

# Unseen Routes: Mapping Black Albany's Past, Present, and Possible Futures

## Scholarly–Theoretical Statement

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I grew up knowing Albany as a city filled with stories that rarely made it into the archive. For generations, Black life here split itself across church basements, neighborhood kitchens, and informal networks that carried memory more faithfully than any official record. The history books never told the whole truth, but our people did. Family stories, whispered histories, half-remembered landmarks, and the “that used to be...” language of elders formed their own kind of cartography — one based not on streets, but on experience. *Unseen Routes* emerges directly from that lineage. It is an attempt to map a city that has always mapped us, even when we were not the ones holding the pen.

Mapping, for Black people in the Americas, has always been political. It is an act that has historically been used to survey, divide, control, and erase. Yet it is also a practice of reclamation: a way to insist on presence even when the physical landscape says otherwise. In Albany, this tension is especially visible. Black neighborhoods were cleared for highways. Black riverfront histories were submerged under new construction. Libraries and community spaces that served as intellectual centers disappeared through redevelopment. What remains is a city where the official map looks deceptively stable, but the lived map — the Black map — is fractured, layered, and alive with ghosts. *Unseen Routes* is my attempt to hold these contradictions in a form that honors them.

At the heart of this project is the BaKongo Cosmogram, also known as the Dikenga. This cosmological framework, originating from Central Africa and flourishing across the diaspora, resists linear time. It understands life as cyclical: movement from birth to full presence, decline, dissolution, and regeneration. The cosmogram is not just a symbol; it is a philosophy of time, memory, and existence that frames the Black experience in the Western Hemisphere. Its four quadrants — *Kala* (birth), *Tukula* (living), *Luvemba* (death), and *Musoni* (rebirth) — form a continual loop rather than a straight line.

The cosmogram gave me a way to think through Albany's layered histories without flattening them. It allowed me to structure the film in four movements:

- **Memory/Foundations (Kala)** — the deep-time past of Black Albany, including enslavement-era docks and early free Black communities.
- **Thriving Black Presence (Tukula)** — the neighborhoods, institutions, and cultural lives that shaped Black Albany in the 19th and 20th centuries.
- **Erasure & Violence (Luvemba)** — the ruptures: urban renewal, highway construction, enforced displacement, and institutional disappearance.
- **Speculative Futures (Musoni)** — the possibilities that emerge when we imagine Albany not solely through loss, but through what might still be reclaimed or created.

This structure aligns with my broader scholarly trajectory, which sits at the intersections of Black speculative thought, memory work, and place-based inquiry. My research has always explored the spaces where the archive falters — where official records fail to hold the fullness of Black life. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Pauline Hopkins, Una Marson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Octavia Butler taught me early that the line between history and imagination is not a boundary but a portal. In their work, speculative methods are not escapist; they are analytical. They allow us to see the contours of Black existence that empirical documentation alone cannot capture.

In *Unseen Routes*, speculative cartography becomes a method for reading the city. I am not charting Albany in the geographical sense; I am charting the “otherwise” — the routes that remain beneath the pavement, the neighborhoods that still hum under layers of suburban expansion and state construction. By blending archival material, abstracted digital collage, and layered soundscapes, I am working toward a way of mapping that acknowledges rupture without centering trauma. The speculative is not used to invent fantasy; it is used to reveal the truths that official maps fail to hold.

The film’s visual language is intentionally abstract because literal representation would betray the complexity of what remains unseen. I use layering, shifting opacity, and superimposition to echo the way Black memory operates: not as a single uninterrupted line, but as a palimpsest — a surface on which histories are written, erased, rewritten, and still legible if you know where to look. The soundscape works similarly, holding fragments of river, movement, hum, and atmospheric noise that mimic the sensory quality of remembering. The result is not a map one can follow with GPS, but one that requires intuition, listening, and imagination — much like navigating Black history itself.

My work is grounded in the belief that absence is never neutral. Erasure leaves traces: a curve in a street that makes no sense unless you know what once stood there, a church whose congregation migrated miles away after a neighborhood was cut in half, an elder’s story about “back when this was all Black.” These traces form a shadow map of the city. By engaging these remnants, *Unseen Routes* positions Albany not just as a site of disappearance, but as a place where history remains active and responsive, even if not officially recognized.

This project also speaks to a broader conversation within Black studies about geography, belonging, and the archive. Scholars like Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, and Clyde Woods insist that Black geographies are always in negotiation with state power, memory, and imagination. Their work illuminates the ways Black people create space, refuse erasure, and build community in environments shaped by constraint. *Unseen Routes* joins this dialogue by grounding it in a specific place — Albany — and showing how these global dynamics manifest in a local landscape.

Finally, *Unseen Routes* is part of my long-term commitment to rooting my scholarship and creative work in the Capital District, where my family has lived for generations. Albany is not just the site of this project; it is my home, my archive, my laboratory, and my inheritance. My work here is not solely historical or artistic — it is deeply personal. The film is a gesture toward understanding my own origins, my family's migrations, and the communities that shaped me. It is also an offering to the future: a way of imagining Albany not simply through its absences, but through the possibilities that remain when we let memory, imagination, and historical rigor talk to one another.

*Unseen Routes* asks viewers to consider what becomes possible when we refuse to accept official maps as complete. It invites a different way of seeing the city — one grounded in Black presence, Black memory, and Black futures. This project is both an inquiry and an invocation, calling forth the histories that linger beneath the surface and daring us to imagine what might emerge if we trace those routes with care.