection for and from an entire community as such. In spite of conflicted feelings around participation in communities of faith as I saw more of their implicatedness in colonial systems, in a relatively short span of three years I had become not only deeply attached to the people within the community but had developed an ethic of responsibility as a member of that community that I hadn't been able to define previously.

Upon leaving Hope Church, I had already chosen another academic community for PhD studies, but we were starting over in forming similar attachments to a church community. Again, Ben and I saw it as important to form a sense of “home” and a foundational piece of that was being involved in a church. After a year or so of attending several services in the area, we kept coming back to a Wesleyan church of about 500 people. Rather than prolong another complicated story, suffice it to say that we resonated with the church's commitment to serving the local community and the denomination's history of social justice practices. So much so that Ben soon began the process of transferring his ordination credentials earned at Hope Church to ordination in the Wesleyan Church.

In this new space, I continued to find some who held many of the same social and political values I did, and perhaps even more so. And I continued to disagree with several of the church's “official” stances on issues as I learned still more stories through my academic work and continued to solidify my own spiritual practices and beliefs. Several years later, we are

again looking at relocation—as one does in academia—and it is again heart-rending to leave a community that has become such a large piece of “home.”

Throughout the previous three chapters, participants have told many stories from their positions between two (or more) community discourses. Each of these communities is inundated with stories of their own, which participants often draw upon and sometimes reject in order to make their own ideological choices. Throughout these stories, participants both create and find existing spaces and practices in which they dwell in this liminality rather than fully rejecting one community or the other in a rhetorical practice of faith and learning. In telling me stories about these spaces, participants simultaneously questioned and strengthened their liminal positions, thoughtfully reflecting on the questions I asked in order to reimagine their own approaches.

I began in Chapter 1 by introducing my relationship to this work as well as to the participants. I then presented their relationships to the Hope Church community as home, family, and a source of knowledge in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I explored participants’ stories about expectations that come out of both their academic and faith communities and the ways they don’t always align. In particular, I narrowed in on issues of political ideals and gender roles as two salient topics for participants and myself. In Chapter 3, participants also revealed that they do not always want to risk relationships within their church community and/or families but do see value in crafting rhetorics that hold both faith and learning in tandem. This leads to Chapter 4 in which I defined a practice of faith and learning as one that constellates relationships between multiple knowledges and knowledge sources. Through a practice of faith and learning, participants and myself are able to create space for knowledges and stories that are at times incongruous. Although this space is not always comfortable, it is necessary to see possibility for altering

community discourse. In Chapter 5, I cited some examples of what that space of faith and learning sometimes looks like, particularly in the areas of politics and gender that participants storied. In this final chapter, I conclude this research by reviewing two key areas that I see participants highlighting throughout their stories about faith and learning: relationality and growth. I then move into some implications for rhetoric and writing teachers and researchers and suggest possibilities for further work both in faith communities and scholarship.

Faith and Learning: Relationality

To hear two discourses and call them irreconcilable—and to leave it at that—misses out on the beautiful and messy complexity around an individual's or community's relationship to those discourses.

Queer scholars and scholars of color (and maybe especially queer scholars of color) already understand and have written about these in-between places that can feel irreconcilable. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls these spaces “borderlands,” or “la frontera.” Anzaldúa's borderlands are about gender and sexuality and religion and community; they are also about race and ethnicity and language:

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself.

Anzaldúa writes in all these languages in her book *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, but not without some explanation because she is also writing her way into this legitimate space that accepts all these cultural aspects of herself and her communities for herself so that she can represent them to others. Anzaldúa indicates that these spaces are not always comfortable and

often lonely, but they are also necessary for understanding one's place in the world and the importance of the communities one comes from and/or takes part in.

Cultural rhetorics scholarship helps both researchers and educators better understand how and why individuals are able to create discourses of faith and learning across communities through constellated knowledges. In addition, if we see relationships to theories/stories and people as mutable, complex connections, we broaden our understanding of rhetoric and the ways individuals and communities employ it to both build and draw upon their own knowledge. Earlier I told Laura's story about her conservative family members and her struggle to reconcile their spiritual importance and her love for them with the political views she finds highly objectionable. Laura takes these views as misrepresentations of the faith she shares with those family members but works to find ways of both connecting and disagreeing. Instead of rejecting the complexity of a relationship that is built on common community knowledge but also stands in opposition to some of her ideals, Laura uses it to solidify her own understanding of concepts like faith and social justice.

