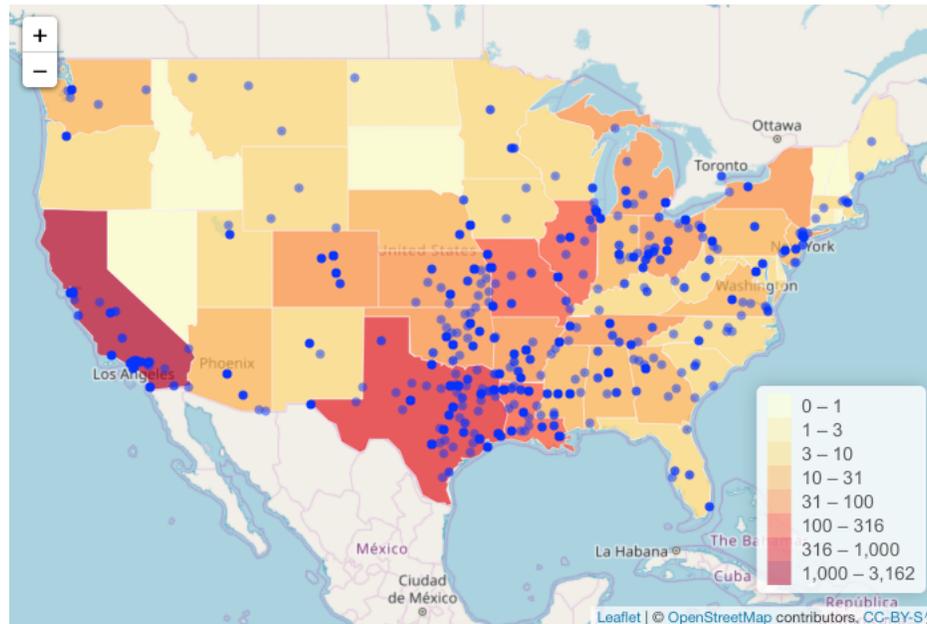


Religion on the Move: Digital Excavation and Black Western Migration



The shaded areas on the map represent the density of migration from each state. The blue dots represent the city and church home of People's Independent migrants, 1938-1946.

The migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans during the twentieth century brought seismic changes to American society. As Black men, women, children and families sought to make their lives over in distant places, their imprint on the communities they left, founded, and joined was palpable. The magnitude of this migration and its larger impact on Black familial structures and the social fabric of Black communities is often difficult to capture with non-quantitative data. My research re-imagines the relationship between religion and migration and seeks to convey how the immense religious diversification that developed within Black communities transformed Black cultural expression.

During the LRDA grant, I worked on tracing the biographical information of Black migrants who relocated to Los Angeles from 1938-1946. These migrants joined People's Independent Church of Christ, a welcome center to thousands of Black migrants who relocated to the west in search of better social and economic conditions. During this period, the church-

maintained membership rolls, which documented the previous city, previous religious affiliation and the address of where the person was currently living in Los Angeles. After transcribing the handwritten pages, I began excavating biographical information to chart the journey of each person. The digital excavation of source material is tied directly to what can be found in newspapers, census records, marriage certificates and other non-conventional primary sources.

My project deploys a diverse range of primary source materials to construct historical narratives that illuminate how religion acts as an organizing force during a period of displacement. Each blue dot on the map represents a person. The interactive version of this map allows a user to click on the dot and follow that person's migration story to Los Angeles. Some individuals have more information than others, but the source provides scholars, students and the public an opportunity to consider the complexity of Black migration experiences during the twentieth century. One of the benefits of this approach is the ability to locate the movement of Black women. While women have overwhelmingly contributed to the organizational development of religious institutions, the texture of their stories and experiences is often silenced by an archive that catalogues the contributions of men in leadership positions. This project serves as a corrective.

For example, Black women like Noreen Forney were central to initiatives in the church and the greater community. Born on August 12, 1889, in St. Louis, Missouri, Noreen Syless Forney migrated to Denver with her family and was educated in Denver schools. As an adult, she married and moved to Kansas, Missouri, before relocating to live in Seattle, Washington. From Seattle she relocated to Los Angeles in 1936 and joined People's Independent Church of Christ. Forney developed an interest in business and attended Johnson's Business College while

she lived in Denver. She sought to create a business in Los Angeles and opened Stenographic Studio in 1938, which trained Black residents on touch typing, comptometer, and picture typing.¹ She emphasized the adoption of business minded principles and advised young people to, “take business as a hobby or a pastime while they are trying to ‘find’ themselves for it is something that will always prove useful, regardless of what profession one might choose.”² Forney’s contributions to the community, through her involvement with People’s Independent and her creation of the Stenographic Studio, uncovers the material contributions developed within and outside of the church by Black women.

Through digital archaeology, the contributions of Black women like Noreen Forney are retrievable. This mapping resource captures “diaspora as methodology,” which illustrates how religion, and the act of Black migration, are working in practice to mobilize and transform Black communities and networks in cities like Los Angeles. These migrants carried with them shared priorities and concerns about freedom, citizenship and belonging. In the case of Forney, her business opened a new employment option for Black women who trained at her studio and went on to work in government, the post office and academia. Uncovering the contributions of Forney and other Black western migrants through digital mapping and archival work enables a dynamic approach to consider the diverse backgrounds and experiences that informed and propelled the agendas of Black religious institutions.

¹ “Training School to Open Here.” *The California Eagle*, November 10, 1938.

² “Noreen Forney Unsung Hero.” *The Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 8, 1966.