Earlier, I explored the ways participants value Hope Church as a community. While knowledge is one aspect of that community relationship, Clara, Laura, and Nicoletta also cite reasons of building home, connecting with others, and creating family as intimately connected to their experience of church. Thus the community serves a function beyond knowledge, even when that knowledge is in conflict with other discourses or values that community members hold. In these multiple roles of community relationship, I am reminded of Andrea Riley-Mukavetz's (2014) discussion of "thereness" as a cultural practice and rhetoric that comes out of her research with Ojibwe women from the Little Traverse Bay Band. Thereness involves not only holding and sharing knowledge but also practices of listening and being present for one another in shared

community experiences. In Evangelical circles, including Hope Church, community members will often talk about “doing life” together, meaning that normal processes of life are shared amongst community members who function from a similar set of moral values. However, even when those values conflict, participants hold the Hope Church community as valuable and seek to negotiate relationships within that community while working to tie their social values to their faith without compromising spiritual knowledge. By practicing constellated knowledges across faith and learning, participants are able to also dwell in relationship to a community, working to shift views where they can and remaining creatively engaged in altering their own knowledge and practice when necessary.

For instance, Laura—like myself and the other participants—demonstrates a relationship to those family members she doesn’t agree with, her church community, her spirituality, and the social justice work she does as an academic. By holding a relationship to all of these things, Laura can balance multiple discourses in order to constellate her own ideological identity and rhetorics of spiritual and academic practice. That’s not to say that doing so is easy or even consistent: those relationships can shift and change. As Laura indicated in her stories, a particularly divisive election cycle is one factor that caused her to reevaluate some of those relationships and her place within them. Nicoletta talked about being introduced to new theoretical language that caused her to reevaluate her relationship to discourses within the church. Relationality within a cultural rhetorics framework and understood through constellating is not about defining a relationship once but consistently recognizing how our relationship to new ideas and new discourses changes our relationship to those we already know. This leads to the second factor of faith and learning I see embodied in my participants’ stories: that of personal growth in and across communities.

Faith and Learning: Growth

Of the three participants, only Nicoletta spoke at length and directly about tying together her faith and learning communities in an intentional practice. Both Clara and Laura alluded or spoke to the idea that they often try to separate the worlds as much as possible. Laura separated her academic career and church association in physical space, placing the church on one side of town, the university on the other, with her own home in between. In placing her physical body in a “neutral” space, she says, she is able to also separate the communities socially and mentally. Clara says that she doesn’t address issues like women’s roles in the church as often as she ought to, suggesting that she too makes attempts to keep her “academic” knowledge out of a space where she feels it isn’t welcomed. Even Nicoletta, though she crosses faith and learning practices, does so not necessarily in the church but through another group of like-minded individuals who are also graduate students practicing their faith together.

As a researcher and a participant in these communities myself, I respect and understand the instinct to often push one world aside when I am physically and mentally inhabiting the other. Indeed, I might suggest that this is often not only desirable but necessary in order to fully participate in my work, relationships, and ideological practices. However, I also hear participants weaving together the stories they tell from each community as they speak to their own development as intellectuals and as spiritual beings. This is a cultural rhetorics and decolonial practice as discussed by Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) (2010). Driskill uses the image of Cherokee double-woven baskets to explore the connections between two-spirit critiques and queer theory. Through this story, they demonstrate how stories can speak to one another, diverge, work together, and ultimately create something new out of that chaos. Driskill calls this practice a decolonial one because it works to deconstruct harmful theories but, rather than forget or dismiss

them, reconstruct them into something else using multiple community knowledges. In performing these mental gymnastics between faith and academic learning, my participants reach deeper understandings of themselves as people and of their relationships to each community, even as they dredge up more questions about who they are in this in-between space.

Both Clara and Laura indicated that they would like to address areas of disagreement with their church communities more directly in the future and even suggested some ways of doing so. They also both told stories about ways they have already done so, though they seem to think these ways are insignificant or inadequate. However, all three participants talked freely about the ways they see their faith and their disciplinary, feminist, and/or political views aligning, demonstrating that some of the topics they explored during graduate school have deeply influenced their ways of connecting with their church community and their own spirituality. Even though they don't always talk about these connections directly, I see participants indicating these factors as personal growth, much like they talk about in their church relationships. Instead of residing firmly in irreconcilable differences, participants use them to draw deeper connections to the practice and understanding of their faith.

The practice of crafting a rhetoric of faith and learning across church and academic discourses can lead to spiritual and intellectual growth when we remain aware of the constellated discourses and knowledges that surround us. In the discipline of rhetoric and composition, scholars are responsible for seeing discourse as constructed by people and responsible for the ways we understand the world and move within it. As compositionists and educators, we help our students to do the same things while learning how to navigate and write about those discourses themselves.

Implications

In taking a closer look at three individuals and constellating their stories with my own, the work I do here is a call for rhetoricians and compositionists both to recognize the complex rhetorical spaces Evangelical Christians occupy and the complex rhetorical strategies they employ to hold space in both faith and learning communities. For rhetoricians, this work constellates across community discourses to show that there is not just one story to tell about Evangelical Christians. I acknowledge that there are many discourses coming out of these communities that remain deeply embedded in colonial structures and harmful to certain groups of people, particularly the oppressed and the marginalized. This is true of many institutions, including academic ones. However, in seeing the work that some are doing to shift those community discourses from within, rhetoricians continue to see the ever-developing function of rhetoric.

As Teachers

In their 2015 text *Mapping Christian Rhetorics*, editors Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer compiled work from a wide range of scholars in rhetoric and communication who work at the intersections of rhetoric and Christianity. This text is perhaps the first in the discipline that attempts to map current and future trends in Christian rhetorics, asking scholars to consider new areas of inquiry and investigation. In her chapter, Elizabeth Vander Lei (2015) “prompts scholars in rhetoric and composition to consider how disciplinary metaphors influence our perceptions of religious student writers and the nature of academic writing” (p. 9). As I touched upon briefly in Chapter 1, Vander Lei applies the trope of composition as a city to demonstrate that Christian students are often figured as monsters outside of that city who are unable to engage in the critical thinking that is central to composition practices. In the conclusion

to her chapter, Vander Lei reiterates the danger of pushing Christian students' discourses to the margins and employs Krista Ratcliffe's (2006) theory of rhetorical listening to urge composition instructors to be aware of their conscious reactions to those discourses in order to engage students in productive dialogue (pp. 81-82). Rather than create monsters, Vander Lei (2015) urges, we need to know the rhetorical consequences of doing so and instead learn how to communicate accordingly.

While Vander Lei (2015) is writing primarily about undergraduate students in first-year composition courses, the stories my participants tell are evidence of the learning that happens behind assumed discourses in and around Christianity. Laura, Clara, Nicoletta, and even myself serve as first-person accounts that Christian graduate students are often willing and even eager to question the community discourses that they are familiar with. Rather than see my participants as "monsters" outside of critical academic discourse, I hope that you, reader, see them as I do: smart individuals who are critically engaging across communities and seeking constellated knowledges that bring together multiple discourses to do the most good in and with those communities. While the kind of critical thinking many composition instructors expect may not result in a rejection of those discourses, it will often change a students' relationship to them and their work within those communities, as it did with the student I introduced in Chapter 1.

In the "Cultural Rhetorics Pedagogy Roundtable," Andrea Riley-Mukavetz points out the "messy and exploratory" nature of cultural rhetorics pedagogy (Cedillo, et. al., 2018, par. 7). She says that listening to stories and expressing their truths and realities allows students to encounter their lived reality with theories and stories from subject positions other than their own. While this work can be confusing, Riley-Mukavetz says, it is a key aspect of cultural rhetorics learning that challenges students to make their own language and rhetoric (par. 7). As a cultural rhetorics

scholar and cultural rhetorics pedagogue who values community knowledge as rhetorical in theory and practice, I am calling for composition instructors to recognize the messy work Christian students are often doing to hold space across community knowledges and craft their own rhetorics of faith and learning. I am asking for those instructors to value that space and remain patient as they work *with* students to shape it according to their community discourses rather than base “critical thinking” on a preconceived notion.

As Researchers

While both academic and faith communities may say that they focus on social projects and the “greater good” in one way or the other, their means and language of doing so do not always align. In fact, they can often stand in direct contradiction. Someone who is involved in both of these communities and recognizes this has to find ways of being in both but adjusting their knowledges accordingly. They must also decide which practices they participate in, which they try to change, and—at times—which they silently oppose, waiting for the opportunity to create change.

Often when I pick up a text about Evangelicals written by a researcher in an “outsider” position, I am reminded that I do not belong here in academia if I am also going to stay in the church. Sure, many authors throw a brief acknowledgment that “liberal Christians” exist, but this is inevitably wrapped up in a stronger emphasis on Evangelicals as fundamentalists who are uncritical fact-deniers and espouse far-right policies to promote “Biblical values” in our political system (Crowley 2006). While I sometimes resent these assumptions, I am also acutely aware that I simultaneously occupy a position of great privilege in a world where Christianity at-large is not only tolerated but even homogenous in a U.S. cultural context. At the same time, I continually hear discourses from Evangelical leaders, church members, and even family who

resist the notion that one can hold to central tenets of Evangelical faith while also remaining critical of the oppressive practices that belong to this tenor of Christianity. As an insider-researcher, I occupy a unique position from which I can constellate my own stories and knowledges in relationship to Evangelical practice and academic discourse. Similar to Driskill's (2010) concept of doubleweaving, I draw upon multiple imperfect strands of knowledge to craft a vessel for something new. In this process there are relationships with my past, present and future; with my participants; with academic and theoretical stories; and with you as my scholar-reader.

Thus this project is, in part, a call for scholars—particularly those who study the rhetorical practices of cultural communities—to consider means of listening across stories for those spaces where opposing values are crafted into something different. It is a request for those doing research in other areas and/or teaching students to not shut out sources of *any* community knowledge based on your own assumptions and experiences. Rather than exclude Evangelical academics from the conversation based on an assumption about their ability to think critically, how can scholars reimagine the work they do to constellate multiple discourses? Rather than dismiss Evangelical students and colleagues as hopeless causes who buy fully into their assumed cultural discourses without a second thought, where can we listen for their constellated knowledges and the shifts they are willing to make?

Imagining Decolonial Possibilities

While it is beyond the scope of this research to offer a complete definition or review of what “decolonial” scholarship is and does, decolonial practice is central to cultural rhetorics work. Thus it is worth considering how the study of an Evangelical church as a cultural community can include decolonial possibilities.

As I acknowledged in Chapter 1, working across spaces that are so deeply implicated in colonial structures as are academia and the church can seem to offer little space for decolonial work. Linda Tuhwai-Smith (1999) says that it is difficult to talk about indigenous peoples and research methodologies together because "the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial projects" (p. 2). In many ways, this statement is as true of Christianity as it is of academic research practices. "Biblical" principles and Church doctrine have been used to oppressive and violent means in ways both obvious and discrete throughout history and still today. However, Smith also talks about the importance of researchers being grounded in the context and histories of a community to do decolonial work. For Smith, this means that researchers who are creating indigenous methodologies come not from Western colonial research practices but from the communities themselves. While their work may *also* be grounded in Western academic theory in order to speak across those audiences, their priority lies with the cultural frameworks of indigenous communities and they are responsible to those communities for the action of the research.

As I have developed a better understanding of cultural rhetorics, American Indian rhetorics, and decolonial scholarship, this constellation has helped me to understand and reimagine my faith and role in faith communities in ways I never thought possible. As someone who is immersed in the histories and context of those communities—good and bad—I stand in a unique position to work within and carry those perspectives into academic communities as well. This project is a practice in decolonial responsibility as someone who chooses to remain part of faith communities that do not always reflect the love, grace, and social responsibility that they so often claim. As I discussed in the previous section, this dissertation is also an exercise in

showing other researchers and scholars in rhetoric and composition that this work is indeed happening, albeit on a small but growing scale.

Through the work of this project, a cultural rhetorics approach has allowed me to develop closer relationships with the participants and with my own stories. As a result, not only do they provide me with a framework for understanding faith and learning as a rhetorical practice, but I am also able to imagine possibilities with them as I see all of us working to bridge community discourses. Smith (1999) says that “in a decolonizing framework, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent” (p. 3). Through relationships with Hope Church and other church communities, I return to a decolonial possibility of building beyond the deconstructing—to thinking about sustainability within communities and dismantling a colonial practice that only sees one story. While a decision to exit faith communities that are harmful is certainly a valid one, I also see work within churches that moves toward constellations of change and possibility.

Thus this work provides me with one starting point among many toward continued research and practice across faith communities and academic spaces to imagine places of decolonial possibility within institutions that remain enmeshed with colonial systems. I am not the first to be considering this kind of work. Joseph Drexler-Dreiss (2018) recently published a text called *Decolonial Love* in which he explores liberation theology in connection with decolonial frameworks to challenge Western theology with a decolonial orientation to Christian salvation and love. In addition, I have made many friends over the years who work in church leadership and are committed to projects of social justice and equality, racial reconciliation within the church, and more. Others, such as Kaitlin Curtice, use public platforms like Twitter to call upon churches to do better in their relationships with marginalized peoples (specifically indigenous communities), local communities, their own histories and theologies, and public

policy. Rhetoric studies offers a unique perspective from which to recognize and reimagine community discourses within churches. From this work, researchers can better understand the ways individuals are challenging and changing those discourses while maintaining community practice. While I begin some of that work here by sharing the stories of a few individuals as they create rhetorical spaces of faith and learning, we need to better understand how rhetorics can shift within whole church communities to understand and take on decolonial projects.

Beyond a Single Story

In a 2009 TED talk that is popular among writing teachers employing cultural rhetorics pedagogies, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the danger of only hearing a single story because of the narrow view of the world one has as a result. I see my participants—and myself—resisting the “single story” narratives often employed in churches to solidify beliefs and social systems. By imagining and constellating multiple stories, participants seek out possibility in their church communities. For Laura, this means tying social justice work and anti-oppression scholarship to the way she understands a loving God. For Clara, this means bringing spirituality into her psychology practice and carrying her understanding of people as whole humans back into the church community’s discourses that at times essentialize people’s complexities into “sin” rather than seek understanding. For Nicoletta, this means presenting her faith to her colleagues in a way that demonstrates openness to multiple knowledges and willingness to question her belief systems in light of constellated stories and theories.

For myself, constellated possibilities within the church means many things, but in this moment it means dismantling the narrative that says those within church communities are only one thing. It means allowing my own knowledges that come from academic and other community and disciplinary spaces to permeate and shift my relationships to those spaces while

being comfortable shaping rhetorics that cross all of these. As I reach the end of my time in graduate school, it also means imagining again what this will look like in yet another church community in yet another geographic location with new relationships while holding all of the “old” ones together.

Home.

Recently, I moved back to the place I grew up and the city where my immediate family has always been and still remains. In making this move, I am making a return, but I come with several more “homes” and all the relationships I have formed and stories I have heard along the way.

My family (mom, dad, siblings) all continue to attend and are deeply involved in the ministries at the church I went to from about 7th grade until I left for college. My family (myself, husband, children) will not return to this church for many reasons, but not because we see it as a “bad” place to be. Our reasons are more about forming connections to our local community as adults who have worked together to make Home in many other places. For me, it is resisting the temptation to go back in time.

I am no longer the same kind of Christian that I was raised to be, and I see this as a good thing. My relationships to discourses within the church I grew up in, the churches I have been in, and even those within my own family have shifted and changed. My relationship to political ideology and feminism are only two examples of how this is true.

But I will go to church. I will form another home and family through another faith community that will continue to expand my spiritual and community knowledges and also present challenges: both those that I have encountered before and those that are entirely new.

And I will remember Clara, Laura, and Nicoletta—as well as other friends—and rest in the un/familiar, un/comfortable space of faith and learning that is an ongoing practice in community discourses that challenge my assumptions, redefine relationships, and also give me life.

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